
A Trojan Horse in Birmingham

PATRICK YARKER

ABSTRACT Pat Yarker gives an account of two official reports into the highly complex 'Trojan Horse' affair in Birmingham.

What is 'Trojan Horse'?

'Trojan Horse' has become journalistic shorthand for an apparent attempt by a small group in East Birmingham to secure control of local non-faith schools and impose policies and practices in keeping with the very conservative (Salafist and Wahhabi) version of Islam which they hold.

In November 2013 a copy of an incomplete, unsigned and unaddressed letter was brought to the attention of officers at Birmingham City Council (BCC). This document describes a five-step strategy to take over governance of a number of schools in Birmingham as a prelude to changing their ethos, curriculum and practices. The provenance and status of the letter remain uncorroborated and it is widely presumed not to be what it purports.

A copy of the letter was passed to West Midlands Police, who decided there was no basis for intervention. However, they passed the letter to the Home Office in December 2013, from where it was passed to the Department for Education (DfE), which began its own investigation. Union reps received redacted copies of the letter in February 2014 and also contacted the DfE. Reports of the letter reached the national media in early March, and have been seized on by the right-wing press.

Separate investigations were launched by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and the Education Funding Agency, as well as by the DfE into its own conduct. BCC chose Ian Kershaw of Northern Education, a private company offering professional support to schools and governors, to look at what had been going on in the maintained schools (and some very recently converted academies) supposedly affected. Controversially, Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, chose Peter Clarke to conduct an additional inquiry, and to report before Parliament's summer recess.

Who is Peter Clarke?

Before his retirement in 2008, Clarke was frequently described as Britain's top anti-terrorist police officer. Clarke took a law degree and then joined the Met in 1977. From 1994 to 1997 he was Divisional Commander in Brixton. During his tenure, in 1995, the death in police custody of Wayne Douglas led to five hours of rioting around Brixton Police Station. Clarke went on to work in the Met's Specialist Operations directorate. In 2005, as commander of the Anti-Terrorism Branch, he led the response to the London bombings, and received an OBE for this work. In 2006 his organisation merged with Special Branch to become the Counter Terrorist Command. Clarke was seen as the interface between the police and MI5. He has advised government on policy and the framing of laws, as well as on practicalities. Since retiring, Clarke has continued to be involved in private security and protection work. He was appointed by David Cameron to the National Security Forum, a body created by Gordon Brown's administration to enable politicians to access expert advice from outside government.

Clarke is aware of the vital importance of impression-management in matters of security and counter-terrorism. He told the Leveson Inquiry that the public still does not recognise 'the true nature of the terrorist threat' (Witness Statement 31 January 2012, paragraphs 16, 18, 23, 72). This led him to engage in off-the-record briefings with national newspaper staff to rebut charges that the police were unfairly targeting Muslims and arresting large numbers of innocent people. His appointment as investigator played to fears about terrorism and was criticised by one Birmingham MP. Ironically, after the 2004 Madrid bombings, the Muslim Council of Britain had praised Clarke for encouraging the media not to use the phrase 'Islamic terrorists', which he said was both offensive and misleading. *The Guardian* has claimed (23 July) that in accepting Gove's commission Clarke required the DfE to indemnify him against legal action, while the DfE retained a say over the contents of his report.

What Did Clarke Find?

Clarke had no brief to look for evidence of terrorist activity, radicalisation or violent extremism, and found none. His report (Clarke, 2014) endorses the view that there was a deliberate plot by a group of associates to gain control of governing bodies at a small number of schools in order to introduce a distinct set of behaviours and religious practices in keeping with beliefs the group held. He identifies and presents what he claims are a pattern of events and behaviours, evident at a number of schools over a period of years (and arguably stretching back two decades), which testify to the reality of the plot and accord with the five-step strategy outlined in the Trojan Horse letter. He notes a sustained and co-ordinated agenda to impose segregationist attitudes and practices, and records examples of sexist, homophobic or otherwise discriminatory behaviour and comments from people allegedly involved. He draws attention to the way the curriculum was narrowed in some schools. He

criticises BCC for failing to support headteachers harassed, bullied and ousted by members of governing-bodies party to the 'plot'. He identifies Park View Education Trust (PVET), which ran three academies, as the incubator for much of the malign activity, and names a number of staff-members as instigators.

Perhaps surprisingly, Clarke also criticises the academy programme. He says the DfE allowed PVET to be set up too quickly, and without adequate oversight of the Trust's financial arrangements and management approaches. His enquiry 'has highlighted that there are potentially serious problems [of oversight] in some academies' (p. 87). He also criticises the way the DfE responds to whistle-blowing about academies. One of his recommendations implies that the entire academisation process, including the way local concerns are considered, is flawed.

How Did Clarke Work?

Clarke says the tight timetable constrained his inquiries. He interviewed some 50 witnesses. He says a significant number only talked to him on condition of anonymity. Two refused to have their testimony electronically recorded. Consequently, his report contains much unattributable material, and allegations which aren't securely substantiated.

However, certain established facts are in the public domain. For example, the nature of a school's curriculum offer and how it has changed in recent years, and the history of recent staff and governor appointments. Minutes of full governors' meetings (and perhaps sub-committee meetings) should also be readily available, along with Ofsted reports. In generating an authoritative account, it is the context within which facts are deployed, and hence how they are framed for understanding, which especially matters. Clarke's background is likely to colour the way he constructs that context.

One significant section of Clarke's report relies on the transcript of postings over time on a private social media discussion-group. Clarke characterises this material as 'disturbing' before he presents it, as if to shape a reader's response. He says the material 'came into my possession' (p. 54), but does not explain how it did. Given the private nature of the source, it seems to me possible to see the hand of a security service in making it available. What has been selected from this transcript for use in Clarke's report fits with the picture Clarke wishes to paint. On other occasions, he appears to make more out of some details than is warranted. He says that a malfunctioning fire-alarm was the pretext to suspend a head (p. 35), but suspension in such circumstances might be entirely justified. Elsewhere he regards it as suspicious that a governor does not have disclosure and barring service (DBS) clearance, although this is not a requirement. He states, questionably, that it is unusual for a non-faith state school to make religious education (RE) a compulsory GCSE course. In other words, in some respects Clarke appears to have slanted the presentation or interpretation of some relatively minor matters to favour his general stance.

How Does Clarke's Report Tally with Kershaw's?

Kershaw (2014), who was asked to investigate by BCC, does not endorse the idea of a plot. Nevertheless, like Clarke, he found clear patterns of behaviour indicative of a concerted attempt to change schools, often by unacceptable practices, in order to influence educational and religious provision. He spoke with 76 witnesses, 18 of whom also spoke with Clarke. (No witness was afforded anonymity by Kershaw, but the copy of the report I have seen is heavily redacted to safeguard some identities.) Other evidence was shared between the two investigations, although their timeframes were different, as were their briefs and foci. Kershaw offers more local and community context than Clarke, and is more specific (though just as condemnatory) on aspects of governance, and on the behaviour of individuals. He also points out how the law was broken. He is concerned to support and value the record of education in Birmingham as a whole, but does not avoid criticising BCC. The Council leader has publicly acknowledged that in some cases the council took no action, was too slow to act, or did the wrong thing in relation to 'Trojan Horse', and that this was often out of fear of being regarded as racist or Islamophobic. A misguided understanding of 'community cohesion' trumped the duty to support school staff and tackle embedded problems with particular governing-bodies.

Implications

The whole complex affair continues to have multiple implications on many levels.

What Kershaw's report says about the council's failure to support some school staff in the face of bullying and harassment would also seem to have implications for the conduct of trade unions in the city. Kershaw's report will lead to a radical overhaul of school governance procedures and practices in Birmingham. This is likely to have national implications for maintained schools and, given the debacle at PVET, for academies and free schools too. Ofsted gave some of the 'at risk' schools glowing reports, only to put them in special measures shortly afterwards. This raises further questions about the existing inspection regime.

Many of the schools caught up in these events serve pupils who come from materially-deprived backgrounds. The proportion of pupils attaining highly across the board in SATs and other public exams has historically been quite low. Ensuring and improving broad educational opportunities for all pupils in these schools, and thereby boosting attainment levels, ought to be a central concern. But if nothing else, 'Trojan Horse' has indicated how contested is the notion of what counts as a good education. The Left is historically committed to a fully-comprehensive maintained education system. We will have yet again to think through how, and to what extent, such a system may be secularised. We will also have to reflect further on how best to engage with the religiously-dedicated without diluting our own adherence to thoroughgoing democracy and equality.

Notes

- Clarke, P. (2014) *Report into Allegations Concerning Birmingham Schools Arising from the 'Trojan Horse' Letter*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337117/HC_576_accessible.pdf
- Kershaw, I. (2014) *Investigation Report: Trojan Horse letter*.
<http://www.nga.org.uk/getattachment/597513c2-7686-432b-8463-1fbfd228d908/Ian-Kershaw-s-report.pdf.aspx>

PATRICK YARKER is a co-Editor of *FORUM*.
Correspondence: patyarker@aol.com

