**What – if anything – can be learnt from the so-called Trojan Horse Affair?**

**Background**

The so-called Trojan Horse Affair arose from an anonymous letter that was circulating within Birmingham in November 2013. This letter set out mechanisms for the takeover of schools by new governors (and senior staff) in order to implement a more restrictive faith-based curriculum and ethos. The letter was aimed at people in a number of other cities and claimed that such events werealready underway in some schools in predominantly Muslim areas of Birmingham.

There was considerable doubt about the authenticity of the letter. Nevertheless, it was passed to the local counter-terrorism police on the basis of needing to establish if any crime had been committed and because some of the sentiments in the letter verged on things that could be regarded as extremist. The police found no immediate links to terrorism. The letter was subsequently referred on to central government departments. It was, at that stage, felt that the letter exposed issues serious enough to warrant deeper investigation.

There were various discussions at local and national levels and a number of reviews were set up to explore what (if anything) was happening. Ofsted (the national body for inspecting education) was sent into a number of schools, some of which had only recently been inspected and judged to have good management in place.

Some of the schools were under the control of Birmingham City Council, as the local authority. The rest had converted to Academy status, independent of the local authority and run under contract by the national government Department for Education.

The whole episode attracted considerable media interest, over an extended period of time. It is hard to believe that some of the issues raised were of significance to Birmingham alone, but since the letter (and its reported activities) arose within Birmingham the episode became labelled the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair. The daily news repetition of that label, in an essentially negative context, created a degree of damage to the reputation of the city as a whole and, to some local communities, it began to feel like a form of Islamophobia – particularly when the Secretary of State for Education appointed the former head of counterterrorism to head up the government’s review.

**Historical context**

In the belief that things do not simply arise from nowhere, and in the belief that social events rarely have single clear causes, it might be useful to set out some of the various interconnecting strands that had been moving with varying speeds and with varying momenta in the periods leading up to the ‘outbreak’ of the Trojan Horse Affair in Birmingham.

* There had been a historical pattern of educational provision in Birmingham that had left a mixed legacy of independent, grammar, faith, single sex and mixed, community, and special schools – with some sections of the community able to feel that their needs were not being met with parity (eg There were reported to be 60 Catholic aided schools and just 2 Muslim aided schools, whilst there were similar numbers of Catholics and Muslims in the city).
* The 1988 Education Reform Act set a trend for schools to increasingly manage their own budgets and to make their own decisions about matters internal to their school; preparing the ground for schools and others to continually argue for greater freedoms to run their own affairs – independent of a local authority perceived as burdensome - without necessarily pushing for comparably greater responsibilities and accountabilities.
* The Thatcher government stressed the need for a smaller state. A rhetoric of individualism was coupled with a contradictory centralism that saw local educators as unable to decide what was best within schools. A National Curriculum was introduced, under John Major’s government. This has subsequently been open to contest about the balance of its content. There are varied understandings and confusions about the extent to which different kinds of schools are able to amend the detail of what is taught, how things are presented, the balance of subjects on offer, and the emphasis to be given to specific aspects of social, personal and religious education.
* Throughout the 1980s/1990s an increasingly positive view of the future was predicated on communities being welcomed and differences in values being accepted and celebrated, within a legal framework. In this context a lot of energy was invested in engagement with minority communities, working with and through community representatives and the recruitment of people (from what were essentially perceived as unified communities) into roles such as school governors and managers.
* The Blair government put great emphasis on ‘education, education, education’; with central models being rolled out to timetable. Beginning with laudable intentions, it became fossilised by the style of Ofsted inspections and the use of national league tables of narrow performance measures. One outcome was that a school could be judged as ‘Outstanding’ on a restricted set of measures, with prescribed academic attainment being promoted as the thing that matters above all else. Once trained in the new approaches, schools were seen as very much in control of their own destiny. There was a push of resources to frontline organisations and a promotion of light-touch monitoring of organisations that were seen as successful.
* Under the Every Child Matters banner, partly in response to high profile child abuse cases, the central government put emphasis on a wide range of outcomes for children (Be healthy; Stay safe; Make a positive contribution; Achieve economic wellbeing; Enjoy and achieve). Local Directors of Children’s Services were put in place to push forward on all issues concerning children in their area. At the same time there was still the over-riding focus on attainment in national assessments. There were sometimes mixed messages to schools about how much they were being expected to do.
* There have been shifting layers of governance and accountabilities. One initial trend was to regional level (Government Office of the Region, Regional Assembly, City Regions….) with devolution of responsibilities and accountabilities to local authorities via Local Area Agreements and via Comprehensive Performance Assessments of local capacities and capabilities to manage developments within a national framework. This was followed by a ‘double devolution’ of power direct to schools/chains of schools accountable directly to the Department for Education and the Secretary of State.
* A reaction to bombings and other events, in the UK and elsewhere, was initially an ‘anti-terrorist’ one built on various views about how violent extremist views were being imported from abroad. This was supplemented by a later focus on home-grown terrorism with an emphasis on the prevention of radicalisation. These were seen as almost totally a Muslim-related issue. There were discrepancies in the views across government departments about the mechanisms by which young people might move from ‘regular pupil’ to ‘radical extremist’ – and thus what a proper national policy response should be.
* It has become increasingly difficult to make the distinction between ‘private’ and ‘public’ as a small number of private organisations take on more and more public duties, becoming reliant on public funding whilst remaining responsible to their shareholders rather than to the public. Initially this was restricted to the private sector provision of services to schools but, under the Academies programme, became the direct provision of schooling by contractual arrangements established between the Department for Education and a number of private sector bodies.
* The central government department established to oversee local government activities (The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; then the Department for Communities and Local Government) initially championed the role that local authorities could have in development activity. This, more recently, has turned into a narrative based on the denigration of local government as wasteful and bureaucratic. There has been a growing tension between expecting local delivery of a wide range of statutory duties (and more) whilst reducing funding available to do this. There has also been increasing uncertainty about the roles of various organisations, and the boundaries to their remits.
* There has, rightly, been an increased emphasis on safeguarding of children. At local authority Children’s Services planning level this created a shift of attention away from developments in education onto assuring the adequacy of care arrangements. There has been an expansion in the range of factors that children need protecting from, with organisations (both local authorities and schools) chasing into place their policy responses to each newly identified threat. Protection from extremism is a recent addition to the recognised set of threats. Checking that schools have such protections in place had not been a strong feature of inspections.
* During the 1960s/70s much of the immigration was from ex-empire countries. Early new arrivals often had a positive view of England, had reasonable levels of English language, and wished to integrate (despite barriers to integration put up by the home population). Later there were concerns that other arrivals had less English, had stronger attachments to their own communities and that some areas of cities were appearing ‘un-English’. This has not lessened with arrivals from areas of the world associated (in the press) with traditional views or extremist views. There has recently been a resurgence of debates about British values. Despite the lack of agreement about what constitutes British values, some schools are expected to be actively promoting them. In political speeches, British values have most recently been defined as the opposite of extremist views (so a commitment to democracy; respect for the views of others; tolerance and the acceptance of differences; respect for the rule of law; fairness; respect for individual liberty, freedom of religious practice etc).

**Could it all have been foreseen and prevented from developing as a big issue?**

Much was made, in the early reporting, of who knew what, when and the extent to which they did or did not do anything about it. In the time before the emergence of the disputed-status letter suggesting a well-developed plot within the governance of some schools in the city, could events have triggered some earlier, lower-key investigation of what was/was not going on?

It seems clear:

* that individual head teachers and governors were involved in particular events, over several years; that knowledge of these events was discussed (maybe only informally) between head teacher colleagues; and that teacher associations/ Head Teacher Association could have been alerted and taken up the matters.
* that governors could have reported back to their sponsoring bodies about any concerns they might have had.
* that each school had, at that time, a link Adviser from the local authority who was expected to have local intelligence about ‘their’ schools and to highlight issues as they arose.
* that pupils may have noted changes in behaviours and practices in their schools and could, in theory, have raised concerns via School Councils and Young Peoples’ Parliament mechanisms right up to city council Cabinet level.
* that concerned members of communities could have discussed things with community or religious leaders, or brought issues to the notice of their local elected councillors.
* that isolated stories reported by the press could have been explored more fully and any wider picture reported on.

… and so on.

There thus appear to have been numerous triggers in the system that might have brought things into focus, but these were not used or not followed-through. This may have implications for setting in place any future triggers.

Could it all have been predicted? Hardly. Who would have said, before the Trojan Horse Affair became public:

* that, against Ofsted’s criteria, several outstandingly well-managed schools would drop several categories, almost overnight, to be judged as now being inadequately managed and governed – requiring governors to be replaced and damaging Ofsted’s already shaky reputation?
* that things would lead to a public squabble between two government departments and that, despite being one of the government’s most respected cabinet members, (Secretary of State for Education) Gove would be shuffled across to some other role – damaging the reputation of the Department for Education and the government in general?
* that Birmingham City Council would be expected to work with an external commissioner to drive into place the required changes in the way some schools in Birmingham develop in future?
* that whole teams of school governors would (from differing perspectives) be ousted from their role or resign in protest to injustices?
* that the Academies programme would be shown to have several serious weaknesses beyond those already being voiced?

It is highly unlikely that any of these would have appeared on the relevant organisation’s risk register. No checks and balances were triggered because people were looking in the wrong direction, with no inkling that any kind of plot might be put in place around education in the city (which, at that time, was buoyed by a story of relentless improvement in educational standards). As issues arose at different times and in different schools these were incrementally dealt with (effectively or not), as specific cases. Senior officers and politicians locally, as well as community leaders and media editors, missed opportunities to add it all up into some coherent picture.

It would be easy to slip into a whole range of conspiracy views. These might range from the more substantial one of the supposed existence of a plot to take over control of the ethos and curriculum of increasing numbers of schools across a number of towns and cities; to the more speculative idea that the period in the run-up to a general election is just the time when one might expect a government to dust off some old bits of knowledge and weave a different story around them in order to denigrate large urban (opposition-controlled) cities.

**The impact of language: Its ability to clarify or cloud the issues.**

Much of the language used to describe and record the Trojan Horse Affair has been media-driven. Newspapers and television current news broadcasting in the UK has its own ways of being careful and careless with words; of using differing phrasings to describe the same event; and of seeking the most exploratory angle or the most startling feature in order to keep a fairly static story running for a while longer. Media are much freer from criticism when they report accounts one day and follow these with contradictory reports the next day – this is seen as following the story as it unfolds. For a public body such contradictory accounting would be criticised as ‘getting it wrong’. Local authorities and national government departments usually take a more considered view, over a longer period of time, which (in an era of instant news responses) can appear as being unresponsive. In the end, the local authority was criticised as being slow to leap into action; whilst the media-driven short-term response of central government came across as clumsy and heavy-handed.

Throughout the reportings of the Trojan Horse Affair there has been terminology that has had a range of meanings: intended, unanticipated, shared or specific. There has been a particular capacity for clarity or confusion at those points where language hovers at boundaries; at the transitions where one set of understandings shade into another quite different one.

Examples taken from the reporting (and the thinking that shaped those reportings) include:

* When does ‘sharing ideas’ become ‘plotting’, and when does plotting become formalised enough to be ‘a sustained plot’?
* When do ‘constant nit-pickings’ add up to ‘robust challenges to management’, and when does that slip into ‘aggressive bullying’?
* What are the overlaps and differences between ‘Birmingham schools’, ‘schools managed by Birmingham’, ‘schools in Birmingham’, and ‘schools for Birmingham pupils’ … and how often was the term ‘Birmingham schools’ being used as shorthand for a handful of variously-managed schools located in one relatively small part of the city?
* When do extreme viewpoints constitute extremism … and when does this start to matter for schools?
* Is there a spectrum around phrases such as … committed, traditional, conservative, hard-line, fundamentalist, extremist?
* Where are the demarcations between ‘responding to the religious and cultural wishes of a community’ and ‘introducing a form of Islamification’?
* When does ‘a desire to bring about change’ become ‘destabilisation’, or ‘radicalism’?
* In much of the reporting, how clear were people when they chose to describe people or actions or intentions as Muslim, or Islamic, or Koranic, or Sunni … and how far were these rather blunt labels in a situation that Birmingham (in other contexts) recognises as being characterised by superdiversities?
* At the boundaries between faith schools and secular schools; with schools expected to have broad-based acts of worship; and the openness to people’s rights to hold particular religious views: Is there an assumption of a benign and compatible nature to all beliefs?
* What constitutes ‘outstanding’ in a school: in the views of pupils, or parents, or staff/head/governors, or in the views of the Local Authority or Ofsted?
* Within the current political rhetoric of ‘freedoms and flexibilities’ and ‘localisation’ (whatever the realities in practice about centralisation of educational influence and control) is there is clarity around meeting legal duties; the need to comply with agreements and expectations; taking civic responsibilities seriously; the possibilities for acting on locally-determined public attitudes and approaches; and the limits on espousing personal values, opinions and behaviours?

**What were the core issues?**

With so much media coverage, from many different angles, it became easy to lose sight of the main strands underlying the day-to-day accounts. These would seem to have been:

* Related issues (Head teachers being forced out by dominant governors) had been talked about and acted on, as isolated cases, for some time. The appearance of the anonymous letter, setting out a plot, triggered the recent events. Initial activity sought to establish the credibility and seriousness of the letter and its contents. There remained doubts about the provenance of the letter: Was it simply a hoax designed to stimulate some response? Or something describing actual serious events? Whilst this was the initial focus it was soon overshadowed by the series of inspections and reviews.
* Were there groups of governors and senior managers that were beginning to impose practices in their schools that were in tune with particular versions of Islamic beliefs? If so, and if these were secular schools, did this conflict with the legal requirements re national curriculum, daily acts of worship, equalities and so on?
* Did the behaviours of individuals, in contact via a series of networks and via social media, constitute a well-constructed plot within Birmingham, and was that spreading into a number of other cities?
* Did some groups of individuals overtly want to expose pupils to anti-British sentiments, or pro-violent extremist views through school activities?
* Would such exposure to the ‘potential for terrorism’ constitute a child protection issue and, if so, what steps would schools and communities be expected to take?

Added to these local issues, there were then a series of national issues that emerged rapidly and which became part of the media focus in their own right. These included:

* What was the basis for the sudden inspection of a number of schools … and to what extent were these conducted with objectivity and openness?
* Who was, ultimately, responsible for the education children were getting in schools that had become Academies (answering, via their sponsoring bodies, to the Secretary of State)? As the champion of the rights of children and young people within the city, what remit does a local authority have to challenge how such schools are governed and managed?
* What was the policy view of national government: To put energies into early preventative work in situations where there could be a progressive conveyor belt moving people from traditional, conservative religious beliefs to a potential for violent extremism? Or to put energies into diversionary activities as specific situations arose? Or to put resources into responding to those committing to extremist actions?

**What were the outcomes from the various reviews, inspections and investigations?**

* Much of the information that led up to the reviews was hearsay, contradictory, anonymous. There was no real evidence of a plot or conspiracy. There was substantiated evidence of unacceptable behaviour by a few people in a few schools. Some key governors had an utter disregard for, and rejection of, the basic principles of public duties.
* Improper processes had been followed by some governors in the appointment and removal of other governors. In a few cases concerted efforts had been made to increase the influence, within school governance, of people holding particular views of Islamic belief.
* Such things were limited to a small number of schools and a clique of people. The majority of the 437 schools in Birmingham remain well-managed and well-governed.
* There was no evidence of concerted attempts to promote an anti-British agenda, violent extremism or radicalisation of children within schools. Some staff and governors had expressed views via social media that reflected beliefs that were incompatible with educating children for tolerance, but there was less clear evidence about the extent to which such views were being promoted within the classroom. At the same time, there were few formal safeguards in place to prevent such personal views being introduced into schools, leaving children at risk of potentially being exposed to unacceptable influences.
* The local authority had dealt with events, from as early as 2007, but as isolated incidents and had not attempted to link things together (internally or with other external bodies) to get to a better understanding of what might (or might not) be happening. Sensitivity to issues of community trust and community engagement acted as a countervailing force in reaching such understandings.
* The responsibilities for dealing with such issues now lie across a number of partners, in what is a more fractured educational landscape.

**Puzzles/issues raised and insights gained**

* To what extent should people expect there to be ‘one voice’ within any community rather than recognising a plurality of opinions, a variety of behaviours, and sets of views that might well be open to change as new information emerges? To what extent is there recognition of the rich complexity under headline labels?
* To what extent can taking account of any particular sensibilities with respect to sexual morality, acceptable forms of music, imagery in art, integrated and segregated activities etc be accommodated within the existing National Curriculum expectations of schools? If not, what needs to change, if anything? Are these Muslim-only issues, or are there similar discussions to be had regarding what is acceptable to a range of different communities?
* To what extent should teachers’ or governors’ personal beliefs and actions be of concern to a school, or a local authority, or an academy management organisation, if these actions do not break any existing law?
* What are the most effective role and function (in practice) of any local independent director of school standards or independent commissioner of school improvements?
* How are schools expected to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain? Is this an expectation of all schools, whatever their status? Is the ‘modern Britain’ envisaged one of many cultures, underpinned by some universally applicable values?
* What is the role of Ofsted (To improve schools through inspection? To form public judgements on the basis of limited data and occasional observations?) What preparation is needed for Ofsted inspectors when undertaking specific inspections? What backgrounds and skills do they need? What screenings are appropriate (given that one of the central protagonists in the Trojan Horse Affair had himself been an inspector on behalf of Ofsted)? What safeguards are in place to stop schools preparing an artificial picture over the inspection period (importing external teachers for inspected lessons, rushing required documents into place etc)? What mechanisms are needed to ensure that reports are fair, accurate and not open to undue influence?
* If a situation has been allowed to develop where there is little mutual trust or respect across the major educational agencies (Department for Education, Ofsted, local authorities collectively, academy chains etc) how can things be moved forward onto a much more positive basis?
* In an era of freedom from monitoring unless things go wrong, who is the guardian of assuring that children are getting a good education? What are the criteria against which an education might be judged to be good or otherwise?
* If the agenda is ‘safeguarding’ – against the potential for radicalisation; against unilateral exposure to specific beliefs about groups of people or about life in Britain; against a restricting of the ethos and curriculum to promote a narrow monocultural inwardness that prevents full participation in modern life etc – then are schools, authorities, academy trusts, and government clear on what schools and others are expected to be doing both to ensure that children are safeguarded against such risks and to take action when any safeguards are breached?
* If there were substantial wishes from governors, staff, parents and the community for schools to have a strong faith-based ethos and curriculum, would the answer simply be for such schools to become overtly faith schools? How are the views of parents and communities to be realistically incorporated when such developments are proposed? Are there some bases of faith (‘hard-line Sunni extremist…..’) that would not be acceptable as the foundations of a faith school – and does that equally apply to other independent schools based on fundamental versions of various faiths? Is the very existence of faith schools incompatible with social inclusion?
* Is this the end of the Affair, or are there similar beliefs and practices still at play – and how would anyone know?

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