

A Momentous Occasion

A report on the
All Party Parliamentary Group
on Islamophobia
and its Secretariat

Dr Chris Allen

An independent report
produced on behalf of the
All Party Parliamentary
Group on Islamophobia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Chris Allen is a Research Fellow in the Institute of Applied Social Studies, School of Social Policy at the University of Birmingham.

Having completed his Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded doctoral studies exploring the discourse and theory of Islamophobia at Birmingham, Chris has since gone on to work closely with the House of Lords Select Committee on Religious Offences, the Centre for European Policy Studies, the Equality & Human Rights Commission, the European Commission on Security Issues in Europe and the Greater London Authority amongst others.

He was co-author of the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism & Xenophobia's (EUMC) synthesis report into Islamophobia in the EU after 9/11 - described in the European Parliament as "a seminal work" in putting Islamophobia on the European agenda – and last year published a monograph entitled, *Islamophobia* (Ashgate).

As well as in the UK, Chris has published chapters on Islamophobia and other key issues facing Muslim communities in Austria, Germany, Italy, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland and the United States. He has also presented his findings at conferences in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway amongst others.

IASS, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT

c.allen.2@bham.ac.uk

+44 (0)7940 537691

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1. INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of June 2011, I was approached by Simon Hughes MP on behalf of the Co-Chairs of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Islamophobia. Part of this approach was request that I produce a report which gives my “objective view” on the unfolding situation surrounding the APPG and its Secretariat. As part of this, I was also asked to consider “what criteria a group should meet if it is to be the secretariat of an organisation” and “how [the APPG] should move forward in the future”. It was agreed at the time that were I to take up this request, any ensuing report would be a “public document”.

This report is my response to this request: to set out my “objective view” of the unfolding events.

This report was researched and written in an extremely short time-frame, given the demands of the APPG and my own work-load. The entire process was undertaken in less than a week. As a result, I was only able to draw upon resources and information that were available in the public spaces or that were supplied to me by the APPG. Having stated this, I do not believe that this was entirely detrimental as the unfolding series of events had largely been played out in public spaces, in particular the media, internet and ‘blogosphere’. However, it is possible that some gaps will exist and I duly acknowledge this from the outset. There is also some anecdotal evidence – both personal and other – of ‘cloak and daggers’ activity having occurred, both in the run-up to the formation of the APPG and indeed since. I have tried – where possible – to refrain from conjecture and speculation and focus only on those issues that can be evidenced and identified in the public spaces albeit with the explicit understanding that other events have occurred ‘behind closed doors’.

On this point and indeed having written the report, I realise the complex and contentious nature of the issues and events that I have been asked to consider. Having researched Islamophobia and various associated issues for more than a decade now, I am fully aware of the consequences and backlashes that can – and probably will – ensue as a result of some of my findings and analyses. In spite of this, I took up the challenge as I remain firmly committed to encouraging informed and balanced discussion and debate about Islamophobia. There need is very real. I therefore support the APPG in the hope that it will be able to navigate the discussions and debates in such a way that it is able to bring about the change that is needed.

It is essential however that I maintain my independence and autonomy. I am non-partisan and non-party political and have received no remuneration whatsoever from the APPG, any organisation or indeed any other source for undertaking this task either financially or in kind. I stress this to pre-empt future criticisms. I reiterate therefore that the findings of this report reflect my own opinions and analyses without prejudice or favour.

Chris Allen, 15 July 2011

2. DEFINING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Without any doubt whatsoever, Islamophobia is an extraordinary phenomenon. Its recognition, whether as a term or concept, remains relatively new: its current usage and definition first appearing in print a mere 20 years ago. Over the two decades since however, it has become confused, conflated, contested and increasingly complex.

Emanating from the British setting, the Commission for British Muslims & Islamophobia (CBMI) published its highly influential report entitled *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* in 1997¹. The report was a watershed moment in the formal recognition of Islamophobia in the political spaces especially, describing it as:

“a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims”².

To explain the phenomenon, the report established a typology of ‘closed views’: these included amongst others Muslims and Islam as being enemies, violent, aggressive, threatening, separate and ‘other’. It also noted how Islamophobia was becoming increasingly normal. Despite the widespread adoption of the CBMI’s definition and closed views model, both have been shown to be flawed and open to contestation and rejection³. Emphasising the closed views, the CBMI established a simple premise from which those who wanted to contest or reject Islamophobia could easily do so: the argument being that if the ‘closed views’ equated to Islamophobia, so the ‘open views’ – the CBMI’s counter balance – had to equate to Islamophilia.

¹ Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all: report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997).

² p.1, *ibid.*

³ Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (London: Ashgate, 2010).

Promoting an abnormal liking or love for Islam and Muslims (i.e. Islamophilia) is as dangerous and damaging as indeed an abnormal hostility or hatred has the potential to be. For those who wanted to reject Islamophobia, this binary approach afforded them the opportunity to justify their rejection: arguing that combating Islamophobia was an insidious smokescreen behind which some Muslims, certain Muslim organisations and a handful of others were seeking to promote or impose a specific type of Islam on everyone. By countering Islamophobia with an abnormal love or liking of Islam and Muslims therefore, those who reject the very existence of Islamophobia have been able to argue that what has ensued is an environment where all criticism of Islam and Muslims – irrespective of legitimacy, validity or relevance – can be deflected or suppressed by merely playing the ‘Islamophobia card’. Within such polarised approaches, discussion, debate and indeed criticism are inadvertently forced into being defined as either ‘Islamophobic’ or ‘Islamophilic’, much of the time excluding and overlooking the nuance and complexity of the issues and events being considered.

This dilemma however is not new. Arguments put forward by Stuart Hall in relation to the anti-racism movement reflect the current dilemma facing the understanding of Islamophobia. Comparing this to what Hall described ‘the anti-racism problematic’⁴, the CBMI model – and indeed much of the debate and discussion about Islamophobia that is proffered by various individuals and organisations - remains overly simplistic where Islamophobia is argued as being bad just because it is. Despite this, many subscribe to, communicate and endorse a weak and insufficient understanding of what Islamophobia is: one that is backed up by a phoney and patronising rationale for opposing it.

It could be argued that there has been a comprehensive failure in effectively communicating what Islamophobia is and, as equally importantly, what Islamophobia is not. The latter is potentially easier to explain. Islamophobia is not for example about rightly condemning the

⁴ Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the crisis: mugging, the state and law and order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

handful of British Muslims who protested after the 7/7 attacks with shocking and despicable banners. Nor is it about rightly criticising the insensitivity of Islam4UK's planned protest and march in Wootton Bassett or the attempt to burn a poppy on Armistice Day. Neither is it about recognising that some from within Muslim communities – as in other communities also – are homophobic. Categorically, none of these are Islamophobic.

Islamophobia is on the other hand when ordinary British people are spat upon, shoved, verbally abused, discriminated against in the workplace, beaten up, have their houses graffitied and fire-bombed or even worse, just because they are – or are believed to be - Muslim. When ordinary British people are discriminated from being asked for interviews or given jobs on the basis that they have a 'Muslim' name that too is Islamophobia. Likewise, when blatant lies and mistruths appear in the media about Muslims and their organisations, it is likely that is Islamophobia also. These are of course just a handful of examples: the list of what is and what is not Islamophobia is exhaustive and will always be changing and varying as different circumstances and situations evolve.

A balanced and reasoned understanding of Islamophobia does not need to restrict or constrain criticism or condemnation: it does not require all to agree or believe in the tenets of Islam, the practices of some or all Muslims, or the views, attitudes, activities and actions of those who profess to be adherents to Islam, necessarily recognising the inherent diversity of Islam's adherents. But as a 'rule of thumb', when that disagreement, criticism or condemnation – including insidious stereotypes and deliberate mistruths - become used to promote, encourage or justify discrimination, hatred, bigotry or even violence whether ideologically in terms of attitudes and expressions or acts and actions against Muslims without any relevant and necessary differentiation, it is likely that this will be either motivated and driven by Islamophobia or will duly become manifested and expressed through Islamophobic acts.

3. EVIDENCING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Critics routinely argue that there is little evidence to substantiate the claims about the existence of Islamophobia and its prevalence. Such criticisms should not be rejected out of hand. There is – and indeed remains – a lack of quantitative data to substantiate the prevalence and voracity of Islamophobia. This needs to be addressed and it is something that the APPG should prioritise in terms of its future remit. This is not to state that Islamophobia does not exist: quite the contrary. It is merely to acknowledge that significantly more needs to be done to ensure that a more complete picture in terms of ‘numbers’ can be established.

Nonetheless, a significant body of qualitative evidence is available that for the past decade or so has shown that Islamophobia remains something very real in the lives of ordinary Muslims and seems to be increasing. Whilst it is not within the remit of this report to set out this evidence, incorporating a brief timeline – drawing primarily upon Governmental and policy-focused evidence – does provide a useful contextual framework within which the formation of the APPG in late 2010 can be better understood.

One of the reasons for the creation of the CBMI and the publication of its 1997 report, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*, was that in the preceding 20 years, commentators felt that anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic expression and attitudes had become “more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous...prevalent in all sections of society”⁵. It referred to this ‘more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous’ phenomenon as a new reality which needed naming.

⁵ Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all: report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997), 1.

A few years later, a report by the Home Office into religious discrimination - *Religious discrimination in England & Wales: Home Office research study 220* - noted how “hostility and violence were very real concerns for organisations representing Muslims...The majority of Muslim respondents thought that hostility, verbal abuse and unfair media coverage had become more frequent...”⁶. The report went on to add that “...a consistently higher level of unfair treatment was reported by Muslim organisations than by most other religious groups”⁷.

As a response to the events of 9/11, the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia’s (EUMC) synthesis report into Islamophobia in the European Union (EU) noted as regards the UK a “...significant rise in attacks on Muslims [that] was reported across a range of media in the immediate aftermath of September 11”⁸. Incidents of violent assault, verbal abuse and attacks on property were noted although the report added that Muslim women, especially those wearing the hijab, were the most likely targets for such things as “verbal abuse, being spat upon, having their hijab torn from them and being physically assaulted”⁹. Mosques were also attacked, ranging from minor vandalism to arson and firebombs.

The report also noted the disproportionate amount of coverage offered to more extremist Muslim groups and individuals. As the report put it, this meant that “...less sensationalist Muslim voices were mainly overlooked”¹⁰. It noted how the British National Party (BNP) and

⁶ Paul Weller et al, *Religious discrimination in England & Wales: Home Office research study 220* (London: Home Office, 2001), vi

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Chris Allen & Jorgen Nielsen *European Monitoring Centre for Racism & Xenophobia: Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*. (Vienna: EUMC, 2002) 29.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

other far-right organisations were gaining success on the back of: “highly explicit Islamophobic campaign[s]”¹¹.

The 2004 report, *Islamophobia: issues, challenges and action*¹² was a follow up to the CBMI's 1997 report. Recognising “disappointment and concern”¹³, the report noted that while some change was in evidence, the negative impact from 9/11 was having a significant impact on Britain’s Muslim communities. Providing examples of how Muslim women had their scarves forcibly pulled from their heads or had alcohol thrown at them, the report quoted sources as having evidence of clubbing incidents with bats, an attack on a Muslim child with pepper spray and another Muslim who was deliberately run over by a car¹⁴. The report also noted how the victims were unlikely to report such incidents due to the fact that many had little confidence in the police.

Providing an update to the sixty recommendations made in the original 1997 report, a series of priorities for 2004-2010 were identified. These priorities were necessary, the report argued, to highlight the many-pronged approach that was required to combat Islamophobia. Many of these priorities have since been acted upon and incorporated in various pieces of legislation – not least the Equality Act 2006 – and its recognition of the religion or belief strand of equalities. However as it went on, to truly combat Islamophobia, “legislation and regulation have important parts to play, but so also do ethical and professional codes of practice, the campaigning and lobbying efforts in the voluntary and community sector, and good will amongst individuals”¹⁵.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Commission on British Muslims & Islamophobia *Islamophobia: issues, challenges & action*. (London: Trentham Books, 2004).

¹³ *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 80.

The following year, a report for the Open Society Institute stated that British Muslims were the most likely to report very serious problems or experiences in relation to seven out of nine indicators of unfair treatment¹⁶, adding that things had become far worse since 9/11. Religion rather than 'race' or ethnicity was recognised as being a more important marker upon which discrimination was based, echoing the EUMC report's acknowledgement that individuals were being increasingly targeted on the visible markers of what it was perceived to be Muslim¹⁷.

The report also highlighted the findings from a survey conducted by the BBC in 2004. Submitting a number of fictitious job applications, the BBC did so using applicants with the same qualifications and work experience but with different names. The findings showed that a quarter of the applications by candidates with traditionally English sounding names were successful in securing an interview compared to only 13% of those with Black African names. More worryingly, of those with Muslim names just 9% were successful (p.18).

Quoting a variety of different polls and surveys, the report noted how since 9/11: 80% of Muslim respondents reported being subjected to Islamophobia; 68% feeling they had been perceived and treated differently; and 32% being subjected to discrimination at UK airports¹⁸. The report went on to suggest that general attitudes and treatment based on stereotypes and prejudice were one of the most prominent ways in which Muslims encounter discrimination noting how young Muslim men had "...emerged as the new 'folk devils' of popular and media imagination, being represented as the embodiment of fundamentalism...dangerous individuals with a capacity for violence and/ or terrorism"¹⁹. It went on to add that Muslims were increasingly being seen to be 'culturally dangerous' and threatening of the British 'way of life'.

¹⁶ Open Society Institute *Muslims in the UK: policies for engaged citizens* (London: OSI, 2005) 17.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 18.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 19.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

Following on from earlier reports, the EUMC published two reports simultaneously in 2007. One considered the evidence gathered by its 25 National Focal Points of its Racism and Xenophobia European Information Network (RAXEN) which showed that since 9/11, European Muslims had become seriously affected by an increasingly hostile social climate. The other reported the findings from 58 in-depth interviews with members of Muslim communities in 10 EU countries with significant Muslim populations. Both were designed to be read in conjunction with each other.

In the first, *Muslims in the European Union - Discrimination and Islamophobia*, the report highlighted how “Muslims are often victims of negative stereotyping, at times reinforced through negative or selective reporting in the media” adding that Muslims “...are vulnerable to manifestations of prejudice and hatred in the form of anything from verbal threats through to physical attacks on people and property”²⁰.

At the European level, this prompted the Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) to publish two relevant General Policy Recommendations: General Policy Recommendation No. 5 combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims (CRI (2000) 21) and General Policy Recommendation No. 7 on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination (CRI (2003) 8)²¹.

At the national level, data from the Crown Prosecution Service's (CPS) racist incident monitoring reports highlighted how in the aftermath of 7/7, “there was an upsurge in 'faith hate' incidents recorded by the London Metropolitan Police Service”²². Whilst these appeared to return to normal levels within a few weeks, the report noted how the Forum Against Islamophobia & Racism (FAIR) recorded in the period 2004-2005 more than 50 cases of violence against Muslim property - including places of worship - and over 100 cases of

²⁰ European Monitoring Centre on Racism & Xenophobia *Muslims in the European Union - Discrimination and Islamophobia* (Vienna: EUMC, 2007) 8.

²¹ *ibid*, 12-13.

²² *ibid*, 17.

verbal threats and abusive behaviour. Despite this, the report warned that the true extent and nature of Islamophobia remains unknown not least because such incidents remain severely underreported and under-documented²³.

In the second report, *Perceptions of discrimination and Islamophobia: Voices from members of Muslim communities in the European Union*, the impact of 9/11 was again significant. Focusing on the British setting, many Muslims felt that they had been placed under “intense scrutiny” and that there had been an “increase in open incidents of everyday hostility”²⁴. Most agreed that the situation had deteriorated over the last five years. Many felt that Islamophobia, discrimination, and socio-economic marginalisation were significant factors in generating disaffection and alienation and that this had been made worse by the overwhelmingly negative representation of Muslims and Islam in the media. Key to this was the way that the media represented Islam as “monolithic, authoritarian and oppressive towards women”²⁵.

Recalling earlier reports, Islamophobia was once again shown to manifest itself in everyday situations where Muslims were recognisably visible. Despite the fact that the majority of attacks were verbal rather than physical or violent, the report noted how Muslims were easily ‘wore down’ by such daily experiences²⁶. The everyday nature of Islamophobia was highlighted by the perception that it was becoming increasingly expressed in the small details of every day encounters: “in passing comments, in jokes, in the way Muslims are observed and looked at by others”²⁷. Victims rarely felt confident enough to be able to challenge most instances of discrimination or Islamophobia. As a result, Islamophobia remains largely unchallenged.

²³ *ibid*, 8.

²⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism & Xenophobia *Perceptions of discrimination and Islamophobia: Voices from members of Muslim communities in the European Union* (Vienna: EUMC, 2007) 7.

²⁵ *ibid*, 8.

²⁶ *ibid*, 9.

²⁷ *ibid*.

Since then, various other reports have been produced which further reinforce the wide ranging nature and impact of Islamophobia. A report from Cardiff University in 2008, *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008*, noted the detrimental social impact of:

“the increasing importance of stories focusing on religious and cultural differences between Islam and British culture or the West in general (22% of stories overall) or Islamic extremism (11% overall). Indeed, 2008 was the first year in which the volume of stories about religious and cultural differences (32% of stories by 2008) overtook terrorism related stories (27% by 2008). Coverage of attacks on or problems facing Muslims, on the other hand, has steadily declined as a proportion of coverage. In sum, we found that the bulk of coverage of British Muslims - around two thirds - focuses on Muslims as a threat (in relation to terrorism), a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general).”²⁸

And most recently, a June 2011 published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) which sets out the evidence base for religious discrimination in Britain since the year 2000, highlights how having considered a wide range of different sources, it “...suggests that Muslims appear to experience religious discrimination with a frequency and seriousness that is proportionately greater than that experienced by those of other religions”²⁹.

What does not come through this indicative overview of the evidence to support the very real existence of Islamophobia is the detrimental impact it can have on British society. This can be seen in the findings from 2010’s British Social Attitudes Survey. Findings from the annual survey showed that 52% of respondents believe that today’s Britain is deeply divided along religious lines; that 45% of ordinary British people believe that religious diversity is

²⁸ K. Moore, P. Mason & K. Lewis *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008* (Cardiff: University of Cardiff, 2008) 4.

²⁹ Paul Weller *Religious discrimination in Britain: a review of research evidence, 2000-10* (London: EHRC, 2011) 41.

having a negative impact on society; and that more than half would oppose the building of a large mosque at the end of their road as opposed to 15% who would object were that building to be a church. None of these attitudes are, in isolation, Islamophobic per se. But they might be – when considered in the wider social and political contexts – evidence of a hardening of perceptions and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam that are being founded upon the misunderstandings and misrepresentations that can and indeed are being exacerbated to the extent that they may at some time in the future translate into more overt Islamophobic attitudes, acts and attacks.

4. THE APPG & SECRETARIAT

NARRATIVE

This section of the report draws upon secondary resources and information freely available in the public spaces during the period of 11-15 July 2011. Some limited information was also provided by the office of Simon Hughes MP.

Whilst most of the unfolding series of events considered in this section were played out in the public spaces - notably the media, internet and 'blogosphere' – there is a possibility that some gaps will exist and this is expressly acknowledged at the outset.

It is also necessary to note that none of the 'players' were interviewed or spoken to directly. Whilst a handful of individuals were willing to be consulted, it was felt that without the input of all those concerned, speaking to just a few might skew the findings in one way or another.

The first evidence of activity relating to the establishment of an APPG on Islamophobia took place on 3 March 2010 when the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) hosted a special closed-meeting at the Grand Committee Room of the House of Commons to discuss the growing spate of attacks in all its forms against British Muslims³⁰. Held in partnership with the Muslim Safety Forum (MSF) and the University of Exeter's European Muslim Research Centre (EMRC), the meeting brought together various Parliamentarians, academics,

³⁰ http://www.mcb.org.uk/article_detail.php?article=announcement-862

journalists, police, public servants, and community representatives who endorsed calls for the establishment of an APPG on Islamophobia with a view to holding a parliamentary inquiry on Islamophobia after the forthcoming general election. Notable attendees included Dr Phyllis Starkey MP, David Burrows MP, Dan Rogerson MP, Baron Ahmed of Rotherham, Baron Sheikh of Cornhill and Baron Hylton of Hylton. Messages of support were received from Jeremy Corbyn MP and Diane Abbott MP also.

During the summer of 2010 and in response to the March event, the MCB circulated a draft document to various commentators and experts to support of the establishment of an APPG on Islamophobia. The document was produced in partnership with the MSF and the EMRC and was supported by an extremely broad coalition of organisations and institutions: the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo), Institute of Race Relations (IRR), Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB), National Association of Muslim Police (NAMPP), Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Runnymede Trust. It is unclear what happened to this draft document or indeed the coalition behind it. Likewise, it is unknown whether this document was submitted to Parliament and if so, what its outcomes were if indeed any.

In September, a briefing document for MPS was also in circulation from ENGAGE (sometimes also known as iENGAGE)³¹. In setting out a range of material, the document argued:

“While the British government has been proactive in tackling race equality through legislation and reports on the state of the nation’s health in the equality scales, the limitations of the Race Relations Act and incitement to religious hatred legislation in protecting the rights of British Muslims has not met with the same level of concern or political will to engage proactively in challenging Islamophobia...

³¹ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/images/stories/islamophobiabriefing.pdf>

...In establishing an All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia, we are seeking the inclusion of Muslims in the official public discourse and policies of the state with a specific focus on eradicating a menace that threatens to continue to obstruct Muslim integration and hinder the identification of Muslims with the British nation and the British people.

This briefing advances the case for the establishment of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia to demonstrate the political will of politicians in the UK to address a serious and growing concern among human rights agencies and Muslim communities of the exponential rise in anti-Muslim hostility, prejudice and violence”³²

Two months later, the APPG on Islamophobia was formed and duly launched, reported on the official Parliament website as having held its first Annual General Meeting on 15 November 2010³³. The purpose of the Group was:

“To investigate the forms, manifestations and extent of prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the UK today.

To review the effectiveness of all legislation with a view to improving the rate of success in the prosecution of hate crimes.

To review existing mechanisms for the recording of anti-Muslim hate crimes both through police forces across the country and through third party reporting sites with a view to improving data quality and comprehensiveness.

To investigate and review the role of the media in fostering mutual respect and tolerance and guarding against misrepresentations of Islam and intolerance towards Muslims”³⁴

A press release from ENGAGE a week or so later, on 24 November 2010 confirmed the formation of the APPG³⁵:

³² <http://www.iengage.org.uk/images/stories/islamophobiabriefing.pdf>, p.41

³³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmhallparty/register/islamophobia.htm>

³⁴ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmhallparty/register/islamophobia.htm>

“An All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia has been launched in the House of Commons.

At its inaugural Annual General Meeting, members elected Keighley and Ilkley Conservative MP Kris Hopkins to serve as its Chair with Liberal Democrat Deputy Leader Simon Hughes and Labour peer Lord Janner of Braunstone as Vice-Chairs.

The Group has so far attracted the interest of more than 20 MPs and peers from across both Houses of Parliament.”

The press release went on to quote Hopkins as describing the establishment of the APPG as a “momentous occasion”, noting that:

“Whilst challenges will undoubtedly arise in the weeks and months ahead, my colleagues and I are hugely committed to the task in hand...I believe there is already a very strong resolve amongst members to better understand the complex issues involved, and to propose considered, evidence based policies to tackle Islamophobia wherever it exists”³⁶.

Announcing also that ENGAGE had been appointed Secretariat, its CEO Mohammed Asif stated:

“There are many Muslim organisations which have worked for many months to see this project come to fruition.

It’s been a long, hard struggle but the work now begins in earnest with parliamentarians taking the reins and leading the way.

³⁵ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/images/stories/appgpr241110.pdf>

³⁶ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/images/stories/appgpr241110.pdf>

There will be many challenges moving forward but we intend to travel to all parts of the UK to take evidence and record experiences to ensure members hear the voices of the Muslim community”³⁷

In its briefing document to MPs, ENGAGE described itself as:

“...a Muslim NGO dedicated to improving media, civic and political engagement by British Muslims”³⁸

A day later, an article appeared on the *Daily Telegraph* website written by the journalist Andrew Gilligan. Entitled “*Islamists establish a bridgehead in Parliament*”³⁹, the article stated that “Islamist sympathisers” had established a “key bridgehead” in Parliament. Listing those who attended the inaugural meeting of the APPG, he stated:

“I’m quite certain all these people are sincere individuals who would have no truck with Islamism or extremism. Indeed, at least one of them is Jewish. But they are being used. They need to look much more closely at who they are getting into bed with”⁴⁰

It is important to note that as well as setting out a number of criticisms and allegations against ENGAGE, Gilligan also notes how he and the organisations have been critical of each other in the past⁴¹. Of the allegations, Gilligan supports these with links to a range of different articles as well as a letter from ENGAGE to the Home Secretary⁴². Broadly, these allegations suggested that ENGAGE was an organisation:

- of “Islamist sympathisers”

³⁷ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/images/stories/appgpr241110.pdf>

³⁸ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/images/stories/islamophobiabriefing.pdf>, p.5

³⁹ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100065538/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament/>

⁴⁰ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100065538/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament/>

⁴¹ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/home/1-news/1078-andrew-gilligan-continues-his-crusade-against-the-east-london-mosque>

⁴² <http://iengage.org.uk/images/stories/theresamay240610.pdf>

- which “consistently [defends] fundamentalist organisations”
- that “routinely attacks all criticism of them as ‘Islamophobic’”
- and of criticising “voices of moderate Islam”

Whilst Gilligan sought to evidence these allegations, he also questioned the view that Islamophobia was as significant a problem as the APPG or ENGAGE – it is unclear which – seemed to suggest:

“There is no question that Muslims face substantial bigotry and discrimination in this country – although the claim, often made by Islamists, that it is “rising” flies in the face of all the empirical evidence”⁴³

Gilligan concluded that whilst there may still be some need for the APPG, there should be no room for it to be supported by “Islamist sympathisers”:

“Because too often, the charge of “Islamophobia” has been used by Islamists to stifle and deter examination of their own actions.

They deliberately conflate Islamism (followed by a tiny minority of British Muslims) with the entire faith of Islam, and accuse anyone who scrutinises or attacks their minority brand of fundamentalism of being “anti-Muslim.”

That is basically iEngage’s entire purpose”⁴⁴

He concluded by suggesting that MPs might not want to be involved with the APPG because of the allegations made about ENGAGE.

Gilligan’s article prompted an immediate response from ENGAGE via its own website on 26 November 2010⁴⁵. The response article accused Gilligan of “hypocrisy”, of “smearing and

⁴³ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100065538/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament/>

⁴⁴ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100065538/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament/>

⁴⁵ <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/1116-a-response-to-andrew-gilligans-smears-about-engage>

slander”, of employing “the art of selected citations” and of “smear[ing] Muslim organizations and accus[ing] them”⁴⁶. It concluded:

“The right of British Muslims to engage in political debate and to argue, criticize or applaud developments in policy and political discourse that upholds and strengthens our shared values and our equal citizenship is steadily undermined by the nefarious efforts of Gilligan and others who with their “Islamists under the bed” rhetoric look to create a Britain of unequal citizenship for its British Muslim citizens. Shame on you Andrew Gilligan.”

The article was personalised and written in what might reasonably be described as polemical.

On the 29 November 2010, Paul Goodman posted an article entitled “*Three tests for a new All-Party Group on Islamophobia*”⁴⁷ on the *Conservative Home* website⁴⁸. In it, Goodman claimed to be the first MP to call for a Parliamentary inquiry into Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime, a point he evidenced with an article on the same website dated 9 March 2010⁴⁹. In that article, Goodman argued:

"There are calls at present for an all-party inquiry into Islamophobia – mirroring the previous all-party enquiry into anti-Semitism. I doubt whether the comparison holds. As I wrote earlier, there’s no Muslim equivalent of the Community Security Trust. This is doubtless because Britain’s Jewish and Muslim communities are very different: the national background, ethnicity, languages, and theological approach of the latter vary enormously. It’s hard to envisage an All-Party Group on Islamophobia representing the interests of all Britain’s diverse Muslim communities...”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/1116-a-response-to-andrew-gilligans-smears-about-engage>

⁴⁷ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

⁴⁸ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/>

⁴⁹ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/centreright/2010/03/how-parliament-should-confront-antimuslim-hatred-and-violence.html>

⁵⁰ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/centreright/2010/03/how-parliament-should-confront-antimuslim-hatred-and-violence.html>

At the time, Goodman expressed his concern about any Group being “infiltrated” by “Islamist groups” which might exploit the opportunity for their own aims. However, Goodman argued that this was neither a reason to exclude such groups from any inquiry nor establish one in the first place. As he put it:

“[Any inquiry] should take evidence as widely as possible. If the Jamaat e Islami or the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to make representations, they should be allowed to do so. So should think-tanks specialising in counter-extremism, such as the Quilliam Foundation or Centri. So should the police. So should those who believe (wrongly, in my view) that Islamophobia is an imaginary construct, and doesn’t exist at all.

Could such an inquiry be exploited by Islamists? Yes. Is that a good reason for not having it? No. Why? Because the problem of the hatred of Muslims and anti-Muslim violence, in particular, is grave. It's a wound that can only fester. Parliament has a role to play in drawing the poison.”⁵¹

In his 29 November article, Goodman puts forward the same view. Uncritically setting out the allegations made by Gilligan against ENGAGE in his *Telegraph* article, Goodman stated:

“It would be easy to fix the spotlight on Engage, and ask further questions about the organisation. However, it would also be wrong, at least at this stage”⁵²

He went on:

“Rather, the light should be shining on those MPs and Peers involved with the group. After all, they - and not some outside body - are responsible for the project: where it meets on the Parliamentary estate, who comes to those meetings, what's said, what's done, what's published”⁵³

⁵¹ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/centreright/2010/03/how-parliament-should-confront-antimuslim-hatred-and-violence.html>

⁵² <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

⁵³ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

Having stated this, Goodman presented an argument about the aim of some “British Islamists”: to gain “credibility, patronage and muscle”. In doing so he implied that organisations such as the Cordoba Foundation and the MCB were ‘British Islamists’ and that the Global Peace and Unity conference for instance was an event organised by ‘Islamists’. He further implied that such groups had made some headway with a range of different Parliamentarians including Simon Hughes, Jack Straw, Sadiq Khan and John Denham. It would seem that much of this was party political with Goodman reiterating how the Conservative Party had taken a much firmer stance against ‘Islamists’: “to date, the various Islamist movements have had little joy with the Conservative Party”.

Goodman referenced this back to the APPG:

“But a minority view within the Party dissents from Cameron's approach to these matters, and a small minority of Tory MPs doubtless think that there are benefits to engaging with such groups as Engage”⁵⁴

He went on:

“But while meeting Engage is one thing, permitting or encouraging it to run an All-Party Parliamentary Group quite another. This, by the way, is what the secretariat to an All-Party Group can effectively do, in some circumstances. I expect that the group, mirroring the All-Party Group on Anti-Semitism, will want to hold a formal inquiry, along the lines of a Select Committee one. This would ask for written evidence, take oral evidence, and draft and produce a report. In such circumstances, the secretariat concerned would issue invitations, handle arrangements, write a draft.”⁵⁵

Goodman set out three conditions for what he believed to be necessary if the APPG was to be successful. These were:

⁵⁴ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

⁵⁵ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

- a different Secretariat should be appointed
- any enquiry must take a wide range of evidence
- any conclusions must be practical

Under the first condition, Goodman set out a criteria for the Secretariat:

“the secretariat concerned must be representative of British Muslims (in so far as this is possible); certainly trusted by the various political, ethnic, national interests concerned; expert, and dispassionate”⁵⁶

Applying this to the suitability of ENGAGE he concluded:

“...it doesn't fit this bill. It's essentially a monitoring website or an attack website (depending on one's point of view) which targets non-Islamist Muslims in particular...It's unclear who staffs it. Over the last two weeks, its 37 posts have prompted a mere 47 comments. Its Newsletter section contains only two items: the last one is dated October 2009. This doesn't suggest that it has a large readership, or is representative of any significant interest.”⁵⁷

Under the other two conditions, Goodman reiterated the need for a wide range of voices to be heard as part of any inquiry, “all probed no less vigorously than anyone else”. Any “recommendations must concentrate on establishing facts; refining data; improving reporting; protecting mosques, worshippers, schools, pupils, events and citizens; working with the police; exchanging ideas with other religious groups”⁵⁸.

ENGAGE immediately responded to Goodman, again via its website⁵⁹. Claiming Goodman had set out “another set of false claims and risible arguments”, the response personalised the debate, made several comparisons of Goodman to Gilligan, and was lengthy. Honing in

⁵⁶ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

⁵⁷ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

⁵⁸ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

⁵⁹ <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/1135-engage-responds-to-paul-goodman>

on the suggestion by Goodman that ENGAGE was not a suitable organisation for the Secretariat, the response suggested that Goodman had overlooked:

“...the various submissions we have contributed to Government consultations, our campaign during the election to “Get out and vote” or the public hustings we organized around the country during the election campaign. Strange too that of the more than a thousand articles that can be found on our website, from attacks on Muslim places of worship to reviews of TV programmes, or coverage of legislation and court judgments impacting on ongoing search for the right balance between security and liberty”⁶⁰

The response also explained ENGAGE’s dislike of the terms ‘Islamism’ and ‘Islamist’.

Responding to Goodman’s question about “who staffs” ENGAGE, the response somewhat bizarrely compared not knowing who staffed ENGAGE to who ‘staffed’ the “Harry’s Place” blog⁶¹. ENGAGE was an organisation appointed as Secretariat to an APPG, Harry’s Place is a blog: it was far from being a like-for-like comparison. ENGAGE also made reference to the Quilliam Foundation and its recent decision to remove details of its advisers “because they wished not to expose their advisors to abusive emails or other harassment”. It concluded by stating that:

“When character assassination becomes one of the most frequently used tools to deter individuals with contrasting opinions from making any headway, is it any wonder that full disclosure is not forthcoming? Trust engenders trust and respect engenders respect. This is not to suggest that the names of individuals working for ENGAGE or serving as its Trustees are things that we will not disclose at any time. But the decision to do so and its timing should not dictate our suitability for the role of secretariat.”⁶²

⁶⁰ <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/1135-engage-responds-to-paul-goodman>

⁶¹ <http://hurryupharry.org/>

⁶² <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/1135-engage-responds-to-paul-goodman>

Whilst various other countering arguments were set out in the lengthy rebuttal, two further points are worthy of note: the assumptions made about Goodman's approach to any ensuing enquiry; and the focus on the Quilliam Foundation. In the first, ENGAGE overlooked the fact that Goodman clearly stated that a wide range of different voices must be heard in any inquiry, "all probed no less vigorously than anyone else". In the second, ENGAGE referred to the Quilliam Foundation seven times. Given that Quilliam seemingly had little bearing on the Goodman's article, the focus on them would seem to be somewhat unnecessary.

On the same day, the *Jewish Chronicle*⁶³ published the following joint statement from Kris Hopkins MP and Lord Janner⁶⁴:

"History has taught us that there is a clear need to address religious hatred in any way it manifests itself.

The APPG on Islamophobia is about facing up to hatred against the Muslim community, and its establishment is clearly appropriate at this time.

In common with many APPGs, the idea of having an external organisation provide administrative support was deemed a sensible and practical way forward.

Sincere concerns have been raised regarding Engage's suitability to be the secretariat for the APPG. The Islamophobia APPG needs to be seen to be above reproach and political leaning, in order to have trust and confidence in the process."

This situation is not sustainable and it is therefore our intention, to call a meeting of the group at the earliest opportunity, to recommend that we dispense with the services of Engage."

On the same day, the *Jewish Chronicle* published a further article written by Martin Bright, "*Anti-Islamophobia parliamentary group drop 'Islamist' secretariat*"⁶⁵. In it, Bright stated

⁶³ <http://www.thejc.com>

⁶⁴ <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/42310/joint-statement-kris-hopkins-mp-and-lord-janner>

that the APPG had been “forced to end” its partnership with the ‘Islamist’ organisation ENGAGE, an organisation described as being one which “has campaigned against ‘Zionist’ teachings at Jewish schools...defended radical Islamist preachers and targeted moderate Muslim groups”. Bright further claimed that:

“the organisation also has an explicit anti-Zionist agenda with regular posts on its website about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The organisation argues that the injustice of the treatment of Palestinians feeds global Islamophobia.”⁶⁶

Bright stated that the Chair of the APPG, Kris Hopkins, had a change of heart following the publication of the Goodman article a week before, alleging also that “at least one former Labour minister warned Lord Janner to steer clear of Engage and senior members of the Jewish community have also raised their concerns”. It was as a result of this, the article alleges, that Hopkins and Janner asked ENGAGE to withdraw their support. In what was described as “a surprise move”, Bright quoted a statement from Simon Hughes who continued to back the organisation:

“Engage is an organisation which promotes the participation and engagement of young Muslims in the public sphere. Occasionally this may mean that the group represents views that others may disagree with.

But as long as they stay within the law and enter into the spirit of a democratic dialogue, I have no problem with them providing support to the APPG on Islamophobia, a group which exists precisely to advance reasoned debate on faith issues in our country.”⁶⁷

On 8 December 2010, Goodman posted a further article on the *Conservative Home* website. Entitled “*All Party Islamophobia Group ‘to dispense with the services of Engage’*”⁶⁸, the

⁶⁵ <http://www.thejc.com/politics/42307/anti-islamophobia-parliamentary-group-drop-islamist-secretariat>

⁶⁶ <http://www.thejc.com/politics/42307/anti-islamophobia-parliamentary-group-drop-islamist-secretariat>

⁶⁷ <http://www.thejc.com/politics/42307/anti-islamophobia-parliamentary-group-drop-islamist-secretariat>

⁶⁸ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/12/all-party-islamophobia-group-to-dispense-with-the-services-of-engage.html>

article stated that the decision by Hopkins and Janner was, in his opinion, the correct one. He added that “it's essential to find a credible, expert and dispassionate secretariat as soon as possible”. Goodman concluded by asking a pertinent question:

“...a mystery remains: who suggested the proposed secretariat arrangement in the first place? The answer's yet to be found.”⁶⁹

The following day, ENGAGE addressed a letter to the APPG⁷⁰. The letter set out many of the same refutations and arguments it had included in its response to Goodman. In the second part of the letter, entitled “*What is at stake here and why is your support absolutely crucial?*”, ENGAGE claimed:

“the trial by blog run by Gilligan and Goodman has been welcomed by the English Defence League. Further examples of anti-Muslim commentary can be found under the blog articles of Gilligan and Goodman – a blatant indication of the kind of hysteria and anti-Muslim prejudice the APPG was set up to address”

For ENGAGE:

“The fundamental issue at stake here is whether the interest ENGAGE has generated on the blogs of Gilligan and Goodman, and not on any account of its performance as a secretariat (since no work of the APPG has yet advanced), is sufficient to defend the decision of removing it as secretariat. In our view the primary question to ask is WHY we seem to have attracted the attention of Gilligan and Goodman and on what grounds they defend the accusation that we are “Islamists.”

They went on:

“If the work of an APPG is to address anti-Muslim prejudice and the discourses that foment anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia, capitulating on this matter at the behest of Gilligan and Goodman and their false claims against ENGAGE will irrevocably demonstrate the weakness of the APPG in tackling the very problems

⁶⁹ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/12/all-party-islamophobia-group-to-dispense-with-the-services-of-engage.html>

⁷⁰ Letter supplied to author by the APPG – no online or public copies would appear to be currently available

British Muslims face and will only augur ill for anything that may pursue henceforth in the work of the APPG.”

A further letter was sent by ENGAGE to the APPG⁷¹. Albeit undated, it would seem to have emerged around this time given that it was a response to the “joint statement issued by Kris Hopkins MP and Lord Janner of Braunstone QC”. It is necessary to acknowledge however that the letter may have been issued earlier or indeed later given that it was undated. For ENGAGE, the letter included “...information on organisations active in the third sector which, like us, work to support APPGs of direct interest by offering secretarial services”. In doing so, it was hoped that this would “...provide sufficient information to address the allegation that our ‘political leanings’ somehow render us unsuitable to serve as secretariat by pointing to precedents set by other APPGs and the organisations that serve them”.

The letter included information about a range of different APPGs and the respective organisations appointed as Secretariat. These included the APPGs on (Secretariat in brackets) Electoral Reform (Electoral Reform Society), Genocide and Crimes against Humanity (Aegis Trust), Homeland Security (Henry Jackson Society), Humanism (British Humanist Association), Race and Community (Runnymede Trust) and Women, Peace and Security (Gender Action for Peace and Security). ENGAGE argued that the criticisms being made about its ‘political leanings’ “...meaning advocacy for particular interests and objectives would make us no different to the organisations listed”. It concluded:

“We seek to be treated no differently to other organisations that have supported the formation of APPGs and/or serve them as secretariat. It would seem to us that we are being unfairly targeted and efforts to recommend our removal as secretariat is a clear case of discrimination.”

⁷¹ Letter supplied to author by the APPG – no online or public copies would appear to be currently available

ENGAGE did not withdraw as Secretariat following the request by Hopkins and Janner. Instead, it launched an online petition that “strongly disapprove[d] of the joint statement issued by Kris Hopkins MP and Lord Janner...” and for ENGAGE’s removal as Secretariat “...to be rejected”⁷². Addressed to Members of Parliament, the petition cited both Gilligan’s and Goodman’s articles as evidence of two “deeply disturbing issues” to have emerged out of the affair. The first was the suggestion that ENGAGE was being placed on “trial by blog” with bloggers and others allegedly directly influencing the opinions and views of elected officials; the second were the allegations that ENGAGE was unsuitable as the Secretariat because of its “political leanings”, especially it being “anti-Zionist”. As of 11 July 2011, the petition had 539 signatories.

On 21 December 2010, ENGAGE launched a Facebook page for supporters entitled, “*ACTION ALERT! Recommendation to remove ENGAGE as Secretariat to APPG on Islamophobia*”⁷³. It stated that:

“If the work of an APPG is to address anti-Muslim prejudice and the discourses that foment anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia, capitulating on this matter will irrevocably demonstrate the weakness of the APPG in tackling the very problems British Muslims face and will only bode ill for anything that may ensue henceforth in the work of the APPG”⁷⁴

It added that if supporters did not “Resist this pressure and signal, through support of ENGAGE as secretariat, that no amount of anti-Muslim prejudice will go unchallenged”. A day later, ENGAGE wrote to its supporters asking for their help in “resisting a concerted campaign by bloggers and Islamophobes to remove ENGAGE from the secretariat of the recently established All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia”⁷⁵. Suggesting that Hopkins and Janner had acted bilaterally, the communication stated that ENGAGE’s supporters needed to resist: “right wing bloggers and the pro-Zionist lobby”.

⁷² <http://www.petitiononline.com/iengage/petition.html>

⁷³ http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=183222735037478

⁷⁴ http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=183222735037478

⁷⁵ <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2010/12/22/appg-on-islamophobia-please-support-engage.html>

In the month following the joint Hopkins and Janner statement, the APPG - more precisely ENGAGE and its suitability as Secretariat – was widely discussed in the ‘blogosphere’. Preliminary research suggests that much of this was in support of Hopkins and Janner although no assessment of the political persuasion on this support was undertaken. Following a meeting of the APPG, Gilligan wrote again in the *Daily Telegraph* that both Hopkins and Janner had resigned from their positions having failed to persuade colleagues to formally remove ENGAGE as Secretariat and having granted a Commons security pass to Shenaz Bunglawala⁷⁶. The article referred to Bunglawala as “an Islamist sympathiser” and ENGAGE as “an organisation of Islamist sympathisers which has repeatedly defended extremists”.

On the same day, Gilligan posted an update to his November article on the *Telegraph* blog. Having amended the title to “*Islamists establish a bridgehead in Parliament, get Commons pass: MP and peer resign*”⁷⁷, Gilligan described ENGAGE as “an extremely dubious bunch of people”. He also reproduced an email circulated by Hopkins and Janner to fellow members of the APPG:

“It is our belief that the Group needs to be seen as above reproach and political leaning in order to maintain trust and confidence in its work.

Whilst iEngage are perfectly entitled to express their views, we did not believe it appropriate for them to do so whilst continuing to act for the Group.

An orchestrated lobbying campaign on behalf of iEngage since we issued our statement has only served to reinforce our opinion.

However, after consulting with several colleagues since Parliament’s return from recess, it appears that this campaign has also persuaded some that iEngage should remain in place.

⁷⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/andrew-gilligan/8290965/MPs-walk-out-in-battle-over-Islamist-group.html>

⁷⁷ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100074022/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament-get-commons-pass-mp-and-peer-resign/>

Whilst it is obviously a matter for members to decide on what – if any – role iEngage should play in the Group, we no longer feel able to remain a part of it.

We have therefore decided to relinquish our positions as Chair and Vice Chair, and our memberships, with immediate effect.”⁷⁸

Gilligan concluded:

“The feebleness of the remaining members of the APPG and their willingness to bow to an “orchestrated campaign” by Islamists has dealt a fatal blow to the credibility of the group. No report it produces can now be taken seriously and no credible MP or peer should wish to be associated with it.”⁷⁹

On 3 February 2011, Conservative MP for Harlow Robert Halfon raised the issue of ENGAGE and the APPG in the House of Commons. The *London Evening Standard* reported that as a consequence of ENGAGE being granted access to the Parliamentary estate, Halfon called on the Leader of the House Sir George Young to raise the issue with Serjeant at Arms Jill Pay, who is responsible for security at Westminster⁸⁰. Using the forum of business questions, Halfon demanded an urgent Commons statement on ENGAGE:

"iEngage has a track record of being aggressively anti-Semitic, homophobic and has extensive links to terrorism in Tunisia and the Middle East. As secretariat, they now have access to the Parliamentary Estate."⁸¹

A week later on 7 February 2011, a Commons debate about APPGs saw Halfon raise a number of other concerns about ENGAGE. Reported extensively on the *Conservative Home* website⁸², a series of heated exchanges ensued. Halfon claimed ENGAGE to be:

⁷⁸ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100074022/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament-get-commons-pass-mp-and-peer-resign/>

⁷⁹ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100074022/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament-get-commons-pass-mp-and-peer-resign/>

⁸⁰ <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23920281-mps-warned-of-muslim-group-in-parliament.do>

⁸¹ <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23920281-mps-warned-of-muslim-group-in-parliament.do>

"...an extremist group that seeks to influence Government and discredit moderate Muslims. It has been appointed secretariat to the new APPG for Islamophobia. It defends mosques that host terrorist preachers, schools that teach anti-Semitism and homophobia, individuals such as Daud Abdullah who have pressed for terrorist attacks on the British Navy, and the invitation of hate preachers to Britain. When those revelations emerged, the elected chair of the APPG, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), and the vice-chair Lord Janner, stood down in protest"⁸³

Peter Bottomley intervened to add that "...there may be more than one side to this", a point reinforced by Simon Hughes:

"I remain an officer of that [APPG]...because it is important that [Halton's] comments, which are his opinion, are not necessarily regarded as factually and objectively accurate. I am very happy to engage in the debate, but there are certainly at least two sides to the story, if not more."⁸⁴

Denis MacShane agreed with Halton's view:

"... it is a great worry to many people that an organisation with a very clear ideological purpose should be seeking to infiltrate the House of Commons and act as a secretariat. My Muslim constituents are worried about that. I do not know Mrs Bunglawala, but I have certainly heard Mr Bunglawala say at a meeting that he cannot condemn the lapidation stoning to death-of women, because thus it is written in the Koran. He is entitled to that point of view, but I do not think it should be propagated. As the Prime Minister rightly says, and as I have been saying for some time, we have to keep ultra-Islamist ideologues out of our campuses and keep them from poisoning young minds. If there is even a hint of suspicion - and there is

⁸² <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/parliament/2011/02/is-it-ever-right-to-restrict-the-activities-of-an-all-party-parliamentary-group.html>

⁸³ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/parliament/2011/02/is-it-ever-right-to-restrict-the-activities-of-an-all-party-parliamentary-group.html>

⁸⁴ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/parliament/2011/02/is-it-ever-right-to-restrict-the-activities-of-an-all-party-parliamentary-group.html>

more than that - that it is now the secretariat of an all-party group, it is quite appropriate for the matter to be raised tonight." ⁸⁵

John Mann raised an interesting question: asking whether it is ever right for a secretariat to choose MPs, rather than the other way round:

"Is not one of the key issues that the hon. Gentleman highlights the dilemma of whether a group of Members of Parliament, as an APPG, appoints a secretariat, and the danger that, in some instances, a secretariat - particularly a professional one - can essentially scout around for Members of Parliament to create the all-party group that the secretariat wishes to run? Should not Members of Parliament appoint a secretariat, not the other way around?" ⁸⁶

Following on from Halfon's statements about ENGAGE, a blog post appeared on the website *London Muslim* ⁸⁷. In a post entitled, "*Robert Halfon MP warned in Parliament to stop attacking Muslim organisation*" ⁸⁸, the author described Halfon as "a nasty Israelite who was Political Director of the Conservative Friends of Israel and never misses an opportunity to bash Muslims in Parliament". Concluding its post, the blog's author added:

"LM believes Engage should consider these smears by an Israelite creature as a badge of honour. When Israelites are worried you can be sure whoever the victims are of their latest character assassination attempt must be doing something right" ⁸⁹

Below the article are two comments attributed to ENGAGE, one saying "thank you for your supportive post. May Allah (SWT) reward you" ⁹⁰.

⁸⁵ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/parliament/2011/02/is-it-ever-right-to-restrict-the-activities-of-an-all-party-parliamentary-group.html>

⁸⁶ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/parliament/2011/02/is-it-ever-right-to-restrict-the-activities-of-an-all-party-parliamentary-group.html>

⁸⁷ <http://londonmuslims.blogspot.com/>

⁸⁸ <http://londonmuslims.blogspot.com/2011/02/robert-halfon-mp-warned-in-parliament.html>

⁸⁹ <http://londonmuslims.blogspot.com/2011/02/robert-halfon-mp-warned-in-parliament.html>

⁹⁰ <http://londonmuslims.blogspot.com/2011/02/robert-halfon-mp-warned-in-parliament.html?showComment=1297267843669#c6730899708956713423>

It would seem that the debate on APPGs in the House of Commons occurred around the same time that a meeting of the APPG also took place. It was reported in an article by Martin Bright for the *Jewish Chronicle*⁹¹ that the APPG had voted by a narrow margin to retain “the controversial anti-Zionist” ENGAGE as its secretariat. Suggesting that the retaining of ENGAGE would be “a direct challenge to Prime Minister David Cameron, who called for Islamist groups to be given a wide berth in a recent speech to a security conference in Munich” the article claimed that Simon Hughes’ ongoing support for ENGAGE “will cause embarrassment to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who has been trying to build bridges with the Jewish community”⁹². The article identified what seemed to be a party political split within the APPG. Reporting that all Labour MPs voted to retain ENGAGE as Secretariat – including Sadiq Khan and Stephen Timms – all but one Conservative MPs – Peter Bottomley – was reported as voting against. The article added that the APPG had pledged to fully investigate concerns about ENGAGE before it is officially confirmed as the secretariat noting, “it is unclear who will carry this out, or how long it will take”⁹³. In the past few days however, it would appear that a complaint has been lodged with the Press Complaints Committee about the accuracy of this article. It can be confirmed that at the meeting referred to, no vote about ENGAGE was undertaken.

Paul Goodman, once more on *Conservative Home*, responded⁹⁴. For him, three issues emerged:

- ENGAGE had discredited the APPG in advance adding, “...the effectiveness of the new group is clearly less important to [ENGAGE] than their own presence”.
- Downing Street needed to take a special interest in what ensues because “Number 10 is seriously concerned about Engage”.
- Ed Miliband should be concerned with Sadiq Khan given his backing of “so controversial a venture”, asking “What's the Labour Party's view of Engage?”

⁹¹ <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/45255/islamophobia-group-keeps-controversial-anti-zionist-link>

⁹² <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/45255/islamophobia-group-keeps-controversial-anti-zionist-link>

⁹³ <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/45255/islamophobia-group-keeps-controversial-anti-zionist-link>

⁹⁴ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/leftwatch/2011/02/by-paul-goodman-mps-met-on-monday-to-discuss-the-future-of-an-all-party-group-on-islamophobia-what-took-place-looks-complex.html>

At the meeting of the APPG, it would appear that ENGAGE made two documentary submissions: a detailed letter refuting the claims made by Halton and others; and a briefing document incorporating ENGAGE's "aims and objectives" and a "financial statement"⁹⁵. In the former, the 12-page document responded at length to the claims made by the various commentators, clarifying a range of different incidents and events which involved a number of individuals associated with ENGAGE including Inayat Bunglawala (described as "former CEO of ENGAGE, and brother of Shenaz Bunglawala, secretariat to the APPG on Islamophobia"), Mohammed Ali Harrath ("Trustee of ENGAGE") and Sir Iqbal Sacranie ("Trustee of ENGAGE"). In addition, specific sections of the document addressed broader issues including "Domestic Policy", "Foreign Policy" and referred to others involved with ENGAGE including Mohammed Asif ("ENGAGE CEO").

In the latter, ENGAGE described itself as "a not-for-profit company that was founded in 2008 to help empower and encourage British Muslims within local communities to be more actively involved in British media and politics". It stated that its mission was "to contribute intelligent, high quality independent research on issues that affect British Muslims and, based on that research, to provide innovative and practical recommendations". This mission it claimed advanced five goals:

- Strengthening British democracy to create a more inclusive and tolerant Britain;
- Promoting active citizenship through political participation and civic engagement;
- Addressing under-representation of vulnerable and excluded communities from public and political discourses through skills training, awareness raising and proactive engagement;
- Working with Muslim and non-Muslim organisations to ensure that Islamophobia is regarded as just as socially unacceptable as anti-Semitism and other forms of racism and xenophobia;

⁹⁵ Both documents were supplied to author by the APPG – no online or public copies would appear to be currently available

- Providing critical commentary and analysis on the high volumes of news content and media coverage that maligns Islam and Muslims and foments anti-Muslim prejudice in the UK and across Europe.

In the financial statement that was incorporated within the six-page document, it named three Directors – “Mr S Ismail, Mr M Ali, Sir I Sacranie” – and declared that “IENGAGE has received no single sum or cumulative more than £5000 from any commercial company. It does however receive benefit in kind from Islam Channel through donation of office space and infrastructure support”.

On the same day, a post appeared on Inayat Bunglawala’s blog – *Inayat’s Corner*⁹⁶ –entitled “*Pro-Israel lobby continues smear campaign against ENGAGE*”⁹⁷. In the article, Bunglawala refers to “a shrill and orchestrated campaign from pro-Israel elements seeking to undermine ENGAGE and have it removed as the secretariat for the new All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia”. In the post he also describes Martin Bright as “Martin ‘The Great Koran Con Trick’ Bright” – lifted directly from an article on the ENGAGE website - and speaks about “a number of pro-Israel MPs [who] urged that ENGAGE be dropped as the secretariat”.

Since the end of February, little formal information appears to have emerged from the APPG. This does mean however that the issue has gone away. In some parts of the blogosphere the issue remains salient and has been discussed on websites such as *Harry’s Place*⁹⁸, *Cranmer*⁹⁹, *Muslim Politics*¹⁰⁰ and others. All tend to be highly polemical and have extremely polarised opinions about the APPG and its Secretariat. A dedicated blog entitled *Not the APPG on Islamophobia*¹⁰¹ has also emerged. Anonymously maintained, the website states that its purpose is to “provide convenient summaries of pertinent information...” and

⁹⁶ <http://inayatcorner.wordpress.com/>

⁹⁷ <http://inayatcorner.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/pro-israel-lobby-continues-smear-campaign-against-engage/>

⁹⁸ <http://hurryupharry.org/>

⁹⁹ <http://archbishop-cranmer.blogspot.com/>

¹⁰⁰ <http://muslimpolitics.com/index.php>

¹⁰¹ <http://nottheappg.wordpress.com/>

to “...ask important questions which the APPG may ignore (and give some answers)”. It adds:

“The causes of Islamophobia are not mentioned (other than the implication that misrepresentation of Islam is a cause). What are the causes and how should they be addressed? If Islam is misrepresented who or what represents the correct Islam?”

As of 11 July 2011, the APPG had 20 qualifying members. These are named on the Parliamentary website of the APPG as: Eric Ollerenshaw; Angie Bray; Dr Julian Lewis; Andrew Stephenson; Stuart Andrew; Lord Sheikh; Simon Hughes; Tom Brake; Sir Peter Bottomley; Gordon Birtwistle; Julie Hilling; Mark Hendrick; Stephen Timms; Jack Straw; Lord Mitchell; Simon Danczuk; David Anderson; Caroline Lucas; Jonathan Edwards; and Lord Ouseley. Jack Straw, Simon Hughes and Sir Peter Bottomley are named as Co-Chairs.

5. MAKING SENSE OF THE NARRATIVE

As the phenomenon of Islamophobia is extraordinary, equally extraordinary has been the events surrounding the APPG and its Secretariat. To recall a thought captured by Paul Goodman:

“I can't remember an occasion when an all-party group - usually the most uncontroversial of vehicles - has caused such contention and division”¹⁰²

This section of the report attempts to try and ‘make sense’ of the events surrounding the APPG and its Secretariat, to try and offer some insight into why this ‘most uncontroversial of vehicles’ has caused such ‘contention and division’. To do this, this section will be divided into headings: commentators, ENGAGE, and Parliamentarians. A final heading will consider other issues. In doing so, this section will consider the various allegations, responses and subsequent impacts as a means of improving understanding.

This section does not set out to either prove or disprove the allegations made about one or other of the various stakeholders: this is a task for the Parliamentarians to investigate and take the necessary action should they see fit, whatever that action might be. Instead, this section seeks to try and understand the fallout and its impact.

¹⁰² <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/parliament/2011/02/robert-halfon-raises-engage-case-in-commons.html>

Commentators

Andrew Gilligan is a journalist who is best known for his 2003 report about a British Government document on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq while he was working on the BBC Radio 4 *Today Programme*. Since then he has worked at the *London Evening Standard* and *Press TV*. He was appointed London Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph* and telegraph.co.uk in 2009. It has to be noted that Gilligan is extremely unpopular within sections of some communities, organisations and institutions. A week before posting his initial comments about the APPG, he was accused in the *New Statesman* of being “obsessed” with “outing” Islamists and their allies¹⁰³. An example was highlighted of how in the month preceding the *New Statesman* article, Gilligan is alleged to have blogged 15 times on the telegraph.co.uk website about the mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman alone¹⁰⁴. Earlier last year, he was involved in the Channel 4 Dispatches programme entitled, “*Britain’s Islamic Republic*”¹⁰⁵ which focused on the activities of the Islamic Forum of Europe (IFE) in east London. Soon after the broadcast of this programme, Gilligan wrote about it on the *Guardian’s* Comment is Free (CiF) blog¹⁰⁶. In it he was critical of - and linked to - an article on the same issue written by Inayat Bunglawala¹⁰⁷.

Whilst this is a mere snapshot of the work and output of Gilligan, it provides a snapshot of the uneasy relationship with some Muslims, their communities and organisations. Likewise too, he has an uneasy with others that are not necessarily Muslim. Of those Gilligan has an uneasy relationship with Inayat Bunglawala might be seen to be one. A quick search on Google provides a much fuller picture of the scale and nature of the various occasions when the two have taken the other to task, not always in the most complimentary of ways. It might be suggested that both have – at times - put the other to ‘trial by blog’. The ‘history’ between Gilligan and Bunglawala – and more widely individuals and organisations that he deems to be ‘Islamist’ – cannot be overlooked when trying to understand the unfolding

¹⁰³ <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/mehdi-hasan/2010/11/andrew-gilligan-islamism-press>

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/mehdi-hasan/2010/11/andrew-gilligan-islamism-press>

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/episode-guide/series-54/episode-1>

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/mar/04/islamic-forum-europe-dispatches-gilligan>

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/mar/04/islamic-forum-europe-dispatches-gilligan>

events: they offer important and necessary context. Many of the allegations reflect the exchanges between him and Bunglawala in the months leading up to the appointment of ENGAGE and so it is neither unsurprising nor unprecedented that Gilligan might make such allegations following the appointment. This is not to endorse or legitimise such allegations, but merely highlight the regularity of similar allegations and criticisms made by him and others against Bunglawala in the past.

The issue therefore is whether Gilligan's allegations were valid and relevant, something which hinges on what is meant by the highly subjective term 'Islamist'. A useful benchmark can be taken from the Quilliam Foundation's definition of an 'Islamist'. Stating how not all politically active Muslims are 'Islamists', Quilliam state that "Many Muslims are involved in politics without seeking to introduce the Shari'ah as state law or claim political sovereignty for God"¹⁰⁸. From this definition, an 'Islamist' then might be a Muslim who seeks to introduce Shari'ah as state law or claim political sovereignty for God. On this basis, there have been instances in the past – as the briefing document submitted to the APPG in February sought to clarify¹⁰⁹ - when individuals associated with ENGAGE may have voiced their support for or indeed defended individuals or organisations that might, if using this extremely loose definition, be defined as 'Islamist'. But does this necessarily equate to ENGAGE being 'Islamist sympathisers'? Or even, an 'Islamist' organisation? Does this necessarily mean that as Secretariat, ENGAGE would seek to insidiously "infiltrate" (to use another of the commentator's terminology) Parliament to gain credibility, influence and power? Indeed, how might it even go about doing this? These are questions for the Parliamentarians to consider.

Gilligan routinely employs the charge of 'Islamist' to a wide range of different individuals and organisations, some which would not appear to sit easily within the Quilliam Foundation definition. Consequently his use of the term is in itself subjective and open to

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/faqs.html>

¹⁰⁹ Document supplied to author by the APPG – no online or public copies would appear to be currently available

interpretation. In many ways, his use of the term resembles the way in which others might use an insult. Branding an individual, organisation or institution an 'Islamist' or an 'Islamist ally' carries with it a slur on the recipient. Likewise also when he employs other similarly value-loaded terms including "fundamentalist" and "moderate Islam", both of which appear in his allegations of ENGAGE. But because these insults and slurs are value-laden, if they stick and are accepted more widely, they can have a detrimental and damaging impact. Because of this it is extremely difficult to objectively view the allegation of ENGAGE being an organisation of "Islamist sympathisers". More objectively, it is easier to see the initial series of allegations – and indeed the responses by ENGAGE - as merely the latest in the ongoing battle between Gilligan and Bunglawala, assuming that Bunglawala is affiliated with ENGAGE.

Paul Goodman is a journalist and former Shadow Minister having been the Conservative Member of Parliament for Wycombe from 2001 to 2010. Having chosen not to stand for election in May 2010, he is now the Executive Editor of the *Conservative Home* website¹¹⁰. Without doubt the website is political – Conservative – and comments on the activities of both Conservative politicians as well as others. In his first post-APPG article¹¹¹, it would seem that Goodman was putting forward his opinions about the APPG and the Secretariat appointment: his criticisms being directed towards the MPs and Peers who had taken the decision to appoint ENGAGE rather more than ENGAGE itself. He called for a change in the Secretariat but did on the basis that the organisation was unsuitable for the role. Goodman categorically stresses the need for and his support for an APPG or similar inquiry into Islamophobia, highlights the dangerous nature of the phenomenon, and clearly identifies the need for more 'extreme' voices from within Muslim communities to contribute to the debate.

¹¹⁰ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/>

¹¹¹ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

Having noted Goodman's commitment and indeed his criticism also, he does reproduce Gilligan's allegations about ENGAGE in his article. He does this uncritically before proceeding to consider the aim of some "British Islamists". The problem with this approach is that by the end of the article, the clear inference is that ENGAGE are 'British Islamists'. Whilst he never says this specifically, he speaks more generally about how such Islamists are seeking "access to Parliament, meetings with MPs, invitations to receptions, conferences at which Ministers can be inveigled to speak, appointments to working parties, contributions to reports, places as advisers, grants for projects" before adding that "while meeting Engage is one thing, permitting or encouraging it to run an All-Party Parliamentary Group quite another": the assumption being that if ENGAGE have 'access to Parliament etc' they will seek to gain power and so on. This uncritical acceptance and the inferred confirmation of ENGAGE as 'Islamists' rather than 'Islamist sympathisers' is therefore problematic. Aside from the 'Islamist' issue, Goodman's article is however critical rather than discriminatory; likewise too his article of the 8 December 2010¹¹². Conflating Goodman with Gilligan is therefore inappropriate and somewhat unfair, as are conflating Goodman's criticisms with Gilligan's allegations. It is essential that these nuances are identified and considered and that blanket assumptions or counter allegations are clearly not made.

Martin Bright is a journalist having worked for the BBC World Service, Guardian, Observer and the New Statesman where he was political editor. Since 2009 he has been the political editor at the Jewish Chronicle. Bright was also the presenter of the Channel 4 programme, "Who speaks for Muslims?" and authored a report published by the Policy Exchange¹¹³ entitled, "*When progressives treat with reactionaries: the British state's flirtation with radical Islamism*"¹¹⁴. In the report, Bright refers to Inayat Bunglawala and Iqbal Sacranie and as with Gilligan, Bright and Bunglawala have a history of responding to each other in the public space. Whilst such activity can be found as far back as 2006¹¹⁵, it would seem that the relationship between Bright and Bunglawala has deteriorated and has become at times extremely personal. In 2009 Bright seemed to threaten to sue after an article appeared on

¹¹² <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/12/all-party-islamophobia-group-to-dispense-with-the-services-of-engage.html>

¹¹³ <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/>

¹¹⁴ http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/When_Prog.pdf

¹¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/jul/17/engagementistherealantidot>

the ENGAGE website under the headline *“Veteran Islamophobe Martin Bright criticises MCB libel win”*¹¹⁶, an article which remains on the ENGAGE website but under the amended headline *“Martin ‘the Great Koran Con trick’ Bright criticises MCB libel win”*¹¹⁷. Again, it might be suggested that ‘trial by blog’ has been something that both have actively engaged in. But the history between Bright and Buglawala, and Bright and ENGAGE would seem to be far more damaging than the exchanges involving Gilligan.

By the time the first article was published by Bright¹¹⁸, there was already significant fallout from the appointment of ENGAGE as Secretariat. The article was a news article reporting on events and was relevant to the readership of the website, as indeed were both Gilligan’s and Goodman’s to their respective readerships. The article records how Kris Hopkins had a “change of heart” about ENGAGE after Goodman’s article and that Lord Janner felt the same after being told to “steer clear” by a former Labour minister and senior members of the Jewish community. Where the challenge lies is with how Bright represents ENGAGE. The title refers to them as an ‘Islamist’ Secretariat; in the body of the article, a number of incidents and events relating to ENGAGE are set out, some of which also appeared in the Gilligan article. It would seem that with each article being published, so there was an increasing acceptance of Gilligan’s allegations. It might also have been that the criticisms of ENGAGE were ‘snowballing’, with the claim being made in Bright’s article that it is an organisation that campaigned against “anti-Zionist” in Jewish schools. However, this ‘snowballing’ was not just occurring on one ‘side’ of the unfolding situation as ENGAGE also sought to conflate criticisms – whether legitimate or illegitimate - with the clear inference that those putting forward the criticisms were Islamophobes.

The highly personal ‘history’ between Bright and Buglawala and Bright and ENGAGE cannot be overlooked: clearly, the ‘history’ between them continues to shape, influence and inform and so provides an important and necessary but extremely difficult contextual framework

¹¹⁶ <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2009/7/24/martin-bright-threatens-legal-action-against-engage.html>

¹¹⁷ <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/448-veteran-islamophobe-martin-bright-criticises-mcb-libel-win>

¹¹⁸ <http://www.thejc.com/politics/42307/anti-islamophobia-parliamentary-group-drop-islamist-secretariat>

within which to try and 'make sense'. Much of the fallout from the appointment of ENGAGE as Secretariat reflects the exchanges that ENGAGE and/ or Bunglawala had with the different commentators in the preceding weeks, months and years. It is impossible to differentiate these or to suggest that events after the appointment had no link. Quite the contrary, they were most likely a continuum. Because of this, it is neither surprising nor unprecedented that such baiting and barracking duly ensued. What emerged would seem to be mere 'tit-for-tat' rivalry: Gilligan describe ENGAGE as Islamist sympathisers, ENGAGE describe Gilligan as deranged; Bright refers to ENGAGE as having an anti-Zionist agenda, ENGAGE respond by claiming the pro-Zionist lobby is campaigning against them. Most worryingly, these tit-for-tat exchanges continued throughout, became personalised and most concerning, increasingly damaging to the credibility of the APPG: something that seemed to get lost in the mire. As each of the respective players – including ENGAGE - doggedly entrenched themselves in their own respective viewpoints, so the exchanges created greater enmity whereby the APPG deteriorated in nothing more than a public spat.

However, not all of the participants of this spat had the same responsibilities. Gilligan is a journalist who was writing on his newspaper's blog. Goodman was conveying his opinions via his party political website. Bright was writing in the newspaper where he is Political Editor. In each of these contexts, there is an argument that each was functioning within their professional framework. But within those professional frameworks there are also questions to be asked about some of the issues they pursue, some of the criticisms they posit, some of the language and terminologies they employ also. As with all in the public spaces, all have the right to be critical and to be criticised. And not all criticism is indeed unfair or illegitimate. Being objective, it remains difficult to conclude that all of what has been written about ENGAGE was unfair or without precedent. But it is also right to highlight and consider the use and attribution of value-loaded terminologies and language, to ask whether the criticisms and accusations that were made within such value-loaded frames were employed deliberately to bring down ENGAGE, the APPG or both. Nor is it wrong to question the extent to which this public spat can be disentangled both from the wider issues and agendas that are clearly important and of relevance to Gilligan, Goodman and Bright and which they continue to pursue. One thing that is clear is that given the many years that

most of the participants have been engaging in baiting, criticising and condemning each other in the blogosphere, it would be very difficult to uphold the complaint that ENGAGE were being held to ‘trial by blog’. Whilst this particular point is easy to understand, ‘making sense’ of the wider picture is not.

ENGAGE

ENGAGE or iENGAGE? On its website¹¹⁹, all logos and related identity appear to favour ENGAGE whereas the APPG website states that the Secretariat is iENGAGE¹²⁰. This might seem superficial but it raises a pertinent question about the outward-face of the organisation, namely that it is confusing. Acknowledging ENGAGE’s response to Goodman’s question about “who staffs” the organisation¹²¹, it is difficult to fully understand what the organisation does. Its website – its ‘public face’ – provides access to its aims and objectives, a Muslim-relevant media feed, information about its media monitoring, a section titled ‘Politics’ that provides information about some of its campaign work and a link providing access to Hansard. There are no details about ENGAGE’s current or forthcoming activities, no details of who works for or is behind ENGAGE, or indeed how it is funded albeit by charitable donations¹²². This lack of information could be misconstrued as suspicious. In the current environment where much has been made of the way in which some Muslim organisations are funded, who is behind them and who they have affiliations with, it might have been sensible for ENGAGE – having been appointed Secretariat – to have provided additional information: to ensure that its ‘public face’ to those who may want to know more following its appointment appeared open and transparent. It would also have reduced the opportunities for critics to exploit any lack of information or clarity for detrimental effect.

Little information is also readily available to support the view that ENGAGE has the specific expertise relating to the issue of Islamophobia excepting the media monitoring which is a

¹¹⁹ <http://www.iengage.org.uk/home>

¹²⁰ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmhallparty/register/islamophobia.htm>

¹²¹ <http://iengage.org.uk/component/content/article/1-news/1135-engage-responds-to-paul-goodman>

¹²² Correct as of 11-14 July 2011

mere part of the bigger issue. This is not to suggest they do not have the relevant expertise, but to observe that its 'public face' does not support this. Consequently, questions raised about the suitability of ENGAGE being appointed Secretariat of such an extraordinary and complex phenomenon may have some validity. Similar also is the way in which ENGAGE understands Islamophobia and uses the term – including as an accusation – in the public spaces, not least in the article referred to previously in relation to Martin Bright¹²³. In its letter asking supporters to resist what it believed to be a concerted campaign against them, it described the main protagonists as right wing bloggers, the pro-Zionist lobby and Islamophobes¹²⁴. In the various responses made by ENGAGE, there are times when they appear to conflate all of the criticisms made against them, irrespective of whether they might be legitimate or otherwise. And it is this point that is critical: ENGAGE rarely seem to differentiate between what might be legitimate criticism, what might be illegitimate criticism, and what might be rather more derogatory or Islamophobic. Without any critical differentiation, ENGAGE responded in exactly the same way, failing to recognise the difference between legitimate and illegitimate criticism but more crucially the difference between criticism and Islamophobia. As such its comment about the 'right wing bloggers, the pro-Zionist lobby and Islamophobes' might have some resonance with one of the allegations made against it.

Goodman describes the ENGAGE website - its public face – as an 'attack' website¹²⁵. Goodman's observation is clearly a criticism - not an Islamophobic attack – and if being objective, may have some legitimacy. Many of the responses that emerged after the appointment as Secretariat were polemical, maybe confrontational. Some might describe the tone as even being aggressive at times. Many are personalised and focus on individuals and their criticisms of ENGAGE or those associated with it. At times, the language and terminology used is incendiary and inflammatory. What message therefore has ENGAGE communicated about itself throughout this process? Has it acted like an organisation that is

¹²³ <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2009/7/24/martin-bright-threatens-legal-action-against-engage.html>

¹²⁴ <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2010/12/22/appg-on-islamophobia-please-support-engage.html>

¹²⁵ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/11/five-tests-for-a-new-all-party-group-on-islamophobia.html>

professional and credible with the necessary respect and standing that is required of the Secretariat? Does this support the decision to appoint ENGAGE as Secretariat or does it raise concerns and questions? Does the ENGAGE website reflect the 'public face' of other Secretariat organisations? As the Secretariat of the APPG, it might be reasonable to suggest that certain responsibilities. In engaging so publicly however, one question arises: did the actions of ENGAGE bring cause damage to the APPG and itself as Secretariat? Taking an objective viewpoint, it would be very difficult to suggest anything except causing damage when considering the public thanking of an anonymous blogger for suggesting the "...smears by an Israelite creature [are] a badge of honour"¹²⁶.

Parliamentarians

Having noted the extraordinary events having occurred since the formation of the APPG, there remains some confusion about events and activities that took place before the formal launch. Considering the event that was convened at the House of Commons in March 2010 and the briefing document that was circulated during the summer of 2010, supported by a coalition of ten broadly different organisations or institutions, it remains unknown what happened to the briefing document, the coalition supporting it, or the Parliamentarians that offered support or attended the March event. Having made enquiries about this, very few appear able – or maybe willing - to provide answers. Most are unwilling to comment, but some have alleged skulduggery. Given that this is entirely anecdotal, such allegations are debateable. However it is worth noting as it may – or may not – have some relevance to the ensuing decision-making, events and activities.

As regards the Parliamentarians involved in the APPG, there are some very simple questions that need to be asked. First, to what extent was any investigation or screening undertaken in relation before appointing ENGAGE as Secretariat to the APPG? Were any decisions made about the allegations that have been made about ENGAGE and those associated with it in the past, were they reassured about these, and if so, why did they not unequivocally

¹²⁶ <http://londonmuslims.blogspot.com/2011/02/robert-halfon-mp-warned-in-parliament.html>

support ENGAGE in the face of criticism? What exactly was it that changed for those supporting the appointment of ENGAGE? Did they receive additional information or were they ‘influenced’ to change their minds? Did the APPG at any time pre-empt or expect any potential criticism or backlash following the launch of the APPG? If so, had any measures or strategies been put in place about how to respond and counter such criticisms and backlashes? If there were any strategies or indeed existing protocols for Secretariat bodies, were these communicated to ENGAGE? What differentiation do the members of the APPG see in terms of their collective voice and that of ENGAGE: are they one and the same? This report cannot provide answers to these questions, only the Parliamentarians can

One final point of consideration is the claim made by ENGAGE that outside commentators were exerting influence especially along party political lines. There would seem to be some evidence for this. Goodman had written a number of articles on *Conservative Home* and there had been a number of references made about MPs and Peers needing to consider their involvement. Gilligan had also suggested that MPs and Peers might be being “used”. The extent of the influence can only be speculative, although Bright did suggest that Kris Hopkins stood down following an online attack by Goodman. Bright also stated that Lord Janner stood down after taking advice from senior members of the Jewish community. However, is this evidence of a conspiracy or unfair influence or might it just be that a Conservative website is seeking to influence – and would appear to have been successful – people within its sphere of influence? Individuals, organisations and institutions all take advice and then choose to act accordingly. As such had Hopkins or Janner acted after having taken advice, such actions surely cannot be criticised or condemned. If however Hopkins and Janner did not stand down because of external influences, what was it that both became aware of that made them change their minds? As Goodman asked: who appointed ENGAGE?

Concluding thoughts

Most damning of all however is the realisation that Islamophobia – the very issue that the APPG was set up to consider – was completely removed from the frame within which all of the participants – commentators, ENGAGE and Parliamentarians – operated within. Islamophobia was lost. All overlooked or sidelined any focus on Islamophobia, some in preference of pursuing their own individual, organisational, political or other agendas, causes and campaigns. In truth, since its launch in November 2010 the APPG on Islamophobia has been little more than a sideshow: an unhelpful, unwanted and unnecessary distraction from giving Islamophobia the rightful, timely and necessary attention it so desperately needs. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the credibility of the APPG has been damaged.

6. THE SECRETARIAT

Whilst the suggestion has been made that there should be no different criteria imposed on the Secretariat for the APPG on Islamophobia as compared to other Secretariats, as the events seek to illustrate such an approach may not necessarily be true. Islamophobia is, as argued at the start of this report, an extraordinary phenomenon and because of this, it is necessary – at times – to require or employ extraordinary approaches, methods or approaches. There is no apology for this nor is it evidence of a pandering or kowtowing to either critics or those who reject Islamophobia: quite the opposite. It is about recognising the intense scrutiny and focus that will be placed upon the APPG – and Secretariat – from a broad range of different stakeholders, some of whom will be seeking to undermine, derail and ultimately destroy in order to further their own agendas. Recognising the need for extraordinary approaches, set out below are indicative criteria that might ensure the damage caused by that scrutiny and focus can be minimised.

Expertise

Does the Secretariat have knowledge, understanding and experience relating to Islamophobia? Does it understand the complexity of the phenomenon and the implications of this?

Credibility

Is the Secretariat recognised and respected in its field or for what it does? Does this have resonance and relevance to the topic of Islamophobia?

Impartiality

Does the Secretariat have the skills and experience to be impartial and objective in its role, something that does not necessarily mean that it does not hold firm and clear opinions and views?

Professionalism

Is the Secretariat going to be able to conduct its business and role with dignity, balance and diplomacy even when criticised and provoked?

Capacity

Does the Secretariat have the necessary capacity to be able to fulfil all of the tasks required of it?

Transparency

Can all aspects of the Secretariat's function be open to scrutiny, funding, activities, affiliations etc?

Open-ness

Is the 'public face' of the Secretariat open, where information about it, its activities and staff can be easily accessed?

History

What is the history of the Secretariat?

More so than anything else however, the APPG – especially the Secretariat - should be prepared for criticism and attack. Strategies should be put in place for dealing with these to ensure that further ‘public spats’ are not allowed to happen: that the focus is not allowed to be shifted away from Islamophobia by minor distractions that are allowed to inflate and take over. All criticisms and attacks need to be dealt with robustly and firmly but so too with balance and restraint. Neither the Secretariat nor individual members of the APPG should engage in ‘tit-for-tat’ exchanges irrespective of the provocation. Where necessary, any false allegations should be responded to within the existing legislative frameworks.

7. MOVING FORWARD

The purpose of the APPG is:

“To investigate the forms, manifestations and extent of prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the UK today.

To review the effectiveness of all legislation with a view to improving the rate of success in the prosecution of hate crimes.

To review existing mechanisms for the recording of anti-Muslim hate crimes both through police forces across the country and through third party reporting sites with a view to improving data quality and comprehensiveness.

To investigate and review the role of the media in fostering mutual respect and tolerance and guarding against misrepresentations of Islam and intolerance towards Muslims”¹²⁷

On all of these aims it has – to date – categorically and overwhelmingly failed. More so than anything else, it has to be recognised that the credibility of the APPG has been damaged and that the focus on Islamophobia lost: this needs to be redressed without any further distraction or delay. To do this, the APPG needs to act firmly and swiftly but so too collectively.

The APPG has therefore two priorities:

¹²⁷ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmhallparty/register/islamophobia.htm>

- to resolve the Secretariat issue and so bring about an end to any more unwanted and unnecessary distractions; and
- to bring the issue of Islamophobia back into focus

Resolving the Secretariat

In addressing the issue of the Secretariat, the APPG first needs to decide the future of ENGAGE: whether it is to remain as Secretariat or is to be removed. This needs to be undertaken with any decision implemented without any further delay.

If it is the former, then the APPG need to give wholehearted support and backing to ENGAGE. It will also need to give its unequivocal public and political support to ENGAGE and be prepared to counter any criticism or backlash that ensues.

If it is the latter, the APPG will need to be able to appoint a new Secretariat as soon as possible, one that possibly meets the criteria set out in the previous section and that can begin to work on the second priority. Again, the APPG will need to give its unequivocal public and political support to the new Secretariat.

If neither of these appears satisfactory, a third way might be to establish a shared Secretariat. This approach could include maintaining ENGAGE as part of the Secretariat and bringing in a further two or three individuals/ organisations/ institutions to support them, or an entirely new Secretariat could be established thus promoting a broader coalition of voices. If the shared approach is preferred, the APPG must not adopt a policy of trying to 'offset' difference or be populist. Instead, all of those identified and approached should be considered against the criteria set out previously especially focusing on the knowledge and expertise they bring.

It is worth being aware that irrespective of which decision is made, the APPG – and possibly the new Secretariat – will become the focus of further attention and criticism: from those that have already criticised and made allegations, adopting the tone of ‘we told you so’; of those seeking to criticise the new Secretariat for whatever reason; and those who may disagree with any decision to remove the incumbent Secretariat, potentially those that were part of or affiliated to the previous Secretariat.

Re-focusing on Islamophobia

Once the Secretariat issue is resolved, the APPG need to begin to consider the issue of Islamophobia as a matter of urgency.

A first activity might be to commission a piece of research that draws together all the existing literature on Islamophobia. This document could be used to inform members of the APPG of existing knowledge and form the foundation upon which further activities are constructed.

At the same time, the APPG might initiate a consultation process.

Initially, the consultation would seek written evidence from all those with opinions or evidence – whether positive or negative – being able to contribute and input into the role and function of the APPG.

Once all of the written evidence had been received, the APPG might want to invite a range of different individuals, organisations and institutions to present oral evidence. To ensure credibility, this must incorporate the full width and breadth of opinion about Islamophobia. Limiting that diversity will only have a detrimental impact on the proceedings of the APPG.