

The Right, the Left and 'Free Expression'

Martin Sullivan

ON SATURDAY 25 March 2006 a campaign calling itself the "March for Free Expression" (MFE) held a widely publicised demonstration in Trafalgar Square. The protest was primarily motivated by the desire to express solidarity with the right-wing Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* over its provocative decision to publish offensive, and in some cases blatantly racist, anti-Muslim cartoons. Although the organisers stated piously that it would be "a march in favour of free expression, not a march against Muslims", the actions and political records of the participants belied their public denials of anti-Muslim bigotry.

Peter Risdon

The main instigator and organiser of the March for Free Expression was a computer consultant from Cambridge named Peter Risdon, who runs a blog called FreeBornJohn. Another blogger, who might have been expected to sympathise with the aims of the MFE, observed about Risdon: "He describes himself as a 'libertarian', but his blog comes across as hard line English right wing nationalist, with a blanket anti-Muslim stance." Among its list of recommended links, Risdon's blog prominently features such hard-right Islamophobic websites as Jihad Watch, Little Green Footballs, Steyn Online, Gates of Vienna and Western Resistance.

In one post Risdon quoted a notorious attack on Islam by Winston Churchill which begins: "How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live."

Risdon commented that "it is always good to read any prose, however tactless, that derives from a time when people felt able to say what they actually thought about cultures different to their own".

A post by Risdon on the March for Free Ex-

pression website on 19 February encouraged its supporters to demonstrate in Trafalgar Square with reproductions of the Danish cartoons. "Since we are in favour of free speech", Risdon wrote, "and because the reason why newspapers and magazines across Europe (though not, shamefully, in the UK) have republished the infamous cartoons was principally 'We are Spartacus' – we stand together – we will be happy to see reproductions of the cartoons in question at the rally."

Risdon also posted a link to a website selling t-shirts that featured slogans such as "Get your fatwa out of my face. Support Denmark. Support free speech", "Up yours, 'religion of peace!'", "Viking jihad" and "Islam is a blast".

Freedom Association

One of the official sponsors of the "March for Free Expression" was the Freedom Association, whose campaign director Mark Wallace was a platform speaker at the Trafalgar Square rally. This organisation gained notoriety in the 1970s for its energetic defence of the "freedom" of Grunwicks to oppress and exploit its employees without interference from the trade unions. Equally energetically, it has defended the right of racists to promote hostility towards minority ethnic communities.

In 2001 the Freedom Association's chairman, Christopher Gill, spoke out in support of Tory MP John Townend, who claimed that "our homogeneous Anglo-Saxon society" had been diluted by non-white immigration. Gill said: "I don't think there is any doubt that it has been diluted. If you pour enough water on a double scotch it ceases to taste like whisky. As chairman of the Freedom Association, I will defend John Townend's right to say what he wants to say. We must have freedom of speech and people must not be put off saying what they like. I can understand John's concern and I support him. He struck a chord with millions of British people. The whole nation was changed by the passing of mass immigration in the 1970s and 1980s."

In 2003 the Freedom Association's then campaigns director Philip Duly wrote:

"The notion that we can accommodate further unlimited numbers of people to settle in what is already one of the most densely populated countries in the world represents the economics of the madhouse. The pressure for more homes, roads, airports, schools and hospitals will intensify further with few offsetting benefits for the resident population.... At the present time, none of the political parties has resolved to restrict the tide of immigration which is increasing the population by 200,000 every year. The Freedom Association campaign for free speech on population growth and its consequences will therefore continue with the twin aims of stimulating further debate and protecting the rights of the existing population of the United Kingdom."

In furtherance of its commitment to encouraging "free expression", the Association's magazine *Freedom Today* includes a regular "Soapbox" column in which assorted reactionaries are given an opportunity to mouth off. The July-August 2005 issue of the magazine featured a contribution by a former army officer who wrote:

"Four times a year I meet my daughter at Terminal Three of London's Heathrow Airport. Those who want first hand evidence of the scale of immigration should join me. Not only are most of the workers, including the security guards, of immigrant stock, but I am always outnumbered by about six to one by whole Asian families, preponderantly Moslem, meeting friends and relations. Judging by the amount of luggage they bring with them, they are not here for a two week holiday. No doubt, what I have written will label me as a racist.... I am happy to accept that accusation if I make it clear that I believe in putting the welfare and security of our own citizens ahead of that of economic migrants."

Libertarian Alliance

Another right-wing body sponsoring the March for Free Expression was the Libertarian Alliance, whose director Sean Gabb was a platform speaker at the Trafalgar Square rally. This is an organisation which issued a press release welcoming the acquittal of British National Party führer Nick Griffin and his sidekick Mark Collett on race-hate charges at Leeds Crown Court in February. Gabb was quoted as saying: "Doubtless, there are people who take offence at the expression of certain views on race and immigration. But free speech that does not include the right to give offence is not free speech." The press release went on to reiterate the Libertarian Alliance's demand that all legislation against racial hatred and discrimination should be repealed and that "the Commission for Racial Equality and all similar organisations should be abolished, and their records burned".

In a Libertarian Alliance press release explaining their backing for the MFE, Gabb made clear that they intended to use the campaign to advocate

the right to incite racial hatred. Indeed, he criticised other supporters of *Jyllands-Posten* for failing to defend the right of open racists to express their hatred freely:

"There are those who say they believe in freedom of speech, but then insist that the promotion of 'hatred' does not come within the meaning of free speech. The Libertarian Alliance utterly rejects this supposed distinction.... We note with distaste that those journalists throughout Europe who are congratulating each other on how brave and liberal they have been over the anti-Moslem cartoons have not said a word for the freedom of racists and anti-Semites to express themselves."

In August 2004 Gabb had issued a press release on behalf of the Alliance defending the right to free speech of one Ake Green, an evangelical Christian in Sweden who had been convicted under that country's anti-hatred legislation after describing homosexuality as "abnormal, a horrible cancerous tumour in the body of society". Gabb's press release stated:

"The Libertarian Alliance believes in the right to freedom of speech. This includes, though is not limited to, the right to say anything about public policy or alleged matters of fact. If someone wants to say that homosexuals are the spawn of Satan, or that black people are morally or genetically inferior to whites, or that the holocaust did not happen (but should have), or that the Prophet Mohammed was a demon-possessed, epileptic paedophile, that is his right. If he causes offence, hard luck on those offended."

UK Independence Party

Also among the sponsors of the March for Free Expression were "several branches of UKIP". Freedom Association chairman Christopher Gill, who so eloquently advocated the defence of "our" Anglo-Saxon society against dilution by non-white migrants, recently defected from the Conservative Party to UKIP – just after Tory leader David Cameron had attacked the latter as "closet racists". This move was hardly surprising, since UKIP's propaganda against immigration is virtually indistinguishable from that of the Freedom Association.

"We live on a small island", UKIP claims. "Our cities are overcrowded, our roads clogged up and our railways are grinding to a halt. Our doctors' surgeries cannot cope and the hospital waiting lists are growing. New housing estates are covering the countryside. In 2002, the UK government allowed in another 285,000 people. The UK Independence Party will put an end to mass immigration."

As for anti-Muslim bigotry, in an account of his disillusionment with UKIP (*New Statesman*, 14 June 2004) former member Aidan Rankin wrote: "I listened, with increasing loathing, to a repertoire of anti-Muslim barbs from people who knew

nothing whatsoever about Islam and were proud of their ignorance.... Islamophobia pervades its internal dialogue.”

In 2004 UKIP stood boxing promoter Frank Maloney as its candidate for London mayor. After a visit to Tower Hamlets, a borough with a large Muslim population of Bangladeshi origin, Maloney posted an article on his campaign website condemning Whitechapel as a Muslim ghetto. “Immigrants are not integrating with the rest of British society”, he wrote, “but creating their own areas, where the rule of law does not apply and people have no allegiance to Britain whatsoever – and even seek to harm British people.”

Like the Freedom Association, UKIP clothes its racist rhetoric in appeals for the right to free speech. It repeatedly denounces political correctness, which it claims obstructs an honest and open debate on race and immigration. Thus the UKIP website quotes one member as saying: “I am no racist, but I am prepared to have a discussion about how things like immigration affect our country. I went to a Christian school where they were not scared to talk about the Empire and colonies and other races. You can't say anything now because people will point their finger and cry ‘harassment’.”

National Secular Society

Another organisation with a record of anti-migrant rhetoric that sponsored the MFE was the National Secular Society, whose director Keith Porteous Wood was a speaker at the rally. The NSS graphically illustrates the point made by Owen Jones, in the March 2006 issue of *Labour Left Briefing*, that “as anti-Semitism once clothed itself in the rhetoric of anti-capitalism, today Islamophobia appropriates the language of secularism”.

An editorial on the NSS website responding to the Danish cartoons crisis was headed “Islamist steam roller attempts to flatten European free speech – it must not succeed”. The article outlined a “clash of civilisations” thesis and added that “these cartoons were published in Europe, where European values still have a precarious toehold”. “Precarious toehold”? What was that, other than an appeal to the racist myth that “western civilisation” is under threat from Muslim migration and population growth? The editorial went on to underline the theme of a threatened Islamicisation of the West by polemicising against “those who have attempted to import the values of Islam into our culture, and who constantly try to change the law to enforce those values”.

The editorial concluded: “We therefore support the newspapers around Europe that have reprinted the offending cartoons. We wish there was a newspaper in Britain that had similar guts.... It would give the message loud and clear that our culture, with its hard-won freedoms, is just as valuable to us as Islam is to those in the Middle East and other parts of the world where it holds

sway. We must be as determined and angry as they are. We must stand our corner and love our liberty, just as they love their religion.”

The objective of reprinting the cartoons would be to “stand in unity with those who want to reinforce European enlightenment values”, the editorial stated. Quite how “enlightenment values” are served by publishing racist caricatures that portray Islam as a violent, barbaric and misogynistic religion, thereby feeding into and encouraging the widespread hostility towards Muslims that exists among Europe’s majority white community, was not explained.

However, a patriotic defence of “our culture” against “them” (the Muslim hordes) is par for the course with the National Secular Society. In January 2004 the NSS appealed for donations on the basis that secularism in Britain was “under sustained threat from a resurgent Islam”. In July that year, when the then home secretary David Blunkett announced his plans for a religious hatred law, the NSS website carried an article by its editor Terry Sanderson which read:

“There was rare unanimity among press pundits last week as they made clear their opposition to David Blunkett’s announcement that he intends to introduce a law banning incitement to religious hatred. The fears of the press commentators were clearly and passionately expressed. Will Cummins, in the *Sunday Telegraph* wrote: ‘A society in which one cannot revile a religion and its members is one in which there are limits to the human spirit. The Islamic world was intellectually and economically wrecked by its decision to put religion beyond the reach of invective, which is simply an extreme form of debate. By so doing, it put science and art beyond the reach of experiment, too. Now, at the behest of Muslim foreigners who have forced themselves on us, New Labour wants to import the same catastrophe into our own society.’”

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association

Sanderson is the former press officer of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, which was also among the sponsors of the March for Free Expression. In September 2005 GALHA published an issue of *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* magazine that was filled with anti-Muslim bigotry. One article, by GALHA committee chair George Broadhead, contained the following passage: “There are two terms that, increasingly, annoy us: Islamophobia and moderate Muslims. What we’d like to know is, first, what’s wrong with being fearful of Islam (there’s a lot to fear); and, second, what does a moderate Muslim do, other than excuse the real nutters by adhering to this barmy doctrine?”

There was subsequently a split in GALHA after a majority of its committee took exception to the more extreme racist outpourings in that particular issue of the magazine, which contained statements such as the following:

"the fastest-growing religion is Islam. Chillingly, it continues to grow like a cancer, both through immigration and through ... unrestrained and irresponsible breeding" ... "for homosexuals, it is doubtful that there is any such thing as a 'moderate' practising Muslim, or that the Koran can be regarded as anything more than just a squalid murder manual" ... "it is not racist to be anti-immigration or anti-Islam" ... "the reckless and mismanaged immigration polices of successive governments have led to the demographics of our major towns and cities being forever changed by huge numbers of foreign settlers" ... "Legal or illegal, many of these Third World and Eastern European newcomers are criminals of the worst kind, and many more are hopelessly ill equipped to live in a complex Western democracy, unable even to speak English in some cases. A parasitic few are bent on the destruction of Western civilisation" ... "Redundant churches are sprouting onion domes and minarets. We are becoming strangers in our own land" ... "In the Netherlands, the warnings of popular gay politician Pim Fortuyn were tragically snuffed out by a left-wing assassin before he could sufficiently alert people to the damage the influx of Muslims is doing to his own native land".

However, George Broadhead, who found the concepts "Islamophobia" and "moderate Muslim" so annoying, remains chair of the GALHA committee. The more overt racists may have left, but GALHA plainly has not rid itself of anti-Muslim bigotry.

Evan Harris

The only speaker at the Trafalgar Square demonstration from one of the major political parties was Liberal Democrat MP Evan Harris, who is an honorary associate of the National Secular Society and a vice-president of GALHA. During the controversy within GALHA over the anti-Muslim articles in *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* magazine, it was noteworthy that Harris failed to make a single public statement dissociating himself from the publication of this explicitly racist material.

Harris has been the most vociferous British supporter of the French ban on wearing the hijab in state schools. He defended this disgraceful attack on the religious rights of young Muslim women as being "in keeping with centuries of secularism as far as state institutions are concerned in France". When a radio interviewer asked him "is this ban not against the fundamental human right of freedom of religious practice?", he replied, "no it isn't because ... schools are for learning not for practising religion".

Describing Harris's remarks on the French hijab ban as "abhorrently prejudiced", the Islamic Human Rights Commission pointed out that the ban had "resulted in an upsurge of anti-Muslim discrimination. Currently Muslim women will be

refused a civil marriage ceremony in Paris unless they remove their scarves, hospitals and clinics are refusing to treat Muslim women unless they do likewise. Other women have been denied access to shops and banks. Is this what the Liberal Democrats wish to see in the UK? Certainly based on his remarks, Dr Harris sees little wrong with this scenario."

By contrast, Harris's stand against Muslims' rights won him plaudits from the fascists. In September 2004, in a post on the National Front's email discussion list, one far right admirer wrote:

"Evan Harris is not a perfect MP but nevertheless he has spoken out on a number of important issues where others have remained silent. For instance he has campaigned against special religious education for minorities. He has opposed the hijab and was one of the few to criticise it in public. Harris is a defender of freedom of expression.... The government is attempting to legislate against 'religious hatred'. All patriots must oppose this proposed law which could be used against us. You will find that Harris will be one of the most articulate spokesmen against this law."

This indeed proved to be the case. The government's attempt to close a loophole in the law against inciting racial hatred, which has allowed the British National Party to stir up hatred against Muslims on the basis that they are not a mono-ethnic faith group, was vigorously opposed by Harris, who argued that it was "essential that we maintain free speech in discussing and criticising religious ideas, doctrines and practices". He worked hard to sabotage the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill by means of an amendment drawn up by his fellow Liberal Democrat, Lord Lester, which had the effect of completely neutralising the legislation. As a result of Harris's efforts, fascists can now continue to promote racial hatred under cover of attacks on Islam. No wonder some of them regard him as a bit of a hero.

Peter Tatchell

Perhaps the best-known speaker at the March for Free Expression was Peter Tatchell, of the gay rights organisation OutRage! Though Tatchell's Islamophobia has become particularly obsessive in recent years, he has been promoting such views for a decade or more. In 1995 he published an article in *Gay Times* entitled 'Islamic fundamentalism in Britain' which characteristically depicted Muslim communities not as potential allies in the struggle against discrimination but as an alien force threatening the liberal values of (white, non-Muslim) British society.

"Although not all Muslims are anti-gay, significant numbers are violently homophobic ...", Tatchell wrote. "The political consequences for the gay community could be serious. As the fundamentalists gain followers, homophobic Muslim

voters may be able to influence the outcome of elections in 20 or more marginal constituencies. Their voting strength could potentially be used to block pro-gay candidates or to pressure electorally vulnerable MPs to vote against gay rights legislation."

US radical Yoshiie Furuhashi has remarked on the disturbing parallels between Tatchell's campaign against Islam and the anti-Muslim demagogic of the late right-wing Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who built a mass racist movement in the Netherlands on the basis of defending "liberal western values" against the "backward" views of Muslim migrants. Accusing Tatchell of "giving a gay obscurantist cover to the politics of intolerance", Furuhashi pointed to the logic of Tatchell's argument: "If Muslim voters are so vulnerable to radical Islamists' persuasion, why not restrict their immigration to England, as the Dutch have sought to protect their 'liberalism' and 'civilization' by implementing more and more anti-immigrant measures? I won't be surprised if Tatchell one day crosses the thin boundary between his rhetoric and Fortuyn's."

Although Tatchell restricts his attacks to "fundamentalists", in practice he uses this term to cover Muslims in general and their representative organisations. He wrote in the *Weekly Worker*, 16 September 2004: "If you take a mainstream organisation like the Muslim Council of Britain, which is the umbrella organisation of all Muslim groups in this country, it has fought a tooth and nail battle, allied with the rightwing Christian Institute, to oppose every measure in favour of gay and lesbian human rights over the last decade."

Tatchell stated that the MCB opposed an equal age of consent, supported the retention of section 28 and opposed the right of lesbian and gay couples to adopt children – as indeed it did, along with leading representatives of other faiths, including the Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism and Hinduism. Although Tatchell knows that perfectly well, he now tries to rewrite history and depict the MCB as being in an exclusive alliance with fellow "fundamentalists" on the Christian right.

Tatchell's *Weekly Worker* diatribe against the MCB continued: "This is the organisation that Tony Blair invites to Downing Street and gives privileged access to when it comes to consultation on social and moral issues. No gay rights organisation and no woman's rights organisation gets invited to Downing Street for special consultations. The Muslim Council of Britain does, despite the fact that it does not believe in full human rights for women and it does not believe in any human rights for lesbians and gay men. Now, is it 'islamophobic' to say that? I do not think so."

It is of course nonsense to suggest that the government fails to consult representative bodies

on issues affecting the rights of women or the LGBT community. As for the MCB, it is consulted by Downing Street on the same basis as other faith groups. Tatchell's accusation that the MCB is being given preferential treatment over non-Muslim organisations carries distinct echoes of a right-wing bigot insisting that non-whites enjoy favours when it comes to the allocation of jobs and housing.

In an article in the November 2004 issue of *Labour Left Briefing*, attacking the influential Muslim scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Tatchell continued this theme, tying it to a bizarre conspiracist theory that there is a fundamentalist Muslim plan to dominate Britain:

"The objective of right-wing Muslim leaders ... is to increase the political influence of fundamentalist Islam in the UK.... Organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain are actively homophobic. They lobbied MPs to oppose the repeal of Section 28 and to support the discriminatory gay age of consent of 18. This push for political influence by rightwing Islamists in Britain is only the beginning. Muslim feminists and socialists warn of the global threat of 'Islamofascism'. They denounce fundamentalist Islam as the religious equivalent of the BNP – but more dangerous. The BNP is an insignificant fringe party, whereas the Islamists already rule many countries.... Qaradawi's projected return visit to London is part of a grand plan to promote fundamentalist Islam in Britain."

It cannot be argued that Tatchell is unaware of the representative character of the MCB. As we have seen, he describes it as "the umbrella organisation of all Muslim groups in this country". Yet he characterises the MCB as part of the "global threat of 'Islamofascism'" and says it poses an even greater threat than the BNP.

When it comes to the BNP itself, Tatchell's has done his best to undermine a united response to the fascist threat. In February 2006 he mounted a public attack on Unite Against Fascism for inviting the MCB to speak at its conference, which had been called to build a campaign against the BNP in the May local elections. The BNP had announced that it intended to make the elections a "referendum on Islam", yet Tatchell seriously proposed that the MCB should be excluded from the platform on the grounds that its general secretary Iqbal Sacranie had made homophobic remarks during a radio interview.

As LGBT activist Kirsten Hearn pointed out in criticism of Tatchell's stance: "OutRage! targets the Muslim community as homophobic when leaders of most major religions have similar views on homosexuality. Why do so? Breaking an alliance with the main faith community leaders and organisations because of their negative attitude to homosexuality would destroy an effective anti-fascist movement capable of defeating

the BNP.... To suggest we jettison the Muslim community from the anti-fascist movement at a time when the fascists are advancing by attacking Muslims is obscene."

Tatchell's campaign against Islam in general and the MCB in particular has won the enthusiastic endorsement of right-wing Islamophobes. An article on the Western Resistance website denouncing Iqbal Sacranie and the MCB's media secretary Inayat Bunglawala as anti-semites contained the following glowing testimonial to the OutRage! leader: "Tatchell is a brave and committed individual.... I think he would have been a far better candidate for knighthood than the odious homophobe and anti-semite, Mr Sacranie."

Another right-winger paid tribute to Tatchell's role in the struggle against the "Islamicisation" of the West, and to his backing for the March for Free Expression in particular:

"Four years after the assassination of gay Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, his warning of the threat posed to the rights of European gays and women by intolerant, anti-assimilationist Muslim immigrants is increasingly vindicated by events. Muslims have migrated in large numbers to Europe, have more children than ethnic Europeans, are disproportionately involved in crime, and increasingly insist on being governed not by the prevailing civil laws but by Muslim Shari'ah law. Many Muslim clerics in Europe look to the day when Europe will become a Muslim caliphate. Scholar Bat Ye'or has dubbed that future Europe 'Eurabia'.... Fortunately, some are refusing to surrender. On March 25 in Trafalgar Square, British gay rights activist Peter Tatchell, a self-described 'left-wing Green', joined ... a rally to defend freedom of expression."

Worker Communist Party of Iran

Another of the speakers at the Trafalgar Square rally was Maryam Namazie of the Worker Communist Party of Iran, an ultra-left sect notorious for its frothing-at-the-mouth Islamophobia. Not only does the WPI refuse to distinguish between various Islamist currents – all are denounced as terrorists committed to stoning adulterers, amputating limbs and beheading hostages – but the group's blanket hatred of political Islamism extends to Islam as a religion, which is condemned for providing the ideological justification for terrorism and state oppression.

Thus, in a WPI television broadcast in July 2004 dealing with Yusuf al-Qaradawi's visit to London, Maryam Namazie observed that some confused people believe there are differences between moderate Islamists and extremists, drawing the following response from fellow WPI leader Bahram Soroush: "There are distinctions. As in every phenomenon – and Islam is not excluded from that – you have extreme, moderate, centre, etc. But that is not the issue. This is a question of degrees; a

relative thing. In any repugnant thing you can find things which are less repugnant than the others. Our problem is with the whole of Islam...."

A WPI front, the Organisation for Women's Liberation, issued a sympathetic statement in response to the murder of Dutch right-winger and racist Theo van Gogh, who was a friend of Pim Fortuyn, shared his political views and habitually used the word "goatfuckers" as a synonym for Muslims. The WPI treated him as a hero, declaring that: "He was murdered because he cared and dared to expose the inherent misogyny in and the brutal nature of Islam. An act which sadly, nowadays, calls for great courage."

Not surprisingly, the WPI strongly supported the French ban on the hijab in schools. As Maryam Namazie explained: "My Hijab My Right" is like saying 'My FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), My Right'!!! The veil is an instrument to control a woman's sexuality, like FGM. It is meant to segregate women.... The veil is not just another piece of clothing – just as FGM is not just another custom. I suppose if it were to be compared with anyone's clothing it would be comparable to the Star of David pinned on Jews by the Nazis to segregate, control, repress and to commit genocide."

On 20 March, a few days before the Trafalgar Square rally, Namazie had been the main speaker at the fifth annual Peter Tatchell Human Rights Fund dinner, where she called the general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, a fascist: "He may be a 'Sir' but he is still a proponent of political Islam, the fascism of today."

Fascists

Meanwhile, the real fascists were organising support for the Trafalgar Square rally at which Namazie was billed as a platform speaker. One supporter of the MFE later admitted that "the fascist connection snowballed and snowballed" as the campaign attracted those "for whom the free speech issue was just convenient cover for having a go at the Muslims".

This was hardly surprising, since the BNP's line on the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy was little different from that of the MFE's official sponsors. The BNP reproduced some of the cartoons on its website, explaining that it did so in defiance of those "who cannot tolerate important western democratic values such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression and those who fail to appreciate a sense of humour". The fascists also used one of the cartoons – the caricature of the Prophet with a bomb as a turban – on a leaflet for the local election campaign, which the BNP announced they would turn into a "referendum on Islam".

A press release issued on 7 March by the so-called Civil Liberty campaign, a fascist front organisation headed by the British National

Party's North East organiser Kevin Scott, announced that they would be attending the Trafalgar Square rally and urged their supporters to participate. And on 23 March the BNP itself officially declared its support for the MFE:

"On Saturday in central London a wide range of political, religious and lobby groups will be taking part in a protest rally to affirm the importance of free expression in frank and honest debate, including the freedom to criticise and mock religions and faiths. The BNP, the only political party which champions free speech backs the protest and we have also been made aware that Civil Liberty supporters will be present to demonstrate against the encroaching intolerance of Marxism and militant Islamicists."

The campaign for the right to publish anti-Muslim propaganda in the name of free expression played directly into the fascists' hands. As the recent Democratic Audit/Rowntree Trust report on the BNP has noted: "The BNP portrays itself as the party of free speech.... It is this stance that allows them to campaign so viciously on race and especially against Muslims while retaining an outward air of respectability."

Nick Cohen

Predictably, journalist Nick Cohen gave the March for Free Expression a plug in his column in the *Observer*, 19 March 2006. He completely ignored the Islamophobic character of the demonstration and the growing support it was attracting from right-wingers and racists:

"Next Saturday at 2pm in Trafalgar Square, there will be a rally for freedom of expression.... Fortunately, the British National Party is nowhere to be seen [sic] and the rally will be filled with democratic leftists, Liberal Democrats, secularists and Iranian and Saudi Arabian dissidents. With the white far right out of the picture, the brown far right has barged in and Islamic fundamentalists are proposing to hold demonstrations against free speech away from central London. So, if you want to protest on Saturday, you have a choice: for free speech or against? Come on, it's not that hard a choice. All will be welcome in Trafalgar Square. Dress? Danish."

The "brown far right" was a reference to the Muslim Action Committee, a broad-based organisation formed in response to the Danish cartoons crisis, which includes the liberal Muslim magazine *Q News* among its affiliates. Indeed, MAC took an extremely conciliatory line towards the March for Free Expression, emphasising that they supported free speech but attempting to convince the organisers that this principle should be balanced against the damage caused by encouraging bigotry against minority communities. Cohen's ignorant attack on MAC echoed that of the BNP, who denounced the committee as "Islamofascists".

IHRC and LAGCAR intervene

Five days before the demonstration was due to take place, the Islamic Human Rights Commission issued an action alert, which was also publicised by BLINK. "The official purpose of the demonstration is stated to be to support freedom of expression but, in reality, it appears to be virulently Islamophobic and racist in nature ...", the IHRC statement argued. "Although ostensibly the organisers have stated that the BNP are not welcome, there is much evidence to indicate that many elements of the Far Right will be present on the day."

The IHRC pointed out that, earlier in the month, Muslim demonstrators had been arrested for carrying offensive and provocative placards protesting against the publication of the cartoons. The IHRC therefore called on its supporters "to contact the Metropolitan Police and the Mayor's Office and ask that the law be implemented equally and that any demonstrators holding offensive and provocative placards and t-shirts be similarly arrested".

The Lesbian and Gay Coalition Against Racism also issued a statement expressing its concerns about far right support for the 25 March demonstration. LAGCAR quoted a representative of the Muslim LGBT organisation Imaan, who said: "We are deeply concerned that LGBT people and organisations appear to be supporting this rally. Our members support freedom of expression and free speech, but this is being exploited by this demo which appears to be aligning elements in society which have singled out the Muslim community, under the guise of 'free expression'."

Risdon backtracks

This pressure evidently had some effect. On Thursday 23 March, two days before the demonstration, Peter Risdon suddenly began frantically backtracking on his earlier call to MFE supporters to display the cartoons. In an announcement on the MFE website Risdon stated: "At the outset, we said that displays of the Danish cartoons would be welcome on Saturday. No, let me rephrase that: At the outset, I, Peter Risdon, said the cartoons would be welcome. I am going to take full responsibility for this. I now think that was a mistake.... I now appeal to people not to bring the cartoons on T-shirts or placards."

Furthermore, the advertisement for offensive anti-Muslim t-shirts was removed from the MFE site without explanation. Not only that, but Risdon declared that "Muslims are welcome" at Saturday's protest.

Whether the Metropolitan Police had a quiet word in his shell-like we do not know. However, the main cause of the retreat was apparently an intervention by Rend Shakir, a business acquaintance of Peter Risdon's from Cambridge who had been proudly billed by Risdon as the March for

Free Expression's token Muslim speaker.

Rend Shakir is the daughter of Samir Shakir Mahmood Sumaida'ie, a former Iraqi Communist Party member turned businessman who became minister of the interior in the puppet "Governing Council" in Iraq and is now Iraqi ambassador to the UN. Rend Shakir welcomed the invasion of Iraq – "I have seen Iraqis in this country struggle to swallow tears before speaking in public, saying things like 'Thank you and thank your government for allowing me to speak freely'" – and she campaigned with the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (a front for that country's Worker Communist Party) against plans to incorporate aspects of sharia into Iraqi law (see the article 'Stamping out Shar'ia' in *The Cambridge Student*). She is even an admirer of Donald Rumsfeld! Not only was Rend Shakir unknown in Muslim communities but she was – to put it mildly – entirely unrepresentative of Muslim views.

However, according to the Muslim Action Committee, Rend Shakir became "concerned about the tone that the March was taking and contacted MAC" – which was to her credit. She brokered discussions between Risdon and MAC, who pointed out to him that "placards depicting the cartoons would be an intimidation to Muslims and would perpetuate the BNP campaign that is very openly being conducted in the run up to the May local elections". Presumably Risdon was faced with the prospect of his single, widely-advertised, Muslim speaker publicly breaking from his campaign, plus he was probably genuinely worried that the Trafalgar Square rally would be discredited by attracting large numbers of far-rightists and open racists – so he decided to cut his losses and accept a compromise.

It should be noted in passing that none of the "left" supporters of the MFE had expressed any concern about the mounting racist and fascist support for the campaign. As we have seen, a few days earlier Nick Cohen had been blithely asserting that "the white far right" was "out of the picture". On the same day that Risdon was being panicked into an about-turn over the demonstration, Peter Tatchell published a piece on the MFE website which airily dismissed accusations of right-wing backing for the demonstration. "Sections of the left moan that the rally is being supported [by] the right", he wrote. "Well, if these socialists object so strongly why don't they organise their own demo in support of free speech?"

Needless to say, many of the right-wing and racist elements who had financed and built support for the MFE were appalled at Risdon's liberal backsliding over a free-born Briton's right to display racist caricatures. The MFE site was inundated with denunciations of the decision. Typical comments read:

"I gave you money because I thought you were standing up to the tyranny of Islam, you

snivelling coward. Either reverse course once again and welcome those cartoons back again THAT WERE THE ORIGINAL REASON FOR THIS MARCH or refund my money" ... "Another pathetic example of grovelling to Muslim 'sensibilities'" ... "I am incredibly disappointed by this – it is nothing but dhimmitude" ... "What a bunch of wimps. You have obviously caved in to the Islamic pressure groups and the Mayor of Londonistan. Another victory for Sharia law and another defeat for Liberty" ... "You guys are truly disgusting and despicable. You are worse than the terrorists and jihadists. You are the ones who provide them cover ... lacking the integrity to tell your true beliefs. You oppose free speech."

The Trafalgar Square demonstration

While most of the demonstrators adhered to Risdon's call not to display the Danish cartoons, Reza Moradi – a member of the Worker Communist Party of Iran – turned up in Trafalgar Square brandishing a placard featuring some of the notorious caricatures. The examples he chose were the most explicitly racist of the series published by *Jyllands-Posten*: the one of the Prophet with a bomb as a turban and another of a wild-eyed Prophet wielding a knife, with two terrified veiled women cowering behind him – the implication of course being that Muslims are terrorists and misogynists. Just in case anyone missed the point, the latter cartoon was accompanied by the slogan "Religion – hands off women's life", implying that the oppression of women is intrinsic to Islam. "It's my freedom, everyone's freedom, to expose these pictures and encourage everyone to do the same", *New Humanist* magazine, which was another of the MFE's sponsors, reported Moradi as saying.

In the rally's opening speech, Moradi's WPI comrade Maryam Namazie delivered a characteristically hysterical rant which featured the familiar WPI theme that political Islamism in all its variants is nothing but a murder machine inspired by the religion itself: "the political Islamic movement kills, it maims, it humiliates – with Islam as its banner – and we are not even allowed to ridicule and criticise it".

Namazie denied that Islamophobia was racism "because criticisms of a religion, idea, a belief and even the practices that result from beliefs – even a phobia and hatred against beliefs have nothing to do with racism against real live human beings". According to this reasoning, of course, the BNP are not racists, as they repeatedly declare that their campaign of hatred and bigotry is directed against Islam as a religion and not against Muslims as individuals.

Namazie also delivered a second, impromptu speech after Moradi was temporarily detained by the police following a complaint about the placard he had brought. She addressed the demonstrators while brandishing the offending placard and then

handed it to the crowd urging them to pass it round and display it. They were only too happy to oblige.

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society asked rhetorically why the government had opposed freedom of expression by bringing forward the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. He answered: "Perhaps a clue lies in the fact that just before the election the Home Secretary wrote to selected mosques ... making the party political point that it was the opposition's fault that the legislation had – at that stage – been rejected." In other words, it was just an attempt to appease Muslims. The fact that the government had responded sympathetically to the concerns of Muslim communities was evidently reprehensible by definition as far as Wood was concerned.

Peter Tatchell got a good reception when he attacked unnamed mainstream Muslim leaders for supposedly issuing death threats against a liberal imam who had been due to speak at his fund-raising dinner the previous week, and when he criticised the police for failing to take action against Muslim extremists. One observer reported that Tatchell did leaven this with some progressive-sounding anti-racist rhetoric, "at which point he started to get heckles from people demanding that he stick to free speech, not go on about racism".

Sean Gabb spoke on behalf of the Libertarian Alliance, taking the opportunity to advocate the "principle" that racists should have the right to free speech, even to the extent of inciting hatred against minority ethnic communities. As a *Socialist Worker* correspondent reported, Gabb "defended the rights of BNP leader Nick Griffin, Holocaust denier David Irving and disgraced racist lecturer Frank Ellis to 'speak their mind'. The crowd cheered him."

By the time Gabb got to speak, the demonstration had dwindled to about 150 rain-soaked reactionaries, as other protestors retreated to the local pubs. At its height, the crowd numbered no more than 350 – significantly less than the "thousands" confidently predicted by Tatchell a couple of days earlier. Some of the more mainstream defenders of "free expression" were no doubt put off by the likelihood of far right participation in the event and had stayed away. On the other hand, many of the racists who had initially been attracted to the protest had been antagonised by Risdon's appeal not to display the cartoons and boycotted the event.

Nevertheless, the organised far right did participate in the protest. The BNP reported that the demonstrators included "a delegation from Civil Liberty, the organisation established earlier this year to defend the rights of patriotic Britons.... About 40 CL supporters attended the protest rally and handed out literature which was well received by other defenders of our fundamental liberties." The same claim was repeated on the Civil Liberty

website, which published photographs of the demonstration.

Islamophobes in denial

Writing for the *Guardian's* Comment is Free in the aftermath of the Trafalgar Square demonstration, Peter Tatchell claimed to have been traduced by his "far left" critics:

"Not content with doing nothing to defend the right to free speech, large sections of the far left have gone into overdrive to depict those who supported last Saturday's Freedom of Expression rally in Trafalgar Square as crypto-fascists and neo-Nazi sympathisers. In a storm of lies and misrepresentations worthy of Josef Goebbels, the ultra-left propaganda machine has insinuated that a mini-Nuremberg took place, flush with supporters of the BNP promoting racist and anti-Muslim hatred. Those attending the rally have been variously condemned by the far left as 'supporting', 'colluding with' or 'endorsing' the BNP. This is plain bloody nonsense."

As a description of leftist criticisms of Tatchell's participation in the MFE, this was certainly nonsense. In reality, our point was that Tatchell had entered into an alliance with right-wingers and racists in defence of the "freedom" to publish anti-Muslim caricatures, and that the MFE had consequently attracted the support and participation of the BNP.

Tatchell, however, furiously denied that there was any far right involvement. "Contrary to the lies and scaremongering of the far left, there was no BNP presence at Saturday's rally ... ", he insisted. "There were no union jack flags, and no leaflets or placards attacking Muslims or promoting fascist ideas." Tatchell's lieutenant Brett Lock chimed in with the claims that "on the day, the BNP were nowhere in sight" and that the fascists "were explicitly banned from the march".

From which we can only conclude that leading members of OutRage! are in serious need of an eye test. Even leaving aside the fascists' own admission that their members participated in the rally, photographers registered the presence of demonstrators waving union jacks and holding Civil Liberty propaganda. Moreover, the latter was openly distributed to the crowd without any interference by the stewards, notwithstanding Lock's claim of a ban on the BNP. As for the placards attacking Muslims, they were also plainly in evidence – although, to be fair, it wasn't the fascists of the BNP who brought them, but Tatchell's allies in the Worker Communist Party.

Conclusion

Writing on the Danish cartoons crisis in the *Guardian*, 4 February 2005, Gary Younge pointed to the double standards that are applied when it comes to offensive racist illustrations:

"In January 2002 the *New Statesman* published

a front page displaying a shimmering golden Star of David impaling a union flag, with the words ‘A kosher conspiracy?’ The cover was widely and rightly condemned as anti-semitic. It’s not difficult to see why. It played into vile stereotypes of money-grabbing Jewish cabals out to undermine the country they live in.... A group calling itself Action Against Anti-Semitism marched into the *Statesman*’s offices, demanding a printed apology. One eventually followed. The then editor, Peter Wilby, later confessed that he had not appreciated ‘the historic sensitivities’ of Britain’s Jews. I do not remember talk of a clash of civilisations in which Jewish values were inconsistent with the western traditions of freedom of speech or democracy. Nor do I recall editors across Europe rushing to reprint the cover in solidarity.”

If in 2002 a bunch of right-wing “libertarians” had called a demonstration in support of the *New Statesman*’s decision to publish this anti-semitic illustration, with the declared aim of upholding the freedom to insult Britain’s Jewish community, would Tatchell, Harris, Namazie et al have participated? Would they have happily joined a crowd parading around Trafalgar Square brandishing placards featuring the *NS* front cover or a caricature of a hook-nosed Jew counting money, on the grounds that they were defending the basic democratic right to ridicule and offend? Would Nick Cohen have devoted a section of his *Observer* column to applauding the demonstration as a principled stand in support of free speech? These questions of course answer themselves.

It should be obvious that the position of genuine leftists or liberals on the issue of free speech is fundamentally different from that of the political right, whether they are open Nazis like the BNP and Civil Liberty or non-fascist hard-right org-

anisations like the Freedom Association and the Libertarian Alliance. For such organisations, “free expression” means the “liberty” to incite hatred and bigotry against minority communities and, more generally, to defend the “freedom” of the oppressor against the oppressed. In relation to racism in general all leftists and liberals would understand this point, but a number of them lose sight of it when the victims are Muslims.

The irony here is that one of the repeated themes of the pro-war “left” – people like Nick Cohen or the neocon bloggers at Harry’s Place – has been to accuse the anti-war movement of being in a block with the “right”, by which they mean Muslim organisations. Yet they themselves evidently have no problem forming a block with the white Islamophobic right. Peter Tatchell declares unceasingly that in opposing war or fighting fascism it is permissible for the left to build alliances only with liberal Muslims. But when it is a question of attacking Islam he is happy to share a platform with the likes of Sean Gabb.

Since the launch of the “war on terror”, the demonisation of Islam has become an important ideological weapon in justifying US attacks on majority-Muslim countries. It is evident that, under the impact of this imperialist propaganda, a section of liberal and “left” opinion has lost its political and moral bearings and is now prepared to form an anti-Muslim alliance with right-wingers and even outright racists. With US imperialism showing no sign of abandoning its programme of military aggression – at the time of writing, it has Iran firmly in its sights – exposing and combating this rotten alliance in all its forms, and defending Muslim communities against it, will remain a challenge for the real left for the foreseeable future. ■

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