Since the 2010 general election, the Coalition government has brought the issue of Islamophobia much more firmly into the political and policy spaces than its New Labour predecessor. This can be seen in the establishing of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Islamophobia, the Cross-Government Working Group (CGWG) on Anti-Muslim Hatred (CGWG), and in a more populist fashion, in the suggestion by the cochair of the Conservative Party—Baroness Sayeeda Warsi—that Islamophobia has passed “the dinner table test” (Guardian, 2011): that the expression of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment has become socially acceptable through conversational civility. To what extent also is it evidence that the Coalition, unlike its New Labour predecessors, is happy to “do God” (Guardian, 2010)? Irrespective of the drivers, Islamophobia is now firmly established on the political and policy radar; interesting given that since the publication of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia’s (CBMI) report by the Runnymede Trust in 1997 (the Runnymede report)—the first British policy document relating to Islamophobia—policy responses to the phenomenon have been scant, indirect, and somewhat implicit. Consequently, developments and discourses emanating from the Coalition are as unexpected as they are unprecedented. Why then might Islamophobia be on the policy agenda now? What has changed?

Given Islamophobia’s timeliness, relatively little scholarly work has been produced, which focuses on governmental policy responses to tackling the phenomenon. Consequently, such a consideration is possibly somewhat overdue. Acknowledging this gap and the shift in Coalition thinking, this article critically analyses British governmental policy responses and approaches to Islamophobia over the past 15 years. Tracing religiously based discrimination from the 1980s to the publication of the Runnymede Trust’s 1997 groundbreaking report into Islamophobia, this article explores how the New Labour government sought primarily to address Islamophobia through a broadening of the equalities framework. Against a backdrop of 9/11 and 7/7, a concurrent security and antiterror agenda had detrimental impacts. Under the Coalition, there has been a marked change. Considering recent developments and initiatives, the Coalition has seemingly rejected Islamophobia as an issue of equalities preferring approaches more akin to tackling Anti-Semitism. In conclusion, definition, evidence, and politics are revisited to offer a prospective for future British governmental policy.

Keywords
Islamophobia, anti-Muslim hatred, British government, discrimination, religion
upon a wide range of policy and academic sources, documents from various governmental sources (including some that are unavailable in the public domain) and research notes from exploring Islamophobia at British and European levels from the past decade are also drawn upon.

Acknowledging the international resonance of the phenomenon, its different manifestations in different national and international settings, and the differing approaches to tackling it in these same locations, this article contributes knowledge toward understanding governmental policy approaches to tackling Islamophobia as well as Islamophobia per se. The wider body of work remains embryonic where the focus has been on theoretical analyses (Allen, 2010; Malik, 2010; Sayyid & Vakil, 2010), media (Petley & Richardson, 2011; Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2004), applied contexts (e.g., education; Shaik, 2006), specific locations (Reeves, Abbas, & Pedroso, 2009), political movements (Allen, 2011a), or from within specific disciplines (Sheriden, 2006). As Campling (1997) observes from research into race relations and equalities, it is easy to be overly “introspective, over-theoretical and disconnected from policy concerns” (p.1), something which is true of Islamophobia. Where research has focused on policy, most have disproportionately focused on associated topics or those conflated with Islam or Muslims rather than with Islamophobia itself. This can be seen in the focus on antiterrorism (Kundnani, 2009; Spalek & McDonald, 2010) and integration (Joppke, 2009; Mandeville, 2009; Modood, Triandafyllidou, & Zapata-Barrero, 2006; Schain, 2010; Sinno, 2008) among others.

Alcock’s (2003) reflection therefore has resonance: “the racism that black people in Britain experience is thus not the same thing as reaction to ethnic differences” (p. 290). As the Islamophobia Muslims experience in Britain is not the same as reaction to religious or theological differences, what Parekh (2006) suggests comes under the moniker the “Muslim question.” As Alcock clarifies, the focus “is thus not race, but racism” (p. 290). Here, therefore, the focus is Islamophobia.

Knowing Islamophobia

Recognition of Islamophobia, let alone political recognition, spans little more than two decades (Allen, 2010; CBMI, 1997). Those two decades, however, have been marked by at times emotive exchanges about what Islamophobia is and what is not. British in coinage, the Runnymede report defined Islamophobia as “a useful shorthand way of referring to the dread or hatred of Islam . . . and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims” (CBMI, 1997, p. 1). In explanation, it suggested that Islamophobia was identifiable through “recurring characteristic[s] of closed views” (1997, p. 1). From its typology of “closed views,” Islamophobia was identifiable where: Muslims and Islam were represented as or seen to be the enemy, violent, aggressive, threatening, separate, and “other”. Despite the definition and typology having been widely adopted, both have been shown to be flawed. For Allen (2010), if the “closed views” equal Islamophobia, then the opposite “open views”—set out in the report as a countervalue or more rational “view”—must equal Islamophilia, itself as unwelcome and unwarranted as Islamophobia. For those seeking to refute or reject Islamophobia, such a binary approach offers convenience: Tackling Islamophobia necessitates the imposition of an unmoving and uncritical (Islamophilic) shield behind which all criticism and questioning of Islam and Muslims, irrespective of legitimacy is deflected or repealed. For critics, therefore, all discussion and debate is forced into being either “Islamophobic” or “Islamophilic.” In doing so, the nuance and complexity that characterizes much of what sits between the binaries is inappropriately referred to in generalized terms and in largely patronizing and phoney ways (Allen, 2010). This widespread and uncritical adoption of the Runnymede definition and typology is therefore seen to be causal in the failure to effectively communicate not only what Islamophobia is but also to convince politicians and policy makers that a response is required (Allen, 2010).

Usage of the term Islamophobia is also problematic. Shyrock (2010) suggests that the usage is oversimplified and “impervious to nuance” (2010, p. 9), whereas for Allen (2010), it is routinely conceived and used in weak and unconvincing ways. Sayyid (2010) offers differentiation: Analytically, Islamophobia is rendered “a nebulous and perpetually contested category” (p. 2); polemically, it is locked in the discourses of those with grievances, smugly pontificating or seeking the ear of politicians. For him, usage is ineffective given the lack of meaning attributed to it by those who use it. Similar criticisms are posited when charges of Islamophobia are made, lacking specificity, relying on conjecture and accusation, therefore being open to challenge and rejection (Vakil, 2010). As Vakil (2010) reflects, given such contention, it might be easier to suspend engagement with Islamophobia linguistically and conceptually. However, as he adds, this miscasts the issue as the term is established in the contemporary lexicon and has had considerable investment from critics and advocates alike. Relevant here is the fact that the Coalition government is now openly using the term. Although as before, what matters will be what is meant by the Coalition’s usage of the term.

Unsurprisingly, the government’s definition and meanings of Islamophobia remain protean. As evidence of this, the APPG has prioritized the need for a working definition to base its work program on (Allen, 2011a). So does the CGWG, noting how “the term Islamophobia is not contained within traditional dictionaries and there are many different interpretations as to its meaning . . . the term may be misleading in the truest sense” (Cross Party Working Group on Islamophobia & Anti-Muslim Hate Crime, 2012b). Similar can be seen at the European level also. Research commissioned by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) following the events of 11 September
2001 (9/11) highlighted how despite member states being asked to monitor levels of Islamophobia, less than half of had a working definition of what exactly it was they were monitoring (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). At the European level, the EUMC has pursued research into Islamophobia (EUMC, 2007a, 2007b). In one of two reports from 2006, the detrimental impact of there being no legally binding or widely accepted definition of Islamophobia was noted (EUMC, 2007a). However, the EUMC did acknowledge the Council of Europe’s 2005 definition: “the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them . . . [taking] the shape of daily forms of racism and discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights” (EUMC, 2007a, p. 61). While admittedly broad, the definition offers some advantages over the Runnymede alternative. While Runnymede’s Islamophobia was an unfounded and irrational phenomenon, the Council of Europe attempt goes further by recognizing the more routine, consequential and exclusionary characteristics and consequences, the “daily forms of racism and discrimination and more violent forms.”

The Council of Europe definition also has resonance with theoretical models of Islamophobia. For Allen (2010), the theory is that Islamophobia functions as an ideology, through modes of operation (e.g., the media or political discourse), and as exclusionary practices including violence as a tool for exclusion. The latter function is crucial to the policy setting as evidence of exclusionary practices will be that which best convinces and prompts politicians and policy makers of the need for change or at least a policy response. The Council of Europe approach also resonates with Allen’s notion that Islamophobia is not always unfounded and irrational. Both acknowledge that Islamophobia can be a “prejudiced viewpoint” as much as fear, going beyond the pathological and reductivism of the Runnymede approach. While still broad, the Council of Europe definition therefore offers a way to incorporate greater nuance and complexity, and so it is positive that the CGWG has used as a start point (Cross Party Working Group on Islamophobia & Anti-Muslim Hate Crime, 2012b). Whatever approach is preferred, however, the APPG and the CGWG would clearly benefit from offering some clarity in defining Islamophobia. In doing so, they might better manage expectations about what might be realistically achievable at the same time as proposing a policy-friendly definition.

**Before Runnymede**

Discrimination on the basis of religion clearly precedes the emergence of Islamophobia in the 1990s as does governmental engagement with faith and religious issues also. As well as there being a greater political openness to the more social and civic version of religion since the mid-1980s (McLoughlin, 2010), so too has a greater impetus been identifiable toward tackling inequalities. While Jenkins and Solomos (1989) rightly acknowledge how at the level of national governmental there was “little agreement about what should be done . . . to help break down racially discriminatory barriers” (p. 3); for Cooper (2004), the same was not always true away from Westminster. Those on the political left in the urban conurbations were becoming increasingly driven to find effective strategies to tackling what they saw as rising inequalities and discrimination. Rather than developing new policies and legislation, they focused on extending prevailing principles of equality to those with “new”—and controversial—markers of identity. Such markers went beyond traditional understandings, sexual orientation, for instance, being seen as more than a form of conduct. Likewise, religion is seen as being more than beliefs and practices. Achieving only minor breakthroughs at governmental level, Cooper (2004) suggests these left a legacy that duly influenced the way markers of discrimination were conceived, formalized, and afforded protection years later.

Still, the recognition of discrimination on the basis of religion was largely invisible in the British political spaces for much of the 20th century, excepting the Northern Irish context. This changed in the late 1980s when calls for religious discrimination to be made unlawful emerged in the aftermath of the Satanic Verses. This acted, according to Weller (2006), as both a lightning rod and magnifying glass for Britain’s Muslim communities: the lightning rod galvanizing Muslim communities and organizations to use religion as a marker of individual and corporate identity; the magnifying glass placing Muslims, their communities, and organizations under increased public and political scrutiny. However, it was not until the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) called for religious discrimination to be made unlawful in 1991 that some momentum became evident: “It is at present within the law to incite hatred against a religious community and to discriminate against a person because of their religion, unless affiliation to a religion happens to be recognised as membership of an ethnic group” (cited in Blakemore & Drake, 1996, p. 115). Little evidence was, however, available. Given that much of this was anecdotal or founded upon conjecture, so the claims were largely rejected and dismissed as a consequence of the “lightning rod.”

The first Muslim organization to call for protection against discrimination on the basis of religion was the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA). Bolstered by the CRE, UKACIA published a report in 1993 titled “Muslims and the Law in Multi-Faith Britain: The Need for Reform.” Drawing upon the 1975 White Paper on racial discrimination, the report called for comparative protection on the basis of religion: “Where unfair discrimination is involved, the necessity of legal remedies is now generally accepted. To fail to provide a remedy against an injustice strikes at the rule of law” (cited in Weller, 2006, p. 304). Once again, a lack of evidence failed to convince politicians and policy makers of such “an injustice.” In trying to fill this evidence gap, the CRE a year later conducted a survey of
agencies that dealt with complaints of religious discrimination. As Weller (2006) notes, the findings were unconvincing due to the low numbers of responses received. In the same year, however, the Anti-Discrimination (Amendment) Act 1994 was introduced extending levels of protection afforded to ethnic groups under the Race Relations Act (RRA) 1976 to monoethnic religious groups, namely, Jews and Sikhs. In response, two leaflets emerged: one from the Inner Cities’ Religious Council’s Challenging Religious Discrimination: A Guide for Faith Communities and Their Advisers; the other, the CRE’s Religious Discrimination: Your Rights (Weller, 2006, p. 305). Neither did the new legislation afford protection to Muslims given their multiethnicity nor did the leaflet refer to Islamophobia.

However, specific interest was being shown toward Islamophobia. Via the Runnymede Trust, a report from the Commission on Anti-Semitism noted how religious discrimination was on the increase. Providing evidence to suggest that levels of discrimination toward Jewish communities was on the increase, the report added that the same was true of Muslim communities also (Runnymede Commission on Anti-Semitism, 1994). Although the report failed to substantiate this with evidence, it did refer to it as Islamophobia. From this, the CBMI was established and 3 years later, its report, Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, was published (CBMI, 1997). For Weller (2006), this “moved the terms of the debate quite significantly,” it “introduced into public discourse the notion that, alongside shared dynamics of discriminatory experience, there may also be particularities of Muslim experience signalled by the word ‘Islamophobia’” (p. 306). Setting out 60 recommendations for national and local government as well as the voluntary and private sectors, the report sought “decisive action” across education, employment, health, housing, and the media (CBMI, 1997, p. iii). Although the report’s definition and typology has undoubtedly shaped understanding, its recommendations were less impacting. Once more, the lack of clear evidence failed to convince many, not just of the need to act against Islamophobia but also of the phenomenon’s very reality (Allen, 2010).

Published soon after New Labour’s 1997 electoral success, this lack of political commitment became apparent at the report’s launch at the House of Commons. Launched by the then Home Secretary (Jack Straw), Straw immediately dismissed two major recommendations: equity for state-funded, faith-based schools; and legislation to protect against Islamophobia (Allen, 2010):

“[The Government] have immediate plans to legislate on racial violence. I am sick to death of the mindless bigotry and thuggery which damages and destroys the lives of so many people in this country . . . It is a continuing shame to our society, and as a society, we must not tolerate it.” (Q News, November 1-20, 1997)

Despite the report seeking to establish Islamophobia as distinct, Straw instead conflated manifestations of Islamophobia with those of “racial” violence. In failing to recognize the necessary distinction between the two, the particularistic nature of Islamophobia—one based on markers of Muslim- or Islam-ness—seemed lost.

**Things Can Only Get Better: New Labour**

New Labour, however, was more open to faith and religion than its predecessor. For Gilliat-Ray (2004), Blair’s language of “social inclusion” went beyond material wealth and poverty to incorporate citizenship and equality of opportunity. The capacity for faith groups to provide voluntary services also gave them economic viability (Gilliat-Ray, 2004). Other drivers too were evident including the social deprivation of some religious communities (Anwar & Bakhsh, 2003; Woodhead, 2010), demographic changes necessitating the establishment of nonhistorical religious traditions (Bruce, 1996; Davie, 1994), and an increasing number of people choosing to identify themselves religiously (Oliver-Dee, 2009). For Harris, Halfpenny, and Rochester (2003), there was also “the personal moral and Christian commitment of several members of the government including the prime minister” (p. 96). And, of course, there was the recognition of growing anti-religious—anti-Muslim?—attitudes post-9/11 (Allen, 2005; CBMI, 2004). Nonetheless, specific interest was being shown toward Islamophobia. Via the Runnymede Trust, a report from the Commission on Anti-Semitism noted how religious discrimination was on the increase. Provided with evidence to suggest that levels of discrimination toward Jewish communities was on the increase, the report added that the same was true of Muslim communities also (Runnymede Commission on Anti-Semitism, 1994). Although the report failed to substantiate this with evidence, it did refer to it as Islamophobia. From this, the CBMI was established and 3 years later, its report, Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, was published (CBMI, 1997). For Weller (2006), this “moved the terms of the debate quite significantly,” it “introduced into public discourse the notion that, alongside shared dynamics of discriminatory experience, there may also be particularities of Muslim experience signalled by the word ‘Islamophobia”’ (p. 306). Setting out 60 recommendations for national and local government as well as the voluntary and private sectors, the report sought “decisive action” across education, employment, health, housing, and the media (CBMI, 1997, p. iii). Although the report’s definition and typology has undoubtedly shaped understanding, its recommendations were less impacting. Once more, the lack of clear evidence failed to convince many, not just of the need to act against Islamophobia but also of the phenomenon’s very reality (Allen, 2010).

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recommendations for tackling religious discrimination emerged including the extension of race relations legislation, the HRA and the largely defunct blasphemy laws (Weller et al., 2001). The creation of new laws—specific and generic—was also posited and was afforded greater inquiry via the Home Office 2001 report “Tackling Religious Discrimination: Practical Implications for Policy-Makers and Legislators” (Hepple & Choudhary, 2001).

In the background to these developments, the fallout from 9/11 was becoming evident. Government’s focus shifted and became fixed on security and the threat of Al-Qaeda inspired terrorism. However, as research undertaken by the EUMC highlighted, 9/11 also brought about an increase in anti-Muslim incidents and hostility:

Muslims became indiscriminate victims of an upsurge of both verbal and physical attacks following the events of 11 September. From its findings, a new dynamism emanating directly from the attacks on the US saw manifestations of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic expression become both more extreme and explicit, and much more widely tolerated. (Allen & Nielsen, 2002, p. 43)

Soon after 9/11, New Labour’s John Denham (2001) highlighted the government’s fear of a real backlash, raising the specter of a cancer-like “normative” Islamophobia spreading through British society. However, Denham’s statement was anomalous. New Labour—whether advertently or inadvertently—repeatedly associated matters of security with religious discrimination at the same time as seemingly preferring not to refer to a particularistic Islamophobia (Allen, 2011c). Therefore, while government quickly introduced legislation to protect those at risk from assault or abuse on the basis of their religion, they did through the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001. Here, the law was expanded to afford equitable protection against violence to religious communities, whether multi- or monoethnic, as for racial groups. Other legislation was also introduced. The Criminal Justice Act 2003 extended sentencing provisions for offenses aggravated by hostility toward victims because of their religion (as well as sexual orientation or disability). The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 also made an offense of using threatening words or behavior with the intention of stirring up hatred on the basis of religion. This built upon the protection afforded under the Public Order Act 1986.

While seeking to protect on the basis of religion, rarely was Islamophobia specifically referenced. Neither was the legislation overtly referred to in terms of protecting Muslims or their communities. Where Muslims were referred to, however, was in the policy discourses linked to antiterror and security. Whether seeking to curtail and control radicalism, proscribe extremist groups, or introduce new offenses including acts preparatory to or encouraging of terrorism and disseminating terrorist publications, research shows how this reinforced many of the public’s fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islam (Briggs, Fieschi, & Lownsbrough, 2006; Khan, 2009). History may offer an interesting precedent. Solomos (1989) and Ratcliffe (2004) write about the close relationship between race relations legislation and immigration. For Ratcliffe, despite introducing the RRA 1968, the Labour government of the time also needed to be seen to be tough on immigration and so simultaneously introduced the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968. The same occurred with the introduction of the RRA 1965 and the 1965 White Paper on Commonwealth Immigrants. While recognizing that religiously motivated discrimination (Islamophobia?) was on the increase, it might also be that New Labour also felt the need to be “tough” on security. Indeed, it could be argued that the political situation dictated this rather more so than any political ideology. Nonetheless, it is clear that throughout this period, two quite disparate issues became linked and that a particularistic Islamophobia seemed lost.

In the latter years of its government, New Labour oversaw the extensive broadening of the equalities framework, including extending protection against discrimination on the basis of age, sexual orientation, and of course, religion or belief and none. Described as a “radical change” by Riddell and Watson (2011, p. 191), legislative protection on the basis of religion or belief was first incorporated under the Equality Act 2006 before being strengthened by the Equality Act 2010. Building on the European Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, which extended protection across all forms of employment against discrimination, harassment, and victimization, the 2006 Act also established the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). As with Weller’s research half a decade earlier, some Muslims were again unhappy that Islamophobia was seemingly negated and rarely mentioned by politicians or policy makers. An example of this can be seen in the EHRC’s report “Religion or Belief: Identifying Issues and Priorities” (Woodhead, 2010). While Islamophobia is referred to, the report offers scant recognition of its prevalence or scale, perceived or actual. This could be consequential once more of a continued failure to necessarily evidence Islamophobia.

What impact, if indeed any, the paucity of acknowledgment for Islamophobia under New Labour had is open to question. As research published at the end of New Labour’s government highlights, society increasingly felt that Muslims were likely to encounter prejudice on the basis of their religion (Botcherby, Glen, Iganski, Jochelson, & Lagou, 2011). Eighty-three percent—from a representative cross section of contemporary British society—believed that levels of prejudice were higher than 5 years previous. Public attitudes toward Muslims and Islam had also changed. In the “2009-2010 British Social Attitudes Survey,” not only were Muslims the least popular religious community but more than half of respondents also agreed they would be bothered by the building of a large mosque in their community. Only 15% felt the same about a large church (National Centre for Social Research, 2010). Such findings are not Islamophobic per se; but they are indicative public attitudes becoming more
negative. This deterioration was felt by Muslims themselves with research showing they were most likely to fear attack due to skin color, race, or religion (DCLG, 2011). Of those Muslims who were victims, nearly half perceived this to be incited because of their religion (DCLG, 2011). In addition, despite the introduction of legislation to protect on the basis of religion or belief, Muslims continued to feel they received too little government protection (DCLG, 2011).

A Government That Does God: The Coalition

As before, it is surprising the emphasis afforded by the Coalition on the issue of Islamophobia since winning the 2010 election. Most notable has been its willingness to refer to Islamophobia as a seemingly particularistic phenomenon. Even more surprising is Riddell and Watson’s (2011) view that equality issues would unlikely be a priority for the Coalition. Clearly not all the recent developments can be solely attributed to the Coalition: the APPG was first called for in March 2010 and so pre-dates the Conservative-Liberal Democrat alliance. Launched months after the 2010 election in November, the APPG had the remit to investigate the forms, manifestations, and extent of discrimination against Muslims in today’s Britain; review the effectiveness of relevant legislation; review existing mechanisms for recording anti-Muslim hate crimes; and investigate the role of the media in fostering intolerance toward Muslims (APPG, unpublished). The APPG sought to replicate the successes of the Anti-Semitism APPG. These included improving the reporting and recording of Anti-Semitic incidents and attacks, minimizing Anti-Semitic activity on university campuses, and working toward greater international collaboration to tackle Anti-Semitism online (APPG on Anti-Semitism, 2006).

The Islamophobia APPG was, however, dogged by controversy soon after its launch. Following the appointment of iENGAGE—a London-based Muslim organization—as the Secretariat, a number of Parliamentarians publicly resigned from the APPG, including the chair and vice-chair, Conservative MP Kris Hopkins and Lord Janner of Braunstone, respectively. The resignations were in response to accusations in the media—including the influential Conservative Home website—which suggested iENGAGE and its associates were “Islamist sympathisers” (Allen, 2011a). What ensued was a series of highly polemical “tit-for-tat” online articles from iENGAGE and their opponents. Aside from the polemics, a number of commentators also questioned whether iENGAGE had the necessary experience or credibility for the role. A full narrative of unfolding events can be found in the report “A Momentous Occasion” (Allen, 2011a) but after what has been described as an acrimonious “trial by blog,” the APPG’s members voted to remove iENGAGE as Secretariat in the autumn of 2011. Although welcomed by many, any focus on Islamophobia was “lost” in the process and so set back the impetus that had been started (Allen, 2011a). Since being relaunched in November 2011, the APPG has achieved a tentative cross-party support and at the time of writing, is devising a work program (Allen, 2011d).

Supporting the APPG, a CGWG was established in January 2012 (Cross Party Working Group on Islamophobia & Anti-Muslim Hate Crime, 2012a). In addition, and with the proviso to collect concrete evidence, the Coalition is financially backing the recently launched TELL MAMA (measuring anti-Muslim attacks) project, a telephone and online third-party reporting service where victims and witnesses can record details about Islamophobic and anti-Muslim incidents. The CGWG and TELL MAMA projects have distinct similarities to initiatives that emerged out of the Anti-Semitism APPG. Although too early to evaluate relative success or failure, the Coalition seems to have shifted the policy direction for tackling Islamophobia, preferring to align Islamophobia with Anti-Semitism more than with the equalities framework. This can be seen in the backing of the TELL MAMA project and its clear resonance with the Community Safety Trust (CST), an equitable Jewish-run organization which assists victims of Anti-Semitism at the same time as monitoring attacks and incidents. The evidence provided by the reporting of the CST is widely acknowledged by the government, police, and media among others.

Comparing Approaches

Although developments are ongoing, there are some clear differences between Coalition and New Labour approaches. First, the Coalition seems much more comfortable in naming Islamophobia and referring to it as distinct and particularistic. Although a lack of definition remains apparent, those such as Warsi have made bold and overt statements about Islamophobia and referring to it as distinct and particularistic. As per the EHRC, there are distinct similarities to initiatives that emerged out of the Anti-Semitism APPG. Although too early to evaluate relative success or failure, the Coalition seems to have shifted the policy direction for tackling Islamophobia, preferring to align Islamophobia with Anti-Semitism more than with the equalities framework. This can be seen in the backing of the TELL MAMA project and its clear resonance with the Community Safety Trust (CST), an equitable Jewish-run organization which assists victims of Anti-Semitism at the same time as monitoring attacks and incidents. The evidence provided by the reporting of the CST is widely acknowledged by the government, police, and media among others.

The evidence is being addressed through the APPG and CGWG.
In terms of definition and evidence, there is little difference between New Labour and the Coalition except in terms of conception. For New Labour, Islamophobia was a phenomenon incorporated within broader understandings of equalities. As such, existing legislation was extended and strengthened, in line with other forms of discrimination and as part of its social inclusion agenda. Questions remain, however, because as the research has shown, a significant driver for New Labour in its early years was the belief that Islamophobia was on the rise (Allen, 2010, 2011b; Allen & Nielson, 2002). Why then did it not feature more particularly in political and policy discourses? Indeed, as public attitudes toward Muslims and Islam deteriorated over the New Labour government, such an approach might be deemed to have failed. For Daniels and Macdonald (2005), policy and legislation do not in themselves change public attitudes: They merely curb certain behaviors. Like Blakemore and Drake (1996) stated, equalities policies “will not change the world” adding, “they were never designed to . . . the policies were designed to win majority consent rather than to force change” (p.210). Maybe then, New Labour’s equalities approach to tackling Islamophobia failed to win “majority consent.”

Under the Coalition, a clear shift away from aligning or incorporating Islamophobia within equalities is evident. More so, the Coalition’s aligns it with Anti-Semitism. In this way, Islamophobia—as Anti-Semitism beforehand—is seen as rather more exceptional and extraordinary. Under the Coalition, Islamophobia is seen to have distinct and differentiable features and characteristics and is clearly particularistic. Under New Labour, Islamophobia was quite different: It was far more generalistic—ordinary and far from exceptional. Maybe the Coalition has drawn from the historical roots of Islamophobia’s emergence, first acknowledged in a report into Anti-Semitism. Maybe also the Coalition has acknowledged how far-right and neo-Nazi groups having contemporarily adopted Islamophobia as the ideology of choice, in preference of traditional anti-Jewish ideologies. A few points require further consideration. The first is that the protection afforded by the extended equalities framework should not be discounted. In establishing an evidence base, the disaggregation of the EHRC’s monitoring data on the basis of religion or belief could prove extremely useful. Second, there is a need to recognize how, at times, Islamophobia overlaps with other discriminatory phenomena such as racism (Allen, 2010; Allen & Nielson, 2002; CBMI, 1997; Sayyid, 2010). Understanding Islamophobia solely as a distinct and different phenomenon might mean that its more fluid edges are negated or overlooked, confusing the extent and limits of the phenomenon. Maintaining the equalities perspective at the same time as affording a greater particularistic discourse therefore has the potential to culminate in a more complete approach to tackling Islamophobia beginning to emerge.

The political discourses and settings of New Labour and the Coalition also need to be considered. For New Labour, a strong linkage between the discourses of tackling religiously motivated prejudice, discrimination, and crimes with terror and security was apparent. As Becker and Bryman (2004) among others highlight, discourse is a recognized tool with which politicians reiterate and reinforce policy and thinking. This linking therefore had a potentially twofold impact. First, it had the potential to further reinforce the public’s fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islamic. Second, it had the potential to further place Muslims and their communities under greater scrutiny and so bring about feelings of anger, alienation, mistrust, and even increase the likelihood of radicalization (Khan, 2009). Set against a discursive backdrop of those such as Jack Straw’s suggestion that the wearing of the niqab—full-face covering—presented a barrier to integration (Allen, 2010), John Reid’s requesting Muslim families look for “tell-tale” signs of extremism in their children (BBC News, 2006), and the Department of Education requesting universities to “spy” on students vulnerable to extremist ideologies (BBC News, 2006) among others, the policy discourse of New Labour was not always differentiable from some of the more explicit discourses emanating from the populist far-right: the British National Party and English Defence League (EDL). One might even question the extent to which New Labour’s discourses attributed greater legitimacy to the far-right especially given its unprecedented growth during the three terms of New Labour government.

Future Policy Considerations for Islamophobia

With the Coalition explicitly recognizing and using the term Islamophobia, it might be suggested that it is a government that is rather more “Islamophobia friendly.” Given Warsi’s comments about Islamophobia having passed the “dinner table test,” maybe under the Coalition Islamophobia has now passed the “political table test” also. In doing so, it would seem that Islamophobia will remain on the political agenda for the foreseeable future. With this in mind, it might be that the same two problems that have dogged policy responses to tackling Islamophobia continue to be relevant: namely, definition and evidence. With the APPG, CGWG, and TELL MAMA projects having all identified the latter as being important, it is hoped that some headway might be expected in the not too distant future. As regards definition, the same headway might be less forthcoming. Although a single, formal definition is not an absolute requirement—there are indeed many different and competing definitions and conceptualizations of racism, for instance—such a definition might provide a metaphorical safety net under Weller’s “tightrope” that the APPG, CGWG, and TELL MAMA projects will no doubt be forced to walk. However, maybe the most pressing relates to Daniels and Macdonald’s acknowledgment that laws alone do not change attitudes. Consequently, any legislation will need to be accompanied by additional policy approaches that seek to address the
social problems which are causal to and exacerbating of tensions, prejudice, and by consequence, discrimination toward Muslims also. Given that public attitudes toward Muslims and Islam would seem to be becoming increasingly negative, changing them—if indeed this is a task for government—will present a very serious challenge. This challenge is further compounded by the opposition that has been historically shown toward policies that tackle discrimination and promote equality (Blakemore & Drake, 1996). The potential for these challenges to have a neutralizing effect is therefore a distinct possibility. Because of this, definition and evidence will be crucially important in the need to explain in a clear and grounded manner exactly what Islamophobia is, why it is a problem, and why it needs to be tackled. Without definition or evidence, confusion and a lack of clarity will continue to punctuate debates, discussions, and developments. Undoubtedly, the way ahead for politicians and policy makers will remain fraught with obstacles and potential pitfalls even if for the Coalition at least, Islamophobia has now passed the dinner table test. Ensuring that Islamophobia passes the political test—maintaining political (conversational) civility—may still be more difficult.

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