

A growing xenophobia

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THE RECENT UNDERGROUND DOCUMENTARY, shot by an intrepid BBC journalist who penetrated the inner circles of the racist British National Party, spotlights the hatred many Brits still feel for those perceived as outsiders.

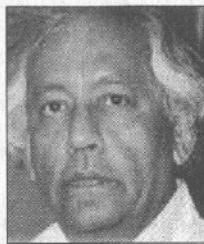
One BNP member boasted about hitting and kicking a 'Paki' until he 'turned floppy, and there was blood everywhere...' He went on to say that after the incident — which sparked three days of violent riots in Oldham three years ago — his victim identified the wrong man as his assailant. The camera also caught Nick Griffin, chairman of the BNP, claiming to repeat dire threats that he alleged were part of the Holy Koran, and warned his followers to act before the British way of life was swamped by an alien culture, and their wives and sisters raped by Muslims.

In isolation, these could be taken as the ravings of a handful of madmen. But alarmingly, the BNP got 800,000 votes in the recent election to the European Parliament. Given the low (around 30 per cent) turnout at these polls, it can reasonably be surmised that at least three times the BNP vote subscribes to its racist views. And it is not just Asian Muslims who are the targets of the party's hate-filled message: the Jews are equally reviled.

Muslim groups in Britain are pressing for a law that would make denigration of any religion a crime. Currently, inciting hatred against any race is a criminal offence, but this law does not protect religions from attacks of the kind Nick Griffin was overheard making against Islam in the BBC documentary. This lacuna will probably save him from prosecution, although he had gone on to state that if he were to make such remarks in public, he could get seven years in jail.

This proposal has been bitterly criticised in the right wing, mainstream press. In a series of three blistering attacks in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Will Cummins questioned why Islam should be given special protection, pointing out that other faiths were regularly and openly discussed and critiqued in Britain. He went on to charge that Islam was an aggressively evangelical religion that was spreading rapidly across the world because it had been given the latitude to do so. Other faiths, however, were not

LETTER FROM LONDON



IRFAN HUSAIN

At one level, Britain remains a remarkably tolerant country. Muslims are far freer here than they are in most Islamic countries. Indeed, this is one reason so many of them have chosen to migrate to the UK. Those who have integrated into the mainstream and adapted to a different way of life have generally done well

given the same freedom in Muslim countries.

A number of readers have written to support these views, revealing the growing sense of discomfort people now feel about Islam and the Muslims in their midst. Even normally liberal people have privately voiced their alarm at the anti-Western feelings frequently expressed by British Muslims. If, they say, these people find our society so repellent, why do they not return to their own countries?

This is indeed a conundrum: many mullahs of the MMA in Pakistan, for example, have sent their own offspring to the West. And yet, hardly a day

goes by without them fulminating against the 'evils of the West'. Why do they expose their children to these evils in the first place?

These contradictions show up in the low employment figures for British Muslims: survey after survey shows that employers are reluctant to hire young Muslims. One reason is that they fear their customers will be put off by the unruly beards grown by many Muslim men, and the hijab worn by Muslim women. Also, Muslim employees demand time off for prayers.

One indication of the skewed employment statistics is the fact that, according to the *Economist*, while 14 per cent of Oldham's population is from ethnic minorities, only 2.6 per cent of the town Council's employees are from this pool. And while 4.8 per cent of the town's white adults are on the dole, 15.3 per cent of the ethnic minorities claim unemployment benefits.

And yet, at one level, Britain remains a remarkably tolerant country. Muslims are far freer here than they are in most Islamic countries. Indeed, this is one reason so many of them have chosen to migrate to the UK. This remains the most popular destination for refugees among all European nations. Those who have integrated into the mainstream and adapted to a different way of life have generally done well. But those who continue clinging to the way they lived back home, and insist that their children reject the host culture, find themselves marginalised.

Earlier, this mattered only to those who found themselves living on the fringes. But in a post-9/11 world, the majority, white society is increasingly questioning these people as a potential fifth column. More and more, Asian and North African Muslims are stopped and searched by the police. Latent racism, earlier suppressed due to strict anti-racism laws, has re-surfaced and given legitimacy by security concerns.

Until Muslims in Britain decide that right or wrong, good or bad, they have made this their home and become part of society, they will remain outsiders and outcasts.

The writer is a freelance columnist