

A return to Cold War climate

By Hasan Suroor

There is widespread principled opposition to the idea of treating students from a particular religious group as suspects in the absence of any evidence that they have broken the law

MOHAMMED Hanif (not his real name) is a fresh undergraduate in a British university. He comes from a conservative Bangladeshi immigrant family, describes himself as a "devout" Muslim, sports a beard, observes Ramazan and offers prayers five times a day even if, on occasions, it means skipping the class. And, sometimes, he goes along with friends to meetings of radical Islamic guest speakers on the campus.

Does all this add up to "extremist" behaviour? And should his teachers be concerned about his activities to alert the police before he is snapped up by the Al Qaeda and turned into a suicide bomber? Students such as Hanif fear that they may end up being "targeted" as a result of the British government's new "guidance" to universities on tackling Islamist extremism.

Under the guidelines, university and college authorities are required, effectively, to inform the police if they detect signs of extremist behaviour among Muslim students. Although the term used is "monitoring," critics say it is a euphemism for "spying." With no concrete definition of "extremist behaviour" in the guidelines, the field is left wide open for universities to interpret it the way they like. There is concern that this is likely to lead to an open season on religious Muslim students in the current climate of Islamophobia.

It was precisely because of such fears that the Blair government was

forced to back down on a similar plan, two years ago, to co-opt universities and colleges in fighting Muslim radicalism. The academic community refused to be party to what, it believed, amounted to turning universities into an extension of M15 and Scotland Yard.

With memories of the anti-communist witch-hunt of the Cold War era still fresh, the move was likened to "anti-Muslim McCarthyism" and met

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with almost unanimous opposition from teachers and student groups. The University and College Union (UCU), Britain's largest trade union of academics, rejected the plan arguing that it would "jeopardise trust and confidence between staff and students."

"Members may be sucked into an anti-Muslim McCarthyism which has serious consequences for civil liberties

by blurring the boundaries of what is illegal and what is possibly undesirable," the then UCU joint general-secretary Paul Mackney said. The plan was also rejected by student organisations, which saw it as an attack on academic freedom and warned that it would poison teacher-student relations. "Turning campuses into some sort of a quasi-secret service is dangerous," an official of the National Union of Students said at the time.

Vice-chancellors were equally vehement in opposing the move. Universities UK, which represents vice-chancellors, called it divisive, "unreasonable" and potentially "counterproductive," arguing that it was likely to further alienate young Muslims and make them more vulnerable to the "jihadi" propaganda. Instead, they emphasised the need for a strategy to win the "hearts and minds" of students who showed signs of disaffection or an inclination towards radicalisation.

Last week, the government brought in revised "guidance" after wider consultations. But the revision doesn't go far enough. Despite its relatively softly-softly language, in essence the "updated" document is little different. It retains the basic premise of government policy — that universities should help (critics call it "collaboration") in fighting Islamist extremism by working with security services to identify potential suspects.

Rather helpfully, the government has also provided them a broad profile of what kind of students to look out for. They are likely to be young, "generally younger than 30 and male" — the sort of students found to be potential recruits for radical groups. While the focus remains on male students, female students — the government says — are also becoming increasingly radicalised with the number of women who

"support and participate in violent extremism", said to be on the rise.

The government says universities have become recruiting grounds for the Al Qaeda and other radical groups and it is important to protect impressionable students from attempts to brainwash them. Unveiling the plan, Higher Education Minister Bill Rammell said the threat of violent extremism from universities was "real and serious" but,

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in the same breath, admitted that it was "not widespread". He denied that the government was muzzling academic freedom or free speech, and insisted that the move was designed to clamp down on violent extremism. "We prize academic freedom and freedom of speech as the most effective way of challenging the views which we may find abhorrent but that remain within the

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law," he said.

He sought to allay fears that students might risk being branded Al Qaeda sympathisers for simply downloading an extremist website out of mere curiosity or being found in possession of radical literature. "It is legitimate and permissible for people to research the origins of violent extremism, even in some circumstances to say that actually we can understand how that leads people to certain courses of action ... But I think it is very clear when you look at ... the views that they articulate, there is a line at which you move from analysis and understanding towards outright advocacy of violent extremism. It is that that we are concerned about," Mr Rammell said.

Sceptics, however, remain unconvinced, pointing to the case of a young Muslim shop assistant who was charged with terror offences and put on trial for jokingly describing herself as a "lyrical terrorist" on a website. She was given a suspended sentence after the court found that she had been simply stupid.

Given Mr Rammell's own admission that campus extremism is not widespread, the move is considered too drastic, and the notion that academics should turn into spies and police informers plainly horrifying.

Martin Everett, vice-chancellor of the University of East London, said: "I cannot support the idea that staff should in some way act as informers or spies. Students are here to gain an education and part of that education is to promote free speech and encourage debate. Staff must be seen as the catalyst that helps move students' thinking on. Anything that compromises that role undermines the primary goal of higher education and I think what the government has proposed would do precisely that."

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opposition to the idea of treating students from a particular religious group as suspects in the absence of any evidence that they have broken the law. Critics point out that Britain has some of the most draconian anti-terror laws in Europe and they are adequate to deal with extremism in any shape or form, including on university campuses.

"Such pre-emptive measures are dangerous and will unleash a climate of

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suspicion and fear in universities. Today, it is terrorism; tomorrow are we going to monitor students for criminal behaviour just because crime is going up? Where is it going to stop? Next, are we going to tell schoolteachers to keep an eye on their young pupils lest they should grow up to be terrorists," asked one academic.

'Orwellian': Students find the prospect of being watched by their

teachers almost Orwellian. They say they would feel "uncomfortable" having to watch over their shoulders all the time. While recognising the need to fight extremism, they believe censorship is not the solution. "Universities are places where ideas are supposed to be tossed around — some of them may be dangerous but it is patronising to assume that students will be brainwashed by everything they hear," said Uzma Khan, a student of a West London college.

What both students and teachers find most worrying is the damage it would do to their relationship which is based, essentially, on respect and trust. Sally Hunt, UCU general secretary, said her members took the threat of terrorism seriously but this didn't mean that teachers should be made to police their charges. "No student should ever think they are being spied on and no staff member should ever be pressurised into treating any group of students differently from another," she said.

Less controversial is the advice to universities to vet external speakers invited by Muslim student groups, and to ban those who are likely to promote hatred, though there is a strong view that this would simply drive such elements underground, making it more difficult to tackle them. The liberal opinion is against banning or censoring views, no matter how odious, unless they breach the law.

The problem is that there is just too much paranoia about campus extremism. Universities have always been a hunting ground for competing ideologies but, as the New Humanist writer, Paul Sims, points out, what seemed a "threat" to society at the time eventually "passed" — and is now remembered as little more than a mere footnote of history. Let us remember history and not panic.

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