

Only a fully secular state can protect women's rights

Tuesday 17 October 2006, by [TOYNBEE Polly](#) (Date first published: 17 October 2006).

It is astonishing that a Labour government has managed to lead the country into this religious quagmire.

This has been a real test of Labour politicians. It is the first time in years that there has been a hard choice about women's rights - and many failed miserably. Here is a conflict between two principles - respect for a religious minority and respect for women's equality. For a host of reasons, some honest, some cowardly, an alarming number of leading Labour voices got it badly wrong. But from the top, only silence. Over religion, segregation and education, Tony Blair has led his party badly astray through his own religiosity and by misunderstanding the effect of personal "choice".

When it comes to something as basic as women hidden from view behind religious veils, is it really so hard to say this is a bad practice? Because some racists may jump on the bandwagon to attack Muslims, that's no reason to pretend veils are OK. Meanwhile, Labour has given away yet more state education to all the religions - 42 of the first 100 expensive academies gifted to Christian groups, seven new Muslim schools, with 150 in the pipeline. Why, in this least religious of nations?

The veil turns women into things. It was shocking to find on the streets of Kabul that invisible women behind burkas are not treated with special respect. On the contrary, they are pushed and shoved off pavements by men, jostled aside as if almost subhuman without the face-to-face contact that recognises common humanity.

The classroom assistant in a Church of England school in Kirklees removed her veil for a job interview, but now expects to go veiled in corridors or whenever she might meet a man. What does that say to children about the role of women as victims and men as aggressors? Of course it should be banned in all places of education, and the community cohesion minister is the right person to say so. The veil is profoundly divisive - and deliberately designed to be.

No one need be a Muslim to understand the ideology of the veil, because covering and controlling women has been a near-universal practice in Christian societies and in most cultures and religions the world over. Western women have struggled hard to escape, but not

long ago women here were treated as chattels and temptresses, to be owned by men and kept out of men's way, to be chaperoned, hidden, powerless under compulsory rules of "modesty". Women's bodies have been the battle flag of religions, whether it's churching their uncleanness, the Pope forcing them to have babies, the Qur'an allowing wife-beating, Hindu suttee, Chinese foot-binding and all the rest.

Jack Straw questioned the veil when he found it was not fading out, but increasing in his constituency. No one would ban it in the street: where would fashion dictatorship end? But between teachers and pupils, or public officials and their clients, the state should not allow the hiding of women. No citizen's face can be indecent because of gender.

Prescott, Hewitt, Kelly, Hain and others failed the test, saying it was women's "choice": can they really believe that's the whole story? Here is an uneasy blend of nervousness about racism and fear of already angry Muslims. It was left to Harriet Harman to make the unequivocal case for women's rights: "If you want equality, you have to be in society, not hidden away from it," she said. "The veil is an obstacle to women's participation on equal terms in society." No nonsense about choice. It took feminist leaders like her to fight for women's rights, often against a majority of oppressed women who at first "chose" to think them outlandish and unfeminine.

Harman is astute about the way choice is culturally determined: do women really choose the female roles societies assign them? She is not alone in meeting Muslim women who are appalled that their own daughters might adopt the veil as a political gesture. It's a danger to other women's "choice" if all "good" Muslims are forced to prove their faith by submission. Linda Riordan, the Halifax MP, says she talks to many veiled Muslim constituents who feel oppressed by it; it's not their choice at all. "And when I see women driving in veils, I am horrified at the danger."

There is only one answer: a completely secular state. It is astonishing that a Labour government has led the country into such a morass. Things are far worse than they were 10 years ago. Labour stood by as Blair gave religion more political influence, leaving one-third of all state schools under religious control.

Alan Johnson, the education secretary, has been allowed to make only a small improvement to today's education bill, obliging new religious schools to offer 25% of places to children outside the faith. (He and many ministers would probably phase out all religious state schools - but no chance under Blair.)

Meanwhile, segregation gets worse, with a third of schools now religious. The Young Foundation's study, *The New East End*, warns that in Tower Hamlets white parents have taken over four church secondary schools, making them virtually all white, so neighbouring secular

schools have become 90% Bangladeshi. Church schools aid segregation: the Institute for Research in Integrated Strategies finds that the number of children taking free school meals at C of E and Catholic schools is lower than the average in an area. That means nearby schools take more, magnifying the difference. Selection is the secret "ethos" of church schools. Everyone knows it - I have just met an Enfield taxi driver whose wife goes to church to get their child into a church school. Is that choice?

As Christian hypocrisy keeps poor children out, others demand their own religious schools. The Leicester Islamic Academy turns state school next year, but the duty to accept 25% non-Muslims may not trouble it much. The principal said on The Moral Maze that all girls must wear the school uniform, both the hijab and the head-to-toe jilbab. Not much choice there. The Commission for Racial Equality says trust schools and parental choice are leading to parents choosing schools of their own ethnicity.

Will the next Labour leader be brave enough to confront growing segregation? If so, start by ending all religious state education. It would be popular: a Guardian/ICM poll finds 64% of voters think "the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind". Desegregating schools is a matter of fairness: Muslims have the poorest communities with the worst schools, and are in danger of increasing isolation and anger. The veil is another totem of that danger.

P.S.

* From The Guardian, October 17, 2006. Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire #1 | October 17, 2006 | Dispatch No. 2303.