

Is Britain an anti-Muslim concept?

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

In this world of threats and perceived threats it's hard to know where demons really lie in wait and whom to believe.

The British government tells us that extremely controversial and harsh anti-terrorist legislation which may erode our civil liberties is important because of threats they know of but cannot tell us about.

After 9/11, the Muslim community feels threatened and humiliated, blamed for just about anything by just about anyone.

It seems everyone from government ministers to Islamic community leaders, thinking journalists and the man on the street agrees that Islamophobia is rife and that British Muslims are under attack in their own homes.

Challenging perceived wisdoms is as tough as ever, a task perhaps complicated by the immense amount of information that filters into our lives. Not only does it make discovering where reality lies incredibly difficult – what with so many competing agendas – but information is used by the media-savvy to make their cases plausible and facts are increasingly irrelevant.

A good case in point is Islamophobia itself, a decade-old concept. Generally accepted, particularly by those that make up the bulk of the Muslim community, the conviction is that individual Muslims suffer disproportionately from ingrained racism and abuse.

Leaders of the Muslim community say that 90%-95% of people who are stopped and searched in the UK are Muslim. Khalid Sofi, of the Muslim Council of Britain, has accused the police of systematically targeting Muslims.

Home Office statistics just released reveal a 300% increase in the number of



Pride and prejudice ... some Muslim women take pride in the burkha.

Asians being stopped. No wonder the community feels under siege. Here is a perfect explanation for the fact that Muslims in England are twice as likely to be unemployed as are whites; that average earnings of Muslim men are 68% those of non-Muslim men.

Yet blaming Islamophobia has become a convenient refrain and excuse.

People with sharp political antennae use fictions to create power bases, playing on people's consciousness, fears and insecurities.

Politicians bend over backwards to adhere to the mutterings of religious leaders. Scaremongering and buying into the idea that we live in a blighted country beset by racism and violence continue the nightmare of our existence. We are a product of our own perceptions.

What happens when you challenge those fixed ideas, start to look at the facts and ask the difficult questions? This is

what British writer and journalist Kenan Malik did in his Channel 4 documentary on Islamophobia.

Malik found that the perceived animus and prejudice on this scale did not exist. Of course prejudice exists, but the UK has become by and large a tolerant society, especially compared to the one in which Malik grew up during the Seventies and Eighties.

Back then, Malik would not venture into a pub unless he knew the risks. Now he wouldn't think twice before going into a British pub.

"In the bad old days when racism was seriously vicious, when the first black footballers began to play in this country, their goals were not considered goals by diehard racist fans," says Malik, who remembers when he would get on the bus and whites would get up and leave.

That is not today's Britain. Blacks and Asians are accepted as part of society's

mainstream. The country has become more cosmopolitan, tolerant and accommodating. But the backdrop is immigration, an explosive issue that besets the nation, tearing both major political parties apart.

Malik dug deeper into the statistics that "suggested heavy-handed policing at the very least": 3 000 Asians had been "stopped and searched under the Terrorism Act. Of these, probably half were Muslim."

"In other words," he wrote in an article for *Prospect* magazine, "around 1 500 Muslims out of a population of at least 1.6m had been stopped under the terror laws – hardly a case of the police targeting every Muslim."

Malik comes with first-rate credentials and personal experience of more troubled times. Growing up in Britain, he used to organise patrols on east London estates to protect Asian families from racist attacks.

The politics of victimisation has entrenched itself in our culture. Being a victim – and it is not only the Muslim community that uses or suffers from this – has become part of the political agenda and there is much to gain from allowing people to see themselves in this light.

Malik believes this comes from the collapse of the left as a movement for social change, but it brings devastating consequences, not least for certain societies – in this case the Islamic one – but for society in general.

Any internal debate that stops facts being used to advance understanding undermines free expression. Criticism, perhaps the biggest taboo, is seen as outright racism, debate as neo-fascist doctrine.

In our pluralistic society, we are too often afraid to ask difficult questions and tackle perceived wisdoms, much to the detriment of a freer and more harmonious country.