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9/11 ten years on - where are we now?

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Guest: Dr Chris Allen
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Intro VO: *Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.*

Lucy: Today we're with Dr Chris Allen (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/social-policy/allen-chris.aspx) who's lecturer in Social Policy in the Institute of Applied Social Studies. Welcome, Chris.

Chris: Good morning.

Lucy: Chris is back by popular demand! [laughing]

Chris: I'm not sure about that!

Lucy: You've done a podcast with us before (http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/MP3s/Dr_Chris_Allen's_podcast.mp3) which I think is fair to say was our most re-tweeted and commented about and successful podcast to date, but we're here again because it's nearly the anniversary of 9/11.

Chris: Yeah.

Lucy: The ten year anniversary which is smack bang in your area of expertise and interest.

Chris: Yeah.

Lucy: And I know that you've been working on a really big piece of work which was kicked off as a direct response to 9/11.

Chris: When I first started at the University of Birmingham it was in the summer of 2001 and shortly after of course 9/11 happened and within a month of that we had been commissioned to undertake **a piece of research for the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/Synthesis-report_en.pdf)**, looking at the Islamophobic backlash across the EU fifteen member nations as it was at the time and to this day it remains the largest piece of monitoring research into Islamophobia to have been undertaken in the world and it's just interesting that ten years on, a lot of the things that we were finding then continue to exist now; the way in which Islamophobia is becoming much more normal, people accept it a little bit more, they kind of justify that actually things have changed so they're allowed to be discriminatory or prejudicial towards Muslims or to be more negative towards Islam than other religions. Increasingly we find that there's groups from the far right and in the mainstream with the political spectrum as well right across Europe, that are looking to use Muslim and Islam issues – or the problems as they suggest they are – as part of their campaigns to gain votes, to gain entry into national and European Parliament and very much in the way that we've seen in this country with groups such as the BNP in the past and more so now groups such as our UK Independence Party and the EDL as a street movement as well.

Lucy: But since we last spoke to you, of course, we've had the massacre which was carried out by Anders Breivik and the fact that, well at first everyone assumed that it was actually a Muslim who had committed that atrocity.

Chris: Well I mean the initial media reports were saying that it was definitely Al Qaeda inspired.

Lucy: Yeah.

Chris: There was a lot of commentators speaking about why Norway would have become a target and there was reference to the war on terror that various issues around sort of the cartoon incidents with the Danish publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad and then of course when it became reported that it was a white blonde European man who had been arrested, again there was this idea well he must be a convert to Islam and so that default position was always that it must be sort of Islamically inspired, Al Qaeda inspired, or it must be a Muslim who has perpetrated the attacks. But of course the reality was quite different.

Lucy: So in one way that things have moved on in those ten years is we've actually got far right extremists committing atrocities which they claim are as a response to Islam or the Islamification of Europe.

Chris: Absolutely and I think what was interesting with Breivik was that just before he undertook the attacks he published online this huge dossier or manifesto as he saw it which set out his arguments for why he felt he needed to undertake these atrocities and part of that was that he believed that he had to make the European people aware of the fact that Europe was being Islamified and that by doing what he did, he would in some way trigger a response or a realisation that actually the Islamification of Europe is real and is going to be a problem and if you actually look through that dossier what really comes out of that is the way in which the ideas that he put forward are very similar to those that say the British National Party were using shortly after 9/11 for example in London when they spoke about London becoming an Islamic Republic by the year 2025, churches being eradicated and being replaced by mosques, they spoke about Muslims coming to this country and deliberately having higher birth rates than other populations so as to try and infiltrate this and I think we've seen this again in places such as the Netherlands for example with people such as Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders; we've seen these arguments from the English Defence League, you know, sort of about the Islamification of different areas in Britain and I think that really what we saw with the Breivik case was the way in which this anti-Muslim Islamophobic ideology can be exploited and used in its extreme form.

Lucy: So the question is: have we been ignoring the actual threat of violence from the far right?

Chris: Well I think we have ignored it to an extent. I think we focus so much on what would be the kind of threat from Muslims and from Islam that we've overlooked the kind of very real threat that was in the far right. And so for example in 2006 we had David Jackson and Robert Cottage – the latter was a former BNP electoral candidate and they were found in possession of several rocket launchers, they had biological and nuclear suits and they had a number of chemical components and a significant cache of weapons as well. Then in July 2009, Neil Lewington was convicted of plotting a bomb attack and he was found with a holdall containing components with incendiary devices, he also had firelighters and ignition mechanisms and he had the tools also to put these together and from the conversations with Lewington afterwards it was very clear that he was targeting Muslim communities as a way of sort of making his ideology sort of violent and extreme.

Lucy: And all these names are names that don't ring any bells with me. This all seems to have happened very quietly.

Chris: Oh, absolutely. These are individuals that have been charged and convicted of very real terrorism-related crimes where they have in each instance, you know, been seen to target Muslim communities and from within the far right organisations with links to the EDL, with links to the BNP but you know, these have never come into the mainstream in the same way that Islamic-inspired terrorism has.

Lucy: And shortly after the massacre in Norway we had our own crisis in Britain with the riots and particularly in Birmingham there was a response here which was quite breathtaking really.

Chris: As a response to this I've begun to undertake some research into this but we look at things such as the Guardian newspaper produced like details of all the people that had been convicted and charged since the riots but a very small minority were actually Muslims. So, you know, the vast majority of young Muslims didn't participate

in the riots whatsoever and what we saw in Birmingham in particular was a very real and very concerted effort by Muslim communities to actually not be a part of these riots and especially when three young Muslim men were murdered protecting local businesses and protecting their local communities, it was very easy that things could have gone either way.

Lucy: It felt like the city was on a knife-edge. That morning it felt like it could have gone either way.

Chris: Absolutely and if you look at Birmingham in the past, you know, it is a city that has a history of conflict within sort of minority communities and between minority communities but what we saw in Birmingham was the fact that despite the three men who were Muslim being murdered, we saw the Muslim community really begin to look at what should be the correct response. As citizens of this country, as citizens of the City of Birmingham, how do we want to take this forward? And I think that we have to look at the words of Tariq Jahan, the father of one of the murdered boys and I think those words, the dignity that was in that speech, you know, about us staying together, about us being together and about us needing to live together, I think it really did cut to a very real place for everybody in the city where we…

Lucy: Yeah, he impressed the whole city. That one man.

Chris: Absolutely and we all understood that actually, yes we are a multicultural society, we are a multicultural city, we're hugely diverse and if we all come together we can actually live together and I think it sent out a very, very positive message from within the Muslim communities in particular about really how they see themselves as being a part of this city and the future of Britain.

Lucy: Chris, I know you're going to be tremendously busy over the next few weeks, you're very much in demand, but you've got the round tables coming up later this month.

Chris: With the tenth anniversary of 9/11 I think it was a good chance for us to actually sort of sit down with the policy makers, with other academics, with people such as the local police and the national police and really talk about what have we achieved in the past ten years in being able to combat Islamophobia and where do we need to go next? Where do we need to look at in terms of research? Where do we need to look at in terms of the policy as well?

Lucy: So that's four meetings that are happening over this month.

Chris: Yeah, four meetings in the University of Birmingham, each one is themed so we bring different types of people together and as part of that in the Autumn as well I'll be using the findings from those round tables to feed into my presentation to the all-party parliamentary group at the Houses of Parliament that's looking at Islamophobia in the current climate.

Lucy: You've got a report (http://issuu.com/se1publications/docs/muslim_voices_birmingham_riots_-_chris_allen_2011) out this week on the response to the riots as well.

Chris: Yeah, that report will be going out. It's hopefully going to be the first piece of research which looks at the riots and the response to the riots and it really does focus on the Muslim voices from within Birmingham.

Lucy: And if you want to hear more of Chris I know you're on BBC Radio WM (http://www.bbc.co.uk/wm/programmes) on the 9th of September.

Chris: Absolutely, on the Drive Show.

Lucy: And BBC Radio Wales (http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/radiowales/) on the 12th.

Chris: Yeah, on the Morning Show.

Lucy: And probably some more that we don't even know about yet!

Chris: [laughing] Probably, yeah!

Lucy: Thank you very much for fitting us in your very very busy month.

Chris: Thanks so much.

Lucy: Dr Chris Allen, thanks.

Chris: Bye.

Outro VO: *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website:* ***www.ideaslabuk.com (http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/)*** *. On the website, you can find out how to e-mail us with comments, questions or suggestions for future topics for the podcast. There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Lucy Vernall, and the producer was Andy Tootell.*

If you want to keep up with Chris's work, you can also read his **blog (http://www.chris-allen.co.uk/)** !

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