

Public Spirit: Case for Support

1. Context

Public Spirit is a proposed new on-line public forum featuring research, analysis and debate on religion and public policy. *Public Spirit* will provide a space for academics, policymakers, politicians and practitioners from voluntary, community and faith-based organisations to engage with current research and debates on religion and public policy, in a forum that crosses political affiliations and religious traditions, supported by regular off-line events. *Public Spirit* will be hosted by the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship at the University of Bristol.

Existing research basis for *Public Spirit*

The proposal for this online public forum emerges from the project 'Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance' (MPCG) that is jointly funded by the AHRC and ESRC through the *Religion and Society* Programme (Ref: AH/HO16066/1; 07/10-12/12). The MPCG project investigates how government in the UK has engaged with Muslim actors through consultations, partnerships and governance networks, and assesses the impact of Muslim participation on the processes, practices and outcomes of decision-making, at national and local levels. The project's focus on this developing engagement is set within the broader context of the state's relationship with religion and faith actors, particularly in the areas of equalities, cohesion, integration and security strategies and in patterns of partnering between the state and faith-based organisations. The online forum will provide a mechanism for disseminating the project's findings on Muslim engagement in governance to a range of policy, practitioner and civil society audiences, and connect these themes to broader contemporary debates about religion and public policy, by hosting contributions from a wide range of public actors who are actively engaged in these debates.

Relevance to wider audiences

Issues relating to religion and public policy have generated considerable interest in recent times – as the *Religion and Society* Programme's successful series of *Westminster Faith Debates* testifies (the project's PI participated in the first of these debates on 'Identity and Super Diversity'). The anticipated audiences for *Public Spirit* include policy-makers, practitioners, civil society organisations (e.g. think-tanks, pressure groups, community organisations and religious institutions) and academics.

Over the course of the MPCG project, the research team has built relationships with a substantial number of actors with insights into the creation and delivery of faith-related policy agendas across the political spectrum and at national and local levels of governance. These include current and former front- and back-bench MPs, local councillors, civil servants, policy advisers and Muslim/faith based civil society organisations and actors. From January to March 2012, the research team conducted a consultation with 44 of these actors to gauge their interest, and willingness to participate, in *Public Spirit*. Feedback from this consultation confirmed that these actors felt that they would benefit from closer engagement with academic research through the forum, and that many would be willing to act as contributors to it. A summary of some of their feedback is below:

- **Paul Goodman**, Executive Editor of ConservativeHome, suggested he would find the forum useful "in order to learn from minds better than my own", and commented that "*at present it is difficult to access conventional scholarly sources before they are out of date*".
- **Christina Dykes**, adviser to the Attorney General, Dominic Grieve responded: "It is true but sad that it is hard for politicians to keep up with good academic research", suggesting "anything that can keep politicians well informed must be a good thing. *A website that would filter recent and impressive research would be a good thing.*"
- **Sunder Katwala**, Director of British Future, stated *Public Spirit* "is an important and welcome initiative...British Future would find several of the proposed features useful, particularly those which would operate as a hub between academic, policy and public debate. *The ability to shed rigorous light on comparative local experiences would particularly fill a gap...*"
- **Humera Khan**, co-founder of An-Nisa, commented "Although 9/11 and 7/7 began an avalanche of public engagement with Muslim communities this has been limited to the prism of anti-

terrorism/PREVENT”, adding that An-Nisa “would welcome this *opportunity to dig deeper into the wider issues of faith communities in the public and policy arena.*”

- **Yahya Birt**, blogger and commissioning Editor at Kube Books, suggested that Muslim/faith-based community organisations “are often affected by new policy initiatives such as Prevent or Near Neighbours, but lack the time, resources, and space to think through their implications and to respond to them thoroughly, critically and constructively. *Public Spirit has the potential to allow grassroots organisations to respond in a more informed way to crucial policy issues, and can act as means to democratic inclusion.*”
- **Raheel Mohammed**, Director, Maslaha, suggested the project “would help feed into the practical work that we do... our practical work could also help to feedback into some of the content on the forum and help to spread good practice. I think the mainstream media is also guilty of listening to only a few voices and *this forum could provide a greater diversity and more intelligent debate.*”
- **Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh**, House of Lords, commented: “I am really impressed with [this] new project. It’s most timely and worth doing both politically and philosophically... [The] project makes academic research accessible to the general public and should raise the level of public debate. It is also *likely to inform the thinking of policy makers* and should hopefully lead to better policies. As I see it, it should also *encourage activists with grassroots experience to engage in a public debate* and bring to it a perspective that might otherwise get ignored.”

Guided by the feedback from across our consultation, we propose that the forum should: provide accessible articles on the findings from the MPCG research; connect this research with views and perspectives from a range of actors; provide accessible analysis and reflections on related research; feature spotlights on evidence and data from local areas to inform national debates; host debates that bring together academics, policy-makers, think-tanks, pressure groups and religious institutions to engage with and inform one another.

In order to maximise the relevance and influence of *Public Spirit* among wider audiences, we have formed an agreement to partner with the recently formed **All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society** and its Secretariat, **FaithAction**. This partnership will allow *Public Spirit* to connect with the actors and audiences engaged with the APPG and FaithAction, whilst providing an additional forum for debate and considered reflection on the issues raised in the work of the APPG. For further details of this collaboration, see Sections 2 and 4 below.

New developments since the launch of the MPCG project

In addition to the new connections and networks with national and local actors that have been fostered through the work of the project, since the MPCG project’s launch in July 2010 there have been a range of policy developments that have had a substantial impact on the relationships between Muslims and the state, as well as between the state and religious organisations more generally, not least as a consequence of the change in national government in 2010. These include:

- a renewed emphasis upon Britain’s Christian history in speeches by David Cameron and other senior Conservatives, accompanied by greater reliance on the Church of England in policy initiatives such as the ‘Near Neighbours’ programme;
- a new approach to integration signalled by the Department of Communities and Local Government which makes continual reference to the role of Christianity particularly, and faith generally, in the government’s developing integration strategy;
- the introduction by the Home Office of a revised ‘Prevent’ strategy signalling some key differences in government’s approach to Muslim community engagement and de-radicalisation;
- the implementation of the Localism Bill and the associated ‘Big Society’ agenda, which sees some interesting shifts and continuities in the partnerships between the state and faith-based organisations in relation to service delivery and (especially local) decision-making.

Many of these developments were not apparent or assured in 2009 when the project was being formulated. Nevertheless, it has been very well placed to study these developments: for example, the project’s three local case-study areas, of Birmingham, Leicester and Tower Hamlets, coincide with the target areas of both the Near Neighbours programme and the new Prevent strategy. We thus have data and analysis on some highly topical issues that are of interest to a range of audiences.

2. Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of *Public Spirit* are to:

- **enhance the dissemination of the findings of the MPCG project** to a range of policy, practitioner and civil society audiences through the publication of accessible online articles and discussions of the research findings;
- **engage public actors with these findings** by featuring contributions from policy-makers and practitioners through themed debates, commentary and contributions;
- **connect the findings of the research to broader themes concerning religion and public policy**, by contributing an informed perspective from our own study of Muslims and governance within wider discussions and research on religion and public policy;
- **connect the themes and discussion of the forum to the work of the APPG** by hosting connected themed articles and debates, with contributions from APPG members and FaithAction, alongside reflections and analysis from academic, policy-maker and practitioner contributors to provide a space to inform, and critically reflect upon, the themes addressed by the APPG;
- **highlight and share knowledge about local contexts and responses to issues relating to religion and public policy**, by hosting regular features that spotlight our three local case study areas, presenting data, contributions from other actors with local knowledge, and links to relevant locally-focused research, policies and data-sets/analysis.

Targets and milestones

- **Creation of an on-line forum** including monthly themed article collections, reports and debates, which will be documented and reviewed on a monthly basis by the project team.
- **Consolidation of a network of supporters and contributors** through a launch event and contact with those who have already expressed an interest in contributing.
- **Development of a thriving user community** demonstrated by sustained debate among contributors and continued engagement by key stakeholders.
- **Securing of funding for activities beyond the initial funded period**, with a contingency plan if further funding cannot be secured.

Originality and innovation

There are several websites and blogs that are dedicated to the discussion of religion in public life, such as *The Immanent Frame* in the US, which features contributions largely by academics on themes relating to religion and secularism, and The Guardian's *Comment is Free: Belief* section, which focuses on religion and public life with contributions from a wide range of bloggers and journalists. There are also a range of think-tanks and blogs which engage with particular religions and public life, such as *Theos*, which focuses on religion, and especially (but by no means exclusively) Christianity in public life; and *iEngage*, which focuses on Muslims in public life. There is at present no blog or forum that focuses on religion and public policy in the UK (at national and local levels), featuring academic research that is presented accessibly and which is engaged with policy, practitioner and civil society discussants and contributors. The *EHRC Religion or Belief Network* is a very useful source of information on current developments and research on religion or belief, but is not an interactive forum fostering engagement between actors across policy, academic and civil society domains. *Public Spirit* will provide a unique forum for Knowledge Exchange that will enhance the reach and impact of research and expertise on religion and public policy, as well as develop that research and expertise.

3. Outcomes and impact

Meeting the aims of the Follow-on Funding scheme

Public Spirit meets the aims of the Follow-on Funding scheme by using digital media to make the findings of the MPCG project easily accessible to individuals and groups outside of academia who cannot normally easily access conventional scholarly sources. It will significantly increase user engagement with the MPCG project, as well as other related research, and enable Knowledge Exchange (KE) among a diverse range of actors concerned with issues relating to religion and public

policy. Fresh opportunities for KE arise from the MPCG project's engagement with new developments relating to religion and public policy that have occurred since the project's launch.

Main beneficiaries

The main beneficiaries of *Public Spirit* will be politicians, national- and local-level policy makers and civil servants, third sector and faith organisations, academics and the general public. As the consultation process indicated, *Public Spirit* will enable these actors to gain insights into the development of public policy and the application of policy agendas beyond their immediate contexts and on the basis of sound research.

Demonstrating benefit and meeting aims and objectives

In order to assess the forum's reach, internet traffic to the site will be recorded, as will any on-line publication that links to the site. Collaborations with a wide range of national-level political and civil society actors, including the partnership with the APPG on Faith and Society, will help maximize the forum's impact, which will be measured by sustained engagement (including written contributions) by significant political figures. The success of *Public Spirit* locally will be demonstrated by significant engagement with the forum and its events by a range of political and civil society actors, and by documenting any impact on the policies and practices of key stakeholders.

Sustainability

Establishing *Public Spirit* will incur significant start-up costs in terms of designing and launching the forum, with the costs of running it in the first year involving a researcher who will promote the visibility of *Public Spirit* and develop its connections with a wide range of users and audiences, as well as build the contents sections and resources. Investment from the AHRC in year 1 would give *Public Spirit* a robust basis on which to apply for funding from other sources to ensure its continuation into year 2 and beyond. Given the often unstable nature of funding, however, we consider it vital to plan for the continued existence of the forum should we experience a break in funding after Year 1. In that scenario, the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship will continue to host the forum and commit staff time to the work of the editorial board, and use its own (albeit limited) sources of funding to provide part-time research assistance for basic maintenance of the website and uploading of content to ensure that *Public Spirit* continues beyond Year 1, and grows in the future.

4. Collaboration

Partnership with the APPG on Faith and Society and FaithAction

To facilitate the impact of *Public Spirit*, we have initiated a relationship with the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society, chaired by Stephen Timms MP, and its secretariat, FaithAction led by Daniel Singleton. The content and debates on *Public Spirit* will inform the APPG, and where the content of APPG discussions is relevant to its aims, *Public Spirit* will host themed issues and debates that reflect upon and develop the work of the APPG, and will include contributions from APPG members. *Public Spirit* and the APPG/FaithAction will feature links to, and updates on, each other's work on their websites, and will facilitate a parliamentary launch event for *Public Spirit*. The relationship will enable our research to influence policy-makers, and provide policy-makers with access to high quality research and expert analysis, and a broadened audience for their debates.

Collaboration with audiences

The MPCG project has included around 100 interviews with key figures involved in policy and Muslim-government relations at national and local levels, with whom we have maintained contact. In combination with these contacts, and the networks that have been built by *Public Spirit*'s host, the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship, we have access to a broad range of potential contributors and audiences for *Public Spirit*.

Some of the individuals who have already confirmed their interest in contributing articles include: **Humera Khan** (An-Nisa Society), **Yahya Birt** (blogger and Commissioning Editor of Kube Publishing), **Kris Hopkins** (Conservative MP, leader of the 301 Group), **Sunder Katwala** (Director, British Future), **Bhikhu Parekh** (House of Lords), **Maleiha Malik** (Professor in Law, Kings College London), **Fozia Bora** (Research Fellow, Cambridge Muslim College), **Anas Altikriti** (President, Cordoba Foundation),

Abdullah Faliq (Trustee, East London Mosque), **Raheel Mohammad** (Director, Maslaha), **Paul Goodman** (Executive Editor, ConservativeHome), **Francis Davis** (former policy advisor on faith and communities), **Stephen Timms** (MP and Chair of the APPG on Faith and Society), **Daniel Singleton** (National Executive Director, FaithAction), **Felicity Smith** (National Coordinator, FaithAction), **Adam Dinham** (Reader in Religion and Society, Goldsmiths College), **Linda Woodhead** (Professor of Sociology of Religion, University of Lancaster, Director AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme), **Charles Clarke** (Visiting Professor in Politics and Faith, University of Lancaster).

5. Management

The **project team** will comprise:

- PI: Dr Therese O'Toole, who will be responsible for the intellectual leadership and day-to-day management of the project, and line-management of the Research Associate. Dr O'Toole will chair the Editorial Board
- CI: Professor Tariq Modood, who will be engaged in the intellectual aims of the project and its public dissemination. As Director of the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship, which will host *Public Spirit*, Professor Modood will ensure the Centre supports and publicises the work of the forum, and supports joint seminars. He will sit on the Editorial Board.
- Research Associate: Dr Stephen Jones (formerly Research Assistant, MPCG project) who will be responsible for: working with the web-team to design and build the website; populating the website with content; uploading edited articles; moderating the discussion boards; coordinating with contributors; building the local spotlight sections; monitoring and reporting on web traffic; distributing email-outs; compiling, editing and mailing the quarterly magazine; coordinating *Public Spirit's* connections to off-line events.

An **Editorial Board** will meet twice a year to plan content and commissioning for *Public Spirit*, and will comprise the project team, with Dr Daniel Nilsson DeHanas (currently Research Associate, MPCG project), Dr Nasar Meer (currently Consultant, MPCG project) and Professor Linda Woodhead (Director of the AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme). We will recruit two further non-academic Commissioning Editors to the Board.

6. Proposed activities

The project to create, maintain and promote *Public Spirit* will include a range of activities:

- **Website:** the team will develop an accessible and easily navigable website for the forum. A 'preview' website will be developed in the first month of the funded period, with the full site launched in the second month. Web content will be made accessible via tablet devices.
- **Monthly themed outputs:** the main content of the forum will be a series of monthly themed debates/articles, based on contributions from the MPCG team, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners active in the field.
- **Online comment and debate:** the website will encourage online comments on articles from readers, though all comments will be moderated to ensure quality of discussion and compliance with standard conventions for online public forums.
- **Forthcoming events/new publications board:** the website will feature a notice board highlighting events and publications of interest to its readership, and will invite notifications from readers, posters and contributors.
- **Quarterly electronic magazine:** the forum will create quarterly contents magazines available in digital format which will collect together the articles posted on the website, with an introduction from the Editors and a preface from a guest contributor.
- **A launch event in Parliament:** The forum will be formally launched at a high-profile event in Parliament in collaboration with the APPG on Faith and Society and FaithAction, to publicise *Public Spirit* and the release of the first quarterly contents magazine.
- **Off-line events:** *Public Spirit* will be promoted via the dissemination activities that have already been scheduled (and budgeted) for within the MPCG project for late 2012, which include a national conference in London and three workshops in Leicester, Tower Hamlets and Birmingham. In addition, there will be further events in Bristol, with one in the ESRC *Festival of Ideas* in November), and two seminars co-hosted with the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship.

- **An email list** will be developed to highlight to subscribers the forum's content, recent publications and research in the area, and events of interest.
- **Local spotlights**, *Public Spirit* will feature regular 'spotlights' on a particular local area, comprising: detailed findings from the MPCG project; links to data and related research studies; a repository of local policy documents; links to local organisations; with reflections and contributions from actors with expertise in that local area. The three case study areas of the MPCG project – Birmingham, Tower Hamlets and Leicester – will be the first 'local spotlights', followed by other areas (drawing on research within the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship).

7. Timetable

Month	Activity	Outputs
0	Editorial Board established; commissioning of 1 st 6 months of content before project launch; webteam commissioned; web comments policy finalised.	
1	Work with web-team to build and launch website and apps; build forthcoming events board; edit/upload Theme 1 content; build e-mailing list; coordinate with MPCG dissemination events; plan launch event. Editorial board meeting to plan future content/ commissioning	Preview website for <i>Public Spirit (PS)</i> <i>PS Theme 1: Muslims & Governance: an evolving relationship</i>
2	Edit/upload Theme 2 content; compile content for 1 st quarterly magazine; finalise organisation of launch event	<i>PS Theme 2: Faith & the Coalition: a new confidence to 'do God'?</i>
3	Edit/upload Theme 3 content; build Spotlight on Birmingham content; upload 1 st quarterly magazine and e-mail-out.	<i>PS Theme 3: Faith representatives: the who and how of representation</i> Launch event, Houses of Parliament 1 st Quarterly Magazine on <i>Faith & Governance</i> (preface Stephen Timms)
4	Edit/upload Theme 4 content; upload Spotlight on Birmingham; review web traffic, produce impact monitoring report	<i>PS Theme 4: From Multiculturalism to Muscular Liberalism? The future of integration</i> <i>PS Spotlight on Birmingham</i>
5	Edit/upload Theme 5 content, compile content for 2 nd quarterly magazine; develop and submit application(s) for further funding	<i>PS Theme 5: Faith & cohesion: the impact of Near Neighbours</i>
6	Edit/upload Theme 6 content; build Spotlight on Leicester content; upload 2 nd quarterly magazine and e-mail-out. Editorial board meeting to plan future content/ commissioning	<i>PS Theme 6: Equalities & religious difference: what is the right balance?</i> 2 nd Quarterly Magazine on <i>Integration, cohesion & equality</i> (preface Sunder Katwala)
7	Edit/upload Theme 7 content; upload Spotlight on Leicester	<i>PS Theme 7 Muslim Civil Society: embattled or thriving?</i> <i>PS Spotlight on Leicester</i>
8	Edit/upload Theme 8 content; compile content for 3 rd quarterly magazine; review web traffic, produce impact monitoring report	<i>PS Theme 8 Prevent 2.0: What has it delivered?</i>
9	Edit/upload late Theme 9 content; build Spotlight on Tower Hamlets content; upload 3 rd quarterly magazine & e-mail-out.	<i>PS Theme 9 Muslim Women in Governance: How empowering is inclusion?</i> 3 rd Quarterly Contents Magazine on <i>Muslim civil society and the state</i> (preface tbc)
10	Edit/upload Theme 10 content; upload Spotlight on Tower Hamlets	<i>PS Theme 10 tbc</i> <i>PS Spotlight on Tower Hamlets</i>
11	Edit/upload Theme 11 content; compile content for 4 th quarterly magazine	<i>PS Theme 11 tbc</i>
12	Edit/upload Theme 12 content; upload 4 th quarterly magazine and e-mail-out; review web traffic/ impact monitoring report. Editorial board meeting to plan future content/ commissioning.	<i>PS Theme 12 tbc</i> 4 th Quarterly Contents Magazine <i>Governing a multi-faith society</i> (preface by Lord Parekh)