Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Don't ban the burqa [1]

Written by **Anton Howes** [2] | Thursday 8 July 2010

Belgium and France plan to ban the burqa in public. Belgium lawmakers have approved a draft ban to wearing the full Islamic veil in public places. France?s will most likely become law in September. These are highly worrying developments for supporters of liberty, not least because of the growing calls to emulate the ban here in Britain.

Some say that the burqa prevents ?social cohesion?, others that its endurance is a symbol of radical Islamism?s triumph over Western values. Others cite its use as a means of repressing women, or the threat it poses to security. However, a ban on the burqa is not only an ill-judged and flawed response to these concerns, but goes against everything that Britain stands for.

Britain is a nation united by liberty under the law. It is an idea rather than an ethnic construct, an idea that allows people of any race, religion, sexuality, lifestyle or opinion to co-exist peacefully, governed by the same laws. It is a unity through liberty and tolerance that allows Scotland, Wales and England, each of them distinct ethnic and cultural constructs to be part of a whole. It is a unity that allows us to have a political culture predominantly based on conflicting ideologies rather than on ethnicities or religions. To ban an item of clothing then, especially one peculiar to a particular religion or culture, is fundamentally anti-British. A ban ostracises thousands, impinges on their liberty, and favours other ways of life at the expense of a minority, striking at the very heart of the British unifying principle. **READ MORE** [3]

It would discriminate directly against Muslims, irrespective of whether they wore the burqa or not in the first place. This would set us back centuries in our constitutional development. It would be a heavy defeat for the side of liberty, a battle lost where so much has been won over the centuries right back to Catholic Emancipation, our right to habeus corpus, and more recently the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Rather than being a symbol of Islamism?s triumph, the burqa?s continued legal presence in Britain constitutes a triumph for British values of tolerance under the law. That is not to say that everyone will or indeed should privately tolerate the use of the burqa, but that the law and the state must.

It is no great secret that the aim of radical Islamists is to end the British or ?Western? way of life: one based on liberty and tolerance. Forcing the imposition of restrictions on that liberty constitutes a victory for them, and a defeat for us. Allowing fear, along with security concerns to override our civil liberties in the form of detention without trial and the explosive growth of the surveillance state, all constituted victories for radical Islamism.

Even on a foreign policy level, the push to engage US-led allies on an ever-greater number of fronts and for extended periods of time is not to force their withdrawal from Muslim countries, but to simultaneously radicalise aggrieved Muslims and force the US to subject its own citizens? liberties with the reintroduction of conscription. In this larger context then, the banning of the burqa would achieve two Islamist strategic goals: the subjugation of liberties by its enemies? governments, and the further radicalisation of Muslims offended by the move.

Addressing further concerns, the burqa may indeed prevent further social integration into the majority?s social norms, but the same argument can be used against any practice that sets a minority apart. Even playing video games could be seen as a barrier to ?social cohesion?! This does provide a sufficient argument to ban them, and nor does it provide an argument for the burqa to be banned. Individuality and differences are so often celebrated in Britain. Why should the use of the burqa be an exception?
Some may respond by saying, ?those who come here should follow our values?. The statement is ignorant of British-born who choose to wear the burqa, but more significantly, of what British values are: that all British citizens should subscribe to a model of government that allows them all to exist together, equal, and free under the law. So long as you do not seek to impose the burqa on others against their will, there is no justification along these lines for it to be banned. In fact, the burqa?s continued use in Britain in this context is a symbol of the triumph of tolerance and co-existence.

The sole problem therefore is the burqa?s use as a symbol of misogyny ? namely its imposition by male members of an often ultra-conservative family against the woman?s will. Unfortunately this does happen, but to use a ban on the burqa as a response would be akin to banning weddings in order to prevent forced marriages: utterly disproportionate, punishing the majority who do it by choice, and not addressing the root of the problem. The burqa is a symptom of sexism within some families or social groups. It is not the cause. There is no case for a ban.

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