

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #365

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

9th May, 2023

[00:00:04] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's part-two of our mini-series on the Trojan Horse [scandal](#)¹, the [alleged](#)² Islamic [plot](#)³ to [infiltrate](#)⁴ British schools and [radicalise](#)⁵ students from within.

¹ event that caused a public feeling of shock and anger

² said to have happened without giving proof

³ secret plan

⁴ gain access, be part of

⁵ push them towards extreme or fanatical behaviour

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:00:32] I should say that if you haven't listened to part one yet, please press pause and listen to that, as we are going to [pick up](#)⁶ directly where we left off last time.

[00:00:42] OK then, let's get right into it.

[00:00:47] As you'll remember, in November of 2013 a mystery letter arrived at Birmingham City Council claiming that there was a [conspiracy](#)⁷ to [infiltrate](#) British schools and [instil](#)⁸ [hardline](#)⁹ Islamic values.

[00:01:03] It [alleged](#) the [plot](#) was already [underway](#)¹⁰ in Birmingham, would spread to other British cities, and included banning sex education classes, inviting anti-western speakers into the schools, and even forcing students to attend Friday prayers.

[00:01:21] When the letter [leaked](#)¹¹ to the press a few months later, the story quickly became a national [scandal](#) and [paranoia](#)¹² spread around the country about Islamic conspiracies and Jihadi terror [plots](#)¹³.

⁶ continue from, resume

⁷ secret plan

⁸ promote, inspire

⁹ strict, severe

¹⁰ happening

¹¹ made known

¹² an extreme and unreasonable feeling that something bad is going to happen

¹³ secrets plans

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:01:35] British schools, it seemed, were under attack.

[00:01:39] But as you may remember, we left the last episode on a bit of a [cliffhanger](#)¹⁴, a big question.

[00:01:46] What if it wasn't true?

[00:01:49] What if the letter was a fake?

[00:01:52] [Picking up](#)¹⁵ where we left off, by mid-2014, with Britain's newspapers stuffed full of [scandalous](#)¹⁶ stories about the [plot](#), people demanded answers, and there were several official investigations into what had been [dubbed](#)¹⁷ "Operation Trojan Horse".

[00:02:12] Britain's Department for Education, OFSTED, which is Britain's school standards body, you might remember, and Birmingham City Council all looked into the [allegations](#)¹⁸.

[00:02:23] And they didn't just investigate schools in Birmingham, or the schools named in the letter, but schools in Luton, Bradford and parts of east London, areas with large

¹⁴ big question about what's coming next

¹⁵ continuing from, resuming

¹⁶ causing public feelings of shock and anger

¹⁷ named, called

¹⁸ statements that had happened, made without giving proof

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Muslim populations, and areas, I should stress, that had nothing to do with the original letter.

[00:02:43] In Birmingham, which was the focus of the investigations, OFSTED investigated more than 20 schools they suspected could have been [vulnerable](#)¹⁹ to radical Islam.

[00:02:55] The investigators went in for emergency inspections, and In May of 2014 all five Birmingham schools named in the letter had their official [ratings](#)²⁰ [downgraded](#)²¹ significantly.

[00:03:10] All five were put into what is known as 'special measures' - the lowest possible rating. Essentially, they were doing very badly and needed urgent attention. That was the official [verdict](#)²².

[00:03:25] Why, you might ask, when we'd already [established](#)²³ that students' exam results had improved significantly?

¹⁹ able to be easily affected or influenced

²⁰ official measurement of how good they were

²¹ reduced to a lower grade or rank

²² opinion, decision

²³ accepted, recognised

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:03:33] Well, this school regulator gives marks to schools based on all sorts of [criteria](#)²⁴, not just exam results.

[00:03:43] And what they found, the inspectors believed, was cause for serious concern.

[00:03:50] Among the reasons given for these sudden [downgrades](#)²⁵ were that the schools didn't educate students enough about religions other than Islam, didn't provide [adequate](#)²⁶ sex education classes, prevented boys and girls from socialising and even [segregated](#)²⁷ some classes, keeping male and female students apart.

[00:04:11] One of the schools at the centre of the controversy, Park View, went from being [rated](#)²⁸ as 'outstanding' to the lowest possible rating despite being the first school in the country to be scored 'outstanding' under new [criteria](#) just two years before.

[00:04:28] If you remember the name "Park View", yes, that's the school where Tahir Alam, the [supposed](#)²⁹ [mastermind](#)³⁰ of the [plot](#), was governor.

²⁴ accepted, recognised

²⁵ reductions to a lower grade or rank

²⁶ good enough, satisfactory

²⁷ separated

²⁸ judged, evaluated

²⁹ generally believed to be

³⁰ one who had planned and organised it

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:04:37] Alam and a number of other teachers and [governors](#)³¹ were [suspended](#)³² from teaching, and during the [initial](#)³³ media [frenzy](#)³⁴ some reports suggested that as many as 100 teachers in Birmingham alone were involved in this [plot](#).

[00:04:53] Operation Trojan Horse was, according to the British media at least, a huge [conspiracy](#).

[00:05:00] But it was the job of the government to find out whether this was really true.

[00:05:07] Was there really some wider [conspiracy](#), a real “Trojan Horse [Plot](#)”, or was it simply a case of some teachers [implementing](#)³⁵ some socially conservative policies that they shouldn’t have done?

[00:05:21] The man tasked with the job of finding out, or at least the man in charge of everyone who was tasked with the job, was a man called Michael Gove. He was the Secretary for Education at the time, essentially the Minister for Education, the top official in the country responsible for education and schools.

³¹ members of group deciding about school's management

³² stopped from doing it

³³ happening at the beginning

³⁴ uncontrolled and excited behaviour

³⁵ starting using them, putting them into action

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:05:42] Now, we need to talk about Michael Gove, because he is one of the main reasons that some have said that this investigation was [doomed](#)³⁶ from the start, and that it was more like a [witch hunt](#)³⁷ rather than an [impartial](#)³⁸ inquiry.

[00:05:59] Even before the Trojan Horse affair, Gove had long had an interest, let's say, in Islam.

[00:06:06] Following the terror attacks in London in 2005, he wrote a book in which he suggested that Muslims were more [prone](#)³⁹ to violence and radicalisation than other religions.

[00:06:19] To quote the book directly, Gove wrote that “The west faces a challenge to its values, culture and freedom as [profound](#)⁴⁰ in its way as the threat [posed](#)⁴¹ by fascism and communism.”

³⁶ certain to fail

³⁷ an attempt to find and punish a particular group

³⁸ not supporting any of the sides, unbiased

³⁹ likely to do it

⁴⁰ great, extreme

⁴¹ caused

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:06:34] He made his views clear from the [outset](#)⁴², and was described by one journalist as the, and I'm quoting directly, '[unsung](#)⁴³ commander in chief of the [Islamophobes](#)⁴⁴ inside the Conservative Party'.

[00:06:47] This is the man who led the investigation into Operation Trojan Horse; the man who updated the Prime Minister, British parliament and media throughout the entire [scandal](#). A [sceptic](#)⁴⁵ might rightly say that he would struggle to have a completely objective assessment of the matter.

[00:07:07] [Crucially](#)⁴⁶, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Gove thought the educational investigations didn't go far enough and he asked for a former counter-terrorism expert, a man named Peter Clarke, to lead another investigation.

[00:07:23] Gove's message was clear: the Trojan Horse affair was not an educational issue but a problem of terrorism and extremism.

[00:07:34] Gove had long suspected this of British-Muslims, and now he had the evidence: the letter.

⁴² beginning

⁴³ not recognised or noticed

⁴⁴ people who fear or hate Muslims

⁴⁵ one who doubts and questions things

⁴⁶ in a way that is very important

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:07:42] But as I [alluded to](#)⁴⁷, or mentioned, in part-one, almost immediately after the letter first [leaked](#) many people, including members of Birmingham City Council, were [sceptical](#)⁴⁸ of its [authenticity](#)⁴⁹, they didn't think it was real.

[00:08:00] There were a number of issues with the letter.

[00:08:03] Why was there no date, for example?

[00:08:06] Why was it anonymous?

[00:08:07] Why was only part of the letter photocopied?

[00:08:11] And why, many people asked, did the letter seem like a [caricature](#)⁵⁰ of Islamist extremism?

[00:08:18] In fact, it's even thought that Michael Gove was warned by members of Birmingham City Council about their [doubts](#)⁵¹ surrounding the [authenticity](#) of the mystery letter, but he ordered the investigation [nonetheless](#)⁵².

[00:08:33] So, what did the investigations actually find?

⁴⁷ mentioned

⁴⁸ doubting, questioning

⁴⁹ the quality of being true or real

⁵⁰ representation aimed to make it look foolish or ridiculous

⁵¹ feelings of not being certain about it

⁵² despite that, nevertheless

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:08:36] Well, the report, which was released later in 2014, concluded that there was, and I'm quoting directly, "no evidence of terrorism, radicalisation or violent extremism in the schools of concern in Birmingham."

[00:08:52] However, the report did find, and again I'm quoting directly, "evidence that there are a number of people, associated with each other and in positions of influence in schools and governing bodies, who [espouse](#)⁵³, [sympathise](#)⁵⁴ with or fail to challenge extremist views."

[00:09:12] They found some offensive and conservative WhatsApp messages between Muslim teachers in Birmingham, particularly around homosexuality, but there was no evidence of any kind of planned [conspiracy](#).

[00:09:26] In fact, despite all the horror stories and [scaremongering](#)⁵⁵ about [subversive](#)⁵⁶ Islamic school [plots](#), four separate investigations couldn't find any evidence of a wider organised [plot](#).

[00:09:40] And as time went on, the number of [alleged conspirators](#)⁵⁷, which had been as many as 100 in initial newspaper reports, began to drop.

⁵³ support

⁵⁴ agree

⁵⁵ spreading stories that made people feel frightened

⁵⁶ trying to damage the political system

⁵⁷ people who made the secret plans

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:09:51] Soon the number was 50, and by 2015, only 15 people faced charges.

[00:09:58] And [crucially](#), none of them were charged under terror or extremism charges, but for ‘[undue](#)⁵⁸ religious influence’.

[00:10:07] These cases were eventually [thrown out](#)⁵⁹, they were [dismissed](#)⁶⁰ in 2017, and in the end only one teacher, the former headteacher of one of the primary schools named in the letter, had any actual charges made against him.

[00:10:23] After all the media [frenzy](#) and social [panic](#)⁶¹, just one person was charged and it wasn't for any kind of terror or extremism offence - nothing even close to what the letter [alleged](#).

[00:10:38] So, what was the impact, the legacy, of this whole affair?

[00:10:44] Firstly, and despite all the investigations finding no evidence of a [plot](#), Operation Trojan Horse has since been used as justification to ‘[beef up](#)⁶²’, or increase, Britain's counter-extremism agenda.

⁵⁸ not acceptable

⁵⁹ removed, considered not important

⁶⁰ removed, considered not important

⁶¹ strong feeling of fear

⁶² increase

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:10:59] The ‘Prevent’ strategy, which is linked with Britain’ anti-terror laws, requires teachers to be [vigilant](#)⁶³ of and report any evidence of what they believe to be ‘radicalisation.’

[00:11:12] In terms of the impact on race relations, and multiculturalism, it was a huge step back. The media spent months writing stories about this Trojan Horse [plot](#), and there was significantly less time spent reporting on the fact that there wasn’t actually a [plot](#) at all.

[00:11:32] To many British muslims, it seemed like the government was determined to find evidence of an extremist [plot](#) in British schools, and when there was no evidence of any such [plot](#), the government sort of [shrugged its shoulders](#)⁶⁴ and moved on.

[00:11:48] But the damage was done.

[00:11:51] And for people like Tahir Alam, who was accused of “[undermining](#)⁶⁵ [fundamental](#)⁶⁶ British values,” their careers and reputations were [ruined](#)⁶⁷.

⁶³ very careful to notice it

⁶⁴ raised its shoulders to express uncertainty

⁶⁵ damaging, harming

⁶⁶ very important, basic

⁶⁷ destroyed

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:12:01] As of the time of making this episode, Alam is still [banned](#)⁶⁸ from having any involvement with schools in Britain, and his [contribution](#)⁶⁹ to the Alum Rock community and academic [turnaround](#)⁷⁰ at Park View have long been forgotten.

[00:12:18] Most of the schools named in the Trojan Horse letter have been renamed and had a complete [overhaul](#)⁷¹ of the governing boards and teaching staff.

[00:12:27] It didn't really matter if no evidence of a wider [plot](#) was found, the idea of Islamic extremism in British schools just felt right for certain people, and the schools needed to be rebranded and [injected](#)⁷² with some so-called 'British values'.

[00:12:45] Now, this Trojan Horse [Scandal](#) was big news at the time in the UK, as you've heard, but it wouldn't be until almost a decade later, when it gained a global audience, with the release of a podcast series about it called "The Trojan Horse Affair".

[00:13:02] This 2022 series, which was produced jointly between media [powerhouses](#)⁷³ Serial and the New York Times, is a seriously in-depth investigation which tries to figure out exactly what happened and, [crucially](#), who wrote the mystery letter.

⁶⁸ not allowed to do it

⁶⁹ the things he offered or provided

⁷⁰ the fact of improving the situation and making them successful

⁷¹ examination and improvement

⁷² introduced

⁷³ organisations with a lot of power or influence

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:13:20] In fact, this podcast series ended up opening up the [scandal](#) again, and, as sometimes happens, the two reporters actually became characters in the story.

[00:13:32] So, it's worth talking about this podcast briefly.

[00:13:35] And of course, if you would like to listen to this entire series yourself, you can find it on any podcast player - it's called "The Trojan Horse Affair".

[00:13:44] Now, this podcast's main concern isn't about the rights and wrongs of the schools, its main objective is figuring out who wrote the Trojan Horse letter.

[00:13:56] After all, the [scandal](#) was started by this letter, this letter is the only "proof" that exists, so it does seem like a sensible place to start.

[00:14:07] This podcast starts with the point of view that the letter was certainly fake, which is a point of view that is held by pretty much every media [outlet](#)⁷⁴ that has looked into it, but the podcast tries to answer the question of "who sent it and why?"

[00:14:24] Was it some anti-Islamic teacher or member of the public? Was it an enemy of Tahir Alam? A [prankster](#)⁷⁵, a joker, someone who didn't know what kind of trouble they would have [unleashed](#)⁷⁶?

⁷⁴ organisation that provides news

⁷⁵ joker

⁷⁶ caused, released

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:14:37] The conclusion this podcast comes to, or its hypothesis at least, is actually less interesting, it's more boring, than that.

[00:14:47] Their theory, and I must say that there is some evidence for this, is that the letter was written and sent by a headteacher from another Birmingham school.

[00:14:58] Why, you might ask?

[00:15:00] Their suggestion is that there was a legal [dispute](#)⁷⁷ between a headteacher and her teaching assistants, and that creating another [scandal](#) would distract from the legal [dispute](#).

[00:15:12] If that is indeed the truth, then it is quite [undramatic](#)⁷⁸.

[00:15:17] There was no Islamic [conspiracy](#) in the first place, and in fact, there was no anti-Islamic [conspiracy](#) behind the letter, it was simply a case of a headteacher having some personal difficulties that she wanted to go away.

[00:15:32] Now, this podcast series, as you may know, was hugely popular, but it did have [its fair share of](#)⁷⁹ critics.

⁷⁷ argument, disagreement

⁷⁸ without involving interest events, uneventful

⁷⁹ a lot of

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:15:42] Many say that the podcast is one-sided, and ignores the homophobia and sexism present in Birmingham schools in order to defend Tahir Alam, who speaks at length with the journalists.

[00:15:55] It has also been criticised in the British press for ‘[cherry picking](#)⁸⁰’ facts that support their theory, that is, only selecting some evidence and ignoring other pieces of evidence that contradict it.

[00:16:08] Michael Gove, the former Secretary of Education, [roundly](#)⁸¹ rejected the podcast and described the two journalists, one of whom is a British-Pakistani from Birmingham, as ‘useful idiots’.

[00:16:22] And the show was criticised by some listeners for having a boring, uneventful ending. The reporters never managed to [definitively](#)⁸² prove who wrote the letter, or why. Yes, it provides some suggestions, but it never manages to come to any [neat](#)⁸³, clever conclusion.

⁸⁰ picking only the ones that they suited their needs or wishes

⁸¹ completely, in an emphatic way

⁸² in a certain way

⁸³ clever, accurate

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:16:44] And you might rightly [criticise](#)⁸⁴ me, and this episode, this mini-series for finishing in a similarly [uneventful](#)⁸⁵ way, without any real conclusions or answers.

[00:16:57] But what I do want to leave you with are some questions and reflections on what this entire [scandal](#), this story, left behind.

[00:17:06] What's the real story, or meaning, behind so-called Operation Trojan Horse and what does it tell us about British society more broadly?

[00:17:16] Almost ten years later, the Trojan Horse affair is still one of the most [divisive](#)⁸⁶ episodes in Britain's long process of social integration, multiculturalism, and relationship with Islam. Even if no evidence of a [plot](#) was found, for people who wanted to believe that there was, this entire [scandal symbolised](#)⁸⁷ the failures of British multiculturalism and dangers of radical Islam in society.

⁸⁴ not approve of

⁸⁵ without interesting events happening, not exciting

⁸⁶ causing disagreement

⁸⁷ represented

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:17:45] **Regardless**⁸⁸ of the evidence, to some people, Muslims **plotting**⁸⁹ to take over British **institutions**⁹⁰ just sounded right, it **played into**⁹¹ what they wanted to believe, even if the investigations didn't find any evidence of this.

[00:18:01] For others, the whole thing was a media-generated moral **panic** and represents how British Muslims, and the British-Pakistani community in particular, are viewed.

[00:18:13] And despite the letter almost certainly being fake, it was too late - the damage was already done.

[00:18:22] Now, were there Muslim teachers in majority Muslim areas of Birmingham who held, and perhaps even **encouraged**⁹² socially conservative views with their students?

[00:18:33] It seems that this is almost certainly true, and there was little evidence to hide this.

⁸⁸ not being affected by it, despite

⁸⁹ making secret plans

⁹⁰ organisations

⁹¹ helped support

⁹² gave support to

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:18:39] Were certain school [governors](#) like Tahir Alam [targeting](#)⁹³ Muslim teachers for his Muslim-majority schools?

[00:18:47] Certainly, he admits [as much](#)⁹⁴; it was part of his entire educational philosophy, and it seemed to have very good results.

[00:18:56] That is something entirely different to a [conspiracy](#) to [infiltrate](#) British schools, but it did leave some people asking some important questions.

[00:19:07] If making cultural changes to a school lead to better academic [outcomes](#)⁹⁵, should these be acceptable?

[00:19:14] Where should the line be drawn?

[00:19:17] What are “British” values, are there any “British” values, should these be taught in schools, especially schools where most pupils come from a different cultural background?

[00:19:29] How should a school in a multicultural society be run, according to the religious customs of most of its pupils, or without any religion at all?

[00:19:40] These are some big questions, and despite the huge media [frenzy](#), the tens of thousands of hours spent on investigations into the [scandal](#), and the millions of

⁹³ having them as the an object of attention

⁹⁴ the same

⁹⁵ results

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

words printed about it, it seems like we are not all that much closer to agreeing on any answers.

[00:19:59] Ok then, that is it for part two of this mini-series on the Trojan Horse affair, a complicated [scandal](#) that all started with a mystery letter but became a [frenzied](#)⁹⁶ debate about Islam and social integration in Britain.

[00:20:15] I should say, as a final message, that if you think this sounds like an interesting story, and you would like to listen to 8 more hours about it, then you can listen to the Serial podcast I mentioned. It is a good listen, although some of the accents are quite [tricky](#)⁹⁷ to understand.

[00:20:32] As always, I would love to know what you thought about this episode and this mini-series in general.

[00:20:38] What do you think about this entire affair?

[00:20:41] How do you think people would have reacted in your country, if there had been a similar [scandal](#)?

[00:20:46] Have you already listened to the Serial podcast about this, and if so what did you think?

[00:20:52] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

⁹⁶ uncontrolled

⁹⁷ difficult

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #365
The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

[00:20:56] You can head right into our community forum, which is at
community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:21:04] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo
English.

[00:21:09] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Scandal	event that caused a public feeling of shock and anger
Alleged	said to have happened without giving proof
Plot	secret plan
Infiltrate	gain access, be part of
Radicalise	push them towards extreme or fanatical behaviour
Pick up	continue from, resume
Conspiracy	secret plan
Instil	promote, inspire
Hardline	strict, severe
Underway	happening
Leaked	made known
Paranoia	an extreme and unreasonable feeling that something bad is going to happen

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Plots	secrets plans
Cliffhanger	big question about what's coming next
Picking up	continuing from, resuming
Scandalous	causing public feelings of shock and anger
Dubbed	named, called
Allegations	statements that had happened, made without giving proof
Vulnerable	able to be easily affected or influenced
Ratings	official measurement of how good they were
Downgraded	reduced to a lower grade or rank
Verdict	opinion, decision
Established	accepted, recognised
Criteria	standards, measures
Downgrades	reductions to a lower grade or rank
Adequate	good enough, satisfactory
Segregated	separated

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Rated	judged, evaluated
Supposed	generally believed to be
Mastermind	one who had planned and organised it
Governors	members of group deciding about school's management
Suspended	stopped from doing it
Initial	happening at the beginning
Frenzy	uncontrolled and excited behaviour
Implementing	starting using them, putting them into action
Doomed	certain to fail
Witch hunt	an attempt to find and punish a particular group
Impartial	not supporting any of the sides, unbiased
Prone	likely to do it
Profound	great, extreme
Posed	caused
Outset	beginning

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Unsung	not recognised or noticed
Islamophobes	people who fear or hate Muslims
Sceptic	one who doubts and questions things
Crucially	in a way that is very important
Alluded to	mentioned
Sceptical	doubting, questioning
Authenticity	the quality of being true or real
Caricature	representation aimed to make it look foolish or ridiculous
Doubts	feelings of not being certain about it
Nonetheless	despite that, nevertheless
Espouse	support
Sympathise	agree
Scaremongering	spreading stories that made people feel frightened
Subversive	trying to damage the political system
Conspirators	people who made the secret plans

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Undue	not acceptable
Thrown out	removed, considered not important
Dismissed	removed, considered not important
Panic	strong feeling of fear
Beef up	increase
Vigilant	very careful to notice it
Shrugged its shoulders	raised its shoulders to express uncertainty
Undermining	damaging, harming
Fundamental	very important, basic
Ruined	destroyed
Banned	not allowed to do it
Contribution	the things he offered or provided
Turnaround	the fact of improving the situation and making them successful
Overhaul	examination and improvement
Injected	introduced

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Powerhouses	organisations with a lot of power or influence
Outlet	organisation that provides news
Prankster	joker
Unleashed	caused, released
Dispute	argument, disagreement
Undramatic	without involving interest events, uneventful
Its fair share of	a lot of
Cherry picking	picking only the ones that they suited their needs or wishes
Roundly	completely, in an emphatic way
Definitively	in a certain way
Neat	clever, accurate
Criticise	not approve of
Uneventful	without interesting events happening, not exciting
Divisive	causing disagreement
Symbolised	represented

The Trojan Horse Scandal Part Two

Regardless	not being affected by it, despite
Plotting	making secret plans
Institutions	organisations
Played into	helped support
Encouraged	gave support to
Targeting	having them as the an object of attention
As much	the same
Outcomes	results
Frenzied	uncontrolled
Tricky	difficult

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com