

*Speech delivered by Dr J Sherif, Chair of the MCB's Research & Documentation Committee*

## **The campaign for the recognition of the British Muslim identity in the public sphere**

The theme of this brief paper is the campaign of British Muslims to be recognised and accepted in the public sphere as a distinct constituency.

The first part of the paper will seek out some of the evidence of institutional change in response to this campaign. The second part will look at the modus operandi of the community in its advocacy of the British Muslim interest.

To place the matter in context here are some facts: Muslims are by far the largest non-Christian faith community in Britain, with a population of about 1.5 million – though we await the results of the Census for more precise information. Almost 50% have been born in Britain, and 50% are under the age of 27.

The British Muslim campaign to enter the mainstream owes a great deal to the advocacy work of three organisations. These representative bodies have to some extent, handed over the baton from one to the other. The first of these is the Union of Muslim Organisations, founded in 1970. The second is the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs that came to the fore after that defining event in the history of British Muslims, the publication of 'Satanic Verses' in December 1988. Finally, there is the Muslim Council of Britain, inaugurated in October 1997.

The measure of success of this sustained effort is to consider what institutional changes have taken place on the ground, and also some of the signals that have been put out by the Establishment.

Here are some examples of institutional responses:

- The Metropolitan Police is testing a new uniform dress code that includes a head scarf
- The Ministry of Defence has relaxed rules to allow Muslim servicemen to wear trimmed beards
- The Prison service appointed a full-time Muslims Advisor in September 1999
- Hospitals have a scheme for employing part-time Muslim counsellors
- Funding for tackling deprivation through the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions 'Single Regeneration Budget makes explicit reference to partnership with faith groups. [There was no specific fund created by the Government to redress the disadvantaged position of Muslims but various funding through different Government

departments have come into existence such as "Connecting Communities" through the Home Office and others from DETR, Department Of Education, Department Of Culture and Sports.]

- The Department for International Development has sought out the assistance of faith groups, including the Muslim community in preparing promotional material. An example is the booklet on world poverty, prepared specifically with the British Muslim donor in mind.
- There also three full-time Muslim community schools that have obtained voluntary aided status, so qualifying for funding from their local authority.

There have also been a number of important signals, in particular:

- The inclusion of a religion question in the national census – this is a signal to the public services that religious identity does have a bearing in the equitable allocation of resources and the provision of services.

The inclusion of this question had to go through a cost-benefit analysis conducted by the Office for National Statistics and here are some responses it received from user departments:

*From the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions*  
"Information on religious affiliation is potentially useful in regeneration, housing and planning, particularly where services are delivered in partnership or consultation with the local community".

*Department for Education and Employment*  
"The question on religious affiliation would have substantial value in terms of policy development but in view of inclusion of an anti-discrimination clause in the Amsterdam Treaty which is likely to lead to EC proposals for a Directive it has now become essential".

Moreover the Department of Health indicated that it would use the information for policy uses ('elderly' and 'health and outcome indicators') and Inequalities ('general' and 'ethnicity'). Local Authorities would require information about religious affiliation for a variety of reasons, including deprivation analysis, providing statistical base for local surveys, multi-cultural education etc

- Another signal was The Wakeham report – the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords – in January last year. The report stated

Non-Christian faith communities in the country form between 5 and 6 per cent of the population. In our view, their explicit representation ought to be commensurate with this, in order to demonstrate a desire to give appropriate recognition to such communities. Religious belief is of course an important part of the identity of many minority ethnic or cultural groups. The Appointments Commission should therefore aim to ensure that at any one time there were at least five members of the second chamber specifically selected to represent the various non-Christian faith communities.

- Other signals have been the formal representation of the Muslim community in national events such as the Millennium and in widely televised events such as the annual Remembrance Sunday, and the Prime Minister's personal endeavours to be seen by the Muslim community. For example Mr Blair attended a reception hosted by the Muslim Council of Britain in April 199 – the first time for a PM – and he also attended the Year 2000 Annual Awards for Excellence event organised by the Muslim News.

This then has been an overview of specific institutional responses and signals. I would like to move on to consider now the modus operandi adopted by Muslim advocacy organisations to secure greater participation and recognition.

This has gone through two phases.

- In the first phase, it appears that the strategy was to submit appeals to the political masters. There was the expectation that a benevolent executive would listen to such petitions and then oblige.
- In the second phase, there was a conscious engagement in the country's democratic process.

This transition is conveyed in the type of documents prepared at various General Elections to communicate the community's concerns to politicians.

- In the 1983 General Election, the Union of Muslim Organisations listed 8 Muslim concerns in a one page typed letter sent to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the other party leaders. In her one page reply, Mrs Thatcher noted that she had "a deep interest and affection for the Muslim community" – a hint of vice-regal benevolence?
- In the 1997 General Election, the UK Action Committee for Islamic Affairs prepared a 14 page manifesto 'British Muslims and the General Elections 1997 – For a fair and caring society' – that was sent to all the parties as well as parliamentary candidates. It addressed both issues of concern to the community and also of wider social concern. We believe it coined the phrase 'ethical foreign policy'.
- In the June 2001 General Election, the Muslim Council of Britain launched the report 'Electing to Listen' well in advance of the political parties preparing their manifestos. 'Electing to Listen' was published in November 2000. This was a deliberate attempt to influence party policy. In fact, for

the first time, round table discussions were held with Labour and Conservative policy makers based on this document.

A comparison of the contents across the 18 year period can be used to track changing priorities. But there is one issue that has always been there – and that is the need for legislation to tackle religious discrimination.

Iqbal Sacranie, the first Secretary General of The Muslim Council of Britain captures the current modus operandi. This is an extract from his report to the body's annual general meeting in for 1999:

On the question of participation, it is also useful to appreciate how policies are articulated and formed and how power is exercised. One may think of Parliament, Whitehall and 10 Downing Street and these are no doubt important instruments of power but they are at the apex of a long process of policy-making. Policy making starts at local and regional levels, in parties and societies, in academies and think tanks, in newspaper columns and journals before it reaches Parliament, Whitehall and 10 Downing Street. It then travels down to the grass roots in the form of reports, consultation documents, green papers and white papers and then bills and committees, becoming laws and processes that affect us all.

I think there is no shame in admitting to ourselves that we hardly take part in any of these processes yet become suddenly concerned about matters after they have reached the last stages when it is very difficult if not impossible to influence anything.

Iqbal's vision of doing things was adopted in the Muslim community's campaign for the inclusion of the religion question in the 2001 census and it yielded results.

To conclude, it is important to acknowledge the clear policy direction given by the Labour Government towards making Britain a successful, inclusive multicultural society.

However in the aftermath of September 11 we are now in very difficult and charged times, and it is a severe test for the multicultural project.

For example, the Times Education Supplement October 11 noted:

The Government was warned this week that plans to increase the number of faith-based schools will damage race relations and create dangerous divisions. Teachers' leaders joined Labour activists and backbench MPs at the Labour party conference to urge ministers to rethink the policy which has become even more controversial in the wake of terrorist attacks in America and riots in Bradford and Oldham.

In the Muslim Council of Britain too we are stretching the barriers of the multicultural project. We are having to tread a delicate line on exercising our right to dissent with government. For example we believe the use of military power against Afghanistan is not the right strategy to attack terrorism. When we issued a press release to the effect, we received many emails questioning our loyalty. Displeasure was also conveyed from the highest levels. It seems the right to dissent is regarded as disloyalty.

Finally the question remains whether there has been an adequate institutional response so far towards accommodating religious identity. Certainly the types of changes listed at the outset of this paper are quite modest.

Perhaps what will force change are several developments.

First - the availability of census statistics in response to the census questions. In particular the correlation between Muslim population and employment, education and housing.

Second - greater representation, in politics and other fields – at present there is only 1 MEP, 2 MPs and 3 Peers from the community. The issue is of having more role models in politics, the media, the civil service.

Third - legislation against religious discrimination. There is no shortage of evidence that the community perceives this discrimination to exist. The reports from the University of Derby present a strong case. However there is serious institutional resistance because of the threat to vested interests in the Race Relations industry.