

National Conference - Building Communities, Building Bridges

Setting the Scene

Full text of the speech 'Setting the Scene'

Ms Rashidah Butt, Chair, Regen 2000, Bradford

Bismillahir Rahman ir Rahim

The recent disturbances in cities and towns in the North of England have shocked the Muslims of Britain. If the mounting tensions are not defused, the social time-bomb will continue to tick away until some minor incident serves to spark another explosion.

The MCB has been discussing, observing and mediating in the troubles since their outset. In fact the Annual General Meeting of the MCB in May this year included a seminar on the problems facing Muslim youth. We heard from a young Muslim parole officer in Halifax describing the drug culture, and the sad case of a boy of 8 caught up in the drug scene. MCB members have visited the troubled spots and collected information from a cross-section of the community. The MCB presented its findings on the Bradford disturbances to the Home Office Minister Angela Eagle on 16th July.

We need to understand the underlying causes of the problem so that they do not re-occur. Clearly it is a multi-dimensional problem that needs to be tackled on many fronts. There are some things we can do ourselves as a community, firstly to change our own culture of ethnic cliques and clans when these harm community development. And secondly, to draw on our religious values and tradition of self-help to interact with, and motivate our youth. There are other actions that need to be done in partnership with schools, the police and local government. Finally there is the vital role of central government in providing resources and leadership.

Today's conference is convened in the spirit of enquiry and research: firstly to hear from the youth, men and women; second, to seek the views of the Law & Order agencies and other specialists; and third, to benefit from the experience and wisdom of our educated scholars and community leaders.

The MCB has received an unprecedented number of calls and e-mails from Muslims deeply worried about the recent turn of events. Here are some examples, one from a Muslim in the South of England and the other two from the North: The incidents that rocked Lancashire and Yorkshire over the past few weeks have been very worrying for millions of Muslims in the UK. However, the incidents do not come as a surprise when we look at the attainment levels of Muslims from Indo Pakistan in UK. The Muslims too have had the same level of opportunities as the other minorities but we seem to allow ourselves the easier option of low attainment with obvious consequences of unemployment, poverty, hopelessness and idleness. There is no shortage of adult education, Muslims need to take up the learning challenge and instil the same hunger into their younger family members. The mosques also need to encourage this by celebrating educational and industrial achievements. Educational achievements of our females is possibly the most important factor, they are the ones who have the greatest influence on the young ones. Our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters should get the best educational and skills to become beacons for the generations they will bring up. We must also realise that UK is our home. We need to start addressing the issues of influencing the UK society.

All the Northern towns that have been targeted by the far right are packed full of Asians who do also happen to be Muslim - mainly from Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is a classic case of Islamophobia. I'm worried that this distinction has not been picked up by the media. It seems that they are perfectly willing to portray Muslims as terrorists and aggressors, but fail to mention Muslims when we are victims. I must disclose that I have special interest in this matter, being a British Asian, Muslim and also from a Northern town."

"It is in utter frustration that I send you this letter. The last three months have seen a worsening situation in relations between the Muslim population and its white counterparts....the BNP in its publications and indeed on national television have openly attacked Muslims...in one of the most crucial times for Muslims in Great Britain... [the MCB should] come forward and take action by urging the government to take more control of the far right...[who] are causing immense damage to our relations with non-Muslims."

However, there is also need to place the matter in perspective. The media and others have latched on to the word 'riot'. According to witnesses in Bradford, the total number of youths involved outside the BMW garage on 8th July was about a hundred. This hardly constitutes a major civil insurrection that could not have been contained by the Police. It seems that there are parties out there who would like to paint a picture of a

troublesome community determined to disturb the peace. Why not use the word 'disorder' - the term used in Lord Scarman's enquiry after the troubles in Brixton in 1981?

Of course some young people did run amok and broke the law, but this is to be distinguished from gangland criminality. We should view the protests on 7-8th July in Bradford in the same light as we view the direct non-violent action of the anti-capitalist brigade. The anti-capitalist brigade's actions in the G8 meetings are a form of direct political action. A small fringe is bound to resort to violent action. Similarly when Muslim youth pelted the Police and burn down some types of businesses, it is a small fringe acting more out of a sense of frustration with the current order of things rather than from criminality. In any case the violent action of this small minority should not detract from the substance of the protest by the community regarding the deprivation in which they find themselves.

The main purpose of today is to hear from young people themselves about this sense of frustration, and their suggestions on what should be done. The Government has also not won much respect for its silence after Shahid Malik was injured and arrested by the Police. The Government has not won much respect by using words like 'thuggery' - this is what the Prime Minister said - or the 'tougher measures' murmurings of Mr Blunkett's Home Office aides. We would have expected the Prime Minister to have at least visited one of the trouble spots - but this has not happened. It would have gone some way to healing the wounds. If you speak to the Muslims in Manningham they would say that in June 1995 youths acted the way they did only after a particular insensitive Policing incident in which a Muslim lady was man-handled. As tensions grew, local community leaders' suggestions were ignored. If you speak to Muslims in Bradford today, they too would say that the Police did not respond to their repeated calls, and our community leaders say that their advice was not sought and Police action was heavy-handed.

Our elected representatives in Parliament have not won much respect either. It seems MPs like Marsha Singh - who said the Police should have used water cannons - do not know their own constituencies. As the editor of The Muslim News has remarked, "the Police are not trusted by the young and water cannons will only make things worse".

The Muslim Council of Britain in its meeting with Angela Eagle called for a Scarman-type Enquiry. Other British Muslim organisations have also called for equally visible responses - the Muslim Parliament recommends a statutory commission to combat discrimination in employment. Instead, the Home Secretary has announced that there would be an inter-departmental ministerial group 'to conduct an investigation to minimise the risk of further disorders'. But the question is why was inter-departmental coordination and communication on this issue not happening already? Is it because the Home Office thought the Bradford disturbances of 1995 were a one-off? The disturbances of this year were far worse. Did the "The Bradford Commission Report" of 1995 not point to the simmering resentment that must be addressed?

Of course it did - I quote from that Report : "The main themes identified by those who spoke to us as being of major concern to them in relation to the disorders were:

- I. ethnic conflicts and misunderstandings in Bradford
- II. the lack of employment opportunities, and most particularly the extent and unfairness of racial discrimination in the labour market
- III. street culture and criminal behaviour by boys and young men
- IV. the problems of appropriate policing
- V. the poor educational level of some schools and the consequences for the educational attainment of many young people
- VI. the ineffectiveness of local political processes

The conference has representation from the Police and the Home Office. We look forward to hearing their point of view in due course.

The sight of a BMW garage being torched, or bricks being hurled at policemen, or news reports of the mugging of an old age pensioner are certainly not in keeping with Islamic values and cannot be condoned. Muslim culture nurtures responsible behaviour and forbearance - referred to in Arabic as hilm - rather than allowing oneself to be swept by a tide of emotions -succumbing to jahilya, or uncontrolled anger - for which the Arabic word is Hamoq. It is from this Arabic term that the English expression 'to run amok' is derived. Philip Lewis writing in The Independent on 9th July observed that "Indeed, the youngsters who attend the mosques are not those throwing petrol bombs at the police". The challenge now is this: how do we engage with the disaffected section of the youth community and also those not drawn to the mosques as they currently function?

The Qur'an and Islamic history provides many inspiring examples of the way in which the youth were fully engaged in the great events of the day. For example there is the story of the young men who would not accept

the social injustice of their time, described in the beautiful surah of the Qur'an called 'The Cave'. Then there is the example of the young lady Asma bint Abu Bakr, who was trusted with the secret of the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina. She had responsibility for packing the provisions that had to last an arduous eight-day journey. The scholar Ibn Kathir states that the majority of the Prophet's followers were young people. One of the Prophet's last acts before his death was to appoint the teenager Usama bin Zaid as commander of a three thousand strong army in the campaign against the Eastern Roman Empire. This was in preference to older men in spite of their experiences in such matters. When the Prophet, peace be on him, was quizzed on his choice, he asserted that "Usama was well up to the task", and the Prophet was proved right. The Prophet charged his young cousin Ali, at the time only 17, on a mission to Yemen. Ali, may Allah be pleased with him, remarked that he was too young to shoulder such responsibility. However the Prophet assured him that he could cope.

Our audience today includes scholars and imams. The conference wishes to hear from them too their ideas on engaging with the youth and inspiring them with this original spirit of Islam.

British Muslims have many aspirations, from the basic ones of having protection of life and property under the law, to access to education and mainstream jobs. Unfortunately these are still mostly aspirations. Listen to what Professor Bikhu Parekh, an expert on multiculturalism and chairman of the recent commission on 'The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain' has to say: "there are Britons who are still made to feel welcome tenants rather than fellow owners of the country".

Muslims support integration into the main stream but not the racist or Islamophobic practices that bring about disintegration. We know that we are raising questions that Britain has not previously had to face, perhaps since the end of institutional discrimination against the Catholics in the Nineteenth Century. In fact, even as recently as 1974, there was some self-consciousness when it was realised that the editor of The Times, the secretary of the Cabinet and the director-general of the BBC were all Catholics. The recent Ouseley report makes the observation "Economic development, inward investment, support for local enterprise and the Muslim community has to be prioritised because 'if the Muslim community fails, Bradford fails'".

Bradford is not the only British town or city with a young Muslim inner-city population. The implications of Sir Herman's point do not need to be spelt out. We dread the scenario when more young Muslim men go to prison than to university.

Like the Catholic minority, British Muslims seek to be distinctive group whose contribution to British life has unique qualities and attributes. But integration should not seek to enforce sameness but recognise and celebrate distinctiveness. We uphold the positive promotion of diversity in British society - this is a cherished value that worthy of respect. However some of the old intolerant characters have reappeared on the scene, trying to blame the victim and offering crass solutions like imposing rules on Muslims on whom to marry and whom not to marry, and picking on Muslim faith schools in the name of removing segregation.

Even highly commendable community actions, such as the attempt by Muslims in Birmingham and Bradford to clear their residential areas of prostitution, are met with hostility and down-right opposition from the authorities who one would have expected to have been the most supportive. New Labour believes in 'communitarianism'. Why does it cease to apply when the Muslim community seeks to apply its moral values at a community level?

We are aware that Britain is at a point in its social, cultural and economic history where it faces choices along many broad spectrums. Here are a few of examples: -first, there are issues of national sovereignty or European federalism

-second, there are the choices between multiculturalism, where equality means accepting differences and diversity, and monoculturalism, where equality means mindless uniformity

-third, on the issue of alternative lifestyles and moralities on the one hand and traditional values on the other

-fourth - and this particularly affects places like Bradford - on the issue of whether individuals are responsible for their poverty, or whether it is a condition shaped by the socio-economic environment

-fifth - on more state intervention or rolling back the frontiers of the state. State intervention can sometimes be positive, for example if it can be tough on those who seek to incite racial violence and religious hatred.

We should recognise the shades of opinion and nuances along these spectrums. Muslim campaigns - for example for more faith schools, on issues of drug legalisation, Section 28, rights of the unborn child, the right to Hijab, respect of the sacred, justice at home and abroad - these intersect the spectrums in different points and draw us into different alliances and confrontations.

In the run-up to the last General Election the MCB was able to conduct a series of discussions with policy-makers of the main political parties that was of considerable mutual benefit. Hopefully it put to rest the canard that Muslims cannot express themselves in English, or that we have an opinion on so-called 'ethnic matters' only. The Muslim community has much to contribute, together with others, for the good of society.

The cure to our ills is surely not the water cannon, nor quick economic fixes to patch up gaping strategic oversights, but a renewal of values and the building of bridges between communities.

Those opposed to Muslim interests are not difficult to identify - this is the voice of the old monocultural brigade. For example quoting from one of the broadsheets:

"In Northern Ireland it was recognised long ago that if you divide people as children, they will remain divided for life. In France, where teachers have refused to teach pupils wearing Muslim headscarves, the determination to keep religion out of the classroom has not prevented racial tension but it is an important first step in the right direction. In Britain the opposite is happening. The government's education strategy is explicitly to encourage more religious schools on the grounds that Muslims deserve the same treatment as Catholics or the Church of England. In doing so the government is storing up trouble for the future and further raising the possibility that some of Britain's cities will come increasingly to resemble Northern Ireland". The Sunday Times, 15 July 2001

We should also remember the statement of Mr Griffin, leader of the BNP: "We are however, opposed to the growth and increased militancy of the various Asiatic religions that have been introduced to this country by mass immigration"

On the other hand the Muslim community has achieved a great deal through its alliances with other faith communities, an example being the successful campaign to include a question on religion in the National Census earlier this year.

The Census question was a signal to public institutions that Muslims are not an invisible community. At a practical level, it will provide statistics to monitor fair employment practices in the public sector, and the fairer allocation of resources and services.

British Muslims constitute a faith community. As such we have a unique faith-based needs and problems. Presently some of our needs and problems are addressed by practices and laws in the field of race relations. This now needs to be revisited, particularly in light of the report on religious discrimination prepared for the Home Office by the University of Derby, and the type of issues we are discussing today. We are a two million strong community that should be recognised for what it is, and whose well-being is inextricably linked with that of our country.

The community feels unprotected and vulnerable as a religious minority. This should not be allowed to continue. The Government now needs to demonstrate leadership, and bring on statute an act prohibiting incitement to religious hatred.

Among today's attendees is a young researcher, Serena Hussain, who is working on a research project under Professor Tariq Modood at the University of Bristol and supported by the MCB. In due course, her project on statistical data on British Muslims will analyse the results of the Census question. In time she will be an expert in her field and a valuable resource person for community organisations. This is the encouraging, positive face of third generation British Muslims, insha Allah.

The MCB's purpose is to work towards removing the barriers that prevent British Muslims from becoming 'fellow owners' and stakeholders in their society.

So the conference today is an important opportunity to begin a public discussion and conduct a public brainstorming. The key participants are the youth and the outside agencies and other experts, and we look forward to a productive day of dialogue and interaction.

The MCB is keen that this should be a conference with a difference. The discussions, views and suggestions of today are to be compiled into a report that will be a point of reference for action plans. In the next session, we invite young people from the affected communities to share with us their thoughts on what is going wrong and what can be done. In another session, we seek a frank exchange with the Police and other agencies present. There have been one unfortunate incident too many in terms of broken arms and concussioned heads, and justice must now be seen to be done. There are hard questions too for the bureaucrats, because the lack of real progress at the grass roots is obvious. Then, there is a session too addressed by our community leaders and imams. We seek to be equally frank about our state of affairs and the need to put our own house in order, so that there can be a better social climate for everybody.

Finally let us conclude with the verse from the Qur'an that guides the spirit of this meeting today: Support each other in righteousness and God-consciousness; do not support each other in wrongdoing and hostility.