

Eid Reception Speech by MCB Secretary General Iqbal Sacranie

Wed 18 December 2002

Held at the House of Commons and attended by the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Members of Parliament and a cross section of representatives from the Muslim Community.

It is a pleasure to take part in the Eid reception here at the House of Commons with so many friends - both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Events like this gathering play an important role. They affirm - even celebrate - Britain's status as a multi-faith and multi-ethnic society.

As the year draws to an end it's worth noting that it does so - thus far - on a largely positive note. A year that started very much in the shadow of the tragedy of September 11th ends with the happiness of Eid and a celebration of the many achievements of the Muslim community across many fields including the arts, commerce, sciences and sports - recognised through the brilliant Muslim News Awards held last week.

And in between there have been some noteworthy achievements for the Muslim community: for the first time a question on religious affiliation was inserted in the census; there has been progress on Islamic Financial instruments; we now have Halal loans via the Prince's Trust for young entrepreneurs; we now have protection against religious discrimination in employment; state funding will now be given to the fourth Islamic school in the country: Balham Preparatory School in Wandsworth and there is greater appreciation from the government and media organisations of the important role of the Muslim community.

All this helps foster a strong and vibrant community in Britain where people of all faiths and none, races and backgrounds are able to realise their full potential.

But of course this represents the tip of the iceberg. So let me say that next year we look forward to even more progress being made. But for that to happen we need to tackle some of the external barriers in three key areas that currently hold us back.

Firstly, too much potential is being wasted through a lack of opportunities. Poverty and social exclusion greatly affects sections of the Muslim community. Too many Pakistanis and Bangladeshi children gaining poor GCSEs, too many young adults out work, too many families living on inadequate incomes. We need government to pour financial resources and political will to tackle this decisively.

Secondly, too many people face discrimination due to their faith. Religious discrimination is a fact of life for many Muslims. It will remain so until legal loopholes are closed and prejudice is outlawed through a comprehensive law against all forms of religious discrimination.

Finally, too much hope and goodwill is being lost through injustice. At home, our confidence in the criminal justice system will not be restored until Muslims are treated fairly and equitably, especially in the sentencing of young Muslims in our northern towns following last year's disturbances.

And abroad the brutal occupation of Palestine continues unabated. Today both the Prime Minister and Home Secretary emphasised the importance of resolving the crisis in Palestine. As much as we appreciate and value their remarks and concerns unfortunately we have been hearing the same comments over the last twenty years. The situation in Palestine is worsening by the day with atrocities heaped on innocent Palestinians by the Israeli government. We can only achieve peace in the region if justice takes place. There can never be peace if we do not respect the international legality which has been blatantly defied by Sharon and his predecessors.

But more than that, we're on the verge of creating even more misery and injustice by embarking on an immoral and unjustified war against Iraq. Our government must be aware that it is not only the Muslim community in the UK and worldwide who oppose military attack on Iraq but, as all the polls show, the vast majority of the British public share our serious concerns that it is the innocent civilian population of Iraq who would suffer loss.

Justice at both home and abroad is what is required. Not just because we ask for it. But because it is right in itself.

These barriers need not stand in our way permanently. Slowly but surely we are chipping away at them, but we need much faster progress. Our goodwill, talent and determination coupled with government action, resources

and co-operation can make a huge difference. And it will benefit not just Muslims, but society as a whole. It will advance the common good.

Then our celebrations can encompass the whole of community.