

# **How can we connect Britain's Muslim communities to the democratic process?**

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## *Check against delivery*

Today we meet in inauspicious times. There is a prevailing discourse in our nation's newspapers and on our airwaves of a growing 'Muslim problem'. We are offered a feast of soundbites, polls and headlines telling us how British Muslims cannot integrate, how many, at best, lack the will to stop extremism. At worst, we are described as tacit supporters of evil and violent acts with polls generated that claim Muslim sympathies for the anti-systemic and anti-democratic expressions. These are all but some of the details in a larger canvas that question the nature of today's Britain. It raises questions as to the validity of multiculturalism as a robust method of cementing diverse communities. Can Britain remain a community of communities at ease with itself? Should our diversity be trumpeted and strengthened or jettisoned in favour of a bland monoculturalism which, though lacking in colour, would no doubt, it is presumed, generate a more rigorous social cohesion.

Our task of exploring ways of connecting Muslim communities to the democratic process is therefore a difficult one. Many come to this discussion with the misguided assumption that since Muslims have no democratic

traditions historically or textually, they ask: how can they possibly connect to a democratic process?

Well, I begin my remarks with an assertion of optimism and hope and a much needed correction to prevailing cultural essentialist arguments as to the democratic and civic impulse in Islam.

British Muslims are very much part of the British success story. They have been net contributors to a successful British economy. Many British Muslims demonstrate their ethic of civic duty through their record of public service, especially in local government, as well as in the host of local organisations and charitable bodies. They contribute to the growing numbers of social entrepreneurs who expend time and energy to create better neighbourhoods and foster better community relations. You will find sustained evidence of this in the honours list each year in which countless Muslims are decorated with orders signifying their contributions to community and social services. And also in the many others who form the silent majority of conscientious citizens who contribute to society's wellbeing through involvement in youth clubs, school governing bodies and a veritable cornucopia of voluntary associations.

And all of this is, more often than not, is inspired by their faith. Islam, more than just a religion that exhorts belief in God and the performance of rituals of worship, commands its adherents to be witnesses before God and humanity to

the goodness of faith and the values it inspires; compassion, mercy, charity and truthfulness. Values that are indeed essential to a healthy and animated political, economic and social environment. Muslims are taught by their faith to contribute to the betterment of society through active involvement in its affairs that Muslims are driven in their civic vocations.

What does the Muslim community look like?

Britain's Muslims are predominantly young; the vast majority of them are born and raised in Britain. Their parents come from many ethnic backgrounds and cultures with a rich diversity of heritages. A 'community of communities', British Muslims have been, and are, united through strong ties of faith identity that transcend ethnic boundaries. Some communities have a longer history of living in Britain than others.

In many respects the needs and aspirations of Britain's Muslim community are no different from those of our fellow citizens - whatever their beliefs or backgrounds. Concerns about health and education, national prosperity, strong public infrastructure and good public services are common to us all. The values of community life and the need to build strong communities of mutual support, are basic principles that connect Muslims to their fellow citizens. From our diverse backgrounds we can make common cause with those that similarly seek

to channel their resources toward building and sustaining an open, democratic society that prides itself on its inclusivity.

We look forward to a more inclusive society whose shared values are shaped through the participation of people of all faith communities, as well as those of no faith. Our vision is of a society that accepts and appreciates the contributions of the diverse cultures of all its citizens. We work for a compassionate and caring society, one where no groups are left behind through disadvantage and discrimination. We seek a society that is vibrant and successful and whose successes are shared by all composite communities.

Our values, our ethic and indeed our vision is complementary to this nation's fine traditions. Traditions that have over centuries embraced and absorbed a multitude of communities that have sought to make Britain their home and in doing so have excelled communally and collectively in the UK. Why then do we hear of a discourse that argues otherwise?

Certainly the atrocities of last year have in the minds of many lent credence to the idea that Muslims are set apart from their fellow Britons. Polling data suggesting the level of sympathy for the horrific acts carried out on July 7 and their justification in the minds of some Muslims leaves many wondering just how far and with what level of success Muslims can be truly democratic and British.

To these arguments I say that the data presented does not reflect the views of the vast majority of British Muslims. Whilst I acknowledge that there is a disturbing presence of sympathies for actions that are, in the view of scholars, un-Islamic (falling beyond the purview of religion) and anti-Islamic (actually damaging to the religion itself), these views are not held by the majority of Muslims. The rump of the British Muslim community would not defend, sympathise with or justify terrorist acts no matter what their defence or grievance.

For the tiny minority of Muslim opinion that thinks otherwise, our responsibility is to root out this mistaken philosophy that abuses religion to defend unconscionable acts of criminality. Not through a flurry of ill thought out legislation and heavy handed displays of the state's strength and authority but through a considered combination of open debate and dialogue and policy instruments that collectively defeat extremism.

Many of us have been at odds with this Government, arguing that our current foreign policy is radicalising many of our young people. I continue to assert this fact. But I will persist in my belief, along with the MCB's many affiliates, that the best way to change Government policy is through democratic, peaceful, constructive discourse. Sadly, our task is made infinitely harder by the

obstinate stance of this Government on certain issues. For example, its refusal to hold a public enquiry into the events of 7/7.

In connecting Muslim communities to the democratic process and to the rest of society, one of the most urgent tasks we face is to relieve the pressure of a community hit by torrents from all angles. To put simply, young people need a space to breath and think. Whether that be through our national conversation, or via our leaders and policy makers who are reactive to that conversation, we all have a duty soften the hysterical and irrational pitch that we are all currently engaged in.

The current picture as I have outlined for you presents a challenge and an opportunity to the democratic process. The challenge is to address the fundamental questions of trust raised by the premises on which Britain participated in a war, and the prosecution of our 'war on terror'. The opportunity is to harness the existing involvement in politics and social action and to combat apathy. To demonstrate that ordinary citizens can make a real difference through democratic participation.

This presents a challenge and opportunity for all political parties, including the Conservative Party. Indeed, the Conservative Party under its current leader has taken strident steps to be more inclusive which we must all applause. Eminent Muslims, who are at the height of their profession, are now leading

figures within this party. And I am heartened that British Muslims - along with other ethnic minorities - have been fast-tracked to 'A-list' parliamentary seats. My colleagues at the Conservative Muslim Forum tell me that Central Office is more amenable to Muslim concerns - concerns, as I have emphasised earlier - that are no different from our British values also. Values such as an emphasis on social justice.

I am heartened by the Party's renewed emphasis on this most urgent of issues. I am also heartened by Mr Cameron's assertion that his conservatism will be rather different from that emanating from the other side of the Atlantic. Britons everywhere will no doubt applaud a declaration that whilst there may be some value to have a self-interested alignment with the United States, it should not be at the detriment to the stability and harmony of the world community.

I would urge the Party to look towards the longstanding policy concerns of the British Muslim community. Issues that have affected the community include social exclusion, which exists at a high-level whereby, amongst Muslims, unemployment is three times higher than the population as a whole. It also includes Islamophobia, which manifests itself institutionally and through the political and cultural discourse of our country. It affects Muslims deeply, whether it be through violence directed at them; through discrimination in the workplace or through the provision of goods and services.

The Muslim Council of Britain is a non-partisan organisation that does not endorse any political parties. But we do have a duty to encourage greater political participation amongst Muslims, and in helping Muslims make informed choices. Last summer, after being elected Secretary-General, I met our many affiliates and visited several Muslim communities across the country. Wherever I went, it was quite clear that Muslims want to participate not just as Muslims, but as Britons wishing to be very much part of our nation's future.

This discussion we are having today, and the message that I pass to you from that exercise is simple. Muslims in the UK are Britons wanting to live as Britons and to make a positive contribution to Britain's future. Help us by celebrating the diversity we represent and do not see us or treat us as an obstacle to our collective progress.