

IQBAL SACRANIE'S SPEECH FOR MCBDirect LAUNCH ON 5 JULY 2003

*In the name of Allah the most kind and merciful
Assalamu-Alaikum - Peace & Greetings to you all*

Chair, Sister Sarah, Our Chief Guests Trevor Philips and the Home Office Minister Fiona MacTaggart, your Royal Highness Prince Turki, Your Excellencies and friends, it gives me immense pleasure to welcome you all this evening to the launch of MCBDirect, a unique and groundbreaking initiative aimed at providing better information about Islam and the Muslim community in Britain. Let me welcome in particular our guest speakers and friends - Trevor Philips, Chair of the CRE; and the newly appointed Home Office Minister Fiona MacTaggart who I know has made an extra effort to be with us today. Our thanks and appreciation for your presence.

We are deeply grateful and honoured of you have chosen to support this event and the work of the Muslim Council of Britain. As many of you will know, the Muslim Council of Britain is an umbrella organisation that serves and represents British Muslims. We currently have almost 400 affiliates ranging from Mosques and charities to Institutions and professional bodies. In the five years since our establishment we have witnessed a phenomenal growth in demand for our services, both from within and outside the Muslim community. MCBDirect represents our latest effort to build on our track record of providing vital services for the needs of the widest number of Muslims and non-Muslims who have a professional or personal interest in Islam and the Muslim community.

One of our service projects that is already underway is in the field of education. The MCB has also been heavily involved in creating ties with academics and educational institutions. The success of our community can only come through education, a vital part of Islam and one which we hope is, God willing, being advanced for all Britons, not just Muslims.

In our role as representative body our duty is to promote and protect the needs of the British Muslim community on a wide range of issues. To enable us to do that effectively we have worked hard to build working relationships with a range of decision-makers - in government, in statutory agencies, the media and elsewhere. One of our most recent and important successes in this effort has been to have the question on religion included in the recent Census. This has meant that for the first time, we had an authoritative figure on the numbers of British Muslims in the UK. We now number 1.6 million, a significant proportion of the population, and second only to Christians in terms of size as a faith community. In fact the number of Muslims in the UK is larger than all the other stated non-Christian religious groups, and that includes the Jedi Knights! Thus the responsibility on MCB and all of us is immense in terms of effectively dealing with the issues affecting not just Muslims but the wider society as a whole.

The religion question was a hard one success. In other areas the battles have proved to be even tougher. We continue to campaign vigorously for legislation against religious discrimination. Yes we now have legislation to protect against religious discrimination in employment but sadly it does not cover all other areas in the similar way as covered by the Race Discrimination legislation.

We believe this is an issue of human rights. Protection quite rightly exists against victimisation on the basis of ethnicity. But despite plenty of evidence of discrimination on the basis of faith the same right is not afforded to victims of Islamophobia. Furthermore, sections of the Muslim community also suffers from one of the highest rates of social exclusion. Government and other statutory bodies need to address these pressing issues sooner rather than later.

The Muslim Council of Britain has also done much to foster co-operation and understanding between different faith and ethnic groups as well as people with no particular faith. Britain is a multi-cultural country and Muslims are a multi-cultural community. In fact, Muslims constitute one of the most diverse faith groups in Britain contributing substantially both economically and socially. Traditionally, it was assumed that all or most Muslims in this country came from the Indian sub-continent (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). However, as the census demonstrates, a third of Muslims are of non-subcontinent ethnicity.

The diversity within the Muslim community is set to increase. This will have important implications as to how we view and cater for the needs of our community. There is much work to be done in this area and through the expertise of its affiliates the Muslim Council of Britain can bring a unique perspective and contribution to this issue.

Turning to the launch of MCBDirect this evening, you will be hearing from the Chair of our Research and Documentation Committee, Professor Aziz Sheikh, about the details of this project, but I would like to say that we, at the MCB, hope that God willing, this project is the face of things to come. MCBDirect demonstrates the

growing confidence of British Islam to function in society openly and professionally. Today we have Muslim MPS and peers (not enough of them of course), academics, doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, artists and teachers. We have vast human resources and God willing we shall grow and succeed even further so as to contribute in the fullest way possible to the life of our country as British Muslim and this is how Islam celebrates cultural diversity and pluralism.

The hallmark of the MCB is the dedication and commitment by a very large number of voluntary workers, ranging from judges and lawyers in the legal profession to Professors and consultants in the medical profession as well as Editors and Journalists and Scholars and Students. Basically across the spectrum of our nation there is a quest to serve the community. This is reflected in the 18 committees of the MCB who shadow every government department. Now it is about time that full time professional staff supports these committees.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank our friends and colleagues in the other faith communities who have helped build bridges of mutual understanding and co-operation through organisations like the Interfaith Network. There are also many in government and in our national institutions that have recognised the valuable contribution that faith communities make to our culture and society. Only last week the Government has set up a Steering Group consisting of Ministers from five departments along with a representative from each of the faith communities. One of the objectives is to consider the most effective means of achieving greater involvement of the faith communities in policy-making and delivery across Whitehall. This indeed is a welcoming development. As more and more people choose to identify themselves by faith it is imperative that we no longer play our role on the margins but now in the mainstream as full partners working towards the common good of all.

We hope that we can continue to work together and learn together for many years to come. Insha Allah, God Willing.

Before I conclude we must all appreciate the tremendous hard work that has been put in to organise this evenings function by the members of the Research and Documentation Committee of the MCB, led by its Chairman Prof. Aziz Sheikh and Secretary Dr Jamil Sheriff. I must mention three names in particular that of Sabira, Tahseen and Shabana for their total commitment and courage in handling the enormous thankless task of organising the event. I am sure they will be greatly relieved when it is all over and back to sanity. May Almighty reward them abundantly. Once again, I thank you all for your presence tonight and I hope that you will find this evening both enjoyable and informative.