

## **Secretary General's Speech at the launch of OSI report 'Muslims in the UK: policies for engaged citizens'**

22nd November 2004

This report expertly details where we are at present. But I would like to start with where we want to be in the future. In other words, with our vision of an inclusive society. One which is multi-faith as well as no faith and multi-cultural. One where no groups are left behind through disadvantage and discrimination. One which is vibrant and successful. If that's our ultimate aim, then today's OSI report highlights just how big the challenge is in turning this vision into reality.

The OSI deserve our thanks and appreciation for their detailed research and analysis. Their latest work adds to the growing body of evidence that points to shocking levels of disadvantage and discrimination endured by sections of Britain's Muslim community. Moreover, the findings chime with the picture we are getting from the Muslim community at the grass-roots. As a representative body of British Muslims the MCB is in regular contact with Muslim communities and organisations throughout the country. Just before Ramadan I was in Leicester. There I met over a dozen organisations. They all highlighted similar worries and fears around the themes highlighted by the report. These are the people at the sharp end of the statistics highlighted today. These are the people for whom disadvantage is a daily reality.

Of course, Muslims are not the only community that is suffering. Social exclusion knows no religious or ethnic boundaries. So tackling the problem will therefore require a combined effort. But the fact is the problem appears more acute for sections of the Muslim community. Moreover, these problems have to be appreciated in the wider context. Many Muslims already feel highly aggrieved at injustices abroad: in Palestine and Iraq. Hardly a day goes by when horrifying images appear on our screens which show how the innocent Palestinians and Iraqis are suffering from the military action carried out by the occupying forces. They also feel anxious at home: at the way some police forces are using the anti-terror powers for instance. On top of all that they are a community that suffers very real hardship. It is circumstances like these that breed despair and anger. We need to replace that with hope, understanding and confidence.

So, where do we go from here? Fortunately the report provides some of the answers. It combines rigorous analysis with realistic policy recommendations. It identifies policy levers necessary for generating and delivering change. We strongly urge the government to give these recommendations careful consideration.

Some of the signs emerging from government are indeed promising. It has made a serious attempt at tackling poverty and social exclusion - albeit rather quietly. But more needs to be done in tackling concentrations of deprivation amongst minority faith and ethnic communities. And after determined campaigning the government has promised to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief in the same way as on the grounds of race, gender and disability. For far too long one of the biggest injustices has been the hierarchy of rights in our legal system. This has caused many groups, including Muslims, to be treated effectively as second class citizens. So we applaud the Government's commitment to the equality agenda. Its proposals will make a huge and positive contribution to the lives and perceptions of many disadvantaged communities.

Building an inclusive society requires bridge-building that cannot be done by the government alone. It requires the Muslim community to pro-actively reach out and interact with the society around them. Later today I shall be at the launch of this year's Islam Awareness Week at the Globe Theatre. It is spearheaded by our affiliate, the Islamic Society of Britain. The theme this year is "Knowing your Muslim Neighbour". Cities all over Britain will participate by opening up their mosques, their community centres, their homes and above all their hearts in order to build friendships, trust and respect. This will also serve to highlight the positive contribution many Muslims are making to British society.

Other Muslim organisations are also playing a positive role. Some of our mosques have come under much criticism lately. But the East London Mosque, which sits in the heart of one of Britain's biggest and most deprived Muslims communities, is a beacon of good practice. It has highlighted how mosques can have a positive social impact beyond the spiritual. By working with the local education authority and parents, the East London Mosque has helped significantly reduce truancy rates in Tower Hamlets. Thus improving the chances of Tower Hamlets pupils receiving a good education. Practical initiatives like these deserve recognition and support. Muslims, like other minority faith communities, are seeking accommodation of their needs, in trying to make this country - their home - more homely. In doing so they are challenging the status quo. This is uncomfortable for some but it need not be so. Religion has a rich tradition in playing a role in public life in this country. This makes it easier for Muslims to participate, contribute and make the case for the recognition of their needs.

So, to make real and lasting progress we need to ensure that government and community organisations work together. We must ensure that we have the right mix of legislation where it is needed, money where it is required and partnership where it is effective. Only then can we really be on course of realising our vision of an inclusive and successful multi-faith and multi-ethnic society. I hope that this report brings us a step closer to that vision. Finally, I would like once again to thank the authors for the excellent report.