

SECRETARY GENERAL'S ADDRESS AT RECEPTION FOR PRIME MINISTER

Welcome Speech by Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General Muslim Council of Britain, at a Muslim reception in honour of The Rt Hon Tony Blair, Prime Minister, London, 5 May 1999.

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

All praise and thanks are due to God, the Lord and Sustainer of all the worlds. We seek His help and forgiveness and on Him we depend. And may peace and blessings be on His noble messenger, Muhammad.

Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, Ministers of Her Majesty's Government, Members of the Houses of Parliament, Respected 'Ulama, leaders of the faith communities and distinguished guests.

On behalf of The Muslim Council of Britain I extend a very warm welcome to all of you and, on behalf of all of us, I extend the most sincere and cordial welcome to the Prime Minister.

Today is an important day not only for the Muslim community but, we believe, for the entire nation.

Prime Minister, you are the first Prime Minister to have honoured the British Muslim community by accepting to be the guest of honour at their Reception.

May I at the very outset publicly reciprocate your most kind and thoughtful greetings that you extended, again for the first time by any British Prime Minister, on the occasion of the last Eid.

We were especially moved by your vision of Britain being a Commonwealth of faiths which made Britain an ideal place for civilisations to meet and to pro-exist and to enrich each other. This is far from the notion of civilisations existing only in clash and conflict.

Islam celebrates cultural diversity and pluralism, as the verses from the Qur'an recited at the beginning show.

And this gathering together with representatives of various faiths and political persuasions is an expression of the richness and colour of our British spectrum.

Some fringe elements may, though, wish to tarnish this spectrum by their expressions of hate and violence.

What motivates them, I do not know.

But one thing is certain that we are all united in rejecting their criminal behaviour.

Prime Minister, Home Secretary, Sir Paul Condon - all of us in this room stand four-square behind your efforts at rooting out these agents of hate.

Let us not be distracted by the acts of a very few from the fringe, but keep our march towards building a just and equal society.

And, today's gathering shows that, God Willing, we can succeed.

Before we dwell on other matters, we must extend to you our most sincere thanks for the bold initiative you have taken in support of the beleaguered people of Kosova in their darkest hour.

And we agree with you that the refugees must be housed such that their return is easier when the conflict is over. However, the community is ready and willing to extend every possible assistance to welcome those who may be coming here.

Dispersing them far and wide and removing them, away from their physical and cultural roots, would amount to unwitting collaboration with those who are engaged in ethnic cleansing and who want a Kosovar-free Kosova to occupy and to colonise.

For, we are all painfully aware that once a refugee always a refugee. But this should not be allowed to happen anymore. The expelled and uprooted Kosovan people should be kept as close to their homeland as possible.

Of course, those hosting them deserve the gratitude of all humanity. It is also our duty to help those countries with the necessary means and resources so that they are able to look after the expelled Kosovan people, and so that they do not become a burden on their hosts.

We earnestly hope that the Kosovan people would be returning soon to their homes.

We are aware that most of the Kosovar Albanians have welcomed the action by Nato to protect them and to degrade the oppressive machine of the Belgrade regime, even though they continue to pay a terrible price.

But they also have a terrible fear.

That, in the name of diplomacy and realpolitik, a deal will be struck with Milosevic as it was done at Dayton; that genocide will be legitimised; that they will forever be excluded from their homeland; that their freedom and their rights will be sacrificed in order to appease the aggressor.

Prime Minister, let me say it very frankly that we have more faith in your words than some other leaders of the Alliance. We, therefore, believe that the Kosovan people must return to their country; that the Yugoslav forces must leave Kosova and that the Kosovan people are given back their autonomy and their freedom.

We don't, however, feel comfortable about the idea of a protectorate, in other words the Kosovan people being made wards of an impersonal international bureaucracy.

It is both fair and reasonable that the vacation of Serb aggression and the empowerment of Kosovan self-rule should happen simultaneously and, instead of a prolonged policing by some multinational forces, the people themselves should be enabled to keep internal order and maintain security. It would be more efficient as well as cost effective.

Lastly, on the question of Kosova, we are sure you are aware that while there is general consensus on the objectives of the Nato operation, there is concern that coming as it did outside the normal and established UN system, it presented problems of international legality. But while the time is past for going into legal arguments, we very much hope this is not going to become a precedent in international order. The UN system is problematic enough, but we believe the United Nations should not be allowed to meet the same fate as the League of Nations.

Prime Minister, let me say again how greatly we appreciate the courageous, moral and humanitarian stand you have taken on the question of Kosova and we hope that such stand is going to inform other areas of our foreign policy; for example, Palestine, Jammu and Kashmir and the continuing suffering of the civilian population of Iraq.

Coming home, Prime Minister, one must speak of the fresh breeze beginning to blow in the country.

While the Muslim Council of Britain does not take a party political position, we have to acknowledge and we appreciate the many measures that the New Labour government has initiated to include Muslims in the life of the country.

In two years, we have seen the first Muslim appointments to the House of Lords; to hospital and prison chaplaincies; and greater consultation with government departments on a range of issues of community, national and international interest, including redemption of the debt of the world's poorest countries. We are also pleased at the contribution of the two Muslim working peers to the work of the upper house.

We cannot also forget the long-awaited approval of Grant Maintained Muslim schools. We see it as an important beginning.

All these denote a positive change in the culture of the government and its relationship with the Muslim community.

This government has delivered on key promises, and given hope and confidence that the days of obfuscation, delay, and procrastination are over. But there is still much work to be done.

As you know, it is still - quite bizarrely - not unlawful in Britain to discriminate against Muslims on religious grounds. Members of the Jewish and Sikh communities are fortunate that they enjoy some protection under the race laws.

Religious discrimination is real. It happens. And worse is vilification of religious sanctities. And it hurts. A law against religious discrimination and religious vilification may not eliminate the problem. But it would be a clear statement of policy of what is not acceptable in a civilised society.

Another important matter that needs the government's attention is on the question on religious affiliation in the 2001 Census.

In principle, the question has been agreed and will be included in the census everywhere except - mysteriously - Scotland. On this historic day for Scotland, we ask the government to remove this oversight.

The census question is an important one. It will allow planners to allocate resources according to needs of the society. It is, therefore, necessary that parliamentary time is allocated for the necessary amendment to the existing law.

Such a census will give policy-makers hard data on the many unfortunate realities of Britain's Muslim community: the high rates of educational underachievement, the crippling levels of unemployment, and the suffocating social exclusion.

These are issues, which, Prime Minister, we know are close to your heart. The census question on religious affiliation is ultimately a means to an end. It is not an end in itself.

Of the many changes that this government has brought in, we particularly welcome the emphasis on basic numeracy and literacy, and lifelong learning. While undoubtedly good for the whole of the country, they are particularly relevant to Muslims in Britain. The Muslim Council of Britain will participate fully in the National Grid for Learning and endeavour to create space for its affiliates to contribute appropriate content for the Grid.

We have here this evening with us distinguished scientists, academics, businessmen, industrialists, lawyers, professionals, physicians and surgeons, sportsmen, religious scholars, teachers and educationists, writers, authors, broadcasters, journalists, information scientists, painters, artists, mayors, councillors and political party members, students, youth and community leaders and workers.

Some of our senior members who could not be with us today such as those who are participating in the local elections tomorrow, including Mr Bashir Maan in Glasgow, the first Muslim councillor in Britain and one of the founding members of the MCB. He sends his greetings. Also from Prince Naseem Hamed and many others.

The MCB's goal is to work together for the common good of society as a whole. We hope and pray that the Muslim community in being true and being helped to be true to its ethos will be an asset and a source of strength to our country. MCB is Muslim Council for Britain. It is also Muslims for Britain.

May I once again welcome and thank the Prime Minister for being here with us this evening. And to you all our distinguished guests, friends and colleagues.