

Welcome Speech by Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General Muslim Council of Britain, at a reception in honour of Mr Peter Hain MP, Minister of State for Foreign Office and Commonwealth Affairs, London, 4 November 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.

Ministers of Her Majesty's Government, Excellencies, 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 Peter Hain to this Reception tonight.

Peter, as you'll know, replaces the late Derek Fatchett, the minister with responsibility for Africa and the Middle East, who sadly passed away early this year.

Derek was a good friend. He was also an innovative minister. He opened doors that previously we never knew existed. He was always willing to listen to and act upon our concerns.

But perhaps, most importantly, he recognised that British Muslims have also a role in formulation of policy as well as promotion of our country's external relations.

It was a recognition that we, too, can help open doors which are too heavy for governments to open on their own; that there exists something called 'British Muslim diplomacy', which can help better both trade and political relations between Britain and the Muslim world.

Derek Fatchett's demise was a great loss. However, what is indeed so reassuring is the arrival of Peter Hain in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

His is an inspired choice for a Foreign Office Minister.

Don't be misled by the ministerial car, red box, and tie. Many of us remember him in altogether different circumstances as a veteran of the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa.

Forgive my choice of example. But we regard you, Peter, in Margaret Thatcher's immortal words, as 'one of us'.

That particular struggle in South Africa is over.

And South Africans are now engaged in a different struggle: to build what has been described as a rainbow nation of black and white, coloureds and non-coloureds and serve as an example not only to the African continent but also to many outside Africa who are still struggling with newer injustices and newer kinds of exclusion and apartheid.

No doubt, Peter, you'll have a full in-tray of issues. But talking about injustice and apartheid, let me pull out just four: Chechnya, Iraq, Jerusalem and Palestine, and Jammu and Kashmir.

Words cannot describe the killings, the carnage, the destruction and the vicious ethnic cleansing which is going on in the North Caucasian republic of Chechnya. Only yesterday's *Independent* pointed out in its leading article and I quote:

'A Large number of civilians have been killed. A third of population have fled their homes, many are trapped inside Chechnya unable to escape. And still the onslaught continues. This is the terrible reality that is daily ignored by the West.'

The world's silence is as deafening as it is puzzling.

We are not asking Nato to rain missiles over Yeltsin's Russia as it did over Milosevic's Yugoslavia. Frankly, after Mr Yeltsin's copycat invasion of Chechnya, one is not so sure whether it's wise to give an open general licence to anyone to impose its unilateral and interventionist solutions.

We are in no doubt, however, that it is very much possible to obtain a civilised solution of international disputes, based on justice and respect for the people's freedom and for their fundamental human rights. However, it is important that the international community doesn't send any wrong signals to the Stalins of today. They may feel encouraged by the enmity and double standards that often seem to inform the policies of some members of the world community.

I mentioned earlier three other issues, Iraq, Jerusalem and Palestine, and Jammu and Kashmir. The idea is only to underscore the deep concern in the community on these questions and not to go into their substance because, I am sure, you are better informed about them than probably most of us here.

Nevertheless, it may be useful to point out that each of these questions provides a telling picture of the world order we live in today.

In Jerusalem and Palestine, the aim is to override international legitimacy and UN resolutions and to press the weak party to make unfair compromises, compromises which we fear may not stand the test of time.

In Jammu and Kashmir, we do not even want to know that the UN is committed to holding a plebiscite and let the people choose between India and Pakistan.

Iraq, on the other hand, is an example where the UN has been too willing to pass any number of resolutions in order, ostensibly, to punish the regime but actually inflicting untold and unending miseries upon the people.

However, Chechnya seems to be a newer defining event in the world order.

The justification of the invasion of Chechnya is sought in the two cases of criminal bombings that recently took place in Moscow, while the fact is that according to many analysts in Russia and abroad, these acts of terrorism had most probably been masterminded by Russia's own dirty tricks department. This was to divert public attention from corruption in high places in the Kremlin and to help the 'Conqueror of Chechnya', Vladimir Putin, win the presidential election early next year. Yet, even if some mad Chechens had been responsible for those cowardly attacks, these cannot be used to justify Russian state terrorism against the entire Chechen population.

There seems method in this madness! The madness has its roots in Islamophobia which has been given respectability by experts like Samuel Huntington. The oracle tells of a necessary clash between the Islamic and Western civilisations; then others try to make sure that the prophecy of doom is proved true.

May I say in parenthesis that this idea of dividing the world between Islam and the West or the West and the Rest is not just simply jingoistic, but it is also untrue. Muslims are as much an inseparable part of the West as the West is so intricately interfaced with the world of Islam. It's not a question of the twain not being able to meet, it is a question of the twain not being able to separate from each other.

However, we are sure that idea of clash and contrariness is not what Tony Blair, Robin Cook and you, Peter, take seriously, but here we are not dealing with a mere theory. We have to make sure that the theory does not cloud the objectivity of relationship between Britain, Europe, America and the Muslim world. We know that after all it was a mere theory, the Nazi theory of Aryan superiority that had led to the Second World War and one of the worst bloodshed in human history.

Unfortunately, it is otherwise very difficult to explain many events and policies except in the backdrop of artificial and orchestrated anti-Muslimism of the post-Cold War decade.

There are times when one begins to think that Islamophobia was beginning to taper off, only suddenly to be jolted by the discovery that even serious writers like Lord Rees Mogg are so easily willing to buy the 'Forecasts of worldwide conflict on the Islamic fault lines.' (*The Times*, 20th September 1999)

So we believe that here is a root-situation in which Britain can, and should, play a leading role.

Why Britain?

Because it is our country and, we believe, it is eminently placed to play a great and positive role in helping to correct the many wrongs in contemporary world order.

Britain also has the goodwill and resources needed to play this role. The colonial period was certainly not a period of which one can be too proud, but if you consider the record of all the other colonial powers of the past two centuries, you might describe Britain as 'gentlemen' colonialist. This was a period of extreme interface between the Empire and the Muslim world. Now that we have come out of it - thankfully and gracefully - we can file and forget the negatives and build and work on the positives. Therein lie the hope and opportunities of the future.

As we have often said, Muslims have a vested interest in Britain being a respected world power. We, therefore, believe that instead of frittering away the goodwill that was generated in the wake of decolonisation, we need to build on our common resources which are available neither to Europe nor even to the United States.

This is also, we believe, the answer to the vexed question about British political identity. A province of Europe or the 51st state of America?

We are neither Eurosceptics nor do we subscribe to any ideology of anti-Americanism. We subscribe to the uniqueness and greatness of this Island connected with Europe, America and the Islamic world, but playing an independent and ethical role of its own.

This is not just a role, it is a challenge and the challenge has to be seized.

Let me conclude by saying before I hand over to you, Peter, that the main objective of this meeting is not to raise any demands but to share our thoughts and concerns as a contribution to the making of an ethical foreign policy. I hope you will find this feedback from the ground as useful as you get from the experts. I don't know whether all this eases your burden or makes it more onerous.

Peter Hain!