

RECEPTION FOR RT HON WILLIAM HAGUE MP
AT THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTRE, LONDON ON TUESDAY 20th MARCH 2001

SPEECH DELIVERED BY SG YOUSUF BHAILOK

Rt Hon Mr Hague, My Lords and Distinguished guests and friends - Assalaamu 'alaikum.

It's our particular pleasure to welcome you to the Islamic Cultural Centre - Regents Park Mosque. Since it was built, this mosque has become a familiar, imposing feature of the London skyline. And like most things based in London it's become a symbol - a symbol of the presence of Muslims in Britain as a whole.

Regents Park Mosque is one of our finest examples. It's a starting point for getting to know the many other mosques in London and the hundreds more across the length and breadth of Britain.

As I was coming down on the train from Preston earlier today, it occurred to me there are similarities between Regents Park and the MCB. The MCB certainly aims to be a fixture on the British landscape - though, for modesty's sake, not too imposing. Definitely, we want to be an effective symbol of Muslim participation in the mainstream of British life. By fostering the means of knowing one another better we want the MCB to harness the capabilities of Muslims

"To serve the common good".

Looking at the big picture, you can read the development of the Muslim community through our mosques. They're the focus and heart of our community. Most began in very modest circumstances - many were converted houses in small side street. For most Muslims joining together to open a mosque was their first communal engagement with British society. It was quite a learning curve. Experiences varied from place to place. The process was not always easy, sometimes even acrimonious. But opening their first mosques provided the backbone and basic fabric of the Muslim community.

As communities matured, the mosques redeveloped. From small converted buildings, to purpose built, sometimes grand, religious and community centres. And a maturing community soon finds it needs to extend the ways it engages with the mainstream of British society. It must find additional means to meet its needs, address its problems and make itself better understood. The MCB is product of that process, a Service and representative body. We always say the MCB's an "umbrella" organisation, what that means is our affiliates are everywhere. Our greatest strength is being an organisation composed of organisations, and they operate across the length and breadth of the country. Through our structure we aim to provide a focus for all British Muslims to work more closely together, to learn from each other's' experience and apply best practice more effectively to serve the common good, for Muslims and indeed Britain as a whole.

To serve the common good means we're founded on shared basic principles - we're a democratic, regularly elected, representative organisation. The desire to enhance civil society is what brought our affiliate organisations into existence in the first place. Serving the common good isn't just a slogan, it's the most basic Islamic precept, one we're specifically taught to pursue through mutual tolerance and dialogue, equal opportunity, equal treatment and equal responsibility.

In the last year we've seen how shared values, common concern for family values, has produced close co-operation between the MCB and the Conservative Party on some important political initiatives. (Baroness Young and I have worked very close on several issues.)

I'm delighted to say, in my first year as Secretary General, I, along with many of our members, have had a series of meetings with representatives of the Conservative Party. This is our third meeting. It follows close on the heels of a most constructive round table discussion with some of your front bench spokesmen, policy advisors and officials, so kindly hosted by Baroness Young.

In these meetings we've made our introductions, we've broken the ice, so like the development of mosques and community organisations, now it's time to mature the relationship. Our consultation document, Electing to Listen, is part of the maturing process. It puts forward our perception and ideas of the common good. Electing to listen is the first draft. The next stage is electing to engage, beginning serious discussions on specific agenda items that inform policy and programme action. The objective is electing to get something done.

As one bluff Lancashire lad to a doughty Yorkshireman, I don't have to tell you that words matter. They're potent and unleash powerful effects. In an age dominated by sound bites and catch phrases - words stick in people's

minds. So, I have to tell you when we look into the future of Britain we don't see a foreign country, we see our home, the country in which we've invested our lives, our best hopes and endeavours. A country where, we know, there are some who are ready to identify us as a foreign element at the least provocation.

Racial tensions, religious, as well as ethnic prejudice and discrimination deforms any society, because it deforms the proper, legitimate life chances and dignity of those who suffer it. It demeans and diminishes those who practice it, for whatever motive. We welcome the undertaking you signed along with representatives of all political parties committing yourself and your party not to enflame or countenance racism in the forthcoming general election. Prejudice simply doesn't need the oxygen of careless political rhetoric.

Politicians have a duty and responsibility to lead. I call it the task of promoting joined up thinking, making connections that help people take a balanced, informed view of issues and choices. There's a much bigger picture beyond the emotive slogans, headlines and political speechifying about asylum seekers and immigration. It calls for a conscientious and consistent message from political leaders. We can certainly agree dealing with an increase in sheer human need and desperation is no easy matter. It calls for cool heads, integrity and calm efficiency. Out on the streets people don't stop to ask who's an asylum seeker, a new immigrant or a third generation born and bred Briton. Simplistic rhetoric breeds simplistic knee jerk responses.

The issues of asylum and immigration are matters of principle, tests of the quality of our compassion, the principled reasons that led us to sign on to our international obligations. Fundamental values are the basis of our obligations, willingly undertaken, to genuine asylum seekers and immigrants. These values have a special place in our hearts because, you should be aware, the very first Muslim community, the Blessed Prophet's community in Medina, came into being because the residents of that city welcomed the Prophet and his followers when they were asylum seekers and immigrants.

Britain as we know it - is itself the product of successive waves of migration. The process has been continuous. Migrants have contributed enormously to the economic, social and cultural life of Britain.

No section of the community can be more emotionally committed to realising a better future than the children of migrants. As soon as we were conscious we were taught the ethics and values of civil society, because they were essential lifelines for new communities anxious and struggling to build a better life in their new home. We breathed in the essential value of distributive justice - fair opportunity, a proper reward and share for effort - because that was the hope that brought us here and without them those hopes can't be fulfilled.

As an organisation we passionately believe in the future of Britain, a Britain that looks and sounds like all its people. When we look we see there are Muslim businessmen, academics, professionals, civil servants, and now politicians, well one MP, one MEP, three members of the House of Lords and many more local councillors. This is a major change. All of these Muslims are making their mark, adding to the quality of British life. They're proof we've crossed a threshold.

But the few examples also show how far we still have to go, to make aspirations real opportunity for all. Our desire is the long held ambition of British society as a whole, to see a real representative democracy, inclusive and drawing on the abilities of all its people. A nation that nurtures, develops and values all its citizens. We have a duty in ensuring all British citizens have the best chance to succeed in life.

British Muslims are mostly concentrated in urban centres. Disproportionately they live in areas blighted by neglect: the decline of old traditional industries, the run down of the physical and social fabric, failing housing stock, bad or struggling schools, poor health provision and decaying public transport. Areas where poverty hampers their prospects for the future.

In all these inner city areas you'll find Muslim organisations, our affiliates, working to remedy the problems. They run homework and weekend classes, covering basic as well as religious education. They provide social welfare services over a wide range of the special needs they intimately understand, because they're part and parcel of the community. They provide youth counselling to make youngsters proud of their heritage and conscious of their duty to civil society, they're engaged in the battle against drugs. They run housing associations that not only cater for Islamic precepts but also provide a more practical and affordable opportunity for poor people to get a better home.

Muslim organisations do this work from their own convictions and largely from their own resources. We welcome the cross party support given to the inclusion of faith groups as a vital element in urban regeneration. We particularly welcome your party's proposals for the lifting of funding restrictions for all faith based voluntary organisations.

We want to make it easier for Muslims to work with the mainstream to tackle the real problems in our community. We want to build cooperation. Muslim organisations would welcome training to increase their skills in serving their community. Muslim organisations, in their turn, have the knowledge, to help public bodies more effectively fulfil their task. Co-operation, common endeavour for publicly set goals should be the future, a home with room for all willing hands, minds and convictions.

There's nothing different in the hopes Muslim have for their greatest trust, the welfare of our young people. Urban blight is no respecter of race, creed or colour. But when it comes compounded by overt or covert religious prejudice and discrimination, when it operates in pockets of increasing disadvantage, it creates an extra burden of frustration and disaffection. When we see young people who feel hopeless, aimless, who think they're not valued or wanted before they've even begun facing life's challenges, we see what we'd call "*zulm*" - an injustice, a waste of God given, most precious, human potential.

As a nation we have an ageing population, a population who'll be increasingly reliant on the enterprise and skills of the younger generation.

The Muslim community does not reflect the national trend. Our community has a different age profile, its disproportionately young. Nurturing the talents of our young people, ensuring they get better skills training, education and employment opportunities is common sense.

Addressing the needs of the young generation is not only a question of resources. We want our young people to be creative, enterprising, to be innovative and in the mainstream of new ideas, confident people with wide horizons. To do that they must feel valued, as who they are, with their own identity and values both welcomed and encouraged. That's why the MCB campaigns, and will continue to campaign, tirelessly for legislation to ban any and all forms of religious discrimination. Its more than a symbolic objective. It's a cruel, malicious problem that must be swept out of our nation's life because it targets the identity that gives people their most basic sense of self, of being and belonging, as citizens here in Britain.

You cannot always change attitudes with laws. But you can effectively signpost the roads into the future. We can send the most potent message, in clear language, that our future is to be pursued with mutual respect, mutual tolerance. We can and must say the common future, for the common good guarantees all Britons their most basic identity; together from our diversity we can make a better tomorrow for everyone. The best of British has place for us all.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Thank you very much.