

**Trade Union Congress
Speech on 11 September 2006
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MCB Secretary General**

CHECK WITH DELIVERY

Chair, Colleagues, Friends

I would like to begin by thanking Brendan Barber and the General Council of the TUC for their kind invitation to address this year's conference. On behalf of the Muslim Council of Britain I would like to record our appreciation of the TUC's initiative in establishing our relationship, initially through Brendan's visit to the London Muslim Centre and subsequently holding a TUC meeting there in February this year.

I take particular pleasure in addressing my fellow trade unionists as I too am a member of the ATL, Association of Teachers and Lecturers – part of the TUC fraternity.

Today is a historic occasion as you are aware of the Joint Statement by the TUC and the MCB. We have both pledged to work together on issues of common interest and concern. The MCB brings together over 400 institutions and organisations across Britain, all representing members of the Islamic community. The MCB's primary aim is to work for the common good of all. It seeks the eradication of disadvantage and discrimination and the fostering of improved community relations in our society.

There is a shared belief by both the MCB and TUC in justice, equality and opposition to prejudice. We both believe that it is in the interests

of the workers to join the appropriate trade union at their workplace and that employers should recognise such unions.

We do not underestimate the scale of the challenges facing us today.

The TUC report 'Poverty, Exclusion and British people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Origin' published last year demonstrated that many people from substantial parts of the Muslim community suffer massive disadvantage and discrimination: sixty nine percent are classified as poor compared with twenty two percent of the country as a whole. Overall British Muslims are three times more likely to be unemployed than the population as a whole. Just last week, a report by the Equal Opportunities Commission indicated that though young Muslim women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent are doing very well at school, they are still faced by a glass ceiling in career progression at the work place.

Further, the spectre of Islamophobia is a real and present threat, fuelled by misunderstandings, prejudice and the stereotyping of whole communities. The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia acknowledges that there is no single report prepared by them that does not mention the media and its role in perpetuating racist and negative stereotypes. The Centre's director, Beate Winkler, has argued for more diversity training in the media industry to ensure both good journalism and more effective implementation of the industry's self regulatory codes of conduct. The intent is to develop a better understanding of issues relating to race, religion and culture and to reflect this in the media's output.

We similarly seek to work in partnership with the TUC and through its networks to enhance awareness of Islam and to counter widespread

misunderstandings of how the religion relates to modern society. At the same time we will also be using our own networks to raise awareness within the Muslim community of the values of union membership and the very important role which unions play in seeking justice and fair treatment in the workplace and in wider society. Thus the common objectives of TUC and the Muslim community fit together in pursuit of equality and fairplay.

I would like to briefly discuss the issue of extremism and security. On the 5th anniversary of 9/11 we remember the sad loss of innocent lives on that day.

The MCB has all along made it clear that “extremists” and “radicals” are in no way sanctioned by the Muslim community. However, it is also clear that the government is in a state of denial of the effect that its policies, domestic as well as foreign, have had in adding fuel to the fire and bringing about a society with heightened levels of mistrust, fear and frustration. We reiterate our call to the government to initiate an independent public inquiry into the events of July 7th 2005 to reveal the exact reasons behind the atrocities, and indeed how the atrocities themselves came to pass. This needs to be addressed for the benefit of our whole society. The MCB has been and continues to be committed to work with the government and other organisations on this.

We believe in unity in our diversity, for diversity in humanity is the message of Islam. Contrary to assertions that religions have been used to foster hatred and sow destruction, the essential message in the Quran is the unity of humankind and its potential as a positive force for harmony and cooperation. Rather than regarding diversity as a source of inevitable tensions, the Qur’an states that human variety is

indispensable when defining common beliefs, values and traditions in community life:

“O human kind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.” (Quran 49:14)

Imagine a multi-coloured flower garden and compare it to a monochromatic flower garden, which will people prefer? I believe that both the TUC fraternity and the Muslim community value the essential unity of the human race in its diversity. By diversity however we certainly do not mean isolation, segregation or insularity for that surely defeats the whole purpose of diversity.

It is in this spirit that I would like to reiterate our determination to work in partnership with the TUC to bring greater awareness of the problems faced by Muslim workers in the workplace as well as in being members of British society. The MCB believes that the only way to address the manifold problems faced by Muslims in Britain is to engage in the political process and to work closely in partnership and in solidarity with all organisations which have an interest in promoting social justice and equal rights for all, as the TUC undoubtedly does. We must create a more participatory economic and social environment whereby all communities can become genuine stakeholders. It is thus, political engagement, participation in the democratic process and creating solidarity with all likeminded organisations, that the MCB and the Muslim community believes to be the true way forward if we are to meet these challenges and promote equality of opportunity for all in this multi-cultural society of ours.

I thank you all for giving me the privilege of addressing you. Unlike the PM, this is not my last TUC Congress – I hope to be with you on many occasions in the future. Thank you.