

THE WAY FORWARD

Keynote address by MCB Secretary General Iqbal Sacranie delivered at the conference 'The Demographic Profile of Britain's Muslim Community: Charting a research agenda' on 26 September, 2002

I would like to thank you all: speakers, workshop facilitators, delegates and organisers alike, for taking part in this unique one-day conference. We are fortunate to have been able to bring together so many individuals and organisations who have an interest in Britain's Muslim community.

We have been privileged to have had the insight of leading academics in this field, as well as contributions from the Office of National Statistics, providing us with a starting point from which we can assess the forthcoming Census data. It has been made clear by many of the previous speakers that we currently have a very limited understanding of the demographic profile of the Muslim community in Britain. This is due to our heavy reliance on the Pakistani/Bangladeshi ethnic categorisation in order to extrapolate the data to cover Muslims of every nationality. I am sure that the new information available to us through the publication of the Census 2001 figures, for the first time including an optional question on religion, will prove to be invaluable. This new information will help to fill many of the gaps that have been identified today, as well as providing new opportunities in the future for British Muslims and the wider community to engage in fruitful debate.

Today we have focussed our energies on the areas of education, health and social exclusion. These topics have a profound and long-term impact on the well-being of any community. Previous studies and debates have identified the problems experienced by various communities along ethnic and racial lines. However, very little solid information has been available in respect of the British Muslim community, which has its own particular needs and characteristics, transcending ethnic and racial boundaries. Whenever ethnic criteria are used in drawing out trends and phenomena we find that Muslims become lost in the figures and the conclusions drawn are skewed in favour of the majority in any given ethnic group. However, on looking at an issue which affects the Muslim community in particular, it becomes readily apparent that ethnicity based data is misleading and in many cases hugely detrimental to the Muslim community. Particular issues faced by Muslims are not identified or the true extent to which those issues arise is not properly investigated.

When Muslims first began arriving in the UK the debate on immigration was literally "black and white" - Muslims were labelled under the black category and that was all anyone needed or wanted to know. However, as the agenda and debate has moved forward, the issue of race has become much more sophisticated, and through this, it has become clear that although race is part of the wider picture, it does not give a complete understanding of all communities. For example, when looking at levels of academic success, the Asian community is perceived as performing better than other ethnic groups. It could then mistakenly be assumed that all Asian Muslims must also perform well academically. However, this is where the problem of generic racial categorisation leads to errors in studying trends within the Muslim community, a community which transcends racial boundaries. When you break down the Asian category into Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, it becomes clear that nationalities which are predominantly Muslim, i.e. Pakistani and Bangladeshi, are faring far worse, academically, than their Indian and predominantly Hindu counterparts. Another example is in the case of the growing numbers of African Muslims in the UK who have been lost in the overall afro-Caribbean racial categorisation. These African Muslims have many needs, which are far different and often diametrically opposed to their non-Muslim Caribbean counterparts, needs which are more similar to those of Asian and Arab Muslims. As for White Muslims, according to the racial categorisation they do not even exist, since there seems to be a huge misconception that being Muslim requires an element of colour! (Unless of course you're Irish) One last example of this inaccuracy in perceptions comes more recently in the riots involving Asian Muslims in Bradford, which have raised uncomfortable questions for British Muslims. It seems that they have integrated less successfully than non-Muslim Asians in the UK.

It is clear that ethnicity is a very blunt tool with which to analyse and address these issues. The danger is that if these issues are never identified in the first place because of the straitjacket of racial categorisation, then in any community, a feeling of being ignored or lost in the political system, will allow resentment and extremism to flourish.

As the Muslim community in Britain has settled and grown, it has developed a more confident religious identity. New issues and challenges have arisen which call for a rethink both within the Muslim community, as to how it interacts with the community at large, and also within the wider community as to the true meaning of a plural society and citizenship. This is not to say that Muslims are a new and radically different category to any other minority. Ironically it is by recognising its religious needs and practising its religious obligations that the Muslim community has stamped its presence in the UK as true citizens rather than transitory immigrants on their way back "home". When a community publicly vocalises something as precious as its religious way of life, it is saying that it is ready to share its experience with the wider non-Muslim community. Muslims can also benefit and learn

from the experience of those minorities which have struggled before and continue to struggle, because there is always a common strand which runs through all minority communities striving for recognition and equality. There is much potential for all minority communities to build links and develop strategies to achieve common goals.

We, at the Muslim Council of Britain, have, ever since our inception, campaigned for the question on religion to be included in the Census, so that the true figures relating to the number of British Muslims would become clear. Until now it has been a bit of a "hit and miss" affair when trying to assess something as simple as the number of British Muslims, let alone anything more complex. In any debate about British Muslims, widely varying figures have been quoted by all sides, from half a million to 2 million, as no accurate figures are available. Even with the figures from the Census 2001 the figures will not be truly accurate since the question on religion was optional and many Muslims may not have wished to volunteer such information. At the very least, however, we will have a base figure with which to start and the true work can begin.

The MCB hopes that today's event demonstrates the need for the question on religion in the Census to be made mandatory in order to achieve integrity within the data obtained. This conference is also the beginning of a more wide-ranging and long-term project to set the standard for future research and policy making at all levels in the UK. The data obtained from the Census 2001 will form the basis of research into the Muslim community for years to come and will have a tangible effect on all policy makers and implementers from local to national level. It is our hope that just as there are numerous and ongoing studies and surveys into every issue concerning ethnic minority communities, there will eventually be the same plethora of information available on British Muslims. The Muslim Council of Britain wishes to identify and implement practical ways in which those wishing to work in this field can get involved and contribute to the ongoing debate. We welcome all contributions to the work of our various committees who organise conferences and put out publications on issues relating to British Muslims. We would like to establish collaborative research bids with academic institutions and other bodies involved in studying the impact of existing and future policies on particular communities. We believe that the only way to do this is in an open constructive dialogue with others who wish to enhance our understanding of British Muslims.

There is also much work to be done within the Muslim community itself. The Census will enable the Muslim community to learn more about its own ethnic diversity, socio-economic breakdown, age demographic etc. The Muslim community will have hard facts and figures with which to back up its arguments, allowing for evidence-based advocacy rather than guesswork in order, not only to meet the needs of its members, but also to promote its needs within the wider community. We can also identify and promote the depth of talent which exists and is yet untapped within the British Muslim community. More and more Muslim youngsters are attending university, more and more are entering professions which benefit the whole community, making our presence a reality rather than a mere token.

I think we must all agree that only when a community is recognised at all levels of society, through inclusion and participation, can true plurality be achieved.