

All praise and thanks are due to Allah, the Creator and Sustainer of all. We put our faith and trust in Him and seek His help, guidance and forgiveness, and May His peace and blessings be on our noble Prophet Muhammad.

Assalamo-alaykum

Secretary-General's Introduction to the 2002 Annual Report.

This has undoubtedly been one of the most testing years for British Muslims – and indeed for Muslims everywhere. Only weeks after last years AGM discussed concerns about the potential for civil unrest in our Northern towns, parts of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham burst into flames in some of the worst race-based disturbances this country has seen. Then, just as we were settling back into the normal pace of things, the terrorist outrages of September 11th heralded our biggest challenge yet as Muslims, especially in the West, braced themselves against recrimination for acts they had nothing to do with.

Twelve months on, hedged between one war in Afghanistan, and then impending war on Iraq, we take time to join our Palestinian brothers and sisters who bereave for the martyrs of Jenin, Ramallah, Bethlehem and other Palestinian towns and villages. Also of great concern is the communal situation in Gujarat India where hundreds if not thousands of innocent Muslims have been systematically killed by Hindu extremists and fanatics. The air of crisis is never far. Our work is never quite done. But through these extraordinary times, we have put our faith in Allah (swt) and endeavoured to do our very best. We are mindful of the verse in Sura Bakarah: *“Or do ye think that ye shall enter the Garden of Bliss without such trials as come to those who passed away before you...verily the help of Allah is always near”*.

We could not have endured the last year firstly without the help and mercy of Allah (swt). Secondly, without the tremendous hard work – going well beyond the call of duty of the MCB team. Many dedicated individuals have devoted countless days and nights in one of the most stressful periods we have ever experienced. From the office bearers, committee chairs and members, the staff at the office and volunteers – ordinary people who took time off work to help out. To them unequivocal thanks. We owe them all our gratitude and may Allah reward them accordingly.

Most if not all of the 15 MCB Committees have worked hard on the respective agendas and delivered on the briefs within their remit. The MCB's function is that of being a service and representative body and this has been addressed comprehensively across the board. I formally would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Chairs and Vice Chairs and other

officers and members of the Committees for the time and commitment. Indeed I add that many personally have borne financial expenditure on behalf of MCB and may Allah reward them accordingly. We may have a small skeleton staff at the MCB Head Office who undertake a superb job in the demanding circumstances, but together with our volunteer input by colleagues our delivery and performance has been of the highest professional standard. At times it has certainly been stressful but rewarding and a privilege to be able to serve and represent the community.

Throughout these times, we have been guided by the suggestions and support of many members of our community. Equally heart-warming and not expected, have been the many messages of support and sympathy we received from ordinary Britons – non-Muslims who wanted to extend their hands of friendship to us at our time of greatest need during the September 11th crisis. Britain has many tolerant and well-intentioned citizens who came to support Muslims at the time of crisis and I am grateful to them as well.

This has in many ways been a defining year for us. We got many things right. We were vocal but clear and levelheaded in our media approach to the disturbances in the north, the September 11th attacks, the war in Afghanistan and the Israeli invasion of Palestinian towns. We moved swiftly to media requests for interviews and opinions – putting the Muslim viewpoint across at times when it was awaited most keenly.

We realised long ago that our northern towns and cities needed urgent attention and have been urging the government to tackle racism and poverty there – and in the country as a whole. We recognised the need to give our young people a platform to voice their concerns. The Manchester conference, held just after the disturbances brought the many different groups together in dialogue. We were the first Muslim organisation to condemn the terrorist attacks on September 11th, responding the same day; only hours after the news broke. It was the MCB, which initiated and the coordinated response to the attack involving many of our major Muslim organisations. When war broke out in Afghanistan, we responded the same night unequivocally opposing it.

Our credibility with the key sectors of society, government, media, politicians, other faith groups, and the Muslim community both in the UK and in some instances abroad, is hard earned. But thanks to this, the MCB was able to speak up for Muslims authoritatively when and where it mattered most. Whether that was with the local police constables discussing security for mosques and Muslim schools, with the media rebutting claims- sadly perpetrated by fringe Muslim groups- that Muslims are extremists, at international conferences, or simply at the local grass

root or individual level with concerned Muslims and non Muslims members of the public. Post September 11th, we had an enormous unprecedented interest in Islam, and the Crisis Management Team set up at the time met several times a week for several months and indeed held seminars and invited non Muslims to come and talk to us. I am indeed very grateful to my fellow office bearers and many others who took on the task of damage limitation after the considerable negative portrayal of Islam. We had I believed faced up to the challenges facing Muslims in this country with wisdom and AlhamdoLiilah foresight. We have a duty to Muslims in this country to look after our interests here in the UK and also balanced that with our wider responsibility for the Muslim Ummah.

In this country we have over the years made noteworthy in-roads as to our acceptability and Muslim identity, being no longer regarded as immigrants but as members of Britain's diverse ethnic minority community. However, our younger generation is still our greatest challenge and at local level we must face up to the real issues, such as underachievement and other social problems. The scourge of drugs and other criminality and social ills also affect also our community and we need to be able to honestly address some of the thorny issues, however difficult they may be.

Across a diverse range of areas the work the MCB has touched the lives of many of us, although we might not necessarily be aware of it our part in the meningitis awareness campaign helped saves lives of British Hajjis and their families, and indeed MCB was part of the medical delegation that served the British hajjis during last Hajj. we help train future prison chaplains, we defended faith schools when every where they were being attacked and indeed there is state funding now available for new faith schools. We campaigned to eradicate poverty and social exclusion both at home and abroad. Many of our affiliates benefited form the Connecting Communities grant. Abroad our support for international causes give people hope and encouragement, and we are there to talk to the media when issues need explaining. These are examples of activities that benefit our community. I could go on. But this small selection of examples shows how much we working often in partnership with others have achieved, and how much more we can still achieve by working both by ourselves and with others for the benefit of society as a whole, and for Muslims in particular.

But of course we need to do need more. We are aware of our many shortcomings. But with the best will in the world, we can only achieve so much in the context of limited resources that MCB has at its disposal. Believe you me; we have had to live up to such high expectations, on such limited personnel, resources and management structure. This is where the MCB Charitable Foundation establish to resource the MCB needs your help and support. There is always room for improvement. We still need a professional managed media/publications informations unit, a policy

studies institute, regional offices and Parliamentary Liaison and other staff to highlight a few recommendations also mentioned in the last years report. Our own MCB headquarters needs to be relocated more centrally in London (MCB is very thankful to the Islamic Cultural Centre at Regents Park and the UKIM at Euston for the availability and use of the premises whenever needed) We also need professional expertise to respond to the many consultation documents that we receive (before laws are enacted) and the many forums that we are asked to address. We have made progress in being recognised as a” major national player” and as with other faith communities we are more and more being consulted by government and others. We now need to raise the quality of our participation.

The government and ‘establishment’ of this country is more and more recognising Muslims as an integral part of society and policies and other measures are being taken to make it even more inclusive. Not only do we regularly meet with government ministers and other politicians and ‘movers and shakers,’ but we now also have access to the most senior of civil servants. Muslims are included at many state functions and events, such as the attendance at the Remembrance Day Celebrations, at Golden Jubilee events, and indeed we gave our condolences by attending the Elizabeth the Queen Mothers Funeral Service. HRH Prince Charles and his Princes Trust have been particularly close to the Muslim community and an Eid Party was hosted at St, James Palace for Muslim youngsters and other encouragement and support given, for which we are most grateful. We have played a constructive role with other faith organisations to campaign reduce third world debt and poverty. We launched a book together with Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief and the Secretary of State for International Development on *Halving World Poverty 2015 Targets*.

I again mention the media, for this is a very important opinion maker. MCB itself has been much exposed to the media in recent months and we are now being more and more pro-active, instead of just reacting. What is now needed is a long-term media strategy on how to soften the negative image stereotyped image of Islam too often linked with terrorism. The MCB has become the first port of call for responding to contemporary Muslim issues and thus we should have in-house or even external media and communication consultants to get our message across. Presentation is an important aspect as content! Islam we all know teaches us to be just, patient and it is without question a religion of the balanced middle path. This is the message we have to get across.

I re-iterate that in my view, there is certainly no incompatibility being a loyal British citizen and being a Muslim. We may disagree on our countries foreign policy, which is often linked to that of the Americans, but that does not make us any less British. As Muslims we can understand the wider

Ummah issues better and will continue to put forward our views to our government. Also in respect on domestic policies on education, health and other social reform we are as much affected as the rest of the community, so we should not lose sight of the wider picture.

As the MCB enters its fifth year, it does so as an organisation that has grown in stature. Equally larger is its burden of responsibility. This is something we take very seriously, which I have tried personally to discharge without fear or favour. To succeed, the MCB needs not only the support of the community, but confidence and maturity in the way it deals with key sections of society including the government. It means having the grace to acknowledge good. This means thanking our government for example, for taking the lead in defending British Muslims from recriminations after September 11th. I say again, as I said at the time that there is no contradiction between being loyal British Citizens and being Muslims. But it equally means having the courage to be able to criticise the government when it does wrong. This means opposing any war on Iraq and opposing the government's effective policy of appeasement towards Ariel Sharon's fascist regime in Israel. This approach, one of constructive engagement, is what the Muslim community expects us to take. It is a principled approach that has brought tangible benefits for the Muslim community. Anything less would be irresponsible.

I would like to end by drawing two lessons from my time as Secretary-General. The first is that when we Muslims stand united and adopt a levelheaded approach, we are strong and an effective force for good. My second lesson is that in order to survive and prosper, the Muslim community needs to turn its attention upon itself. We must ask ourselves to what extent we bear some responsibility for the disturbances last summer, to what extent do we bear responsibility for the small minority of young people who join fringe groups and fan the flames of hatred. We must ask how we can help our community rise from the clutches of poverty and social exclusion. Critical self-appraisal is not a luxury, but a necessity. There is only so much blame we can pile on the doors of others. I raised the same questions to several international conferences I have recently attended. We must play our positive roles in our own respective societies and be pro-active and engaged at all levels in civic and mainstream bodies. We must critically examine our own selves and respond to the challenges as effectively as we can.

The role of our madrasas and mosques need to be widened at so that they become even more responsive to communities local needs. And be able to deliver a more youth focused package of both religious teachings, of homework clubs, of youth social activities, of interfaith dialogue and of engaging our youngsters so that they become vibrant, dynamic and confident members of the community, proud of their Islamic heritage.

Educational achievements have to be increased for some sections of the Muslim community who form an underclass. They must feel stakeholders in this society and look to the future. The MCB must in future be more active at regional level and hold more meetings away from London. We are too London focused and at some stage should have regional MCB offices.

Britain is a multi cultural society, whose future is also our future. Being citizens of this country we have equal rights and responsibilities. We have similar opportunities as most in British society, although we still believe there is scope to enact a wide encompassing law to combat religious discrimination, as identified and highlighted by the earlier University of Derby Report, although we have had some recent amendments to existing Crime and Disorder legislation. In light of the resurgence of extreme right in some parts of Europe (Austria and more recently France), we have to be the ever more vigilant. Mainstream politicians must be sensitive not to use inflammatory language that can be misinterpreted.

Although we face sometimes religious and racial discrimination, and also living in urban areas of deprivation we have the inner city problems, some of the responsibility for our own ills – whether large or small rests with us. Our biggest challenge lies in whether we, like the *First Khalifa Abu Bakr (RA)* can stand up and acknowledge that we are prone to make errors and need to be corrected. Or whether we are content with carrying on with the old ways of doing things simply because that is what we are used to. One path leads to renewal and hope, not just for us but also for our future generations. The other path may well lead to more Bradfords, Burnleys and Oldhams. The choice is ours. We need to be even more pro-active and engage and continue to participate at all levels of civic society, at local neighbourhood level, at regional, national and international level. Lets make our home a better place to live in for all of us! We have to be visionary and determined and play a part in shaping our lives in this country, for us now and for our future generation of Muslims.

May Allah (swt) guide us making the right choice, and give us the wisdom and courage to carry it through. I had the honour with other delegates who attended the recent *Muslim World League Conference in Makkah al Mukarramah on Globalisation and the Muslim Ummah*, to be given the great honour and privilege of being allowed inside the Holy Kaaba. May the prayers made there for all of us, for peace, justice and honour be accepted and may he accept the services towards His Deen and may our shortcomings be forgiven and that He guides us to success. For it is His pleasure that we seek, both in this world and in the Hereafter.

JazakAllah Khair and wassalam

***Yousuf Bhailok
Secretary General.
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