

The Muslim Council of Britain

Secretary General's Report

To

The Annual General Meeting

held at the Islamic Cultural Centre on 26 April 2003

Bismilaahi-r Rahmaani-r Rahim

In the name of Allah, the most Gracious, the ever Merciful

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.

Mr Chairman, Representatives of MCB Affiliate Organisations, Members of the Central Working Committee, Guests, Sisters and Brothers.

As-salaamu alaykum wa rahmatullah.

Alhamdu lillah – all praise and gratitude is due to Allah – we have been blessed with the opportunity to serve the interests of the Muslim community in Britain and the society of which we are a part for another year – the fifth year of the MCB's existence.

This year - like the previous year - has been dominated by the continuing war and conflict, invasion and occupation – in Iraq and Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere where catastrophic ventures have been embarked upon which are not defensible in moral, legal or human terms.

Unfortunately, because of these grave issues, we find that here in Britain, our energies are being substantially diverted from the real needs of our country and community – working, as we must continue to do, to create a society based on the values of mutual trust and compassion, giving a sense of hope and direction to our young, strengthening the moral foundations of the family, and working for a just and fair political culture that would command respect and make people the real stake-holders in society.

Abroad, the attention of the world is sadly being diverted from real and critical issues and even from meeting the very basic needs of millions of people - clean water, food and clothing, health care, education, social services and other essential amenities. Think of the billions of dollars and pounds that are being spent on these wars and how these resources could have been spent dealing with the massive problems of poverty, disease and illiteracy in Africa, the Americas and other parts of the world. These wars exacerbate the divisions between the rich and the poor. A few

individuals in the industrialised world now own more than entire countries in Africa and Asia. Obscene inequalities and blatant injustices abound. It's called globalisation.

We as Muslims in Britain - in concert with all our fellow citizens of conscience - have to work for an equitable and just world order in which real and painful problems and not fictitious ones are tackled.

All these trends – in particular the reckless and unprincipled use of power and wealth and the concentration of the world's media in the hands of a select few - undoubtedly have a profound destabilizing and destructive impact on society everywhere. Leaders and politicians, parents and teachers and all people in positions of responsibility, need to set an example of speaking the truth and being honest and trustworthy in their dealings.

When leaders use misinformation and discredited evidence to justify indefensible wars, they unfortunately lose credibility. And then there is a further disconnect between calling for freedom, fighting for liberation and working for economic reconstruction on the one hand and dropping massive bombs, terrorizing whole populations, killing innocents, committing mayhem and destruction on a vast scale and engaging in economic theft and pillage on the other. What right or moral authority then, we may well ask, do we have left to talk about, for example, the growing levels of crime on our streets and in our societies? Without trust, and people in positions of responsibility who are honest and who can be regarded as being trustworthy, civilized society and responsible government is impossible. We are in no credible position now to call for international legality and respect for human rights, for example, and at the same time have hundreds of men, some of them very young, locked up like animals in cages and brutalised in Guantanamo Bay, without a ray of justice in sight. We need to address these big issues of injustice and double standards that plague our world.

The real war that needs to be fought is the war to reclaim our own futures based on compassion for the weak and the down-trodden, the hungry and the starving, the diseased and the illiterate. It is essentially a war for truth and justice, not greed and global hegemony, not arrogance but humility, respect for human life and dignity.

The duty of Muslims and of the MCB in all this is to stand up for all that is positive in our society, shoulder to shoulder with those who do. We have been heartened and profoundly moved by the hundreds of thousands of people throughout Britain - and indeed throughout the world - from all walks of life, from all religious and none, from all ethnicities, from all age groups including school children – who have come out again and again in the last few months and demonstrated for truth and justice and for human dignity and compassion in a brave and fearless way. The MCB has argued and campaigned against the war on Iraq and other blatant injustices and have participated with all our fellow citizens of conscience in this effort..

We have to commend the initiative and hard work of our affiliates. The Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and others for being in the forefront in helping to organize the Stop the War Coalition. As a result of active Muslim participation, Muslims throughout the country now have a stronger sense of participating in mainstream society, of not merely benefiting from, but of adding value to, the society of which we are a part. We feel humbled and grateful for all the commitment and passion we have seen across the country for justice and the stance taken by people from all walks of life – mothers with babes in arms, human rights lawyers and activists, parliamentarians from across political divides, leaders and the rank and file from the trade union movement and young conscientious students from all over the country.

This coming together of peoples in a movement of this size in common humanity and solidarity is something unique in the history of Britain as Tony Benn pointed out in Hyde Park on 12 April. He also said - to the loudest cheer of the rally, 'I hope the Muslims in Britain would feel that they now have millions of friends in Britain.' Yes, and we say to our fellow Britons, thank you so much for the many friends like Tony Benn.

We must reciprocate and build on this understanding and friendship. There are meetings and forums to participate in, there are initiatives and campaigns for improving our neighbourhoods, there are social causes to promote and campaigns to be waged locally and on a national basis and we hope that Muslims would increasingly be involved and be in the forefront of these. Local elections of course are around the corner. Participating in these is vital and only those individuals who are known to be people of integrity and who can be trusted to work for the genuine interests of the community should be supported. In this and in countless other ways, we can show our commitment to the common good and welfare of our society.

Within the Muslim community itself, we are faced with a number of major challenges, the foremost of which is to build in all individuals a genuine Muslim personality based on knowledge and individual responsibility. All our formal and informal institutions - the mosque, the school, youth clubs, positive parenting in the family - have to be mobilized towards this end. Education, training and full employment need to be our goals if we are to be a strong and effective community in society. All the indications are that we have a steep uphill climb in this regard.

The collective challenge for us all – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – is to create a society that is based on the principles of social justice. This means we must do more to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Whilst this is a problem that affects Britons of all faiths and no faith and all ethnic groups, there is mounting evidence that sections of the Muslim community suffer greater levels of disadvantage. Three quarters of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children are living in households below the poverty threshold and unemployment is around twice the rate for the population as a whole. Those in employment face barriers against equal earnings and progression. Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims also suffer from poor educational outcomes, bad housing and ill health.

As the disturbances in 2001 starkly demonstrated, inequalities – and the frustration and anger they generate – can easily erupt into something far worse. The recent report by the Strategy Unit on inequalities in the Labour market recognises this threat to social cohesion. This is a welcome admission in its own right. But the report goes further and makes a number of important recommendations. Chief amongst them is that in ten year's time, ethnic minority groups living in Britain (which would include disadvantaged sections of the Muslim community) should no longer face disproportionate barriers to gaining employment and achieving success in the jobs market.

We shall be observing the government closely to ensure that it takes up the recommendations. But we too should do whatever we can to help. We need initiatives at the community and even family level that encourage and support our young people to do better in school in order to tackle poor educational outcomes. We also need to ensure that we can use our links with the community to help members find routes to jobs and training. Mosques and community centres

can work more closely with voluntary organisations and job centres for instance in helping to bridge the information gap that prevents people knowing about jobs and training opportunities.

Tackling poverty and social exclusion is going to be a massive challenge. We rightly expect the government to take the lead in this. By combining our own efforts with the government's we can help bring about change quicker, *in sha Allah*.

We should not of course expect that the road ahead would be easy and trouble free. In many of the representations that we make on behalf of the Muslim community and in promotion of the shared values of truth and justice and compassion for all peoples, we sometimes feel that we are politely heard but that the status quo remains firmly in place. While the security services, for example, have a legitimate and often dangerous role to perform in protecting the public, we wondered why it was necessary to ring Heathrow airport with battle tanks and associate the religious occasion of Eid al Adha with terrorism. How much, we may well ask, is the 'war on terror' stoked by institutional Islamophobia?

The police and judicial system also at times seems to be geared to tracking down Muslims and have on occasion violated our sacred spaces. Innocent people have been arrested and kept in detention and then released after a long time while careers are ruined and families are damaged and traumatised beyond recognition.

We need to be clear in our minds, however, that even if we face challenges and obstacles in pursuing what is right and necessary, we must continue to persevere in order to be successful.

So far as our communities are concerned, we would like to see our mosques especially and our community institutions in general being much more outward-looking and geared to meeting the pressing challenges that our community and society are throwing up – challenges relating to our children and young people, the use of leisure time and the acquisition of skills, the stability of marriage and families, and the negative fallout when all these are not managed properly. It is concern for the pivotal role of mosques in Muslim communities that our AGM this year is focussing on the place and the role of mosque institutions in regenerating communities and creating bridges with the wider society.

We would like to see a greater willingness on the part of those with responsibility in government to use the determination they are capable of to respond more readily to the genuine needs of the community. We have been campaigning now for years to get legislation to outlaw discrimination on religious grounds and for legislation to criminalise incitement to religious hatred. While the Sikh and Jewish communities are protected under existing race laws against discrimination and hate crimes, Muslims – because they transcend race, have no such protection under and recourse to the law. The evidence and argument in support of these have been presented in books, in memoranda and this year – through our Legal Affairs Committee and others - in special House of Lords Select Committee hearings. This process has been going on for more than a decade. We have nothing to show for it yet. In contrast, when the government decides it wants a law against terrorism that so far has been largely used to target Muslims and vulnerable groups like asylum seekers, overnight almost we find a law on the statute books.

In the long campaign to get the religious question included in the recent census, we had to go right up to wire in order to get parliamentary time for an emergency bill. Only personal intervention by the Prime Minister at the eleventh hour ensured that parliamentary time was

made available for the inclusion of the question in the census. The whole process of attrition has been well-documented and is on the MCB website.

There are other areas as well where the Prime Minister's support has been critical and most appreciated such as approval for voluntary aided status for Muslim schools. This year, approval for one such school has been granted bringing the total number of VA Muslim schools to four. There are a number of applications still pending and experiencing delays and difficulties in the processing of these applications.

We have seen that beneficial changes can be put in place with comparative ease when required. The new regulations brought into this month's budget that facilitate Shari'ah compliant products for the Muslim community which hopefully will benefit the wider society as well is a good example of this. We are grateful to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the MCB's Business and Economic Affairs Committee for helping to facilitate this.

We hope that other matters that are critical to the life and well-being of the Muslim community would not be left in a state of limbo or even subject to derogation. In particular, I refer here to the renewed attempt on the part of the FAWC – the Farm Animal and Welfare Council – to make the stunning of sheep and cattle compulsory before slaughter, and thus effectively banning the Jewish requirement for *shechita* and the Islamic requirements of *dhabh* in the process. We believe that the FAWC position is unscientific and harmful both to animals and humans and should not be allowed to proceed. This is something that the MCB will continue to campaign for. We need to establish a specialist monitoring body to keep track of this important matter.

Internal functioning of the MCB

I'd like to turn now to some of the internal matters of the MCB.

The Central Working Committee (CWC) has met regularly as constitutionally mandated and the affairs of the MCB are there open to scrutiny.

We have tried to firm up institutional procedures for proper consultation and decision-making. The elected officer-bearers of the MCB meet on a regular basis with the chairs of committees and advisers and now form a sort of cabinet in order to institutionalise regular consultation and the principle of collective responsibility.

Work of committees

The constitutionally mandated committees have been functioning quite well. These are FGPC, Membership, Redoc, Media and the Legal committees. Most of the other committees have also been very active and a summary of their wide-ranging work is included in the main body of the Report. The MCB committees are the engines that drive the multi-faceted work of the organisation. Here, we need to acknowledge the tremendous work carried out by various committees. Permit me to highlight some of this work:

The campaign for the Religious Question in the Census 2001 has been a major success story and the way in which institutions and individuals are being encouraged to use the data for the benefit of communities, particularly disadvantaged communities at local government level display a great deal of foresight and attention to detail.

The Women and Family Affairs Committee (WFAA) chaired by Dr Refaat Drabu has campaigned along with Church-based groups and the Christian Institute against a Government amendment to The Adoption

and Children Bill that would have allowed homosexual couples and unmarried couples to adopt children. The amendment was thrown out by the House of Lords.

The anti-smoking campaign of the Health and Medical Committee, the Public Affairs Committee's joint campaign with other faith groups for a living wage, the European and International Affairs committee signing of a protocol of understanding with ISESCO for furthering understanding and cultural cooperation between Britain and the Muslim world are other examples of enterprising work. Also, the Social Affairs Committee took up the initiative to monitor the welfare of Muslim prisoners and their families particular those who have been detained for long periods without being charged.

These are just a few of the many noteworthy activities of the various committees. The detailed work is outlined in the main report.

And may I draw your attention to an event coming up soon, *in sha Allah*. The Redoc has embarked on a new initiative called MCBdirect to develop a wide-ranging community information service. This MCBdirect fundraising event on 5 July requires wide publicity and your maximum support.

Media

We have attempted to be proactive in our relations with the media. Because of the major impact of the media on our lives, it is appropriate that we should note that there is now much that is balanced and positive in the media so far as Islam and Muslims are concerned. We pay tribute to the many individual journalists who have shown a passion and a commitment to the truth that have endeared them to people of conscience everywhere. Without their diligence and sacrifices, we would be in the dark about many things that affect us profoundly.

We record with appreciation the greater space that national media has been allocating to balanced coverage of Islam and Muslims and contributions from Muslim writers. The supplements in the Guardian and the Telegraph are examples of this.

There are some newspapers and individual editors and journalists who have a skewed view of the world and of Islam and Muslims and who continue to use such terms as 'Islamic terrorists' – thus highlighting the undiminished power of the media itself to demonise and terrorise, to abuse and subvert.

Meetings and contacts

The main report that follows mentions a number of meetings, symposia, social functions, briefings etc which members from various MCB committees attend. In many cases, these may seem to be inconsequential in terms of tangible outcomes. These, however, have a variety of positive effects in that people who often involved in decision making often get to know one another, mutual understanding is deepened and important concerns are often highlighted or pursued.

Demands on the MCB

The demands on the MCB have grown and the pressures on the organisation are often enormous, especially given the fact that all MCB office bearers and all workers, apart from four office staff, are volunteers most of whom have full-time jobs. Our financial resources – critical to consolidating and extending our work - are meagre. We urge all affiliates to try to appreciate the very tight situation in which the MCB finds itself and help in all the ways they can to make the organisation financially healthy to fulfil all the demands that are being placed on it. The success that the MCB has achieved nationally and internationally (apart from attracting snipes from a few detractors) has of course meant that the demands on and challenges to the organisation are

constantly on the increase. This of course calls for constantly greater resources to meet these demands.

A great deal of autonomy and responsibility is placed on individuals. Individuals work through committees and have a duty to consult with others especially in matters that require public pronouncements on behalf of the MCB. A collective approach to responsibility needs to be institutionalised. We are a rich and diverse community and our statements and policies should take this into consideration.

It should also be noted that a policy has been instituted whereby the Chairs of committees change every two years. The purpose of this is to allow new talent to come through and create leadership in depth.

Within the Muslim community and indeed in parts of society as a whole, there is an apparent wariness and even distrust of some attitudes and policies of responsible persons in government. Statements made by the Ministers for example in relation to the question of 'integration' have been demeaning to the Muslim community and, in such cases; we have made direct representations urging ministers to exercise due care in their use of language.

The MCB's clear position is that as citizens of Britain we have a social contract and obligations just as we have certain rights as citizens. As Muslims, and indeed as citizens, we cannot demand rights and enjoy privileges without at the same time discharging our obligations to our neighbours and the rest of the society – obligations broadly to create a just, healthy and stable society. The only way that this can be done is through participation in the institutions of society. The place and role of Muslim community is in the mainstream, not on the margins of society. The Qur'an gives us the principles on which this participation is to be done: "Cooperate on the basis of righteousness, fulfilling of obligations (birr) and on God-consciousness (taqwa) and do not cooperate in sin and transgression of what is right." This verse is in the preamble to the MCB's constitution.

The alternative to participation in society is either (1) agitation from the outside and being nothing more than an irritant or a fly in the ointment or (2) opting out (if this is possible) and being a totally ghetto community, inward looking, and isolated. We believe that both these alternatives cannot be justified either on the basis of Islamic teachings or on the basis of Muslim history.

This does not mean of course that everything done by the MCB or said and done in the name of the MCB has exclusive claim to what is right and proper. There may be the odd occasion when positions are adopted or statements made which do not properly reflect the message or the method of Islam and which create tensions within sections of the Muslim community. In such matters, the MCB is and must be open to criticism and advice both from within and from the wider community and society. Such criticism and advice where merited must be accepted with good grace and humility. The MCB therefore welcomes all honest and sincere advice.

Affiliates

The number of our affiliates has now increased to 380. In the past year new ones include both national and local and specialist bodies. It is essential that our affiliates keep the MCB informed about their activities so that good practice in a given field can be passed on to other organisations in the country. Also, the MCB has been blessed with a growing range of responsibilities and the demands on it have increased many fold. People with skills and talents at the local level are

especially needed to assist in various ways. It is also important that affiliates contribute to and feel pride in MCB's work at the national level and contribute advice, much needed finance, and personal skills.

We need to keep up our campaign to get more organisations, from whatever background, to become affiliates of the MCB and reflect the unity and diversity of the Muslim community in Britain.

Affiliates are also urged to use the MCB logo on their letterheads and on their literature and posters to create a greater feeling of unity and national solidarity.

Most affiliates continue to be very active and a significant number have shown innovation in a wide variety of fields: academic programmes, human rights, emergency relief, education and training, media, social services, health campaigns, youth activities, career guidance, literary pursuits, family based work, legal and counselling, sports and entertainment, mosque and local community affairs, lobbying and political activity. Permit me to mention just a couple examples of such innovative work in addition to the ones mentioned earlier:

To mark the start of the annual Islam Awareness Week, our affiliate, the Islamic Society of Britain, last November, commissioned a special YouGov poll of British attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. The astonishing findings of that poll should give all British Muslims food for thought concerning how we are discharging our responsibilities towards our fellow citizens.

In the heart of East London, in Tower Hamlets, the East London Mosque with input from our affiliate Islamic Forum Europe has embarked on a landmark expansion project to build the London Muslim Centre. This centre, when completed, will *in sha Allah*, be a source of renewal and empowerment for the area's large Muslim population. The East London Mosque deserves our wholehearted support for investing in our future.

The MCB affiliate, the World Federation of the Khoja Shia Ithna'asheri Muslim Community (KSIMC) in conjunction with the Council of European Jamaats (COEJ) and the Regeneration Committee of The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) focussed on the process of "Building bridges with other communities" and explored ways in which Jamaats and institutions should develop thinking and apply knowledge about organisational development, resource and capacity building.

And, we need to make mention of the MCB's own humble attempt to contribute towards the worldwide debate about 9/11 and its aftermath with its own publication, *The Quest For Sanity*. Put together in a remarkably short period of time due to the immense commitment and efforts of its editors, AbdulWahid Hamid and Dr Jamil Sharif and the graphic designer ZafarAbbas Malik, *The Quest For Sanity*, has been very warmly received. The MCB has received a huge number of letters of appreciation from a wide range of public figures who have responded very favourably to its message of co-operation and increased understanding between peoples.

During the year, the links with the grassroot community have been strengthened by visits carried out by Office Bearers and Chairs of committees. It is important to emphasize that the strength of the MCB lies in its contacts and constant consultation with the grassroot community throughout the country to be aware at first hand of their issues and concerns and to communicate with and inform the wider community of the MCB's work.

The introduction of the weekly E-Newsletter enabled us to inform both our community and others of the varied work of the MCB and its committees. Other forms of effective

communication of news and analysis of issues and trends are being considered for the coming year.

The financial position of the MCB has once again been weak. The F&GPC has been putting considerable effort in raising funds. The detailed report by the Treasurer will be provided later. We are immensely grateful to them to provide financial support for various projects and in particular for training programmes.

Thanks

I would like to place on record my gratitude and deep appreciation for the support and cooperation I received throughout the year from fellow Office Bearers, Chairs of the Committees, Advisors, Office staff, my predecessor Yousuf Bhailok and individuals who have given help and advice and much of their time to the work of the MCB.

I also wish to thank all those individuals and organisations who have provided financial contributions and support for specific projects and those who make regular contributions through banker's standing orders. We hope that the number and size of such contributions will increase substantially in the coming year so that the MCB can be placed on a firmer financial footing, insha Allah.

We also wish to put on record our deep appreciation to Dr Dubayan, the Director of the Islamic Cultural Centre, and his staff for providing facilities at the centre for meetings and seminars. Many affiliates across the country also provide their premises for meetings and conferences for which we are immensely grateful.

We pray to Allah Subhaanahu wa Ta'aala to guide us and bless us with all that is good, that He makes this land safe and secure for all who live in it, and that He brings peace, justice and prosperity to all the oppressed people of the world.

Iqbal AKM Sacranie
Secretary General