

Secretary General's Report



IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, MOST GRACIOUS, MOST MERCIFUL

Dr Basil Mustafa, Respected Scholars, Distinguished Guests, Delegates of MCB Affiliate Organisations, Members of the Central Working Committee, Sisters and Brothers.

As-salaamu alaykum wa rahmatullah.

Alhamdulillah – all praise and gratitude is due to Allah

Sadly, we begin by remembering one of our community leaders who is not with us, Maulana Mahmudul Hassan Khan, Central President of the Da'watul Islam UK & Eire. Maulana Mahmudul Hassan died two weeks ago at the age of 56, *Innalillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*. He was a model Islamic personality, learned and unassuming; always ready with a kind word and smile. We pray to Allah Almighty to accept his good deeds, overlook his faults and grant him Paradise *insha Allah*. We pray that Allah in his Mercy grants strength and patience to his wife, his family and his colleagues in Da'watul Islam.

It is such episodes that remind us to be constantly vigilant – for who knows what the next moment may bring and our time on this earth is up. The hadith *man maatha faqad qamat qiyamata-hu* – who ever dies his day of judgement is established – is a reminder that ever moment is precious and we should be doing those acts that will be of benefit in the life to come.

Maulana Mahmudul Hassan was a believer in practical action, as the Ummah Boys Secondary School stands testament, and ready to join hands with others to build unity within our community.

Allhamdu lillah we are here today in the same spirit of *shura* – mutual consultation – and brotherhood. The family of like-minded organisations within the umbrella of the MCB is increasing, and in the last year we welcome two important affiliations: the Council of Mosques of Tower Hamlets and the Muslim Council of Wales. Between them they represent over 40 mosques and Muslim community centres.

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is a local authority district with one of the largest Muslim populations - the last Census placed this at over 70,000 – almost 36% of the total population. It was thus important for the MCB to have the Council of Mosques Tower Hamlets as an affiliate. We have benefited from this

participation because it has brought experienced imams and ulama into our consultation meetings and the community as a whole has benefited from their contribution. As I will be describing in more detail later, in the last year the MCB organised three consultative meetings with mosque imams and ulama: the first after the July bombings; the second to discuss the Government's proposed closure orders for places of worship, and the third held in Manchester last month to launch the 'Voices from the Minarets' report and debate the 'Mosques & Imams Advisory Board' proposal.

In contrast with Tower Hamlets, Wales of course has a smaller Muslim population. The coming together of its mosques in various cities to form a council is a sign of a local leadership with a sense of vision. I will not say how much time our Membership Committee spent trying to establish the best pronunciation of *Cyngor Moslemaidd Cymru* when processing the affiliation form for regional affiliation. Again it was important for the MCB to have the Muslim Council of Wales as an affiliate, not only because of the wise counsel it has to offer, but to reflect all regions of the United Kingdom in the work of the MCB.

The MCB's affiliates today include the major national Muslim organisations in the country and most of the regional councils of mosques. There is representation across the board – in terms of geography, different school of thought and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Of course we must work harder to be inclusive and gain greater outreach.

The MCB was launched in 1997 after three years of preparatory work and planning involving a large number of community bodies. A whole year was spent on drafting a constitution. Today is our ninth annual general meeting. The MCB is the best that the community has at the moment and represents an enormous investment of creative hardwork and volunteers' time and effort. It serves as the central negotiating authority on a vast number of issues. We are not unaware of the relevance of the history of the labour movement. It tells us that an employer would much rather not negotiate with a single union, but play off one workers' group against the other.

The MCB is a precious flower that has only reached this stage after sacrifice and effort. It is our collective responsibility to ensure it blossoms. I call on you to be vigilant and alert because in the last year I detect an unhappiness in some circles with this emerging Muslim unity and leadership. They would like to see the clock turned back. We have a vision and we will stand by that *insha Allah* like a firm wall.

As I noted in my report to you last year, the best description I can find of what you sign up for when joining the MCB is contained in one of our first published documents, entitled 'Invitation': the MCB is as an independent body working for the pleasure of Allah; it has a formal system of representation and

accountability; it is non-sectarian, working without interfering, or displacing or isolating any existing Muslim work; it is a body that bases its policies and decisions on consensus and the largest possible practical measure of common agreement; and finally and importantly, it seeks to draw on the talents and specialist skills of individuals, and the strengths of organised bodies, to meet the great challenges ahead.

As many of you know, today is the end of my term as your Secretary General. After two consecutive terms I am stepping down with no small sense of relief and I look forward to returning to my professional interests and catching up on my family responsibilities. I pledge to help the new office bearers to the best of my abilities *insha Allah*. I will fulfill my obligations under the Constitution to attend office-bearers' meetings for one year in an ex-officio capacity to ensure an orderly transition. I remain devoted to the vision just outlined and will support the work of the MCB specialist committees, in particular the Business & Economics Committee which has a major conference on Islamic Trade & Finance planned for 13th – 14th June, in which the Chancellor Gordon Brown will be delivering the keynote speech.

After this introduction, there are now three themes that I would like to take up in more detail. First, a review of the performance of the MCB in the last year and a critical appraisal – of course the July 2005 bombings and their aftermath placed the community in the spotlight like never before and the MCB and its affiliates both responded to the demands and were able to take proactive steps.

Second the challenges that the community faces – of three types. There is the external challenge from those who do not share our vision of Britain as a multi-faith, multi-cultural, diverse society. It is open season for alarmist statements about Muslims from those who feel threatened by a reduction of resources or because of cultural snobbery. Then there are practical internal challenges, in terms of our own institutional development and nurturing mature community leadership. There is also an intellectual challenge - moves to seek a cultural disarmament of the Muslim word.

Third, some thoughts on our role as a faith community – what is to be the contribution of Muslims to Twenty-first century Britain? I raise this last point with a personal interest: my term as Secretary General has coincided with some personal landmarks. I have seen my daughter's wedding and the birth of a grandson, *alhamdu lillah*. There must be many like me in the midst of four generations – with one of both of their parents fortunately with them, themselves, their children and their grandchildren. Perhaps this is the first time that there are four generations in the recent history of Muslim settlement. What legacy should we be leaving for future generations?

So I will begin with the specific, gradually widening the canvas to include longer-term strategic questions.

The year in review

Three specific events stand out: foremost are the atrocities of July 7 and the aftermath, particularly anti-terrorism legislation and the security regime; second, our campaign for Muslims to be given the same protection from racial and religious discrimination afforded to Jews and Sikhs; third, the John Ware Panorama programme in which the MCB's leadership and some affiliates were charged with anti-semitism and extremism;. I will focus on these developments but of course there are a whole range of other issues that have affected the MCB and taken up our time - I will only be referring to the Danish cartoon offence and the homophobia controversy in passing. The range of MCB activities are documented in the printed report or the MCB website. There you will find accounts important work such as the Media seminar held on 17th September 2005 on the theme "British Muslims - Engaging with the Media", our leadership development programme, and the pioneering Books for Schools project.

July 7 and aftermath

In July 2005, the 'war on terror' which President Bush and Prime Minister Blair had declared against a nebulous enemy in far off lands came to the shores of Britain. For reasons that can only be unraveled by a comprehensive inquiry, a number of young Muslim men committed acts of criminality leading to 52 deaths, including four of their co-religionists, and causing untold grief and suffering to the innocent. The Government chose not to allow an open inquiry because it wished to appear blameless. Instead it has been convenient to single out the Muslim community and make them bear responsibility for addressing the root problems. Hence the raft of legislations specifically targeting Muslim institutions.

There were many warning signals to have alerted the authorities, and the recent Intelligence and Security Committee's report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2006' makes this evident. Last July the Sunday Times leaked Home Office documents which included a letter from the senior-most civil servant at the Cabinet Office, dated April 2004. The letter noted "there is a feeling that some parts of the Muslim community, particularly young men, are disaffected. This includes some that are well-educated with good economic prospects. Al-Qaida and its off-shoots provide a dramatic pole of attraction for the most disaffected. The first pillar of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, is prevention....."

Of course the Muslim community needs to be introspective and face up to a bizarre mentality that has taken root in a small number of young men. They have a casual disregard for human life - as if action films and war videos have made them lose touch with reality. They have been highly secretive and even their own parents are incredulous. The Cabinet Office made a wise assessment in 2004 - someone, somewhere should be held to account for knowing there was a time

bomb ticking away, and not doing enough about it. We are justified in asking why there had been no preventative action.

I take particular objection to two of the Prime Minister's recent statements. Speaking in Chappletown in Leeds in November last year he said that Muslims found it easier to blame others than to look inwards; that "given half a leadership", Muslims would "face up to the extremist menace in their midst". Then last month at his Downing Street press briefing, he said, "the only way we are going to overcome this threat is to confront it head on from within the community and I think we need a new generation of young Muslim men and women as leaders of their community who are prepared to do that". It is unfair and simplistic to apportion such responsibility on the community alone, or to complain about a failure of its leadership. Mr Blair is rightly for facing down the troublemakers of the Militant Tendency and purging them from the Labour Party. Perhaps this is the experience at the back of his mind and he is frustrated that we cannot act decisively like he did. Unfortunately there are no quick fixes.

The Muslim community is called to show leadership. Surely facing up to the outcomes of an open inquiry would have been an act of bold and courageous leadership.

The MCB's foremost concern on 7/7 was to declare to society at large that the acts of July 2005 had nothing to do with Islam - our religion outlawed aggression against the innocent. Any attempt by the perpetrators to seek religious justification for acts of political revenge was a travesty. By 12th July the investigators had sufficient basis for identifying the men involved and their link to Leeds. The MCB's affiliate network enabled the Secretary General to visit the city immediately and assure the traumatized Muslim community. The MCB together with the British Muslim Forum organised a meeting of leading *ulama* and imams on 15th July 2005 at which a Declaration was read out by Maulana Shahid Raza of the BMF and signed by those present. The Declaration included this passage:

We are firmly of the view that these killings had absolutely no sanction in Islam, nor is there any justification whatsoever in our noble religion for such evil actions. It is our understanding that those who carried out the bombings in London should in no sense be regarded as martyrs.

It is incumbent upon all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims – to help the authorities with any information that may lead to the planners of last week's atrocity being brought to justice. The pursuit of justice for the victims of last week's attacks is an obligation under the faith of Islam.

Islam is the middle path and the Qur'an designates Muslims as the *ummatah wasata* – the middle community. Any form of extremism is to be utterly and completely rejected. What we need, therefore, in our

troubled world, more than ever before is to stick to the middle and balanced way of Islam.

The tragedy of 7th July 2005 demands that all of us, both in public life and in civil and religious society, confront together the problems of Islamophobia, racism, unemployment, economic deprivation and social exclusion - factors that may be alienating some of our children and driving them towards the path of anger and desperation. Islam prohibits both anger and desperation. Anger and desperation are *haram* (forbidden) and may lead to some people being targeted by people with a sinister and violent agenda. There is, therefore, a great deal of positive work to be done together with everyone in our own and wider community in order to channel the energy and talent of our youth particularly into constructive avenues, serving God and society for the common good. The youth need understanding, not bashing.

This is the leadership that the community has displayed. The MCB issued a statement by 11 am on 7th July noting, "The Muslim Council of Britain utterly condemns today's indiscriminate acts of terror in London. These evil deeds make victims of us all...."

Let me read out to you extracts from two emails sent to the MCB:

"I am writing to say how much I appreciate the work you are doing to distance the ordinary, peace-loving Muslims in the UK from the actions of extremists who would seek to destroy our society. Like so many, my first thought after the London bombings was to blame Muslims en-masse. However I quickly realized that this was not the way because the vast majority of Muslims are ordinary people, living and working in the UK and enjoying a peaceful life. Because your organization was so quick to condemn those who carried out the atrocities it made me realize the way forward isto support rather than condemn or blame ordinary, peace-loving Muslims".

Another email said:

"During this difficult period, I have been hugely impressed by the leadership shown by the MCB in representing the moderate Muslim view. The organisation's influence within the non-Muslim sphere has clearly grown

Nevertheless there was a backlash with a number of hate attacks on individuals and mosques, and the MCB itself received an unprecedented volume of hate mail. The Met Police recorded 800 hate and faith crimes by the end of July. Mosques affected by graffiti spray and broken windows included the Acton Mosque and the Mazhirul Uloom Mosque in London, and incidents were also

reported by mosques in Leeds, Bristol, Telford and Birkenhead. The community must be alert that there is a segment of the population that is xenophobic and on the wait for opportunities. The MCB has urged politicians and the authorities not to use the phrase 'Islamic terrorism'. It establishes a link so that people who look like Muslims are thought of as potential terrorists. Our politicians on the one hand say that this is not a war against Islam, yet phrases like 'Islamic terrorism' reveal that in their mindset the enemy is Islam.

Three developments following 7 July should be brought to your attention: first, the publication of a Prevention of Terrorism Bill; second, the Home Office Working Groups, leading to roadshows and the proposal for a mosques and imams advisory body - known as MINAB; and third the consultation studies initiated by the community itself.

The Prevention of Terrorism Bill (now the Terrorism Act 2006)

While still at Bill stage, this legislation was criticised for several provisions, most notably (i) an extension of detention without charge from 14 days to 3 months (ii) a new offence of 'glorification' - criminalising expression of support for armed resistance to any state or occupation if this was with the 'intention' of inciting acts of terror (iii) plans to give police powers to temporarily close down places of worship 'being used by extremists'.

The MCB formed alliances with civil liberty groups, the London Mayor's Office and other bodies in seeking changes to the Bill. The wide-spread concern ensured a strong case was made to parliamentarians so that the proposals for the extension of detention without charge to 90 days was not accepted and is now 28 days. The new offence relating to glorification has unfortunately gone through. It is bad law that potentially criminalizes Muslim concerns with the *ummah*.

It was clear to the MCB that though the Home Secretary was using the term 'places of worship' the focus was on mosques in the UK. This was in our mind unwarranted and discriminatory. It is unthinkable for a synagogue not to host discussions on politics, history and culture. Restrictions were never imposed on Catholic churches during the Northern Ireland troubles, or on Sikh gurdwaras affiliated to Akali Dal, or Croatian or Serbian churches during the Balkan crisis. Steps have never been taken to limit extremist political expression, for example in the centres managed by the Vishwa Hindu Praishad (VHP), the Hindu supremacist movement. Why mosques? The MCB took the clear line that the proposals relating to places of worship is grateful to the steps taken by other faith communities in objecting to the proposals to give police powers to seek restriction orders on places of worship. These include The Rt Revd Tom Butler, Bishop of Southwark and the British Sikh Consultative Forum.

In our mind, The Rt Revd Tom Butler, Bishop of Southward, put his finger on the issue. I quote from his statement:

There are about 40,000 churches in Britain of which 16,000 are in the Church of England, and there has never been any suggestion of behaviour related to terrorism in any of them. There seems to be only one case in the public domain, Finsbury Park mosque, where any potential link between a place of worship and terrorist activity has been suggested. Even in that case, the problem was resolved by the management committee within the present law. Other places of gathering are far more likely than places of worship to be used for the purposes the government has in mind and one must question why places of worship have been singled out.

The MCB organised a well-attended meeting of imams and ulama on 11th November 2005 at the London Muslim Centre to brief them of the implications of the proposed legislation and to seek their views. Their view, captured in the MCB's response to the Home Office, was that "mosques are being mis-identified and stereotyped as incubators of violent extremism, while the social reality is that they serve as centres of moderation; the bombers were indoctrinated by a sub-culture outside the mosque; the notion of influential 'back-door' mosques is a figment of the imagination". The Home Office took heed and withdrew the proposals. This is in no small measure a result of the MCB's mobilization of community opinion, though we acknowledge the stand taken by the Churches.

We should be under no illusions that there is now a forbidding security regime in place and the authorities have sweeping powers for stop and search and detention under the Terrorism legislation. Young Muslims are bearing the brunt. In the two years to 2004, there were over 50,000 stops and searches under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000. It is likely that post 7/7, the cumulative total would be over 100,000. A feature of Section 44 stops and searches is that the police do not need any evidence of wrong doing, so long as an authorization has been obtained for a geographical area. Of the 22,000 stops and searches in 2002/3 there were only 18 terrorism related arrests. In October 2005, the Home Secretary released statistics on the impact of the Terrorism Act 2000: between 9/11 and 30th September 2005 a total of 895 people had been arrested; of these, 138 were charged under the legislation, 156 charged with other offences, 106 were "dealt with in other ways" including handing over to immigration authorities, leaving 496 who were released without charge. Twenty three convictions were obtained in the courts – these include 7 Irish, and also Kurdish and other groups. The number of Muslims convicted is believed to be three, of whom 2 are appealing against their convictions.

As a community we have nothing to hide, yet this does not mean we should not be aware of the authorities' declared intention to monitor our institutions. It would be naïve to be unaware of the changing environment. The Home Office has

dedicated £30 million extra next year and £60 million in 2007/8 specifically to expand the capabilities of Special Branch. This will be translated in large measure in sufficient numbers of people out there monitoring the community.

Tens of thousands of Muslims have therefore been picked on by the Police of whom only a handful have been shown to be dangerous to society. There is an undisputable disproportionality. The detentions and arrests have frequently made for sensationalist headlines, but when charges are dropped or people acquitted in the courts, these outcomes barely receive any attention. The public at large is left with an image of a problematic, fifth-column community in their midst, while leaving Muslims themselves feeling misrepresented, stigmatised and victimised.

Yasmin Ali-Bhai Brown, who is fiercely independent and often a critic of Muslim community institutions, does not mince her words. She writes:

“Every day men and women in this country are being hauled into custody as nameless suspects. They may or may not be guilty. It doesn’t really matter any more. They are Muslims. Dogs have better safeguards than these presumed terrorists”.

When innocent people are arrested and incarcerated the communities they come from will become ever more alienated from the mainstream – that was the Northern Ireland experience. Moreover there is a risk that the police’s new powers will encroach into mainstream life – ask the peaceful protestors outside the military base at Fairford in Gloucestershire, the bomb depot at Weford, or the annual arms fair in the Docklands; remember too the Labour Party activist Walter Wolfgang, the 80-year old John Catt who was searched and interviewed for carrying a placard and t-shirt with anti-Blair info, and the tragic shooting of Charles de Menezes.

The draconian anti-terrorism laws should be repealed. This is not being complacent about terrorism, but rather wishing for the well-being of society as a whole. Professor Conor Gearty recently observed, “the set of assumptions about the necessity of terrorism laws needs to be confronted if we are not to drift further into an authoritarian state. Terrorism is a particularly serious form of criminal conduct that should be dealt with by mainstream law, the provisions of which are entirely robust enough to catch killers, bombers and conspirators”. Lord Carlile QC has observed that stop and search powers were being used too widely. In his last annual review of the Terrorism Act he said use of Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 “could be cut by at least 50% without significant risk to the public or detriment to policing”.

The Home Office Working Groups

On 19th July 2005 both the MCB Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General attended a round table meeting initially chaired by the Prime Minister, and subsequently by the then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. I stressed that the criminality had no connection whatsoever with Islam, and that only a very, very small minority of British Muslims were extremists driven by hate. Following this meeting, the Government announced the formation of the 'Preventing Extremism Together' Working Groups which convened between August and October 2005. A number of task/working groups were set up, chaired either by civil servants or Muslim participants - these groups were on topics such as Education, Engaging with Women, Imams and the role of mosques, Security and policing, and Tackling Extremism and Radicalisation. The invitees were drawn from a broad cross-section including academics, community activists and community organisation representatives, and members of Parliament (both MPs and peers). The MCB was invited to participate and it nominated several individuals from its specialist committees, for example Inayat Bunglawala and Shaikh Ibrahim Mogra from our Media and Masjid & Community Affairs committees respectively.

Each task group submitted its findings and recommendations. Our representatives ensured these included a call for a judicial inquiry on the causes of 7th July. In November, 2005 the Home Office published the Working Groups report. From the MCB's point of view it contained many excellent proposals which had been under consideration for years but could not be pursued because of lack of resources, but there was disappointment that the recommendation for a judicial inquiry had been sidelined. By a process known only to the Home Office mandarins, of the 50 or so proposals, only two were pursued – roadshows and the mosques and imams advisory board or MINAB.

I do not propose to dwell on the roadshows – these are proceeding though there is an air of the colonial era about them. A number of foreign scholars have been brought in, as if the natives cannot be trusted. There is an “extremist virus” that requires the expertise of overseas doctors! The MINAB issue however is far more important with reverberations for the future.

The task group on 'Imams Training and Accreditation and the role of mosques as a resource community' chaired by Labour peer Lord Ahmed, proposed a national body for Imams - the recommendation stated, "this body would be inclusive and representative of the many traditions practiced in the UK, independent and lead by the institutions it serves". Organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain supported the idea because of this wording - an independent, community-driven association to promote good practice. However the initiative soon became mired in controversy because of excessive Home Office involvement, insufficient consultation and the perception that there was an attempt to marginalize the MCB. The MCB of course does not claim any sort of monopoly, but it is

concerned that the voices claiming to speak for the community should be representative and inclusive.

On 13th May 2006 the Muslim Council of Britain convened a consultation meeting that was attended by an unprecedented diversity of mosque representatives. For several hours at Didsbury Mosque in Manchester, about 250 imams and *ulama* debated the way forward. I felt it important to alert the scholars and imams present of attempts to divide the community and sideline its main representative body. It was clear from the meeting that the MCB could have provided clearer leadership on whether it supported, or had reservations, with the Home Office scheme.

Looking to the future, the MCB, for its part, will continue to engage with all other Muslim organisations to preserve the total independence of Islamic institutions. While there was much scope for improvement and development in our mosques, there were excellent local examples of good practice that can be emulated more widely. This will lead to an improvement of standards and also increase awareness of the positive role of mosques in society. The consensus that emerged from the meeting was that a steering group led by community organisations which would include the MCB as well as others, must work together to establish an independent inclusive advisory board to deal with specific issues related to mosques and imams in the UK.

The MCB studies

In a separate and independent initiative not funded by the Home Office, the MCB also started a consultation process with Muslim youth, resulting in a youth groups convention at the Manchester City Hall in September 2005. A process of surveys and interviews has also started, and some of the audio recordings have been played back at the Central Working Committee meetings. These offer an important insight into what young people expect from their mosques and community organizations like the MCB, their life experiences and hopes for the future. The data from such field studies reveal the serious social realities within our community – of gang warfare and petty crime, drop out from education and such problems.

The MCB's Masjid & Community Affairs committee also commissioned a mosque survey, whose findings have been published in the report 'Voices from the Minarets'. The report was launched at the *ulama* meeting I described earlier held on 13th May in Manchester. This is the first survey conducted by the community, for the community – about our imams and the management of mosques. The report found that Britain's over 1000 mosques were providing a remarkable range of social welfare and educational services and often served as an essential focal point through which many disadvantaged people accessed services. While a number of mosques do make provision for women and youth, more could be

done in extending the range of activities and providing opportunities for participate in decision-making in an appropriate way.

Both of these studies should really be on-going work within the community. We need well-wishers who can come forward and recognize the importance of research work undertaken by the community, for the community. Insha Allah the time will come when we can start shaping the research agenda.

With these remarks I conclude the section that describes how the MCB has responded to the strategic aspects of 7/7.

Campaign for protection from racial and religious discrimination

In June last year, a bill was placed before Parliament to criminalize incitement to hatred on religious grounds. The aim was to provide a level playing field so that the protections that applied to race would be extended to religion e.g. criminalising reckless, abusive and insulting behaviour directed at an individual because of their faith. It would have given Muslims the same protection afforded to Jews and Sikhs.

Representative bodies of the community have been lobbying for such protection for over a decade. The campaign in fact was initiated by the UK Action Committee for Islamic Affairs in the early nineties. The MCB's Public Affairs and Media committees were in the forefront in seeking support within civil society and amongst parliamentarians for this bill.

We were acutely aware that this lacuna in the law was exploited by the BNP, who are increasingly resorting to using 'Muslim' as a code word for 'non-White' because then they cannot be prosecuted for racial hatred. It is on this very basis that BNP leader Nick Griffin and a sidekick were acquitted in February this year. This is after they made this utterly hateful statement, and I quote

"...you will find verse after verse [in the Qur'an] saying you can take any woman you want as long as they're not Muslim. These 18, 19 and 25 year-old Asian Muslims are seducing and raping white girls in this town right now".

Griffin told the Court that he was attacking a religion and not a race.

On the face of it, there should have been little objection to a new law that criminalizes incitement to hatred on religious grounds. Hatred - intimidation and verbal violence - can never be condoned, particularly when the victim is a disadvantaged community. However you will be surprised that the so-called liberal establishment was the most adamant that Muslims should not be afforded this protection. All sorts of arguments were made, ranging from the threat to freedom of expression and the right to ridicule religion, to the adequacy of the

existing race laws. In our view, the proposed law would protect the adherents of a faith, not the faith itself, and moreover why should Muslims accept a second-best i.e. protection provided to Muslims because of their race identities.

Notwithstanding our efforts the proposed legislation did not succeed in Parliament. The Government was frustrated by the Bill's opponents skilfully using parliamentary procedure and a well-managed lobby of odd bedfellows - including former Archbishop Carey, the National Secular Society and some Muslims.

A lot of our time and effort came to naught. There are lessons to be learned here, not just in developing better political contacts but the need for extending and deepening our alliances in civil society and the Churches. We should be carrying out post-mortems of our unsuccessful campaigns. In this sense our political work is well-intentioned but remains ad-hoc and amateurish.

The John Ware Panorama programme

The BBC's flagship investigative programme Panorama on Sunday 21st August 2005 broadcast an hour long documentary fronted by reporter John Ware. His underlying concerns were the religious vision held by Muslims of bringing about social and political change, the spirit of ummah or world-wide community, and the strictures in the Qur'an on other faiths. The programme portrayed the Muslim Council of Britain as a problem organisation contributing to 'extremism' in the country. The very title of the programme – 'A question of leadership' – seemed to us very much part of a coordinated attempt to marginalize the MCB.

The Panorama programme was concerned with some actions of its Secretary General, such as attendance at a memorial service for the founder of the Palestinian movement Hamas, and non-attendance in the 2005 Holocaust Memorial Day. These were cited as 'failures in leadership'. Prominent affiliates such as the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, and the Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-hadith Muslim Association of Britain, were also maligned. The MCB deputy Secretary General Dr Abdul Bari and Professor Khurshid Ahmed of the Islamic Foundation were also interviewed as 'extremists'. The Panorama programme impuned the character of the imam of the Ka'aba, and presented a number of Muslim apologists with little grass-roots support to back up its agenda.

We are grateful to Madeleine Bunting of the Guardian for her perceptive article on the day following the broadcast:

"A campaign is being orchestrated through the media to destroy the credibility of many of the most important Muslim institutions in Britain, including the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The impact of this campaign - in the Observer and particularly in John Ware's Panorama documentary last night - will be a powerful boost for the increasingly widespread view that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim:

underneath, "they" are all extremists who are racist, contemptuous of the west, and intent on a political agenda".

The MCB of course send a detailed rebuttal to the BBC and a formal complaint to OFCOM. The tone and content of the programme offended the entire Muslim community and their response was to rally round the MCB. The episode has been a wake-up call, alerting us to the 'Israel test' – that is sympathy with the Palestinian struggle for justice can be readily deemed 'extremism', and criticism of Israel, 'anti-semitism'. Mr Ware is currently working on a follow-up programme and we await, like in a Monty Python sketch, the return of the Spanish Inquisition!

This then is the end of my summary of the main events of the last year. I will now proceed with the remaining two sections of my report – Challenges facing the Community and some thoughts on future scenarios. Looking back, it seems to me that the MCB has often been like a frail craft seeking to keep afloat against strong under-currents. There are times when we have been pulled in directions not of our choosing, or been quite clear of the steer, but *alhamdu lillah*, we remain in control of our ship and we retain the trust of the community.

The Challenges facing the community

After this review of the past year's most important aspects, I will now move on to the second main theme of my report – the various challenges confronting us. These include the need to keep the multiculturalism project alive, the institutional challenge in terms of what sort of community organizations and personnel we need in the short to medium term, and the intellectual challenge posed by those who call for a reformation of Islam.

Multiculturalism

In my report last year I made a reference to our vision of Britain and 'Britishness' – one of Britain as a community of communities, in which the core religious identity is not 'privatised' but finds expression in the public sphere. However the last year has seen an increasing attack on the concept of a multicultural, multifaith Britain – from prominent individuals in the racial equality sector, the Churches, and the centre left intelligentsia – a formidable alliance.

We know that Trevor Phillips of the Commission of Racial Equality, a stalking horse by appointment in these matters, has been calling for an end to multiculturalism since 2004. Then he said, "Multiculturalism suggests separateness. We are now in a different world". By September 2005, his agenda became clearer

"In recent years we've focused far too much on the 'multi' and not enough on the common culture. We've emphasized what divides us over what unites us. We have allowed tolerance of diversity to harden into the

effective isolation of communities, in which some people think special separate values ought to apply”.

In October 2005, he claimed “We are becoming more segregated residentially... to the formation of communities that are shut off from the outside world; that simply makes the situation worse. But that is what we are seeing emerging”. Paradoxically, while he felt Muslim faith schools imposed isolation, this was not the case for others. He is an advocate of segregated classes for black youth – they should be singled out for special booster classes because they were under-achieving. More recently, Trevor Phillips also called for Muslims who wish to live under a system of *sharia* law to leave Britain – so much for freedom of expression and the right to dissent!

Another attack on the notion of a multifaith, multicultural Britain comes from quarters in the Church. Ruth Gledhill in *The Times* a few days ago reported that Reverend Nazir Ali, the Bishop of Rochester, accused fellow church leaders of “pandering to a multifaith society”. He said that Britain was a Christian country that “owes its constitution, institutions, legal arrangements and values to the Christian faith”. Referring to chaplaincy services in hospitals and prisons, he considered these to be a ‘multifaith mishmash’. In a similar vein we hear from Cardinal Keith O’Brien, who in January this year issued a call to ‘re-Christianise’ Scotland. What about the 70,000 Muslims in Scotland?

A third type of salvo against a multicultural and multifaith Britain comes from the liberal intelligentsia. Consider this comment on faith schools from the leading columnist Polly Toynbee writing in *The Guardian* in November last year – she has dredged up a most extreme example to support her case:

“There is good and bad work done by voluntary groups, but the faith groups have no special magic. They do have special dangers, however, with “charismatic” leaders causing a high risk of abuse - mental and physical - wherever there are closed worlds of believers. A Muslim council employee told an Islamic debating meeting I attended last week that he had recently visited a Muslim school where girls were not allowed to look out of the windows. Is that magic too? State money should only be spent on secular schools and social services. People are free to believe and practise what they like, but keep God out of state schools and social services”.

It seems that there was no problem with ‘multiculturalism-lite’ – which is about enjoying the boom of curry houses in Britain or mother-tongue language teaching. But then there is ‘multiculturalism-serious’, which is where we enter the debate on faith schools, protection in the law from incitement to religious hatred, ensuring allocation of resources to provide hospital and prison imams. There seem a complex bundle of emotions at work, and what is articulated may not be the whole story.

Professor Biku Parekh offers a thoughtful explanation of this hostility and the way out of the conundrum in his most recent essay, 'Europe, liberalism and the Muslim question':

“The stage is now set for mutual hostility and suspicion....the fear is particularly acute among liberals and leads to a veritable panic...they want Muslims and other immigrants not only to accommodate themselves to their way of life but also to give it their whole-hearted moral allegiance. And they think that they can do that only if they give them transculturally convincing reasons. Since the liberals cannot find such reasons beyond a certain point, they panic, and worry deeply about how they are to defend their cherished way of life against its large numbers of determined critics who now are their fellow critics...it is not the best, the most rational, or the only universally valid form of good society, and it need neither claim nor endeavour to show itself to be one in order to demand and deserve the allegiance of its members...this calls for a dialogue, which is possible only if liberal society recognises itself as a distinct cultural community encountering other such communities represented by the immigrants...”.

The response must be one of dialogue and assurance and an appeal to mutual cultural respect. In our report last year we had welcomed Chancellor Gordon Brown's focus on the importance of shared values as a basis for a cohesive society. Here are four examples of Islamic values that contribute to such dialogue and cohesion:

- hospitality and good neighbourliness. This is a cultural and moral value. We should not eat if our neighbour is going hungry. We thus respond immediately to the teaching in the New Testament “whoever does not love the brother that can be seen, does not love God who cannot be seen”. In fact our traditional definition of neighbour extends to seven houses in all directions!

- respect for the privacy of the individual. We are familiar with the incident when the Caliph Umar stood corrected after he had entered a person's home without permission to accost him for consuming alcohol. What people do in the privacy of their homes is their business. In some schools of *fiqh*, it is even considered wrong to peep into people's windows as you are walking down the street.

- family life and marriage. The marriage contract between a man and a woman is the central pillar supporting the Islamic vision of family life and is the only proper context for sexual relations. This is a view shared by a large number of people in Britain, and we were heartened by the messages of support on the stand we have taken on homosexuality – that it is not acceptable and that it is a sin. It was ridiculous to have construed these remarks as homophobic and I am glad that good sense prevailed. Interestingly, the newly appointed government minister responsible for equality – a committed Catholic and member of the Opus

Dei group - Ruth Kelly is being pursued for not voting in parliament on such matters as lowering the age of homosexual consent and gay adoption. I take this opportunity to make clear that there has been no change of policy within the MCB on this matter –Islam clearly rejects homosexuality and this is not an issue of whether on is mainstream Islam or non-mainstream Islam.

- the honouring of contractual agreements and the integrity of business dealings. The Qur'an describes it as a great sin any attempt to offer inducements to officials or amend testaments unlawfully. We have a covenant with the State to show loyalty and respect its laws – in return for our physical security and respect for human rights and basic freedoms.

The success of Britain rests with the success of the multicultural project. It is this celebration of diversity that won us the Olympic Games bid. We seek a multicultural, multifaith Britain – a community of communities. Multiculturalism-serious means mutual cultural respect, as proposed by Professor Parekh. We do not underestimate the British genius to adapt and evolve in an era of globalisation. The conference we are organizing on Islamic trade and finance is a case to point and it will showcase both British capacity and the market opportunities.

The institutional challenge

My own experience in community work started at the Balham Mosque, thanks to my father's encouragement. After that I had the opportunity to work with a wonderful group of colleagues during the years of the Rushdie affair. During the early 1990s I served as joint-convenor of one of the national bodies, the UK Action Committee for Islamic Affairs. It was only later that my colleagues gave me their trust and I became the first Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain in 1998. I mention all this because I am a strong believer in the gradual and systematic preparation of our community leadership.

We must face the challenge of nurturing and developing the men and women who are to take leadership roles in our umbrella bodies. If the MCB is to institutionalize then our affiliates should be prepared to release their most capable workers for service at the community-wide MCB level.

I believe there is a logical progression. Individuals should work up from the grass roots and gain essential skills and experience at the regional or other appropriate levels. We have over twenty five affiliates that are national and regional bodies and these create their own leadership. I am calling for competent individuals to be released from their undoubtedly crucial roles at this level, so that they can make a contribution at the community-wide level. In the first instance they can participate in the work of the MCB specialist committees or form part of the Central Working Committee.

You might think this is a loss to your organization but I urge you not to be parochial. You will find the transition may become a tremendous opportunity for self development and the full realization of one's potential.

The MCB has commenced a leadership development programme to contribute in this process but at the end of the day I feel that it is up to our national and regional bodies to clear a path for their best people.

My vision for the MCB is that it should be the vehicle through which we can develop wise community leadership – men and women who are able to rise up above their parochial allegiances and think strategically for the benefit of the community a whole.

The intellectual challenge

In my report to you last year I made a reference to the voices that were emerging for a so-called 'reformation of Islam'. I noted the role of some US think tanks. I return to this issue this year because the mantra is being taken up more stridently within the UK. Of course all and sundry and bit-part apologists are free to contribute to the discussion – and they are - but it is our responsibility to ensure there is a measured and authentic response as well.

It is amazing how our political leaders feel themselves qualified to comment on matters of our theology and offer us advice. Mr Blair for example knows that the "extremist view of Islam is not just theologically backward but contrary to the spirit and teaching of the Qur'an" (his speech at the Foreign Policy Centre, 21st March 2006). He calls on Muslims to tell these extremists that "their attitude to America is absurd; their concept of governance pre-feudal; their positions on women and other faiths, reactionary and regressive..." Only last month, the higher education minister Bill Rammell called for a review because "there is evidence that unhelpful narrow interpretations of Islam are available to young people".

I am also concerned about the trend arguing for a new type of 'European Fiqh'. Its adherents refer to the *maqasad shariah* and offer the view that there is a great compatibility between these over-riding objectives of the shariah and western liberal values. They then make the connection that a new *fiqh* can grow more naturally from the west, rather than Muslim lands. I do not have an issue with geography, but we should not slip into a Eurocentric mindset. We should also be wary of the trend to sideline the vast goldmine of classical Islamic scholarship and the temptation to start afresh from first principles. This seems to be a form of intellectual smugness.

The MCB is of course not equipped to take up the intellectual challenge, but here we have a forum to voice concerns and inspire our *ulama*. Muslim scholarship has its own mechanism of reforming society – the term is *islah* – and

we do not need to be told by think tanks and self-appointed experts what is right and wrong with Islam. If the *ulama* do not respond then believe me, the time will come when we are told that there is the Britishised Islam to which you should adhere and this is the official interpretation.

The last year has seen the emergence of an organization called the Progressive British Muslims Forum, that held its inaugural meeting in the House of Commons in November 2005. I think our *ulama* should enter into a dialogue with all such initiatives to seek out the common good of Muslims as well as society as a whole. The scene is shifting rapidly and we should be alert.

Future Scenarios

I conclude my report with some blue sky thinking.

When I look back at my 35 years as a Muslim activist in Britain, it seems that our institutional life has passed through various stages. Stage 1 was the period of the 1970s and 80s, during which we built our mosques and institutions. These were mainly ethnically or linguistically self-contained. They were like the silos you see in an industrial complex – separate store-houses with little interchange. Stage 2 was the late 80s and 90s, the time of the Rushdie Affair and the Balkan crisis. At this point a form of ad-hoc coordination emerged between the communities and organizations. Stage 3 was the creation of the first truly inclusive and broad-based body, the MCB, in which communities and organizations formed a coalition to achieve what was on a commonly shared agenda.

In parallel with these stages there were three other trends. First is the gradual evolution of our mosques from places of worship during Stage 1, to sophisticated multi-purpose hubs of community life in Stage 3, offering not just facilities for worship, but also legal advice, IT training, health advice and a range of other services. Interestingly, it is not just the content of what mosques offered that has changed, but also their outward architectural form. The traditional South Asian styles have given way to functional designs. Second is the gradual mental transition where we stopped looking at ourselves as temporary residents; the 'myth of return' has gone and we do not consider ourselves anymore as guests, but as British citizens. Third is the emergence of identity politics – in which Muslims were able to challenge the categorizations based on ethnicity and seek recognition as a faith community. This culminated in the inclusion of the religion question in the 2001 Census and was a watershed moment. However while identity politics has been psychologically satisfying and allowed socio-economic inequalities to be addressed, it also nurtures community self-interest.

The question now is what is Stage 4? It seems that one strategic choice is for Muslims to be doing much more for the moral and social upliftment of society as a whole, rather than just their own communities. It will mean replacing an

inward-looking approach with greater engagement as individuals in civil society around us. It will mean the age of identity politics is over. However the change also needs a greater level of self-confidence – we should overcome the fear of disappearance and be more willing to mix and befriend. How should our community institutions prepare for this scenario?

We are so taken up responding to crises that we rarely have the time to think about future scenarios or to undertake longer-term planning. I hope the new office-bearers will be able to improve on our record as far as this is concerned and my thoughts here can be put in the pot as well.

We pray to Allah Subhaanahu Ta'la to guide us and bless us with all that is good. May He forgive our shortcomings and accept all our efforts.

*By (the Token of) Time (through the ages),
Verily Man is in loss,
Except such as have Faith, and do righteous deeds, and (join together) in the
mutual teaching of Truth, and of Patience and Constancy.*

Wa-salaam

Iqbal AKM Sacranie

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