

Secretary General's Address
To the Annual General Meeting of the General Assembly

In The Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Respected Chairman, Distinguished guests, Brothers and Sisters.

A year has now passed since the onerous responsibility of Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain was given to me. It has been a turbulent and testing year to say the least.

In the course of my talk today, I hope to touch on issues related to the MCB's ongoing work with the government and political establishments, alongside Muslim participation in civil society, our own 'Connecting with the Community' initiative and the MCB's internal development.

Forest Gate and the 'war on terror'

My induction into the job started with a visit to Forest Gate in the wake of the high-profile botched arrests of alleged Muslim terrorism suspects. Nothing could highlight more vividly than this episode, the shape of things to come: the dilemma the MCB faces daily, of managing a balancing act between our national security and human rights.

I visited the area within a few days of the raid and spoke to the affected family and the community at large. The anger was palpable, especially amongst the younger generation, concerning the way in which the raids were carried out. It was felt by many that the police action was over the top and disproportional. The position that the MCB maintains is that police and counter terror raids must be intelligence led and the Police and security services must be able to assess the objectivity of the source before it assesses the intelligence. It is not unusual for faulty intelligence to be fed for the purpose of misleading security services. We need to ensure that intelligence is processed with community input. It must take on board seriously the criminalising affect that anti-terror raids have upon the wider Muslim community. Otherwise, the community will feel victimised and stereotyped and the police and intelligence services may not get the whole-hearted support and understanding of the community without which any counter terror campaign cannot be successfully waged.

It is also pertinent to raise here the recent media reports of the Police now being given even wider powers to stop and question without even having to show any reasonable grounds. If it is approved this will go even beyond the notorious SUS laws of the 1970s and 1980s which specifically targeted the black youths and caused such serious disturbances and riots in the major cities of Britain. No one wants to go back to those days again. So my request to the politicians, policy makers and law and order agencies - please let us pause and think whether these proposed laws are going to deliver the outcomes which we all are seeking.

Nearly 22,700 stop and searches took place in the year up to last September under Section 44. However, out of these thousands of stops there were only 27 terrorism-related arrests. These statistics which have already shown very poor should be a lesson for us. Legislations being rushed through in haste hardly ever deliver results and this problem requires more than giving ever-increasing powers to the police and must be accompanied by genuine political dialogue, and more importantly identifying the causes of the problem. We are in dangerous territory and times and it is ultimately up to the elected government to maintain public safety without eroding our civil liberty.

It would seem there is a growing gap between Muslims and the political and media establishments concerning the community's role in British society. The good image of an entire community is tarnished overnight for the misdeeds of a handful of mindless young men. We urged the government to initiate a Judicial Public Inquiry into the events of 7/7, but sadly this has been continuously being denied. A new and persistent barrage of attacks is daily heaped on the MCB, mainstream Muslim organisations and the Muslim community at large. It gives the impression of an open season of Muslim and Islam bashing, seemingly orchestrated by the British chapter of neo-cons in politics and media.

Naturally, the whole community is perturbed and confused. People are asking what, after all, is the agenda? Why are those supposedly entrusted with the responsibility to foster cohesion among communities, bent on wrecking it? However, time and again it is proved beyond any shadow of doubt that the negative stereotyping of Muslims is plainly wrong. For instance, in a Channel 4 NOP national survey last spring an overwhelming 82% of Muslims said they felt that they were a part of Britain, of these 45% felt this very strongly and 37% felt this fairly strongly (37%). Gallup's finding in a latest survey in London made the startling discovery that more Muslims (57%) than non-Muslims (48%) identified strongly with Britain. Muslims are more likely than the general public to express confidence in the police (78% versus 69%) and other UK democratic institutions, e.g., judicial system (67% versus 55%) and elections (73% versus 60%).

Renewing our engagement with Civil Society

So, to a large extent ignoring the politically motivated discourse from Whitehall and Westminster village we have decided to invest our time and efforts in cultivating more friends within civil society and strengthening our existing links with the community at large. We have reaped a great reward.

As a result, we have developed solid relations with the TUC, the Mayor of London and GLA, the LDA, the NUS, the National Youth Agency of which I am proud to be a patron, and a range of other civil society organisations. We work closely with the Interfaith Network and greatly value Brian Pearce's contribution in this field. The MCB actively supported the 2012 Olympic bid and a number of MCB personalities were ambassadors in the success of this bid. I am now fortunate enough to be a board member of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Para Olympic Games - LOCOG.

I was honoured to be invited to and given the privilege of addressing the last TUC annual conference in Brighton and in the spirit of reciprocity I am very happy that Brendan Barber, the General Secretary of the TUC, is here with us today as our Guest of Honour in the morning session.

The TUC is a major national institution promoting and championing the rights of the working people of this country. A very large number of Muslims working in the various sectors of the economy are members of the numerous trade unions which make up the TUC. The TUC has signed a memorandum of understanding with the MCB in which all its affiliate unions pledge to resolutely fight Islamophobia and all forms of discrimination. The MCB will, through its affiliates, undertake to promote the good work of the TUC and encourage Muslims to join and participate in their workplace trade unions. As part of our partnership the TUC and MCB organized a joint seminar in Congress House on "The Muslim Community at work: Socio-economic Issues".

Our mutual solidarity is exemplified by the support shown when the Conservative Party issued a report early this year criticising Muslims and vilifying the MCB. The Mayor of London Ken Livingstone, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber, Sadiq Khan MP and Christina Odone wrote a letter to the Guardian entitled 'Attacks on the MCB are unacceptable', noting that Cameron's speech and the Policy Exchange paper reveal undue conflation of organisations such as the MCB with the likes of the BNP. Their joint letter stated that "Such comparisons legitimise the BNP....The

unnecessary attacks this week on the MCB and the exclusion of racism as an issue that has to be addressed are unacceptable”.

Regional TUC and MCB affiliates have started working in some areas. The main issue at hand is linking up Imams and mosques with local TUC representatives.

For the record, I'd like to state that the Islam-bashers have failed in their key objective of driving a wedge between Muslims and the rest of the nation. The response from the Muslim community has been measured and mature. The collective reaction has been balanced and marked with dignity and responsibility. Civil society groups from all communities expressed their solidarity with the Muslim community in their continuous defence of civil liberty and human rights. A motion most recently put forward at the University and College Union (UCU) annual conference condemned the demonisation of Muslim students on campus and called on staff to 'oppose the ethnic profiling of students and staff for immigration control or security purposes.'

Launch of the 'Muslims in London' Report

In October 2006 I, alongside the London Mayor Ken Livingstone, jointly launched the report 'Muslims in London', a groundbreaking report that brings together statistics and information from a variety of sources in a single, easily accessible volume. It also documents the needs of the community and identifies policy initiatives. The report is a role model for other major cities in the UK and even for mainland Europe. The report makes a number of recommendations for work by the Mayor, Government, Borough Councils and public bodies including the MPS and LDA to improve monitoring and research, investigate direct and indirect discrimination and improve the representation of Muslims in local, regional and national government.

The MCB's London Affairs Committee has been closely involved in its preparation. At the launch Mayor Livingstone noted: "London's future success and prosperity as a global city depends on our ability to welcome and respect people from all over the world. One in eleven Londoners is Muslim and the London's Muslim communities, in all their diversity, must play an essential part in the life of our city. However Muslims in London face serious discrimination and prejudice. London's Muslims have the lowest rates of employment of all the faith groups. Only 15 per cent of Muslim women aged 25 and over work full time compared with 37 per cent of women in the general population. Muslims are disproportionately victims of religiously aggravated crime, more so than any other faith".

'Connecting with the Community' Initiative

At the very outset of my new term I decided to place connecting with the community at the top of my priorities and announced this intention in my acceptance speech at the MCB June 2006 AGM on my election as the Secretary General. I devoted five weeks of my annual summer holiday to this programme, invited colleagues and other leaders to join me as and when possible.

The MCB is seen by some as both London-centric and comprising of a fairly select group of individuals who interact primarily with the government and civic institutions, rather than with the Muslim community at large. This was the first time that such wide-ranging and numerous visits across the three countries of England, Scotland and Wales had been undertaken. We connected numerous communities, including their youths, women and Ulama and these were widely covered by the media.

A number of senior leaders of MCB joined me in various legs of the tour as and when time permitted. They include Dr Daud Abdullah, the Deputy Secretary General, Dr Akber Mohammed Ali, the Assistant Secretary General, Br Iqbal Sacranie, Br Tahir Alam, Hasan Salim Patel, Dr Manazir Ahsan, Qari Mohammad

Ismail, Mufti Barakatullah, Dr Jamil Sherif and the regional and local affiliates of MCB. I would like to thank all the individuals in all the cities who put in tremendous efforts to make the visits a huge success.

The initial tentative plan was to visit 16 cities; however the demand from the communities meant we had to include more cities in the tour programme. Some cities such as Birmingham, Leicester and Manchester had to be visited more than once to attend annual and other large conferences organized by our affiliates. So, last summer we visited 22 cities: Burnley, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Batley, Dewsbury, Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Blackburn, Brighton, Newcastle, Bristol, Gloucester, Cardiff, Leicester, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Luton and London,

I was able to visit Muslim youth clubs and gyms and exchange views with the young people. Despite the short duration of the visits, I along with other members of our MCB roadshow, were able to meet with various prominent personalities within the Muslim community and also highlight the work of the MCB enabling it to reach a substantial audience and cross-section of the grass-roots community.

The core message we tried to convey is the need for greater unity in our own community at this very challenging time that our British nation, our Qawm, is passing through. We listened to the hopes and aspiration as well as criticism and concern of so many people and tried to provide honest and convincing replies. We explained why along with the vast majority of the British public the MCB firmly believes that our government's mistaken and grossly unfair foreign policies are making us more insecure. However, we urged Muslims to reach out and make alliances with good and fair minded peoples of all faiths and none, to work towards a better and safer Britain which will make us all proud. We also discussed enlisting the greater involvement of all sections of our community including women and youth in the affairs of our community so that they feel at ease in the wider society.

Members of the community expressed the wish that such visits should not be one-off events and clearly wanted to see more in the same vein. It was felt that there is a clear need to make MCB more visible in the provincial cities including a specific request from Scotland to perhaps consider devolving the work of the MCB, for which a working group has been formed in Glasgow. This initiative needs to be continued, not least because of the repeated attempts, from various quarters, to undermine the MCB's credibility by questioning how representative it actually is. We strongly feel that our community's tremendous potentials need to be harnessed and developed to strengthen our society. It is crucial that these visits are extended. We firmly believe that we need to encourage more young people and women to take part in our committee works and we need to make more space within our MCB structure so they can play a more creative, dynamic and self-fulfilling role.

Personally, I have found this tour rewarding and informative. This has given me enough assurance that while we are passing through a challenging period there is tremendous potential in our community to turn them into opportunities with the blessings from Allah (SWT). I appreciate only too well how time-consuming and draining these visits can be: my gratitude to all those in MCB head office who worked behind the scenes to facilitate this. May Allah (SWT) bless all those who were involved in it.

Ruth Kelly and the MCB response

I now move on to another much publicized saga, that of Ruth Kelly's public condemnation of MCB in her speech on 11 October 2006. This will probably go down in history as a kafkesque episode in the current government's handling of affairs with the Muslim community. We at the MCB made a considered response to her speech, but unfortunately instead of responding to us in a transparent manner Ruth Kelly sent her response to our letter to the media first. We clearly articulated in

our letter the feelings of a very large section of the Muslim community on the various prevalent government policies and practices.

We at the MCB look forward in earnest to working in partnership with the new Prime Minister and his team to promote a truly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith Britain where all its citizens are afforded equal opportunity and treated with dignity and respect without any fear or favour. That is the vision for a new and equitable Britain we should all be striving towards.

Lebanon and the MCB Open Letter to the Prime Minister

As British Muslims we retain the right, alongside the rest of the population, to support the government where we think that support is deserved for the greater good of the country but also to retain our inalienable democratic right to criticise the government where we think its policies are wrong and harmful to the national strategic interests of the country. The MCB has always wholeheartedly supported democratic institutions and their associated processes in this country of ours. We have made it our duty to ensure that all our affiliates, now numbering in excess of five hundred, and their respective memberships along with the wider Muslim community that make up the whole of Britain, take part in all the local, regional and national democratic and electoral processes and practices.

Countless individuals and friends associated with MCB are local councillors, Members of Parliament and politically active members of the wider society. We now warmly welcome the newly elected first Muslim Member of the Welsh Assembly and the first Muslim Member of the Scottish Parliament. This further demonstrates how dearly the Muslims in Britain have taken to their heart the democratic institutions and customs of our nation within a single generation of their settling in this country. Furthermore, this clearly demonstrates how those who say that the Muslims in Britain are isolated and segregated are so very wrong.

In view of this impeccable democratic tradition within the Muslim community in Britain we are offended when it is suggested that our open letter to the Prime Minister on the issue of Israel's unjustified and unwarranted war against Lebanon last summer and our government's shameful inaction in the international foray amounted to an attempt to "blackmail" British foreign policy. This underlines the fact that certain elements do not consider Muslims in Britain as due citizens of this country nor do they have larger, strategic British national interests in their hearts or minds. Such riposte aimed at the MCB is both shameful and disgraceful and I just pray and hope that in future more sane and intelligent people will prevail and greater wisdom is shown.

I want to make it crystal clear that the MCB, with the greater British national strategic interests in mind, will continue to criticize current British government policies and practices in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and the wider Middle East. We at the MCB will continue to uphold the international legal right of all peoples to defend their national independence and sovereignty and the right of subjugated people to national self-determination. These are the first principles upon which the United Nations was founded and we shall cherish these democratic rights of peoples till eternity.

MCB's Internal Development and Evolution

Office Infrastructure

Moving on to internal matters, the MCB offices were moved during this last year from a one room basement office near Stratford to a self contained Office Unit near Whitechapel. The new office is fully equipped and capable of supporting eight staff members and three Office Bearers. The availability of this office space coupled with the appointment of an Executive Director has added new impetus and energised the support provided to the volunteers whose valuable contributions are now better coordinated. The office structure improvements have only been possible due to the

financial commitment from one philanthropist, Br Mohammad Arif Zabadne, who has shouldered the responsibility for the quarterly rent.

Other areas of MCB's Internal Development, e.g., 1) MCB Registration as a Company Limited by Guarantee, 2) MCB's 10th Year Anniversary events, 3) Policy Seminar Series, 4) MCB Survey and HMD participation, 5) MCB Projects, including a) Books for Schools, b) Footsteps Project, c) Leadership Development Programme, d) Mosques-100 Capacity Building project and e) Mosques and Imam National Advisory Board or MINAB - are discussed in the rest of the Annual report.

A number of important Consultations and Documentation were done in the last year, they are;

- 1 The Research and Documentation Committee or REDOC Briefing Paper in January 2007. "Our Stand on Multiculturalism, Citizenship, Extremism."
- 2 REDOC response on ONS Consultation on Ethnicity, Identity, Religion and Language question 2011 Census Test in January.
- 3 The Public Affairs Committee's in-depth response to the Conservative Party National and International Security Group's incompetent interim report on national cohesion: 'Uniting the Country'.
- 4 The Education Committee's launch of 'Towards Greater Understanding: meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools' in March 2007.
- 5 The MCB and TUC's joint seminar on 'The Muslim Community at work: Socio-Economic Issues' at Congress House in April 2007.

Conclusion and Way forward

In this tenth year of the MCB's life we can truly be proud of our remarkable success story. We have charted a journey accosted by challenges and a schedule of works far wider in range and more daunting than we could have possibly anticipated at the outset of our voyage. Together we defeated attempts to drive a wedge between the Muslim community and the wider community. We faced these and many other challenges with determination, faith and courage. Our community has grown more mature than ever and thus redoubled their effort to engage even more with the wider society.

The task of giving voice to an otherwise voiceless community, working with them and for them to make our mark in the overall tapestry of our national landscape by contributing to the common good is undeniably demanding. Serving the Muslim community is in many ways the essence of the MCB, and therefore staying close to the community is vital for us. The community engagement initiatives injected new life and enthusiasm into the MCB. Never before have we visited so many cities, met so many people and held so many meetings and conferences in the regions. It brought us ever closer to our community and helped us to know first hand what is happening on the ground and respond to their hopes and concerns. The MCB has always believed that it must put the community first, it is from community focus whence our strength is drawn.

The community focus does not, however, mean that we are any less mindful of our greater societal responsibilities. In the nationwide tours which I described to you earlier, I tried to present the idea of 'Qawm' or British nation which includes all of our fellow citizens. They may not be part of the 'Muslim Ummah', but they are our 'Qawm'. The Qur'an repeatedly quotes the Prophets calling their people, both Muslim and non Muslims alike, as 'Ya Qawmi' - O my nation! This is what the Qur'an means when it says:

*'and do good to ...the neighbour who is near of kin
and neighbour who is not of kin'.
(The Qur'an 4:36)*

Anything that is community focused galvanises and reinforces our determination to work even more for the nation as a whole. A community can only progress when the whole nation prospers, and it follows that all our communities must have a sense of belonging to this greater British nation. We sink or swim together. While the prophets of doom are busy spreading panic about how few Muslims identify themselves as British, another groundbreaking research by two academics of the London School of Economics published no more than a fortnight ago in LSE Magazine (Summer 2007) proved otherwise. Using responses from UK Labour Force Survey of almost one million people Professor Alan Manning and Sanchari Roy found that 99.2 percent Muslims in this country identify themselves as British. As opposed to 96.1 percent Hindus and 95.1 percent Sikhs, even 0.1% more than the Christians. This only goes to reinforce my point made at the outset that our first generation Muslims have integrated almost seamlessly into the mainstream body politic of this country.

But more important for us is to prepare ourselves to assume the mantle of duty that such assertion of identity places upon us – to make even greater contribution towards the common good of this nation. This indeed is the motto of the MCB – ‘Working for the Common Good’. It is no longer enough to be concerned only about our jobs, our housing, our schools and our youth; we must equally be concerned about all these issues for the rest of our society. We must remember we will never succeed to save Muslim youth from drugs and crime unless we try to save the rest of the youth of our nation. Issues of employment, housing, education, environment, health and security are not only Muslim issues; they simultaneously affect the whole society. We have a duty to join the rest of the country in pressing for change and improvement in all these areas and any that arise in the future of our nation and work tirelessly for our collective peace, security and prosperity.



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