

THE MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN



14 October 2006

Mrs Ruth Kelly MP
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Elland House, Bressenden Place
London,
SW1E 5DU

Dear Secretary of State,

I was not able to attend your speech 'Britain: our values, our responsibilities' on Wednesday 11th October. I only came to be notified by a DCLG official about your talk the evening before, and I found that the timing clashed with a meeting I already had in my diary between a delegation from the MCB and the Home Secretary, Dr John Reid (a meeting which turned out to be very constructive).

Anyhow, I have now been able to read your entire speech and would like to offer the following observations:

- a) We fully share your conviction that core values such as respect for the law, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, respect and responsibility for others, should be adhered to and defended by all sections of British society.
- b) The Muslim Council of Britain, as the UK's largest and most diverse independent Muslim umbrella body has, since its inception in November 1997, sought to develop a British Muslim discourse centred on the themes of integration, higher educational attainment and working for the common good of all British citizens. In the past nine years, we have launched successful initiatives in schools, prisons, hospitals, mosques and local communities due to our longstanding partnership with over 400 affiliated Muslim organisations across the country. We have a democratically elected leadership whose members are elected every two years and we believe the MCB's grassroots structure and resilience is unparalleled among Muslim organisations in the West.
- c) You say that in their anti-terror efforts the police will occasionally make mistakes, but that these mistakes should not be seized upon 'to falsely suggest that the Police are the enemy rather than the terrorists.' We would certainly agree with this and in a letter that was published in The Times on 8th June 2006 following the tragic raid in Forest Gate, London, we added that 'if the Police make mistakes - as they inevitably will because of the very nature of this kind of intelligence work - then it is equally important that these are duly acknowledged. This is not a matter of apportioning blame, but of maintaining trust and building a genuine partnership to defeat a terror threat that looks as if it will be with us for some years to come.'
- d) We would concur with your assessment that our country's foreign policy is not 'anti-Muslim overall'. However, in light of many other factors, including the leaked memo

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from the Joint Intelligence Committee in April 2005 which stated that the Iraq war "has reinforced the determination of terrorists who were already committed to attacking the west and motivated others who were not" and also the recent remarks by the Head of the British Army, Sir Richard Dannatt, in which he said "I don't say that the difficulties we are experiencing around the world are caused by our presence in Iraq, but undoubtedly our presence in Iraq exacerbates them," we have cause to wonder whether some of our foreign policies are, in fact, contributing towards undermining Britain's national security.

You may recall that in April 2004, more than 50 former British Ambassadors, High Commissioners, Governors and senior international officials, including some who had long experience of the Middle East, sent an open letter to the government appealing for an end to some of our policies in the Middle East 'which are one sided and illegal' and indeed, 'doomed to failure'.

- e) You say you accept that people and organisations have a right not to attend the Holocaust Memorial Day and yet add that you 'can't help wondering why those in leadership positions who say they want to achieve religious tolerance and a cohesive society would choose to boycott an event which marks, above all, our common humanity and respect for each other. When society's core values are transgressed, it can, as a minimum, lead to resentment. But at worst if we fail to assert and act to implement our shared values this makes us weaker in the fight against extremism and allows it to flourish.'

Your suggestion that the MCB is not fully committed to religious tolerance and community cohesion merely on the basis of a single criterion of non-attendance at the HMD is both inaccurate and absurd. Since when has the achievement of community cohesion been dependent on attending the Holocaust Memorial Day? We find it most patronising to be lectured to in this way. The MCB has always been, and remains, fully engaged in bridge-building with all sections of British society, including with other faith groups. We have often taken the lead in bringing together faith leaders in the pursuit of peace (for example, our participation in the Interfaith Centre at the Millennium Dome, our goodwill reception at the Commonwealth Institute, etc).

It may be that you are not aware, or have not been correctly informed, that the MCB had always stated from the outset in 1999 when the idea of a Holocaust Memorial Day was first mooted by the Home Office, that we would be honoured to participate in such a commemoration provided that it gave equal respect to the innocent victims of all genocides and mass killings around the world, regardless of their racial or religious background. This is a fundamental Islamic principle. We cannot accept that some people are more worthy of remembrance than others purely on the basis of their race or religion. For that reason, we have called and continue to call for a more appropriately named Genocide Memorial Day. You say that the HMD event marks 'our common humanity and respect for each other', but if that is really the case, then why the continued refusal to make it more inclusive by naming it a Genocide Memorial Day?

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The plain fact is that for some years now, a particular political interest group and certain allied journalists have tried to intimidate the MCB into remaining silent about the ongoing injustice and human rights abuses perpetrated against the Palestinian people. They have singularly failed in their ignoble aim. It now seems that those same individuals and groups are seeking, via the HMD, to coerce the MCB into abandoning a key principle – the equality of all human beings. We hope it goes without saying that this attempt will also not succeed, God Willing.

Moreover, the manner in which some persons have politicised the Holocaust Memorial Day is truly demeaning. As the MCB has repeatedly stated, the cry 'never again' should be for all people.

That said, we would assure you that we have met and continue to discuss these issues with the Holocaust Memorial Trust in order to find a way to bridge the differences between us.

In addition, we take this opportunity to reiterate that we are absolutely committed to working together to maintain good relations with Britain's Jewish community. Indeed, at national level, the MCB worked with the BOD on halal/sechita and circumcision issues and at the grass roots level, MCB affiliates - for example in Bristol - are engaged in project work with local Jewish bodies as a means of promoting better understanding. There are many other initiatives being carried out jointly by the two communities in a spirit of enhancing mutual understanding and respect.

It is important for you to be aware that the MCB, since its inception as a national representative body, has participated fully in all national events and ceremonies. We are also fully involved in our great national projects, such as the bid for the 2012 Olympics. In fact, two senior members of the MCB were Britain's Olympic bid ambassadors. Lately, I was privileged to be appointed as a board member of LOCOG (London Organising Committee of Olympic Games.) How do you think it was that Lord Coe was able to draw upon London's record of diversity and confident faith and ethnic communities in convincing the Olympic judges of the merit of our bid? Such positive statements could only be made because of the extensive network of partnerships forged by the formidable Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, and faith bodies like the MCB, over a number of years.

- f) We take note of your statement "It is not good enough to pay mere lip service to fighting extremism. I want a fundamental rebalancing of our relationship with Muslim organizations from now on". We note too, Secretary of State, your speech at the launch of a sectarian Muslim body on 19th July 2006, where you stated, "that is why we are looking to organizations and individuals across Muslim communities to be vocal and challenge the ideology of extremists". The inescapable and preposterous intimation behind these two remarks, when taken together, appears to be that mainstream Muslim organizations – including the MCB – have been half-hearted in confronting extremists. This is demonstrably untrue and deeply insulting.
- Following the 9/11 atrocities, it was the MCB which took the lead in organising a special national conference for UK Imams and 'Ulama (religious scholars)

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which declared that British Muslims had a duty to 'uphold justice, honour their 'social contract', state differences of opinion with government policy openly and in a measured tone, and do not indulge in any criminal or subversive activity whether against people or property.'

- Following the Madrid train bombings in March 2004, it was again the MCB which took the lead in writing to each and every mosque and Islamic institution in the UK to urge a concerted effort to work for the peace and security of all in our country. To this end, our letter appealed to all Islamic organisations in the UK 'to liaise with the local Police and give them the fullest cooperation in dealing with any criminal activity including the terrorist threat.' In case you have not been informed about this action, you can still read the full text of the MCB letter at: http://www.mcb.org.uk/media/presstext.php?ann_id=80
 - In September 2004, in an unprecedented move, the MCB produced half a million copies of a Pocket Guide on Rights and Responsibilities in which we prominently printed the Anti-Terror Hotline Number and in which we described the averting of possible terrorist attacks as "an Islamic imperative". The Pocket Guide was produced by the MCB working in close cooperation with the Association of Chief Police Officers. In case you have not seen the Pocket Guide, you can still download it from: <http://www.mcb.org.uk/PDF27Sept.pdf> . In addition, we hope your officials have informed you that the MCB has been working hard at updating the Pocket Guide and we hope to issue a newer version in the coming weeks.
 - In April 2005, with the UK General Elections just around the corner, the MCB published a special Voter Card for British Muslims urging them to 'get more actively involved and participate in the democratic process.' The voter cards were distributed to Mosques and Muslim community centres around the country with a view to channelling Muslim concerns about foreign policy, anti-terror legislation, underachievement in education etc, peacefully into increased participation in mainstream politics.
 - Secretary of State, there are many other pertinent examples we could have listed here of the work that the Muslim Council of Britain – a voluntary organisation - has diligently carried out in recent years to help combat extremism and safeguard our society, but we hope that these will be sufficient to dispose forever the canard that mainstream Muslim leadership bodies are not playing their due role in this common effort.
- g) We have noted your decision on funding and engagement with some amazement and deep concern. It appears clear to us that the publicly announced 'shift' in your policy regarding funding is arguably unlawful. The indication that only those organisations that agree with your particular strategy as the best way to fight extremism will receive your favours is another way of saying that only those who support your government can expect to receive public funds. Access to public funds should not and cannot be dependent on such considerations as on who is and who is not attending the Holocaust Memorial Day. As a responsible representative organisation the MCB has a duty to represent and reflect the views

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of its constituents fairly and if those views are unpalatable to the government of the day, so be it. The legal framework and traditions of our country do not allow the government to be vindictive or punitive in the use of public funds. As part of our constitutional duty to work for the common good of British society as a whole and our Islamic commitment to seek justice, the MCB will not be deflected from its duty or commitment to social cohesion and a just society by the possibility of being treated less favourably and unfairly by the government.

Let us state for the record that the MCB has never received a single penny from the government for its core work. Of course, we have exercised our right to apply for project funding – in common with other faith organisations. British Muslims happen to constitute the second largest faith group in the country and all studies indicate a consistently higher level of deprivation than in other faith groups. For instance, 33% of Muslims live in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Unemployment among British Muslims is three times higher than the national average. 69% of Muslim households are below the poverty level as compared with 22% nationally. This is just to give a few examples of our difficulties. And yet we have never sought or received any preferential treatment, contrary to popular misconceptions. Indeed, this unwarranted perception, which for some reason is not clearly refuted by the government, only serves to feed resentment and hatred towards British Muslims. We seek to have our community's needs considered on their own merit – not as a special case.

We know that there are a clique of Islamophobic journalists (including Nick Cohen, Michael Gove, Melanie Phillips, Martin Bright and John Ware), each with a sharp axe to grind, who have desperately and repeatedly tried to malign the MCB and other important Muslim institutions. They would clearly prefer that British Muslims be marginalised and represented by those individuals who are unwilling to speak out on matters of importance. Their actions do not come as any surprise to us. What is ironical, however, is that your department, which is meant to be promoting community cohesion, appears to have now also subscribed to a similarly blinkered vision. We believe that any attempt to sideline mainstream Muslim organisations will be both dangerous and counter-productive.

- h) It is, of course, right that the government seeks to speak to a wide range of Muslim organisations and individuals. It would be wise to distinguish the mainstream, democratically-constituted Muslim bodies from the mavericks. However, for your department to foster and promote new sectarian Muslim bodies with barely concealed links to US neo-cons is bound to raise justifiable concerns about your department's true intentions.

We should like to remind you that following the terrible 7/7 bombings, the government got together a group of Muslims and Muslim organisations in various working groups to come up with recommendations on how best to prevent extremism. At the time those chosen were regarded 'moderate' and 'representative'. However when their recommendations served to confirm the position of the MCB on the need for a judicial public inquiry into the events of 7/7 and that aspects of our foreign policy were a 'key contributory factor' behind the rise in extremism, the government appeared to have lost its enthusiasm to engage

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with those same Muslims and has done little since to implement their recommendations. You cannot expect to succeed by engaging in a merry go round to find Muslims who agree with you. Surely, you can best succeed if you work with and take on board the views of those Muslim organisations that are rooted in the community and who have a track record of delivery?

- i) Secretary of State, we would not be true to the real feeling within the Muslims of Britain if we did not raise one final and important point. In recent months there has been a veritable regular drip-feed of ministerial statements stigmatising an entire community. We have seen ministers' tours and even legislation being proposed on the premise that 'mosques are a problem'. We have been told to accept that greater numbers of Muslims will be stopped and searched and also to 'inform' on our children. This relentless barrage has been disheartening and you will understand our worry about where all this is leading. Some Muslims have even sought the MCB's advice on whether they should change their names in order to avoid anti-Muslim remarks. This is what happens when a community is singled out by those at the helm of affairs. This is a great diversion from the many other real social challenges facing all of us in Britain - of caring for our infirm and elderly, strengthening the family and giving a sense of purpose to the young. Our nation deserves a strategy to move forward - what we have been receiving instead from our leaders are hastily formulated responses masquerading as policy.

We would be happy to meet with you at your convenience should you wish to discuss some of the issues we have raised in this letter.

Let me reaffirm our commitment to continue our engagement and discourse with your department on the basis of mutual respect.

Finally, in view of your public remarks, please note that we shall be sending a copy of this letter to all mosques and local, regional and national Muslim organisations across the country, including, of course, those affiliated with the Muslim Council of Britain.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari
Secretary General
The Muslim Council of Britain

cc:

Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, MP, PC
Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, MP
Leader of the House of Commons, Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, MP
Home Secretary, Rt. Hon. Dr John Reid, MP
Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition, Rt. Hon. David Cameron, MP
Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Dr Menzies Campbell, MP