

Draft speech: Trade unions and the Muslim Community, 12th April 2007

Dr AbdulBari

It is a humbling experience to be speaking today at Congress House. I am grateful to Brendan for providing the bold leadership that has made today's event possible. It is also a privilege to be sharing the stage with Muhammad Taj, a veteran and courageous activist in the T&GWU. This is the union associated with the legendary Ernest Bevin. There is an interesting exchange recorded in the history books between President Roosevelt and Bevin around 1940. The President asked Bevin where he had been educated. Bevin, the newly appointed Foreign Secretary, replied,

"Sir, I gathered my knowledge on the hedgerows of experience".

This wonderful self description conveys the essence of the man – but it also conveys an attitude to life. Bevin's life was one of practicality and becoming immersed in the struggles to achieve what one holds dear – whether the struggle for a fair wage or the fight against facism. The trade union movement has deeply embedded values of fairness and solidarity and the Muslim community is grateful for the outstretched arm of friendship offered to us by Brendan in difficult times.

In January this year both the Tory leader and his policy team cast aspersions at Muslim organizations and indicated to the media that the Muslim Council of Britain and the British National Party to be at par. We are grateful to TUC General Secretary and others for their promptness in disabusing the Tory leader in a letter published in The Guardian. It stated,

"This comparison is false. The MCB calls for British Muslims to carry out only legal and peaceful activity and is opposed to racism. With over 400 affiliates, it is a body of Muslims in Britain which must be engaged with by decision-makers. Fascism is an ideology in whose name millions were

murdered on the basis of their race or beliefs. Such comparisons legitimise the BNP. We note that David Cameron claims there are 'five Berlin walls of division' but fails to list racism among them. The unnecessary attacks this week on the MCB and the exclusion of racism as an issue that has to be addressed are unacceptable".

Thank you for this intervention.

A framework for our partnership has been established in Motion 18 endorsed at the last Congress and the joint statement to work together in support for workplace justice and against Islamophobia. Some initiatives have commenced on this basis, like a proposed conference between Muslim organizations and trade unions facilitated by the London mayor Ken Livingstone, the unions' participation planned in Islam Expo in July, and also today's seminar.

There are two areas which I believe are important for me to cover at the outset of our programme. First, the MCB needs to present to you what it brings to the table in this partnership. Second, it is important that some sensitive issues that may be at the back of your minds are also put on the table. Some of these were raised in the course of the debate in Brighton. However I am aware that there are others as well. My colleagues and I are here to listen and learn, and if necessary, think again. I intend to be open and frank with you. This is what makes a partnership worth having.

To begin with, what MCB has to offer? This is three-fold. As I said in Brighton, we are ready to use our networks to raise awareness within the Muslim community of the values of union membership and the very important role which unions play. Most of the regional councils of mosques, and the larger independent mosques, are affiliates of the MCB. We have earned the trust of imams and Islamic scholars. So we can help unions in facilitating meetings between mosque imams and local union officers. We can advise you on the sorts

of promotional materials which will be culturally and religiously acceptable. If the imam is convinced of the merits of union membership, then this is the most effective way of gaining the support of the community. Trade unions have tremendous assets which should be marketed to Muslims. For example, not many know that union membership can provide access to legal professionals on workplace matters. Trade unions are also trusted for being independent of profit or commercial motives.

Secondly, the MCB has gained some expertise in the Employment regulations relating to direct and indirect discrimination at the work place on religious grounds. We have prepared a number of leaflets and guidelines. We have an interest in the law being used in a sensible manner, ensuring employees' needs are met, without placing unreasonable burdens on employers. For example, what do we do if a till operator in a supermarket is deeply troubled by handling alcohol and goes to the union rep? What happens if shift workers find the start of shift clashing with the break of the Ramadan fast? The MCB has access to a network of legal specialists and Islamic scholars to whom trade unions could direct such queries. .

Thirdly, the MCB can help you benefit from demographic trends. For example because of the age profile of Muslims, there are greater numbers of young people entering higher education and the labour market. Both ought to be tapped for union membership. You can reach out to them by introducing skills training programmes and again through promotional material that builds empathy and makes a connection.

I would now like to focus on some of the issues I picked up in Brighton, starting with our stand on gender equality and lifestyles. To begin with, the MCB itself is committed to opening up itself, mosques and community organizations to participation of women in decision-making roles. Among our three elected office-bearers, our treasurer is Mrs Unaiza Malik, who has brought to this role

tremendous expertise and professionalism. At our most recent national conference of mosque imams and trustees, held in London on 22nd March, there was a strong message from speakers from the MCB platform that our religious institutions should stop being a sort of men's club. A young imam who is a young leader within the MCB, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, shamed many with his accounts of female exclusion from mosques. We are working to change this culture through our recently launched '100 mosques capacity training' programme. It will make participating mosques aware of equal opportunities legislation and also the good practices followed at more enlightened institutions.

The MCB has no truck with homophobia. It is our religious belief that sexual relations take place within the institution of marriage between a male and a female. However our religion teaches fairness and justice. The Qur'an states:

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for God as witnesses to fair dealing (5:7)

Discrimination on the basis of religion, gender or class is unfair. So any harassment of, or discrimination on grounds of a person's sexuality is obnoxious.

The Gay rights issues will not go away, but what we seek to avoid is becoming bogged down in debates similar to those facing the Anglican Church when our priorities are elsewhere. We accept that a principle of multicultural Britain - a project that we support - is that we would treat others and we would like to be treated ourselves. But I cannot avoid stating that there are difficult areas like Sexual Orientation Regulations and adoption. Our stand here is similar to the Churches - that the natural milieu for raising children is within the setting of a traditional marriage. It is one of the areas where we may have to cordially agree to disagree.

A further sensitive issue is our stand on the Holocaust Memorial Day. The MCB was consulted by the Government in December 1999 on a 'Holocaust

Remembrance Day', as it was named at that time. In December 1999 we responded, stating

“ Without in anyway wishing to minimise the enormity of the Holocaust or create parity with what happened in Germany during the Nazi Rule, the Muslim Council of Britain strongly feels that it would be inappropriate not to remember and highlight these crimes against humanity at the same time as we remember the Holocaust. By focusing exclusively on the Holocaust we feel that the Government will not be successful in its objective because it could be seen to put less value on the lives of millions of people of faiths other than Jewish who suffered genocide because of their tribal affiliation and faith. The Muslim Council of Britain would like to see a Remembrance Day that is inclusive and is shared and owned by all sections of the British society and Europe. The Muslim Council of Britain notes that the consultation document acknowledges that “the troubling repetition of human tragedies in the world today restates the continuing need for vigilance...” We also note that one of the aims and objectives of the “Holocaust Remembrance Day is to “Reflect on recent atrocities that raise similar issues”. However the Muslim Council of Britain urges the Government not to miss this excellent opportunity to articulate its vision of a multi-cultural Britain by naming the Remembrance Day as European Union Genocide Remembrance Day rather than Holocaust Remembrance Day. The title conveys a powerful message. It needs to be more inclusive to be really effective and cohesive”.

I have given you this long extract because it explains our stand ever since. However decisions are not cast in stone, and the issue was reopened for debate in the MCB's Central Working Committee meeting in December 2006. The decision was again reached not to attend on 27th January 2007, but to conduct a survey of our affiliate's attitudes on the matter. The findings will inform us on our future position. We are also in dialogue with Stephen Smith, chairman of the

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. However what we object to strongly is heavy handed pressure to attend and making this the end-all and be-all litmus test of our commitment to shared values.

I will conclude by reiterating our commitment to engage in the political process and work in partnership and solidarity with you. We both believe in social justice and equal rights for all. We are also a community facing problems of discrimination and poverty, as some of the presentations later on will no doubt illustrate. A third of Muslims live in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods of the country. But we also have a lot going for us. There is our demographic profile that I have mentioned, and with youth comes optimism and energy.

The MCB's vision is of a multi-faith, pluralist society. As Benjamin Zephaniah said recently – the opposite of multiculturalism is monoculturalism. This is what the extreme right wing wishes for Britain. Colour racism has been subsumed within cultural racism, or Islamophobia.

There is an authoritarian and chilling wind sweeping Europe and there is no room for complacency. Almost every week an opportunist politician in Britain seems ready to tap into the streak of xenophobia which undeniably exists in our country as well. There was no need for Jack Straw to commence a debate on the veil, which is a matter of religious conscience and piety for only a small proportion of Muslim women. Similarly there was no need for the Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt to point a finger at Muslim doctors, with the suggestion that they breached the confidence of their Muslim women patients.

Muslims are here to stay. We have, we are, and God willing we will, contribute for the common good of all sections of society. I would like to conclude with a short extract from a paper written by our chairman, Taj, in which he talks about growing up in Bradford and the memories of his father:

In his last days some of his relatives wondered if he wanted to be buried among his family, near his birthplace. He dismissed the idea out of hand.

He wanted to be buried in the city that had become his home. The city in which children and grandchildren had been born. The city that had allowed him to work and build. The city that had recognised his contribution by sharing the burden of care with his family as illness overtook him.

He wanted to be buried in the city he was proud of.

Lord Herman Ouseley once said words to the effect that Bradford would be successful if Bradford's Muslims were successful. The same could perhaps be said of Britain as well.

Thank you.