

3 January 2003

Dear Sir,

RE: The Government's Race Equality Strategy

The Muslim Council of Britain (the MCB), having held consultations with its affiliates, is pleased to respond to the Home Office paper on the Government's Race Equality Strategy in the following terms:

As it said in its response to the Draft Report of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, the Muslim Council of Britain supports, commends and applauds the commitment shown by the present government to eliminate racial discrimination and racial harassment. Many initiatives taken by the government to translate its commitment are a matter of record and surely worthy of appreciation.

With particular reference to the Strategy Paper, we note with some degree of surprise that although, as one would expect, the race terminology used in the paper is generally consistent (ethnic minorities or minority ethnic groups) there are places where the outmoded and somewhat offensive phrase – Black and minority ethnic – is used. We strongly recommend that the use of Black be deleted. People of black colour are also minority ethnic or ethnic minority and there is no need therefore to make reference to or give separate recognition to colour. "Black" as a term of political power is no longer valid or acceptable. Islam transcends colour, race, ethnicity and nationality.

As the MCB has said before, the British society is no longer a black and white society. Thanks to the legislation and the determination of successive governments, the British society is not confronted by the evil of colour-based racism to the same degree as before. As times have moved on race has become less important. It does not mean that we should discard the laws that underpin this development or not support the strategy that is set out in your paper. It only means that we need to look at the British society afresh - without a vision that is tainted by colour and race. Islamophobia must receive the same degree of condemnation, as rightfully does anti-Semitism. Both are evil and yet law prohibits one and not the other. Faith and culture more than the skin colour or racial origin in the main determine the needs of people these days. We note your reference to the tragic disturbances that took place last summer in the North and we also note that these events have highlighted for you the tensions that exist in "some local areas between different communities". We respectfully suggest that this is an understatement of the problems that have been in the horizon for sometime and which might get worse unless race based politics gives way to faith based politics.

We remain deeply concerned and greatly dismayed that equality agenda of the government continues to place no value or weight on faith and belief. Despite clear evidence that large sections of the British community suffer from discrimination and

harassment on grounds of religion, the government has remained unconcerned and inactive. We believe that the government will not succeed in its broad mission of bringing about cohesion in the community unless it addresses the multi-faith dimension of our society. Although the Prime Minister and his Ministers often talk about the British society as being multi racial, multi cultural and multi faith, we do not yet have a law that gives protection to citizens and residents of Great Britain from discrimination on grounds of religion.

We believe that unless there is in place a legal framework that gives equal rights and protection to all irrespective of their colour, race, age, gender, belief and religion, the vision of a just and cohesive society will remain no more than a pipe dream. In the current legal framework, people of faith, in particular the Muslims, feel undervalued, marginalised and vulnerable.

We recognize that discrimination on grounds of religion will soon become unlawful in employment and training. This is entirely due to the EC initiative, which we greatly appreciate. Nevertheless the remit of protection is too narrow.

Since the government appears to be unwilling or unable to provide faith groups in Great Britain the protection to which they are entitled under international conventions, may we therefore ask the government to agree to give its citizens and residents the right to raise their individual complaints and concerns directly with the UN Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination. In this way at least we will have some form of protection.

In the current climate of hostility and great unease to which the Muslims are being subjected to, the government's continued failure to take on board the legitimate concerns of Muslims has the real and serious potential to undo all the excellent work that has been done in the field of race relations over the last many years.

The MCB urges the government yet again to put in place, without further delay, a legal framework that protects religions from vilification and gives people equal rights in all spheres of life irrespective of their religion and belief.

Yours faithfully

Iqbal AKM Sacranie OBE
Secretary General