

**Muslim Weekly Interview with  
Iqbal AKM Sacranie OBE  
Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain**

**19 May 2004**

**The MCB has been in existence for more than six years. To help our readers understand the activities of the MCB, please can you begin by explaining how the MCB came about?**

The MCB was formed after almost a decade of sustained groundwork and extensive consultation with existing Muslim organisations and with individuals around the country. The need to coordinate efforts on wider issues of common concern became more pressing in the course of the Rushdie affair. This had created a climate of trust and cooperation between many diverse groups.

The MCB was finally inaugurated on November 23 1997 at Brent Town Hall in Wembley by representatives of more than 150 Muslim organisations – local, regional and national bodies - from all parts of Britain including Northern Ireland. Today, the number of MCB affiliates stands at over 400 organisations, alhamdulillah.

The emergence of the MCB is a natural expression of Muslim solidarity and a sign of the growing maturity and confidence of British Muslims. It is an initiative of the community, led by the community, for the service of the community and the wider society.

**A few Muslim organisations have decided not to be part of the MCB. Why is this, and what steps are you taking to bring them on board?**

The Muslim community is a richly diverse community. It has many organisations and institutions with a distinguished history of service to the community. Some may feel that their identity may be compromised or their particular focus blurred by affiliating to a larger body. However, even though such institutions or organisations may not be part of the MCB, the MCB tries its best to inform and consult with these bodies on matters of common concern. At the level of personal contacts, it is true to say that there is a great deal of mutual warmth and solidarity prevailing.

However, it is also true to say that there are a few individuals and groups who have been highly critical of the MCB for a variety of reasons. One of the most prominent of these relates to the very question of ‘participating’ in or encouraging participation in the wider institutions of society. Part of our response to this has been to say that Muslims are part of British society and that they have both rights and obligations to fulfil towards the wider society. We are not a ghetto community. We believe that the carefully drawn up constitution of the MCB is based on principles that are informed and guided by the Qur’an and the Sunnah in all its aims, policies and procedures. We would welcome any institution or organisation that is willing to work with others for the common good. The MCB has a Membership Committee that works proactively to invite and encourage all Muslim organisations to affiliate. We are an inclusive body.

**What's your response to people that describe the MCB as 'Asian thing'?**

To those people who describe the MCB as an ‘Asian thing’ we request that they go through our membership and affiliate list and also see the composition of its Office Bearers, of the MCB’s Central Working Committee and its specialist committees. They will see reflected there a richly diverse community, ethnically and culturally from nearly all parts of the world. However, as I have said, we still have a lot of outreach work to do to get a full representation of all the communities that make up the mosaic of the British Muslim community.

### **How does the MCB acquire guidance on issues concerning Fiqh and Shari'ah?**

We are extremely fortunate to have in the MCB decision-making process access to the heads of all major Islamic institutions and heads of different schools of thought to whom we regularly refer issues that require guidance on matters of Islamic law. It is part of our Islamic duty to consult which we value immensely and that process is applied continuously.

One of the major strengths of the MCB is that representatives of nearly all Schools of Thought are affiliated members.

### **What is the MCB's relationship with the government? Some are critical that the MCB is too close to the government.**

Every government in the world today deals with matters that affect almost every aspect of the lives of individuals and communities, from birth to death. As citizens of this country, we have a role to play in electing the type of people who represent us. We have a duty to see that when elected, a government pursues policies that make for good governance, the good reputation and stability of our country. We have a duty to encourage what is right in both national and foreign affairs. Also, to campaign against what is wrong and harmful to the individual and society, both here and abroad. This principle is enshrined in our Social Contract.

The MCB also works with other campaigning bodies such as the Jubilee Debt Campaign which lobbies to reduce the crushing burden of debt that the poorest countries of the world suffer. The MCB has also been at the forefront of the campaign against the terrible wars unleashed against the land and the people of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As a recognised community in pluralist Britain, Muslims are disadvantaged in many respects. We need to see as a minimum that we have equal protection in law, for example, that other communities enjoy. That is why the MCB has been campaigning for a law to criminalise discrimination against Muslims on religious grounds, something that Jews and Sikhs enjoy, but not Muslims. That is why we have campaigned for and expressed our appreciation to the Prime Minister and the present government for giving approval to Muslim denominational schools.

Our meetings with and relationship with government and government departments can be seen to be based on principled and constructive engagement. If we are to bring about the much needed changes in areas where we are treated unfairly and unjustly then it is through constructive and principled engagement with the Government that will bring about the desired results.

### **The MCB is surely unable to put hard-hitting questions to the government (e.g. the occupation of Iraq and Palestine)?**

One has only to read through our press releases and the information appearing on our website ([www.mcb.org.uk](http://www.mcb.org.uk)) in respect of meetings with government officials on the issue of our opposition to the war in Iraq and occupation of Palestine to realise that we have been at the forefront of many campaigns against injustices. In many instances we also find it more effective to pursue the matters through our affiliates who focus on such matters

### **What are your links with other faith organisations in Britain?**

The MCB participates actively in the Inter-Faith Network which has representatives from all the major faith communities at national and local levels. One of the very active members in the MCB Dr Manazir Ahsan is a Vice-Chairman of the Inter-Faith Network, which has over the years which has not only brought together different faith communities to understand and respect each other but to build good relations between the communities and identify common values shared by all. For all our diversities and occasional differences, we place great value on developing

further our mutualities, especially within the members of the Abrahamic faiths. We have established direct contacts and engage in discussions with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi and Heads of other faith organisations. This has yielded some important practical results such as the preservation of the halal and shechita methods for preparing animals for food. We also work closely with the Hindu and Sikh community in areas of common interest.

**What do you think are the key achievements of the MCB, and how have these contributed to the quality of lives of British Muslims?**

The most important achievement of the MCB to date is to bring together the diverse sections of the community on one platform. The MCB is also, uniquely, a forum where all the leading Muslim organisations in the country are able to sit down together to discuss issues and formulate a way forward together. It is only through Allah's (swt) grace and favour that we have achieved this monumental task. Many such efforts have been carried out in the past but with little success.

A number of the MCB's successes can be reported such as the incorporation of the religion question in the 2001 Census, providing consultation on chaplaincy, the appointment of a Muslim prison advisor, the establishment of a hajj delegation, and campaigns on issues of morality and preserving family values. We have also published in the context of the current heightened frenzy against Muslims and Islam the MCB book "The Quest for Sanity" a book that has been highly praised and appreciated across communities. We have established regular bilateral meetings with the Secretary of State for all major Government departments. This gives us the opportunity to raise issues of concern at the very highest level of government machinery.

Most of our work is through specialised committees. Earlier this year, the MCB's media committee initiated vigorous protests to the BBC about the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim views expressed by the TV presenter Robert Kilroy-Silk. Very soon after, Kilroy-Silk was forced to step down from his show. The regular meetings with editors of mainstream media have helped to improve the much needed media coverage of Islam and the Muslim community. We have been instrumental in pursuing with media organisations undertakings to change inaccurate and damaging terminology such as "Islamic Terrorists" in their coverage.

MCBDirect, an initiative of ReDoc, is a groundbreaking Islamic portal which deals with the vast amount of requests we get for information. We recently launched the unique Books4Schools initiative to equip schools with the materials – books, artifacts, multimedia resources and support notes – that teachers need in order to present to our children with a correct understanding of Islam and Muslims.

The Business and Economic Affairs Committee have been successful in working with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to obtain certain Shari'ah compliant financial products and in campaigning with other groups for reducing the obscene burden of third world debt.

We were at the forefront to ensure that the good name of our affiliate Interpal was cleared by the Charity Commission of any wrongdoing, in spite of the sinister campaign to prevent them from carrying out their vital humanitarian work in Palestine.

The long campaign to bring about changes in legislation against religious discrimination partially paid off with the introduction of legislation which offered protection from religious discrimination and harassment in the workplace. We are continuing with our campaign to ensure that we have protection against religious discrimination in all other areas as well.

These ongoing successes all enable the full participation of Muslims in mainstream society so that we may work and live in and contribute for the betterment of this society with dignity and self respect.

**The achievements you mentioned are commendable and must also involve a lot of expense. How is all this funded?**

A unique feature of the MCB is the immense support from people of different backgrounds and professions who provide voluntary assistance and services. Our income is fairly limited and therefore substantial work is carried out fi-sabilillah. However, the MCB cannot rely on voluntary service alone. The Muslim community own the MCB and it is the community that has to provide not only moral but financial support so that the organisation can function in a professional and systematic way. Our main sources of income are through membership fees and donations from well-wishers and supporters of the MCB. Recently we have been successful with our applications for project funding for specialist projects such as for Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003.

**You are coming to the end of your second term as the Secretary General of the MCB. How does this term in office compare to the last? And how do you manage the enormous demand placed on your time?**

The Secretary General is just one of the seven Office Bearers of the MCB who work closely with Chairs from eighteen specialist committees. It is this collective effort and commitment that has produced the results outlined earlier. The MCB is not a leadership body. It provides a service to the community and the work it carries out will give due recognition of its importance. It is the MCB's work not the personalities that matter. The strength of the MCB was and continues to be in its grassroots membership. Without grassroots support the MCB's purpose of existence is defeated. We would only be respected within the community if we are able to address the concerns and issues affecting the community in a rational and effective manner.

From the outset, during the first term I have faced immense pressures and challenges and these have now multiplied although they are of a different nature. The first two years the challenges were to establish a new body as a credible voice of the Muslim community: an organisation that had affiliations across the country.

Since the impact of September 11, which has been felt in the second term of office, new challenges have arisen. The MCB has established itself as the leading Muslim organisation and commands respect across the Muslim Community as well as from outside the community. This recognition has raised the expectations of the community which are becoming increasingly difficult to meet in view of our meagre financial resources. It is the tremendous sacrifice of the office bearers and the chairs of the organisation who work voluntarily that has enabled us to gain that respect.

It is only through the grace of Allah that one survives through this continuously difficult period, whilst at the same time trying to fulfil the responsibility that one has undertaken. Naturally there are deficiencies in our workings but the constant support and assistance provided by many friends within and outside the MCB keeps us going.

**What do you think the future holds for a) the British Muslim community, and b) the MCB?**

The future of the British Muslim community is bound up very closely with the state of our society as a whole. We can only be a strong and vigorous community if the wider society is stable and strong. Neighbourhoods and communities that are now blighted by anti-social behaviour and criminality are a threat to all. This is why the MCB has always stressed the need for all Muslims, in concert with others, to work for the common good of society as a whole.

There are of course specific disadvantages that the Muslim community faces. Many, through demonisation from parts of the media for example, see Muslims totally erroneously as a threat from within. We have to counteract this totally false image with wisdom. I firmly believe that our

dear religion, properly understood and projected, can only serve as a source of immense good not only for the Muslim community but for the society as a whole.

Within the Muslim community, so many of our young people suffer from under-achievement in education and consequent unemployment and poor job opportunities. Many do not have the basic minimum level of Islamic education to allow them to fulfil their Islamic duties properly. Many do not have the social milieu to encourage them to grow morally and socially as they should.

The challenges are enormous. The work of the MCB has only just begun. We all have a lot of work to do. We can only do this work as an organised body with active support from all. And, insha Allah, we are optimistic, as our faith requires us to be.

وتعاونوا على البر والتقوى ولا تعاونوا على  
الإثم والمعصية

سورة المائدة آية رقم ٢

“Help one another to virtue and God-consciousness and do not help  
one other to sin and transgression.”

*The Qur'an, 5: 2*