

House of Commons Eid Reception 16 January 2006

Speech by Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain

My Lords, your Excellencies, parliamentarians, friends and respected colleagues, I'm very pleased to be here this evening to mark the celebration of Eid ul-Adha this year.

Whilst this is a day of celebration we must reflect on the tragedies that have occurred this year. The first is of course, the horror of the stampede in Mina, Saudi Arabia in which hundreds of pilgrims lost their lives whilst performing the stoning ritual. We pray that Allah accept the Hajj and receive into His mercy the lives of those that were killed.

The second, the devastating earthquake in Pakistan which claimed the lives of so many thousands of people. We continue to do all we can to support the relief efforts to rebuild communities and villages that have been so devastatingly affected.

And finally, closer to home, the tragic events of July 2005. We remember the lives of those that were killed in the bomb attacks in London, and the shared sorrow of their families and their friends.

Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of the Sacrifice is the second of the two main celebratory days in the Muslim calendar. It is day which marks the monumental sacrifice Abraham was asked to perform in his duty to God; the sacrifice of his beloved son Isma'il.

The day itself and all the rites of Hajj, during which period the celebration falls, is a perpetual reminder to Muslims and others of two important aspects of Islam. Firstly, that of the notion of sacrifice. Of one's unremitting devotion to God and the performance of duties that faith demands. The second, is the common bases that all revealed religions share - the figure of Abraham. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad, in speaking of the Hajj and the rites performed therein referred to them as 'walking in the footsteps of Abraham'.

The Hajj is the symbol par excellence of the unity and breadth of the Muslim ummah; the Muslim nation globally. Pilgrims gather from all corners of the world to perform a fundamental pillar of their faith. Pilgrims that are united in a single faith no matter what their country of origin. The Hajj encapsulates this spirit and reality of the universality of Islam. That it is a religion for all mankind. Islam does not differentiate between individuals based on narrow restrictions such as race or ethnicity. It embraces all that submit to the Will of God.

Celebrating diversity whilst holding fast to a common core set of values is also a feature of the nature of British multiculturalism. It is with great enthusiasm that we welcome the Chancellor's comments on our celebrating 'Britishness' through the establishment of a day that celebrates all things 'British'.

This is particularly important for the younger generation that needs a sense of belonging. Almost one third of Muslims are aged 0 to 15 years. 34% of the

Muslim community is under the age of 16, compared with 20% nationally. 52% of Muslims in Britain are aged 24 and under.

We welcome such an open and public recognition and celebration of Britishness which itself is of an inclusive nature. It recognises the diversity of our communities in our country and speaks of our taking great pride in our being a multicultural state.

We also welcome the Prime Minister's '**RESPECT** agenda' and its hope to invigorate local communities with a communal spirit of respect and responsibility:

Muslims in being taught that they 'bear witness' to God are taught that their behaviour, their mannerisms, their speech, their conduct, everything they do and say is testimony to their faith, a faith built on the foundations of a firm belief in God and on the values of justice and equality. Muslims are therefore taught that their being responsible, conscientious and moral are all religious requirements; not civic ones singularly, but ones which resonate with the teachings of their faith. This then, for Muslim, is what citizenship entails.

A shared society must be a society in which all citizens are valued equally and in which all communities are free and able to contribute to public life. A shared society must be an inclusive society.

The fruits of this level of engagement and inclusion can be seen in the recent report published by the European Monitoring Service on Racism and Xenophobia (November 2005) on **The impact of 7 July 2005 London bomb attacks on Muslim Communities in the EU** which found that:

"the strong and united stand taken by the UK Government, police and community leaders, including Muslim community representatives, in condemning both the bombings and any retaliation, has played a major part in preventing an anti-Muslim backlash. This joint action was decisive in countering a short-term upsurge in anti-Muslim incidents in the immediate aftermath of the bombings."

It is worth pausing to make mention of the importance of the Prime Minister's declaration that the tragic events of July 2005 were NOT 'Islamic' in any sense and that the British Muslim community and Islam should not be held responsible for the criminal acts of the few.

The Police response that assured all British Muslims that any attack on their persons, their properties and their places of worship would be pursued and prosecuted as criminal acts in accordance with the law should not be underestimated in terms of its results.

And lastly, mainstream British society and its appreciation that Muslims in Britain do not and will not allow their religion to be abused by the few who harbour ill intent shows how far we've come as a multicultural society. The true teachings of Islam are now better understood by the British people. The

sheer number of emails received by the MCB that conveys an understanding that Islam does not preach hatred or violence is reflective of this.

The MCB has always sought partnership and dialogue in its pursuit of the common good for society. This is clearly demonstrated in the many and varied campaigns we have been involved in over recent years. For example, our support for the Living Wage campaign lead by The East London Citizens' Organisation (TELCO); a broad alliance with faith communities to campaign for the inclusion of the faith identity question in the 2001 Census; our support for third world debt relief through Jubilee 2000; working together with other faith communities to ensure that our institutions (e.g. armed services) have chaplaincies that serve all faiths; the joint efforts in partnership with Jewish community organisations for the right to have Halal/Kosher foods; and working with the police service through the Muslim Safety Forum to increase community confidence and co-operation.

I offer these humble examples as indicative of our willingness to work in partnership with others and contribute to civil society. We recognise that there is much more that can still be achieved and are ready to play our part for the betterment of our society.

I hasten to add that the strength of our multicultural society and the robustness and vigour of our democracy is built on the foundation of our being able to agree to disagree on matters in which we differ. Our differences in theology and morality does not and should not undermine or endanger our capacity to work together as Britons for the good for our society in collaboration with others.

It pleases me that I should speak these words on a day that marks the unflinching devotion of Abraham. As the patriarch of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, I hope his enduring example, which is celebrated on Eid al-Adha, continues to inspire and remind us of our common heritage and all the good that emanates from the true practise of belief in God and adherence to justice.

A Muslim community that finds itself at ease and is self-confident will translate into a Britain that has something great and unique to offer to the world.

Muslims who are true to their faith, have proved how much they value humanity, law and order, family and community ethos, enterprise and social harmony. Islam teaches us to stand up for truth and justice and to speak out against oppression and injustices in a lawful and civilised manner. This is part of our religious obligation. We should reject any victim mentality and positively engage with others to create social harmony and stability.