

ISLAMOPHOBIA ISSUES, CHALLENGES and ACTION

REPORT BY THE
RUNNEYSMEDE COMMISSION ON BRITISH MUSLIMS AND
ISLAMOPHOBIA

RESPONSE FROM

THE

MMUSLIM

CCOUNCIL

OF

BBRITAIN

**Boardman House
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(20 November 2003)

THE MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN

RESPONSE

TO

Islamophobia – issues, challenges and action

IDENTITY, INCLUSION, COHESION AND EQUALITY IN MODERN BRITAIN

A report by the Runnymede Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia

In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is the largest Muslim umbrella organisation with over four hundred national, regional and local Muslim bodies and associations including mosques as its affiliates.
- 1.2 The MCB welcomes and commend the Commission's initiative in producing the consultative document. It has come at a time of great need. It is the view of the MCB that very little progress has been made in tackling the horror of Islamophobia in the United Kingdom after it had been brought into sharp focus by the Commission in its report published in 1997. Whilst we recognise the adverse impact of international politics on the perception of Islam generally and Muslims living in the United Kingdom, we strongly feel that the government has done little to discharge its responsibilities under international law to protect its Muslim citizens and residents from discrimination, vilification, harassment, and deprivation. The legal framework required to articulate standards of behaviour and to bring about a cohesive society remains as inadequate as it was when the report was published by the Commission in 1997.
- 1.3 The MCB would have appreciated a longer time scale for submission of response given the importance of the subject and the diversity of our affiliates. However, we have, within the time scale given, done our best to base this response upon consultation with many affiliates and interested individuals.

2. RESPONSE TO THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT

Our response to the contents of the document is as follows:

- 2.1 We suggest that Page 11, note 15 which presently reads: “In May 2003, two British Muslims were the first foreigners to be involved in a suicide bombing operation against Israel.” be amended so as to insert “suspected of being” before the word “involved”
- 2.2 On Page 16, box 2: MCB website address should be amended to www.mcb.org.uk and not www.mcb.co.uk as cited.
- 2.3 We suggest that Page 16, box 3: ‘Threats’ section should contain much more material to underscore the huge responsibility of the media in fostering Islamophobia. For example:

“There was a brief surge of media interest last year in Afghanistan (the benighted country that had harboured the evil-doers) and in Islam (the yucky religion that had started the whole thing).” Zoe Heller, Daily Telegraph, 7th September 2002.

“Orientals, by contrast, shrink from pitched battle, which they often deride as a sort of game, preferring ambush, surprise, treachery and deceit as the best way to overcome an enemy...This war [in Afghanistan] belongs within the much larger spectrum of a far older conflict between settled, creative productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals.” Sir John Keegan, Daily Telegraph, 8th October 2001.

“Unlike Islam, Christianity does not justify the use of all forms of violence. Islam does.” Patrick Sookhdeo, Daily Telegraph, 17th September 2001.

For full details about how Muslims were treated in the media following the Sept 11 attacks, see the paper, ‘British Muslims & The Media’ by Inayat Bunglawala, published in The Quest For Sanity by the Muslim Council of Britain (2002).

- 2.4 With reference to Page 32, point 51: “For clearly there is such a thing as legitimate criticism and suspicion of Islam” – if this is to remain in the published version then it should also mention other faiths eg Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism etc. Islam should not be singled out alone.
- 2.5 With regard to Page 39, note 68: It would be helpful in this context to explicitly state that according to the 2001 Census Islam is now the largest minority faith in the UK with more followers than all the other minority faiths put together. (Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and Buddhism).
- 2.6 With reference to Page 43, note 78: “It is not at present (2004) recognised in the law relating to incitement to hatred or in law on provision of services and there are no plans to by the government to change this situation.” , we would suggest that the points on being in breach of its obligations under International Law be strongly made. Further it should also be stated that the government’s position is at odds also with the recommendations contained in its sponsored Derby Report (2000).
- 2.7 On Page 45 note 85, it would be helpful to mention that the Muslim Council of

Britain, in collaboration with its affiliate Muslim Directory, and The Muslim News and the British Muslim Research Centre has initiated a project to increase awareness in the community of the new Employment Regulations relating to Religious Discrimination that come into force next month. For more details go to www.mcb.org.uk .

- 2.8 With reference to Page 45, box 11, Scenario 2 (peripatetic teacher) we believe that there is a need to explicitly highlight that the Friday prayer, (Jumu'ah) is the compulsory congregational weekly prayer for all adult males.
- 2.9 On Page 47, note 89: Islamophobic attacks, we suggest that Far more serious attacks need to be added to the example list. For instance:

“Two Guilty of Setting Fire To Scottish Mosque”, The Times, 15th October 2002.

Pig's Heads Thrown Into Exeter Mosque, The Independent, 7th August 2002.

“Family Free Racist Attack”, BBC News Online, 16th October 2003.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3198316.stm

Again, more details are included in the MCB book, The Quest For Sanity.

- 2.10 With reference to Page 60, note 132 we suggest that the point be made that only Muslim Schools are picked on and not schools run by other faiths such as the Jews or the Catholics etc. To underscore how unfair the remarks about Muslim schools being breeding grounds for ‘trainee ayatollahs’ are, it is pertinent to point out here the very high percentage (compared to Muslim children) of Jewish children that attend Jewish schools and yet no similar remarks about ‘trainee Rabbis’ are heard about them.
- 2.11 For Page 71, box 00:, we suggest that you should mention the recommendation in the Open Society Institute report “Monitoring Minority Protection in the EU: The Situation of Muslims in the UK” (2002) that mainstream schools should offer to teach Arabic as a foreign language. Could this action perhaps also serve to help increase the confidence of Muslim parents in the state school system?
- 2.12 With reference to Page 83, note 127: It should perhaps be pointed out that Charles Moore, then editor of the Daily Telegraph actually wrote a prominent comment piece at the time in his paper explaining why he refused to sign the ‘Pledge for Religious Tolerance’. The former Conservative Minister David Mellor, now a columnist, said at the time that the organisers of the Pledge Card on religious tolerance ‘should stick their pledge where the sun doesn’t shine’. The People, 11 November 2001.
- 2.13 We suggest that the contents of Page 85, note 132: “The fact that several of the Algerians arrested a few weeks earlier for producing the deadly toxin Ricin in a north London apartment had applied for asylum added spice to an already heady

brew.” Have the potential to make a very significant and powerful; point. We believe the police have now conceded that Ricin was not produced by the arrested Algerians. This needs to be looked into and a more up to date statement is needed. It is revealing to compare the amount of initial publicity given to the Ricin claim and the almost non-existent coverage given to the police statement (In September 2003) in which they admitted that they may have got it wrong.

- 2.14 On Page 86, note 138: “It noted the Express printed a letter of rebuttal from the Muslim Council the following week.” Please note that It was actually a full-page article – not letter - by Inayat Bunglawala, Secretary of the Media Committee at the Muslim Council of Britain (not just Muslim Council).
- 2.15 We suggest that care be exercised in identifying credible objective evidence to back the statement on Page 92, point 11: “For its part, the Muslim Teachers Association has been involved in community campaigns to encourage more entrants to the profession.”
- 2.16 Page 92, point 13: On Saturday 8 November 2003 the Food Standards Agency in collaboration with the Islamic Cultural Centre, London and the MCB organised a seminar on the theme 'Food, Halal & Culture'. This perhaps could be mentioned as an example of progress in this area.
- 2.17 Page 104: “On Islamophobia, the first port of call is the **Forum Against Islamophobia** (FAIR) at www.fairuk.org.uk. Amongst other things FAIR has a valuable news service whereby subscribers receive free of charge, several times a week, a selection of news items.”
- 2.18 On Page 105: Islamic Faith and Culture we strongly recommend that you should mention the website of the Islamic Society of Britain at www.isb.org.uk . Also the **Ummah News** (www.ummahnews.com) appears not to have been updated since April 2003.

3. SUBSTANTIVE COMMENTS ON EDUCATION & ISLAMOPHOBIA

In the field of education, we believe that Recommendation 34 in the original report was of paramount significance and value. It said Schools and LEAs should “develop written guidelines on meeting the pastoral, religious and cultural needs of Muslim pupils.” (‘Islamophobia – a challenge for us all,’ Runnymede Trust, 1997.) Page 46 of the report stated that these guidelines should cover the following areas:

1. Religious Education
2. School dress code
3. School meals
4. Collective acts of worship
5. Fasting periods
6. Religious holidays
7. Friday prayers
8. Single sex groupings and classes
9. Contacts with parents

10. Contacts with mosques and mosque schools

11. Physical education dress

12. Showering arrangements

3.1 We strongly recommend that these original points are re-stated in the new document as progress against many of these is seriously lacking to say the least. It is high time that the DFES now developed and published Guidelines for meeting the needs of Muslim pupils within state schools, along similar lines to their commendable publication on 'Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of minority ethnic pupils.' Furthermore, measures should be set to challenge schools and LEAs to implement these guidelines within a given time frame. Research should be carried out into how far schools and LEAs are responding to the needs of the Muslim community with respect to the 12 indicators noted above. This should become an integral part of school and LEA improvement planning and advice given and incorporated as part of the OFSTED inspection regime. In order to adequately carry out these tasks we recommend that all inspectors and advisors are trained with respect to the needs of Muslim children, so that accurate assessments can be made. In many cases current inspection reports and advice given fail to identify Islamophobia because of the inability to recognise it on the part of inspectors and advisors.

3.2 Of all the above points we have found collective act of worship to be the one of the most contentious. This merits a section or specific box in the report. The spiritual and moral needs of Muslim children are major issues within vast majority of schools, even in schools where there are very high composition of Muslim children, there are simply not being given due consideration. In an LEA where 25% of school children are of the Islamic faith background (more than 40% are of other faith backgrounds ie Islam, Sikh, Hindu etc) from a total 520 schools only 25 schools have applied for determination to lift the requirement and make provision for an appropriate act of worship according to the family and faith background of the children. When parents or governors from Muslim communities have suggested that there should be an Islamic act of collective worship for Muslim children, they normally receive a swift and sometimes an aggressive and negative response and are often told that 'this is not an Islamic school'. Below are some quotes from head teachers in respect of requests for Islamic Act of collective worship in schools which have more than 85% children from Islamic faith background.

(i) 'Over my dead body'

(ii) It's not going to happen while I am Head Teacher here'

(iii) Governors insisted it is legal requirement, heads response 'The law is an Ass.'

(iv) 'This is not an Islamic school'

(v) 'If you want this then, you need to take your child to another school'

(vi) 'I am willing to break the Law'

(vii) 'we could be opening a can of worms' (99% children are Muslims)

Senior staff in a number of schools have threatened to leave the school if Islamic worship was introduced.. Threats have also been made with respect to standards saying 'standards will go down, as teaching staff will not be happy'. In another school it was commented that 'this school used to be a good school before they

messed it up with all this religious stuff”, that is collective worship. In those schools that do offer Islamic act of worship it is a process that has on average taken between one and three years of discussion, debate and argument to be made a reality on the ground. Delay tactics are employed to no end.

- 3.3 The vast majority of Muslim children within the state sector are going through from the age of 4 to 16 with the school offering them no input from their own culture and faith background with respect to spiritual, moral and cultural development. To a very large extent they are expected to leave their culture and faith at home. Any attempts to improve this situation are normally opposed by the institutions. There is a palpable reluctance in some cases and opposition in others to recognising the Muslim dimension of the pupils and hence catering for their needs. People appear a lot more comfortable with race terminology than faith identity – Use of ‘Asian’ is preferred to “Muslim”.
- 3.4 With respect to cultural inclusion and closing the gap between mosque and school it is essential that Muslim children should be offered to do Arabic language as part of MFL. In two secondary schools with high percentage of Muslim pupils a survey was done at KS3 to determine their preference in respect of languages. The result was interesting, although Arabic language had never been offered as an option before in the school, it topped the preferences ahead of Urdu, Bengali, and French and Spanish which are the current options.

The MCB is of the firm view that the British society is currently at a crucial cross road. For the society to remain true to its tradition of tolerance and respect, it is essential that the voluntary, public and government sectors join together in the battle to make Islamophobia as abhorrent and unacceptable as anti Semitism. The positive legal duty to promote equality on racial grounds should be extended to cover religion. The Runnymede Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia has a pivotal role in informing public debate by highlighting problems and auditing progress. The MCB would like to record its great appreciation of the Commission for its excellent work.

THE END