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The Muslim Parliament of Great Britain: political innovation and adaptation

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History, it is said, repeats itself. Perhaps it does. But the inauguration of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain today is truly without parallel. We are responsible for the most original and innovative piece of social engineering in modern Britain. After today, British society will not be the same again. Nevertheless, this Parliament has very deep roots in history. The whole of the history of Islam and the vast political experience of Muslims have gone into its conception and creation. This Parliament also represents the fusion caused by the injection of the political culture of Islam into a hostile Western environment. This fusion has generated a great deal of new energy in the otherwise depressed state of the small Muslim community. The fall-out might yet enrich two great, if disparate, political traditions.

The Muslim community that is now a permanent part of the British society has suffered all the hardships of a migrant people. Within the last three years an attempt was made to disparage and demoralise us. Even more importantly, an attempt was made to open Islam and the Prophet of Islam up to the Soho culture of

London's nightlife. We have beaten back both these attacks. Under the most intense pressure ever applied by the West on Islam and Muslims, we have refused to yield on either of these flanks: we have held, extended and consolidated the moral high ground we alone occupy, and we have beaten our opponents back to re-examine the values at the core of their own existence. Liberalism has found its match; it may not survive the test we have set for it.

Beyond that, we have dug deep into our spiritual and intellectual resources to produce a working political system that seeks to transform the condition of Muslims and permanently alter the ground rules by which we all live in this country. Our problems are complex. Their roots go back many centuries. They are embedded in events beyond the range of most people's immediate consciousness. One of the functions of this Parliament is to bring our historical consciousness to bear on our contemporary problems and the shaping of a future for generations of Muslims yet unborn. The Muslim Parliament is a prism that will refract light from our past to enlighten our present and brighten our future, *insha'Allah*.

The source of all light is the Divine Guidance of the Qur'an and the life of the Great Exemplar, Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, upon whom be peace. We must, therefore, take our position from the Qur'an and the Sunnah (precepts) of the Prophet of Islam. The Qur'an states quite categorically:

And consult them in the affairs of the moment, then (after consultation) when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah. Allah loves those who put their trust in Him. (*al-Qur'an 3:159*)

And Allah *ta'ala* also says in the Qur'an:

(Allah's reward is for) those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation; who spend out of what We bestow upon them for sustenance. (*al-Qur'an 42:38*)

As for the example set by Allah's Messenger, he created the prototypical political manifestation of Islam. He showed us how to generate the political power of Islam in a minority situation and how to nurse and develop it until the creation of the Islamic State and the victory of Islam over its opponents. The emphasis the Prophet placed on leadership, organisation and discipline may be gauged from his institution that if three people should be on journey, they must appoint one among them as their leader (*amir*). The message is clear: Muslims should never be without leadership, without organisation or without discipline.

Is it conceivable, therefore, that Islam should approve of two million Muslims living without leadership, organisation and discipline? This Parliament collectively, and all its Members individually, have taken up the role and duty of leadership, organisation and discipline within the Muslim community in Britain. In this sense the roots of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain go back to the historical experience of the Great Exemplar, the Prophet of Islam, himself.

With the inauguration of the Muslim Parliament (or, strictly, the Lower House), we have set up only the base camp. The summit of our destiny is still a long way away, to some extent clouded in the mist of uncertainty. We have arrived here with very few resources, but with an ever-growing party of dedicated men and women. However, despite difficulties and a paucity of resources, we have cut no corners. No shortcuts have been taken. Hardships have not been avoided. Every inch of the road so far has been diligently covered. We have followed a rigorously scientific method. We have first produced original ideas and then tested them against the harsh realities of life in Britain. We have undertaken research, followed by extensive fieldwork. We have explored non-Muslim opinion and consulted all shades of Muslim opinion. In the beginning we faced a media that was unanimously hostile. Today some of the sceptics have become converted. Messages of covert support are also coming in. What is more, important and influential sources in the media have begun to

show understanding and even a little admiration for our constancy and achievement. Our method has been an unflinching commitment to intellectual rigour, honesty and openness.

Already there is evidence that we have helped to raise the moral tone of British society as a whole. The debate in the House of Lords over BBC2's plans to screen the blasphemous film *The Last Temptation of Christ* is a case in point. Lord Tony Pandy, a former Speaker of the House of Commons, pointed out that the honour of the Prophet Muhammad was now protected by his followers in Britain. In his opinion the honour of Jesus Christ ought also to be similarly protected. A number of other peers, including Lord Hailsham, a former Lord Chancellor, made similar points. The BBC was forced to cancel plans to screen the film. This of course has caused great consternation in the liberal lobby. But by resisting blackmail, we have deprived the liberals of one of their favourite weapons, the 'law'. As a law-abiding people we instinctively understand when it is right and proper to stand by our principles and let the law find its own level.

This brings me to consider the place and role of the Muslim Parliament in the context of contemporary British society. Where do we stand?

We have called ourselves a Parliament because, above all, we are a 'political system' in every sense and meaning of that term. We want to take our place among the primary institutions of Great Britain. The inauguration of this Parliament transforms the disparaged Muslim minority in Britain into a political community with a will and purpose of its own. After today it should not be possible or necessary for Whitehall, local authorities, and other statutory bodies or indeed the Parliament at Westminster to make laws or other instruments of public policy affecting Muslims without consultation with us. This Parliament will be alert to the menace inherent in such moves. We seek to develop regular consultative, political and legal procedures to help legislators and makers of public policy take our views and interests into account. A time should come when such procedures will have become

established and recognised as necessary for good government at all levels.

It is often said that a political system has no value without power. What power does the Muslim Parliament have? If power be defined in terms of constitutional, military or police powers to coerce, then the Muslim Parliament has none. But if power be defined more broadly, including moral authority and ability to persuade, facilitate, co-operate, and, if necessary, obstruct, then the Muslim Parliament already has enormous power. The nonsense that was talked about us a couple of years ago has largely died down. This is some measure of real power that we already exercise in Britain.

And, as anyone can see, assembled here in this Great Hall of Kensington, is all the proof one needs of our far-reaching influence in British Society. The first concrete evidence of our influence is the fact that the Lower House of the Muslim Parliament has been put together in less than two years. Members have come from every part of Britain and from all schools of thought in Islam. What is more, Members of this Parliament are not drawn from any single section of British Muslim society. We are not all Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Farsi, Turkish, Bengali, Malay or Hausa speakers. Those here today come from all linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of Muslims living in Britain. The only language common to all Members of the Muslim Parliament (MMPs) is English. Even more important is the fact that among us are men and women of a great variety of social and professional backgrounds. There are philosophers and academics, doctors and dentists, religious scholars and penitent Marxists, scientists and engineers, teachers and students, writers and journalists, and small businessmen and a few tycoons as well. But above all there are among us ordinary men and women whose only education has been through life's everyday hardships and the trials and tribulations of the first-generation immigrant working classes.

Thus the human material at our disposal is of a very high quality. This Parliament will seek to make policies to mould this

material into a high-powered and disciplined machine dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual, material and social excellence. This means:

- we must aim at a Muslim community with more graduates per thousand of the population than the average for the country;
- we should aim at a strong Muslim entrepreneurial class (there is no harm in having more millionaires than any other minority community!);
- we must have strong Muslim representation in all the leading professions; and
- we must make sure that the Muslim community as a whole does not forever remain at the bottom of the economic league in terms of income, savings, housing and consumption.

That these goals will be achieved I have no doubt, for Muslims have a long record of making sacrifices today in order to build a better tomorrow. And simultaneously we must prove that we can also be the best moral exemplars for our fellow-Britons, with the best-contented families, the best-looked-after widows, the best-cared-for old people, the best-sheltered orphans, and so on.

A time will come when every Muslim household in Britain will be on our database. When a child is born, this Parliament will hear of it. When someone passes away, this Parliament will know about it. When somebody loses his job, this Parliament will be alerted. When families or orphans fall on hard times, this Parliament will have the resources to come to their rescue. Slowly but surely a whole network of institutions, based on *zakat* (2.5 percent of cash and other savings on an annual basis) and other dues will be created. The entire welfare system of Islam will ensure that no Muslim man, woman or child will ever become destitute. We will become recognised as the most caring community in the country. And a time will come when we will be able to care for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

All that we have today, by way of our homes, mosques,

community centres, religious schools and the education of our children represents the sacrifices and savings of among the poorest, least-paid and most exploited first-generation immigrant labourers in history. We are proud to have many of them as Members of this House. The great future that beckons us will be built on the sacred foundations of the sweat and tears of our working classes. It is one of our ambitions to make the Muslims of Britain among the most prosperous people in the country, but the prosperity of the future will be built on the sacrifices, poverty and deprivation of those who came here to help rebuild the British economy after the devastations of the Second World War.

However, it is also important that we understand, and everybody else in this country understands, the source of our power and influence:

- this source is our commitment to serve and defend Islam;
- this source is our commitment to follow the method and example of the Great Exemplar, the Prophet of Islam;
- this source is our commitment to all-round moral excellence;
- this source is our commitment to serve the Muslim community in Britain and the British community at large;
- and this source is our commitment to turn Muslims in Britain into the best-educated, most morally-upright, law-abiding and prosperous community in the land.

The method by which we intend to achieve this is essentially and unashamedly political. In the secular and Western context the term 'politics' has a diversity of meanings and no agreed definition. But our understanding of 'politics' in the context of this Parliament and the Muslim community in Britain is clear and precise.

By politics we mean all those activities that are designed to establish a strong Muslim presence in Britain on the basis of common citizenship, to develop consensus on major issues among

Muslims, to set goals for the Muslim community, to improve the economic and social position of Muslims in Britain, and to mobilise the Muslim community's human, spiritual and material resources in the service of the community itself and of Islam.

The nature of politics in a Muslim context is based on both personal and collective *taqwa* (piety). None of us is in 'public life' for personal gain. Many of us have entered 'public life' for the first time because we believe that the greater good of Muslims in Britain is not only unprotected, but actually in great danger of extinction if left to the mainstream of British political processes. The fact is that the British Government, all political parties, the media, the Churches and all other influential and established groups in Britain have made it clear that they regard the influence of Islam in Britain as undesirable. In some areas the policies of the British Government are openly and unashamedly unjust and discriminatory against Muslims. The Government's persistent refusal to allow voluntary-aided Muslim schools is an obvious example. At some stage we might have to take Her Majesty's Government to the bar of world opinion or some such institution as the European Court. We may also have to resort to symbolic forms of civil disobedience to attract attention to our plight. In this respect we shall be engaged in the normal activities of a 'pressure group' in British public life. Members of this House, and of the Upper House, and the numerous Muslim Manifesto Groups in the country, will engage in intensive 'pressure group' activities in their own areas at the local level, while the Muslim Parliament as a whole will engage in similar activities at national level. Let us make it quite clear that Muslims in Britain will oppose, and if necessary defy, any public policy or legislation that we regard as inimical to our interests. The dictatorship of the majority, dressed up as democracy, is unacceptable.

However, we sincerely hope that our role as a 'pressure group' will be only a small part of our many concerns. The bulk of the work of the Muslim Parliament and its network of institutions will be concerned with the consolidation of the Muslim

community in Britain into, in the language of the Qur'an, the 'best of all communities'. This means that our children must be the best-educated; our teenagers must be the best-behaved; our adults must be the best examples of manhood and womanhood; our old, sick, disabled, unemployed, widows and orphans must be properly cared for. This is not going to be easy. In a society whose standards of behaviour in all departments are falling rapidly, it will require very hard and dedicated work to raise the standards within a small community. This will amount to swimming against the current of modern Western 'values'. Western civilisation is the sick man of the modern world. It is destined for oblivion and will eventually take its place in the same dustbin of history that has already swallowed up Marxism. Islam alone is the antidote to a morally bankrupt and sick world.

As the *Muslim Manifesto* has pointed out, the Qur'anic remit 'to enjoin good and forbid evil' (Al-Qur'an 31:17) has to be our role in British society. In the situation of a small minority, if we are to enjoin good we must act in association and we must mobilise and consolidate our resources. It is not enough for us to be vaguely aware of what is good and what is evil. It is not sufficient merely to have a general commonality of purpose. What is required is that all facets of the 'good' that we seek to promote be first consolidated in the institutions of Islam established in this country. The first of such institutions is this Parliament. The drive to develop and acquire power is inherent in the very nature and method of Islam. In the months and years to come, proposals for new institutions to take up specialised functions and services for our community will be brought before this House.

For example, the agenda proposed in the *Muslim Manifesto* includes the setting up of an Islamic University. A White Paper on Muslim education in Britain is presently under preparation and will consider the proposal. The fact of the matter is that we are, above all else; a 'people of the Book'. What this means is that our basic instrument of social action is knowledge. Islam lays great emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge. The Muslim

community in Britain must also make its own contribution in the field of higher education and research. Our pursuit of identity and moral excellence must also be based on our own philosophy of science and the application of scientific knowledge. Islam's encounter with the West may take many forms in different parts of the world. But here in Britain the Muslim community can contribute by contesting the West's philosophy of physical and behavioural sciences. The Islamic University will also represent the intellectual and spiritual power of Islam. While the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain may be restricted in its political role by constitutional constraints, no such constraints may hamper the work of the Islamic University. Detailed, step-by-step proposals for the setting up of the Islamic University will be put before this House. The Islamic University's role in defining and promoting the 'good' will be unhampered and free.

Our role as forbidders of 'evil' on the other hand is more problematic. In modern Britain many of the evils described in such revealed books as the Bible and the Qur'an are now upheld as virtues. Some of these evils, such as gambling, prostitution and homosexuality, may also be protected or even promoted by Acts of Parliament. To oppose some of these evils might actually be illegal! In this increasingly oppressive climate of moral anarchy, Muslims must make sure that at least within our community the frontiers between good and evil are clearly drawn and understood. Let us set an example that may one day draw deviant mankind back to its spiritual roots.

These are uphill tasks. Our method must be deliberative and, therefore, slow. For example, the White Paper on Muslim education in Britain we hope to publish in a few weeks' time. It may be debated in this House in May. More detailed proposals for its gradual implementation may be brought before this House in the form of a Bill later in the year. It may take us a year or more to complete work on the White Paper and the Education Bill that might follow. This is a time-consuming process. But the time spent now will ensure that the decisions made by this House are

properly debated and considered in depth. Members of this House will also have the opportunity to take the White Paper and the Bill for discussion at public meetings in their towns and cities. The work of this Parliament will be meaningful only if we carry a strong and informed Muslim public opinion with us.

This brings us to consider, briefly, the role of mosques. Our mosques, perhaps as many as a thousand of them, are our greatest single achievement. We have invested perhaps as much as £200 million in little more than 20 years. This shows clearly that the first generation of Muslim immigrants to this country were deeply conscious of the need for Islam's basic institutions in Britain. However, these mosques have also come to represent our greatest single failure. They should have been dynamic centres of Islamic learning and social and political platforms meeting the needs of a growing and young Muslim community. Our mosques should have taken the initiatives in developing an Islamic culture in Britain, offering our young men an alternative to disco culture. Instead what we have are mosques that are socially, culturally and politically dead. They offer little but ritual prayers within a setting of sectarian obscurantism. It is easy to blame the *ulama* and the committees that control these mosques. In fact, we are all to blame. Perhaps a two-pronged strategy is needed. First, this Parliament should approach the mosque committees, trustees and *ulama* and discuss with them ways and means of bringing the present state of affairs to an end. Many of them, I feel sure, will cooperate. Secondly, we should launch a bold new programme designed to increase the number of mosques in Britain to meet the needs of a growing community. We should make sure that the new mosques are harbingers of a new Islamic culture and centres of the Muslim community's social and political role and power in British society.

I now turn to consider, again briefly, the Muslim Manifesto Groups (MMGs). The MMGs form a network of grassroots institutions. At the moment they are mostly embryonic. But most have already held two or more public meetings. Each MMG has a

core around local MMPs who meet frequently. The MMGs have the potential to develop in the role of Muslim 'local government' in their areas, providing essential services in the field of education and general social welfare. Many of these services can be provided through registered charities managed by Members of this House. Whenever possible the MMGs should seek to work closely with established mosques and set up new mosques, if necessary. The MMGs have already played a significant part in providing this House with the bulk of its Members. In years to come a more direct electoral system may be devised, still using the MMGs as electoral colleges.

The same is true of the professional groups represented in this House. These are the Muslim Medical Institute, the Muslim Business Group and the Association of Muslim Scientists and Technologists. A very active and versatile Muslim Women's Institute now has branches in many towns and cities throughout the community. One of the great achievements of this Parliament, even before its inauguration, has been to bring into public life a large number of Muslim women. So much so that no fewer than 20% of the Members of this house are women. (This, incidentally, compares with only seven percent at Westminster!) Muslim women in public life have the added responsibility of nailing the lie that Islam oppresses women. This propaganda has been in the vanguard of the West's attack on Islam for hundreds of years. Now, perhaps for the first time in history, articulate Muslim women living in the West have the opportunity to demonstrate the place of honour and dignity they enjoy in Islam. On this issue we have to stop being defensive and instead demonstrate that modern Western woman is among the most overworked, underpaid and sexually oppressed, exploited and degraded women in history. Western woman is now just another factor of consumption; the logical end of capitalism. This House will give the Muslim Women's Institute the highest priority in resource-generation and resource-allocation. Already, two of the leading figures in the MWI are Deputy Speakers of this House.

We live in a secular society in which the pursuit of the material world alone is applauded. It is seldom realised that Islam enjoins mankind to seek and enjoy the many pleasures with which this world is endowed by its Creator. As such, and within the moral paradigm of Islam, one of the major objectives of the Muslim Parliament is to maximise the generation of wealth and prosperity in the Muslim community in Britain. We hope to pursue this goal in two ways.

First, by encouraging more Muslim young men and women to go into higher education. The policies now being pursued by the Government will increase the financial burden of higher education falling on parents. This must inevitably mean that, Muslim parents being among the poorer categories, fewer Muslim school-leavers will go into higher education unless the Muslim community make a conscious effort to ensure that they do. The student-loan scheme is also likely to be a deterrent to Muslims from low-income families. The White Paper on Muslim education will include proposals to supplement the income of Muslim undergraduates.

Secondly, by inviting Muslims in the leading professions such as medicine, law, dentistry, accountancy, engineering and so on, to devise ways and means of increasing the number of Muslims going into these professions. The professional groups already set up have been invited to examine this issue closely and to develop relevant strategies. In the Muslim community there has already emerged a strong entrepreneurial class. We are inviting Muslim professionals and entrepreneurs to become Members of the Upper House.

The Upper House of the Muslim Parliament will be the primary engine for the generation of more prosperity in the Muslim community. It will give men and women of eminence in our community a prestigious platform from which they shall be able to use their considerable knowledge and experience for the greater good of all. Similarly, many elders of our society will find the Upper House a suitable culmination to their distinguished careers in the service of Islam.

The professionals and the entrepreneurs, though relatively better off than the rest of us, are still among the disadvantaged within their respective groups. The rate of unemployment among Muslim doctors, for example, is higher than among doctors as a whole. Other forms of discrimination, even victimisation, are also common in the medical profession and indeed virtually all the professions.

Our entrepreneurs, too, face many difficulties in trade, banking and industry. Even the most successful of them are often living on the crumbs that they are allowed to pick up after the big boys have cleaned up. The Muslim Parliament will give special attention to the problems of our businessmen and industrialists. With the larger European market now opening up, the opportunities even for picking up crumbs will be greater. We shall arrange for parliamentary trade delegations to visit overseas markets in order to open up opportunities for Muslims here and for Muslims overseas. A Muslim parliamentary trade delegation sets off for South Africa shortly. By helping Muslim entrepreneurs to become more successful we hope to open the fields of trade and industry for more Muslims.

In sum, we hope to help the professionals, traders and industrialists among us become more numerous and successful. We also expect to use those groups, their knowledge and their expertise, to generate greater prosperity for the entire Muslim community. There are numerous other areas of concern that will occupy the Muslim Parliament in the years that lie ahead. Some of these have been identified in the Muslim Manifesto. I do not propose to go over that ground again today.

There is only one more area I want to touch upon today. This concerns the financing of the Muslim Parliament and its programmes. Let me say at once that the bulk of the finance will, indeed must, come from Muslims living in Britain. We estimate that there are, at a conservative calculation, 400,000 Muslim households in this country. The average industrial wage at present stands at more than £12,000 a year. If every Muslim

household is assumed to have one wage-earner, there are about £5,000 million a year coming to the Muslim community as income. This is a large pool from which to draw our resources. In the last 20 years, Muslims in this country have contributed about two hundred million pounds to build nearly a thousand mosques. When motivated, Muslims can contribute large amounts. I feel sure that over the next 20 years Muslims in Britain will contribute even larger amounts to build the schools and other institutions we need to secure the future of generations yet unborn.

At the same time the Muslim community in Britain is part of a global community of Islam. We now live in a global village. Details of the financing secured by a former British Prime Minister from her friends world-wide for the proposed 'Thatcher Foundation' have recently come to light. The British Government, too, is broadening its links with Europe, while maintaining its 'special relationship' with the United States.

It is well known that we subscribe to few of the values of the West or the West's agenda for mankind. In some important and critical areas our values are diametrically opposed and our agenda is fundamentally different. Both our values and our agenda are part of the alternative global civilisation and culture of Islam. Let it be clearly understood that this Parliament shall be a platform for the promotion of the values and agenda of Islam in Britain, indeed throughout the world. At this level our resources, physical, intellectual, and spiritual, may be drawn from all corners of the globe.

In the final analysis, however, this Parliament must stand or fall on the performance of its individual Members. By this I do not mean our performance on the floor of this House or our parliamentary and debating skills; what I mean is the service we render through it to our communities. As MMPs we must visit as many Muslim homes and families in our areas as possible. We must find the needy, the old, the sick, the orphans, the unemployed, the infirm and the disabled, and arrange whatever help we can for them. We must visit the sick in hospitals, we must

visit the bereaved families, and attend social events such as weddings. Similarly, the MMP should be in touch with local Muslim or Islamic organisations, the mosques, their trustees and *imams*. The MMP should be a person trusted by everybody. He or she must be above petty 'politics' between competing groups on such issues as the control of mosques. The MMP must never take sides or take part in sectarian controversies. An MMP should make himself or herself known to the local DSS office, the Social Services, the Town Hall, the police, the schools and the Education office. He or she should also cooperate with and, whenever possible, attend meetings or other functions arranged by social, cultural and educational groups. We are not against anyone. We seek confrontation with no-one. Ultimately, it is the MMG, organised as Muslim 'local government', that is the framework within which the MMPs must work and serve the community.

This Parliament must define, defend and promote the Muslim interest in Britain; it must solve these problems of the Muslim community that the mainstream political systems and the Government cannot attend to. It is not in any sense a 'separatist' body, however. The large majority of Muslims in this country are British-born. We are here to stay and we must live as fully integrated citizens of this country. This Parliament, therefore, must iron out the problems of common citizenship; it must encourage and help Muslims in this country to play a full part in British society; and, in doing so, it must raise the moral outlook of the entire society. This Parliament must, in short, become an integral and essential part of contemporary Britain.