



2014 Annual Curriculum for Cohesion Dinner

Address of the Rt. Hon. Simon Hughes MP

Minister of State for Justice and Civil Liberties

Thursday, 26 June 2014

Matthew, Sir David, friends, *as-salaam-alaikum*. And every good wish for *Ramadan*.

I apologise I wasn't here earlier I was at another Muslim event timed also for the eve of Ramadan substituting for a government colleague who couldn't at the last minute be there and it's been an interesting bridge, it's an event led by Islamic Relief to mark their 30 years anniversary and from there a cast of hundreds to this event is a reminder of how broad the span of Muslim influence and participation in British life. One of the last people I saw as I came out of the doors at the other end was Amir Khan, role model of all role models for young British Muslims in many ways and now I'm here.

I've had the privilege since December of being one of the justice ministers and also share part of the responsibility for the prison service. I particularly look after women prisoners, women offenders where the ratios aren't quite as dramatic as the ones, [Sir] David [Calvert-Smith] you gave but one of the first things I realised afresh when appointed in December was exactly the



statistic that you reminded us of, which is how high a proportion, how disproportionate a proportion of our prisons are filled with Muslims nowadays.

And there are challenges not just on the streets of Bermondsey, where I live, on the streets of South London, but there are challenges throughout the whole country now in making sure that young British Muslims and Muslims who are not yet British but are living here, from many different cultures, are able to not just understand the society they're in but to be understood. And Matthew that's where your really impressive, dedicated, tenacious, academic and focused work belongs.

So I just want to say just three things simply and then I have a present for you Matthew for which I don't think even you with all your good planning will have expected.

Firstly, when we first talked about Curriculum for Cohesion, and I and other Parliamentary colleagues across the [political] Parties had founded the All-Party Group on Islamophobia to try to educate people about the extent of Islamophobia, to try to make sure we had proper understanding, proper recording, proper reporting and proper responding in a way that the Jewish community had to do and had done much more coherently.

When we started to do that and you came to talk to us, the burden of your song as I understand it and understood it then was that we just need to start to hugely improve the education



of our society so that people can be informed, participating, understanding members of the society they're part of.

Let me give you a very simple example of how it's so important for that education. When I practised at the Bar and on occasions when I've given evidence in the Court I used to get quietly and internally frustrated when the usher at the moment they would come to bring somebody to give evidence and would ask them to swear or affirm, would sometimes say, "Which religion Protestant or Catholic?" Well that has several flaws in one short sentence. Firstly my understanding was, is and will remain that Protestantism and Catholicism are not different religions they're different types of one religion and secondly there would potentially be other options that might have been available to me. I used to further throw the system by insisting that although I was a Christian I wished to affirm which slightly people found a bit difficult to deal with.

But there is a latent frequent, extensive lack of understanding, of education, of simple awareness of the history of Islam, of the types of Islam, of the method of interpretation of Islam and unless what [Sir] David [Calvert-Smith] described which is the education of the process, whether it's through the judicial training board for judges or whether it's for people practising at the bar and in our courts, whether it's the police through ACPO and other things, unless there's that clearer understanding of a global religion of which there are three million plus people in this country ranging from people who have been here for centuries to people who are converts to Islam, who are born in the UK,



then we are in difficulties and we are likely to make some very serious mistakes indeed, not just in the criminal justice system but in many other parts of society.

So the first is making sure that we have intelligent, informed citizenry because of the sort of work that the Curriculum for Cohesion wants to do.

The second when I was appointed I was asked to be the Minister of State for Justice and I requested that my title was extended a bit to be the Minister of State for Justice and Civil Liberties. I regard myself, not a very good one, but as a civil liberties lawyer and I thought it was important that there was somebody in government who was seen to be there whose job was to make sure that the civil liberties of everybody were fought for, were understood and were argued for in government and that international and national obligations were upheld.

It's really important that there is an understanding of Islam so that the civil liberties, the *civil* liberties, the political and civil liberties of people of faith and of different faiths can be as well upheld as the civil liberties of other people.

In a country that was traditionally Christian there was a common understanding of what the civil liberties of Christians might be and recently there have had to be test cases as to whether a Christian can wear a cross at work around their neck and the answer was "yes", provided it didn't clearly interfere with their work. But if we're going to have equal citizenry, if there's going to be an equality on the street and in the homes and in the



workplace then people of Islamic faith, Muslims of Britain, need to know that their religious faith will bring the same civil liberties as the religious faith of other people or people who have no faith at all.

The third reason for education, is a very obvious one to me: we are in danger of serially discriminating against people who are Muslims in a way that is likely to make our national security worse.

If the presumption of somebody wearing a *burka* or the presumption of somebody with a beard that would identify them as probably being a Muslim, leads to other consequences, is that likely to bring them closer to a feeling of solidarity with their fellow citizens? No, it's not.

Is the propensity to suggest that if you have certain characteristics, you're more likely to be stopped coming in through an airport, more likely to make you a better citizen? No, it's not.

What should we do to make sure young, energetic, enthusiastic believers in their faith don't find that faith turned into something that is put to much less good use in society?

It's a real challenge, it's a real challenge. And it's been challenged throughout the generations in different faiths and it's now a challenge particularly in Islam.

And if there are political decisions made by Parliaments and governments of the world that appear to be offensive to, or



offending world faiths then it won't be surprising if young people rise to respond to that.

So there's a real national security challenge which is much better understood if we can really deliver, manage, enable, a society of equality where people of different faiths have that equality. And in the present day and age, before 9/11, after 9/11 in the context of the period post the invasion of Iraq, with all the consequences of that, if we're not aware of that now and we don't do something about it urgently there is a real danger for our cohesion as a society.

Just after the Iraq invasion I was in Pakistan talking to students at Lahore University. They thought they could trust us to set an example of ethical behaviour and observance of human rights and conformity with the UN.

But once you start going down the road as a society when some people do not appear to be treated equally then the reputation internally and externally is no longer there. Why should somebody fully respect the state, which is their home, if the state doesn't fully respect them?

One footnote, if you look at opinion poll surveys as to what matters to different communities I think I'm right in saying that it is still the case that a far higher percentage of Muslims say in issues in Britain that matter to them, and the list will be employment, housing, education, all the other things, a far higher proportion will say, "What matters to me is my faith." It matters in their litany of issues of importance in their daily life.



That's probably why many more people practise fasting at *Ramadan* than practise fasting and equal self-discipline in other faiths in this country because it matters more.

That's even more important therefore that we respect and understand that. Don't generalise, don't misinform, don't misrepresent, and remember that every single Muslim in Britain or around the world is both an adherent of a great world faith but also an individual with their own interpretation, their own coming to terms with how their faith impacts on them and should never be the subject of a generalisation, not in any sense let alone as somebody of extreme views.

So Matthew I'm really clear that this is really seminal good work, core work and the criminal justice system and the justice system needs to be very understanding.

So I end with the present. It's a good thing I went to the Islamic Relief event because I met somebody I had never met before and he gave me his card.

And his business address is Clarence House, London, SW1. And he works for the Prince of Wales and he made his way to find me. He is, in fact, his Deputy Private Secretary, and said, "We haven't met but I understand you have something to do with something called the Curriculum for Cohesion," "Plead guilty, your Honour." He said, "The Prince of Wales is actively exploring if he can become further involved with that organisation and knowing you were here I hope that we can now establish further



conversation with a view to seeing whether it's appropriate and suitable and right now to take that forward.”

So the reward for your labours Matthew may be that there will be an expedited engagement with the occupant of Clarence House and the heir to the throne and that the Prince of Wales' real interest in and concern for and understanding of these issues may be something you can add to your litany of supporters and friends who are gathered here.

Thank you Matthew for what you've done. Thank you to everybody for participating. This is really important work for a civilised, equal, respectful and successful United Kingdom

Thank you very much.