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A Question of Leadership: The Failure of Engagement for Its Own Sake

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“Muslim Leaders in Feud with the BBC” may sound familiar, but this headline is not about the broadcaster’s recent coverage of the conflict in Gaza. It is a news story from the Observer on 14 August 2005[1]. The BBC investigative journalist John Ware had been looking into the Muslim Council of Britain and the Observer, where I was Home Affairs Editor at the time, had been doing the same. The BBC was about to broadcast a Panorama documentary about the MCB and its origins in the sectarian politics of South Asia. It would be highly critical of the organisation’s Secretary-General, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, who was very close to the New Labour government, over his ambivalent stance on suicide bombers and the Palestinian terror organisation Hamas. In response, the MCB issued a statement blaming the influence of the so-called Israel lobby: ‘It appears the Panorama team is more interested in furthering a pro-Israeli agenda than assessing the work of Muslim organisations in the UK.”

As it turned out, the Observer investigation and the Panorama documentary marked the beginning of a significant shift in the discussion of what constituted extremism in British Islam and transformed the relationship between the UK government and the British Muslim community forever.

For me, it had all begun over lunch with Malise Ruthven, the Middle East and Islamic history expert. I’d admired Ruthven’s standard work on the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, The Rushdie Affair and his book on al-Qaeda, Fury for God was one of the best books on the background to 9/11. When I was working at the Observer at the beginning of the century, Ruthven had become an invaluable guide to the complexities of the war on terror and the revival of Islamism as a global political force.

In the summer of 2005, shortly after the al-Qaeda attacks on London, Ruthven suggested I take a look at the Muslim Council of Britain and investigate whether the organisation, which advertised itself as the moderate, representative body of British Islam, was everything it claimed to be.

Free expression and extremism have often been intertwined in my work as a journalist. But never more so than in the series of articles I wrote for the Observer over that period. I had previously covered the growth of political Islam in the UK, with groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun and the crackdown on terror suspects following 9/11. I was among the first to write about hate preachers Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada. But the home-grown terror attacks of 7 July 2005 had taken everyone by surprise.

That summer, the police and the intelligence services were struggling to get a grip on the situation and the Blair government was desperate for moderate Muslims with whom they

1 Martin Bright, Muslim leaders in feud with the BBC (The Observer, 14 August 2005).

could engage. The MCB, with its quasi-democratic structure, led by the recently knighted Sir Iqbal Sacranie seemed to fit the bill perfectly. The organisation had developed a strong relationship with Jack Straw during his time as Home Secretary and the bond remained strong when he became Foreign Secretary. The consensus within government was that the best way to keep young Muslims from the path of violence was to keep the MCB close and listen to their advice about what was happening on the ground.

But the approach was already causing concern in some quarters. Booker Prize winner Salman Rushdie had raised his voice in protest about the increasing influence of Sir Iqbal Sacranie. The MCB's grandly-titled Secretary General had said "death was perhaps too easy" for Rushdie when Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran had called for Muslims to assassinate the writer in 1989. Sixteen years later, Rushdie criticised Sacranie and the Muslim Council of Britain for boycotting the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony. Writing in The Times, the Satanic Verses author said: "If Sir Iqbal Sacranie is the best Mr Blair can offer in the way of a good Muslim, we have a problem."[2]

By the summer of 2005, the internal contradictions of the MCB had become impossible to ignore. Its leadership had condemned the terror attacks of July and Sir Iqbal Sacranie issued a personal statement saying: "nothing in Islam can ever justify the evil actions of the bombers." But this didn't seem to entirely square with his position on suicide bombings when Israel was the target. In 2004, for example, Sacranie had attended a memorial service for Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, after the Hamas leader was assassinated by Israel.

The Observer investigation[3] noted the roots of the MCB in the extremist politics of south Asia. Its leaders, including Sacranie were inspired by Maulana Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-i-Islami, which promoted the establishment of an Islamic state in Pakistan. Ahl-i-Hadith, one of the MCB's affiliate organisations described the ways of "disbelievers" as "based on sick and deviant views concerning their societies, the universe and their very existence". At the very least, this raised some interesting ethical questions about what did and didn't constitute extremist thought and expression in the UK context.

By November 1997, when the MCB was founded, the recently elected Labour government of Tony Blair was keen to have a reliable line of communication with the Muslim community. Home Secretary Jack Straw, who had a significant Muslim population in his Blackburn constituency, was instrumental in building the credibility of this new organisation, which quickly became the one-stop-shop government for all Muslim matters. The Foreign and

2 Salman Rushdie, Muslims unite! A new Reformation will bring your faith into the modern era (The Times, 11 August 2005).

3 Martin Bright, Radical links of UK's 'moderate' Muslim group (The Observer, 14 August 2005).

Commonwealth Office also found it convenient to cultivate the relationship and the MCB was drafted in to help write the FCO's official guide "Muslims in Britain" and organise the official ministerial celebrations of the festival of Eid. By 2005, the MCB's partial interpretation of Islam was fast becoming the orthodox position of the British government.

The increasingly problematic role of the MCB within Whitehall came into sharp focus when the British Council decided to fund a Festival of Muslim Cultures planned for 2006. The MCB used its government influence to gain a place on the festival's board. Designed to celebrate the full diversity of Muslim creativity around the world, the festival was instructed that it would need to be compliant with the MCB's notion of Islamic sharia law in order to get the support of the organisation.

Some of the performers and art works were potentially problematic for the MCB. The Uzbek singer Sevara Nezarkhan, for example, performed with her head uncovered and had worked with Jewish "klezmer" musicians. Plans to exhibit the 14th century world history of Rashad al-Din was particularly controversial because it represented the human form, including Mohammed himself, a challenge to the orthodox view that images of the Prophet are "haram" or forbidden.

Sacranie made the MCB's position clear: "If any activities are seen to contradict the teachings of Islam, then we will oppose them. If you organise a festival in the name of Islam then it must be Islamic. We will advise them accordingly."

The organisation dug in and defended the reputation of Maududi, pointing out that Jamaat-i-Islami was a legal organisation in Pakistan. Others, such as Abdul-Rehman Malik of the Muslim magazine Q-News, criticised the stranglehold the MCB had on policymaking and its failure to clarify its position on political violence. "You cannot be equivocal about innocent people," he said. "An innocent person in Tel Aviv is the same as an innocent person in Baghdad or London."

After the Observer published its investigation, the MCB came out fighting. In a lengthy riposte, the organisation attacked its detractors, defended its stance on Israel and the boycott of Holocaust Memorial Day, which it felt should be to extended to create a more "inclusive" Genocide Memorial Day. "Fortunately, the MCB derives its mandate from British Muslim organisations and not from pro-Israeli sections of the media," it said.[4]

This intemperate and often personal response attacked the "mischievous efforts of the Panorama team" and suggested that my approach in the Observer "reveals all too clearly his own Islamophobic agenda". This was a cheap, unsubstantiated and potentially dangerous

4 Muslim Council of Britian Press Release, 14 August 2005.

claim. But looking back, it raises some fascinating questions for journalists working in this area. I had always been interested in the interface between Islam and free expression since the Rushdie affair itself.

While living in France in the 1990s, I had interviewed activists from the Algerian war of independence and Islamists from the civil war that had blighted the country since 1992. On returning, I studied for a master's degree in history at the School of Oriental and African Studies, specialising in the history of Islam in India and North Africa. It would have been more accurate to describe me as a curious Islamophile rather than someone hostile to the religion. This was a month before the Danish cartoons controversy, when the magazine *Jyllands-Posten* published satirical drawings of the prophet Muhammad to challenge self-censorship. This was 10 years before cartoonists at French magazine Charlie Hebdo were murdered for their consistently satirical approach to the Muslim religion. I felt I had been fastidiously respectful, and the charge of Islamophobia was hugely irresponsible in this context.

But there was a further element to the MCB statement that was even more troubling. Whoever wrote the response had drawn attention to a cover piece I had written for the New Statesman in December 2001. The article looked at the work of a group of western scholars of Islam, who had examined the historic origins of the religion and raised some important questions about the reliability of scriptural sources. This approach, though not uncommon in biblical studies, was highly controversial in the study of Islam. It's safe to say that some of the scholars involved were not happy with my journalistic approach and the implied criticism that they had kept their heads below the academic parapet in their critique of Islam. The sensationalist headline, The Great Koran Con Trick, was an error on the part of an over-zealous editor and a gross distortion of the content of the piece. In 2005, the MCB, not surprisingly, jumped on the New Statesman headline as evidence of my hostility to Islam. "In that piece, Bright tried his hardest — and quite miserably failed — to disprove the Divine origin of the Holy Qur'an." This was an absurd charge. As an atheist, I have no interest in what Muslims want to believe about the holiness of the Quran. But the whole incident raised important questions about what can and can't be said about Islam and what constitutes blasphemy and extremism. The charges of Islamophobia were part of a concerted effort to close down a debate of significant public interest about who speaks for Muslims in Britain.

The BBC programme and the Observer investigation were entirely positive and initiated discussions at public meetings and across the Muslim media. As I wrote in the Observer two weeks after the original report, the central claims of the Observer and Panorama reports remained as valid as ever: "that the moderate credentials of the leaders of Britain's most powerful Muslim lobby group are open to question; that the MCB grew out of sectarian Islamist politics of south Asia and that it fails to control its extremist affiliates." I added: "To say this is

not to attack Islam or British Muslims; rather, it is an attempt to call to account the leaders of a powerful organisation that has the ear of ministers and influence across Whitehall."[5]

I assumed it would end there, but there was more to come.

Towards the end of the summer, I started to receive documents from a Foreign Office civil servant concerned about what he saw as the Islamist capture of policy within Whitehall. This led initially to a story about Foreign Office concerns a year before the 7/7 bombings that UK intervention in Iraq was fuelling a rise in radicalisation among young Muslims. This had always been denied by the government. Further leaks to the Observer included an ingenious plan by MI6 to infiltrate Islamist groups online by spreading anti-western propaganda and then persuading jihadists to pursue the path of peace. More concerning was advice to approve a visa for the Qatar-based Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who had consistently argued for the legitimacy of suicide bombings in Israel and armed resistance to the coalition forces in Iraq. The memo from Islamic issues advisor Mockbul Ali stated: "Exclusion ... could turn Muslim opinion further against the UK and encourage some to move to violence against British targets." The adviser continued: "We certainly do not agree with Qaradawi's views on Israel and Iraq, but we have to recognise that they are not unusual amongst Muslims. Refusing entry on these grounds would also open a Pandora's box in relation to entry clearance for others in the Muslim world." The view was supported by then Political Director of the Foreign Office, John Sawers.

Towards the end of September 2005 I took up the post of Political Editor of the New Statesman and the leaks from the Foreign Office kept coming. Email exchanges revealed a Cabinet split on proscribing extremist parties. One report demonstrated Britain had full knowledge of CIA rendition flights of terror suspects despite denials. There was even a leak of the investigation into the Observer leaks. The documents provided a near-live commentary on policy making as ministers and officials grappled with the aftermath of the London terrorist attacks. The disclosures also allowed me to demonstrate that the Government's "Preventing Extremism Together" Task Force, set up after the London bombings, was little more than a cosmetic exercise. Most seriously, at the heart of it all was a record of the profound soul searching about who on the spectrum of Islamist radical thought the British government should engage in dialogue. The leaks showed the government was already talking to one of the more radical groups in the Middle East, revealing secret Foreign Office negotiations with Egypt's Islamist opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Some within the diplomatic service were worried. In June 2005, Sir Derek Plumbly, the British ambassador to Egypt, wrote to Sawers: "I… detect a tendency for us to be drawn towards

5 Martin Bright, Let's shed more light on Islam (The Observer, 28 August 2005).

engagement for its own sake; to confuse 'engaging with the Islamic world' with 'engaging with Islamism'; and to play down the very real downsides for us in terms of the Islamists' likely foreign and social policies, should they actually achieve power in countries such as Egypt." Plumbly was deeply sceptical of the efficacy of such an approach: "I suspect that there will be relatively few contexts in which we are able significantly to influence the Islamists' agenda."

In January 2006, my source in the Foreign Office was arrested for breaching the Official Secrets Act. Derek Pasquill had been working in the Engaging with the Islamic World Group and, like Plumbly in Egypt, had become worried about the ideological drive to engage with Islamists. The leaks dried up, but already the policy mood music was changing. A revived Conservative Party under David Cameron began to ask serious questions about Labour's relationship with the MCB. This push was driven by Michael Gove, one of the chief intellectual architects of the Cameroon project and a fierce critic of what he saw as Labour's dalliance with radical Islam.

Through 2006, the New Statesman continued to publish stories on the subject. At the same time, I was approached by Channel 4 to make a short documentary, Who Speaks for Muslims? about the Foreign Office and the MCB. This allowed me to travel the country and speak to dissident voices within the Muslim community, mainly from the spiritual Sufi tradition, who felt their voices were not being heard. Policy Exchange, the centre-right think tank co-founded by Michael Gove commissioned a report entitled When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries, which enabled me to examine in detail the evidence from the Pasquill disclosures.[6]

The documentary and the report helped embolden critics of government policy within the Labour Party. In May 2006, Ruth Kelly had become Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and was already deeply sceptical of the MCB. Immediately after the broadcast of Who Speaks for Muslims? Kelly announced the establishment of the Sufi Muslim Council to provide an alternative voice. Then, in October 2006, she announced the government would no longer be funding organisations which boycotted Holocaust Memorial Day: "I can't help wondering why those in leadership positions who say they want to achieve religious tolerance and a cohesive society would choose to boycott an event which marks, above all, our common humanity and respect for each other."

In just over a year, the Muslim Council of Britain had gone from favoured partner to pariah and there is no doubt that my work at the Observer, New Statesman, Channel 4 and Policy Exchange had played its part.

6 Martin Bright, When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries: The British State's Flirtation with Radical Islamism (Policy Exchange, 1 July 2006).

Inevitably, there were unintended consequences. For a start, I began to be feted by the political right.[7] David Frum, the American neo-Conservative credited with coining the phrase "axis of evil" began quoting my work favourably, while the right-wing journal American Thinker ran what would now be called a "long read" on my findings. I was praised by the Mail on Sunday and former Telegraph editor Charles Moore apologised to his readers for speaking approvingly of a New Statesman writer. One of the most insightful pieces came from former Spectator editor Frank Johnson, who wrote: "Some of us distinctly non-leftists have been worried about the growing signs that certain Western leftists have embraced militant Islam as they embraced Jacobinism and Stalinism: as a powerful force against the Western bourgeoisie and as a source of support among the British masses." But Johnson also recognised something else at the heart of my critique of the totalitarian tendency within Islamism: 'Many leftists see militant Islam as destructive of the European rationalism in which the left has its true roots.'

It took another year for charges to be brought against Derek Pasquill, the civil servant who leaked the documents to bring the government's potentially disastrous policy to public attention. Finally, in January 2008 government prosecutors announced there was no longer a realistic prospect of a conviction in this case.[8] Internal FCO papers revealed that far from harming British interests, Pasquill's leaking of the documents had helped to provoke a constructive debate. But by then Pasquill's career was over.

In sharp contrast, the architects of the policy of "engagement for its own sake" were never held to account for their questionable judgement. Mockbul Ali went on to have a successful career in the UK diplomatic service, receiving an OBE for services to foreign policy in 2010, while John Sawers received a knighthood and went on to head up MI6.

The London bombings were devastating for the families of the victims and those who had survived with appalling injuries or lifetime of trauma. They were also deeply troubling for British Muslims, who had to recognise that the bombers came from among them and for the police and intelligence services, who had failed to see it coming. Politicians and officials were also forced to recognise that their strategy of engagement with Islamists may have been unwise. I still believe that the work done by journalists during this period to expose these policy errors remains crucially important.

But there is a price to pay for speaking out on this issue. In my case, there are those who would have those 18 months in 2005 and 2006 define my whole 30-year career. Whoever wrote my Wikipedia page (and I have my suspicions) insists that "since the late twentieth

7 Martin Bright, Right showing left the way on radical Islam (The Observer, 30 July 2006).
8 Chris Tryhorn and agencies, 'Victory for press freedom' over leaks (The Guardian, 9 Jan 2008).

century, he has particularly covered the rise of Muslim extremism, terrorist attacks in Britain and abroad, and aspects of British governmental relations with the Muslim community in the United Kingdom." The career section of the crowd-sourced web encyclopaedia is, for the most part, an inflammatory Islamist take on my 2001 New Statesman article on the Qu'ran. It would be laughable if it weren't the first thing people read when they Google me.

My take on radical Islam also put me on a collision course with the hard left in British politics, and particularly the former London Mayor Ken Livingstone. In January 2008, I made The Court of Ken for Channel 4 Dispatches. which discussed, among other things, Livingstone's decision to invite the radical cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi to London. I discovered that the Mayor's own advisor on race issues. Atma Singh, had warned against the invitation, but had been overruled and subjected to a campaign of harassment until he resigned.

Peter Tatchell, the gay rights campaigner, was also in Livingstone's sights for criticising the invitation the cleric: "Ken took the view that because I didn't agree with him inviting to London someone who is anti-Semitic, homophobic, misogynistic and who justifies terrorist suicide bombings I was an Islamophobe," he told the programme.

This became a familiar smear to those of us who tried to call out Livingstone and his ill-advised flirtation with an Islamist ideology he barely understood. In 2010, as the political editor of the Jewish Chronicle, I published an open letter to Livingstone after he went on the now-banned Iranian state TV channel Press TV and called me "a bit of an Islamophobe". The letter still stands as an important statement of principle for me:

> *"I have been fiercely critical of some Islamist groups which share the politics of far-right parties in South Asia and the Middle East. I have also challenged the Labour government's relationship with certain organisations claiming to represent Muslims in Britain. But that is not the same thing as being anti-Muslim or racist, as you imply. Every one of the criticisms I have raised in my journalism in print and on television is of concern to British Muslims, who have themselves led the fight against extremism.*
>
> *"I have written widely on Islam and Muslim culture and you should understand that it is extremely damaging for me to leave claims of Islamophobia unchallenged.*
>
> *As the political editor of the Jewish Chronicle, whose readers are understandably horrified by racism against ethnic minority communities, I find such a charge particularly distasteful.*
>
> *I consider myself an Islamophile and have devoted considerable time to the study of the religion and the history of the Muslim world. I suggest you do the same before making such unfounded claims."*[9]

9 Martin Bright, Livingstone, you have libelled me. Apologise (The Jewish Chronicle, 27 May 2010).

Livingstone never apologised.

Why does this debate from 20 years ago matter so much? Because the politics of extremism tests the limits of democracy and the principles of free expression that underpin it. Yusuf al-Qaradawi said: “Through his [Allah’s] infinite wisdom he has given the weak a weapon the strong do not have and that is their ability to turn their bodies into bombs as Palestinians do.” It was therefore entirely legitimate to challenge those who believed he should be invited to speak in Britain and that refusing to let him into the country would inflame young Muslims. In 2008, the government changed its policy and refused the cleric a visa. No one took to the streets in response.

This debate also matters because it has ossified over the past two decades. The Prevent anti-terrorism strategy brought in after the 2005 bombings has had mixed results, although critics must recognise there has been no attack on the scale of the 7/7 attacks in the years that followed. Sadly, attempts by the government to find alternative interlocutors to the MCB have never quite taken root. The Sufi Muslim Council was a short-lived experiment and another moderate Muslim organisation, the Quilliam Foundation, foundered when government funding was withdrawn. The Muslim Council of Britain can argue that it remains the largest umbrella body for Muslim organisations, but its stance on Israel and the Holocaust still makes it a problematic partner for ministers.

In 2025, it seems we have come full circle with Muslim organisations once again accusing the BBC of pro-Israel bias over the recent decision to withdraw a documentary on Gaza. But this is not the whole story. The government no longer indulges in “engagement for its own sake” and legitimate criticism of Muslim organisations is not always met with cries of Islamophobia.

But the pro-Palestinian demonstrations have shown we still have a problem drawing the line between free expression rights and support for terrorism. Perhaps the anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 2005, should prompt us to find new ways of addressing the problem. We still have a long way to go.

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