

Speech: A strong country needs strong and vibrant communities

Introduction

Good evening everyone; Assalamu Alaikum.

It's a real pleasure to be here again at the Muslim News Awards for Excellence surrounded by friends, parliamentary colleagues from all political parties and leaders from across our Muslim community.

We are all here to celebrate the fantastic achievements of this wonderfully rich and diverse community we have here in our country.

For that is what I want to briefly touch on with you here this evening: that word, community, and why the strength and vibrancy of strong communities is so important to us all.

I hope I'll be forgiven if I quote The Holy Quran, which teaches: "O mankind! We have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another."

I made a speech earlier this year in Wales, and I talked about the value of our United Kingdom. My argument then and my argument again tonight is that there is no contradiction between one's loyalty to one's country, and loyalty to one's community as well.

People across the country derive a sense of who we are from a variety of different sources. From family and community; town and village; political persuasion and of course, religious faith.

It is precisely the plurality of these sources, and of those bonds, which come together to form a whole that is greater than the mere sum of its parts. And a country that is truly united and stronger, confident in itself and its purpose in the world.

You can be British, but also English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish. Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jew. Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cornwall, Brummie, Cockney.

None of those loyalties make us feel less loyal to the country. Less entitled to stand up and take our place in the mainstream of our society in the United Kingdom.

There really is no community which demonstrates more pride, enthusiasm and pure inspiration, than that of British Muslims across our country – many of whom are gathered here in this room tonight.

In the words of the Prime Minister, for whom the value of community is appreciated more than many people, your influence as community reaches every

sphere of our society – from sport; charity, the arts and youth work; to business and enterprise. There are British Muslims who really are the role models, the thinkers, the visionaries. Everywhere I look around this country, British Muslim men and women are leading the way in whatever field they choose.

Sir Mo Farah, with yet another record yesterday, is one of the finest sportsmen the United Kingdom has ever produced.

Or in the media, Mishal Husein, who regularly relishes the opportunity to skewer myself and other government colleagues in the early hours of the morning on Radio Four.

Or you look at politics, and my colleague Nusrat Ghani, the first female Muslim minister to speak at the dispatch box in the House of Commons, alongside my Cabinet colleague Sajid Javid, the first British Muslim and the first British Asian to hold the office of Secretary of State.

And of course yourself Ahmed Versi, the editor of the largest and oldest Muslim newspaper in Britain. I haven't read the write-up of this speech, but I do hope you say nicer things than what I tend to have dished out on a daily basis back in House of Commons!

Quite simply, British Muslims include some of the brightest lights that make up the constellation of brilliance that is our diverse United Kingdom.

And it's why it is right that we come together tonight to recognise the achievements of the whole British Muslim community. Those achievements are something of which we should all be proud, wherever we come from in society, and can celebrate with enthusiasm, pleasure and sheer gratitude.

Divisions and disparities

But it is also why we must never cease our mission to strengthen our communities further – and bring people closer together

One of the events I most enjoyed in my own constituency last summer was when my local mosque in Aylesbury decided to celebrate the end of summer by holding an Eid fete. Bringing together the British tradition of a summer fete, with the Muslim festival of Eid.

The doors of the mosque and the arms of the community were thrown open to everybody in Aylesbury. I remember going to the mosque and standing next to the head of the local police, the command of the local RAF station, and the Mayor, to hear the Imam talk about the faith, and the head of the mosque committee describing the local community there.

But it's also true that while Britain is a proudly multi-ethnic and diverse country, we cannot pretend that divisions and disparities do not still exist within our society; that examples of prejudice and injustice are still too common in everyday life; and that for too long, if we are honest with ourselves, governments of all political colours have not acted sufficiently

to correct them.

Nearly two years ago, the Prime Minister set out a mission on the steps of Downing Street to build a country that works for everyone. No simple task, nobody said it would be easy, or that it would happen overnight.

But part of creating that fairer country we all want to see involves working harder and faster to break down those barriers that still hold people back from achieving their true potential, and that objective is something I believe politicians of all political parties in this country believe in too.

That is why one of the Prime Minister's first acts upon entering Downing Street was to commission an unprecedented Race Disparity Audit of the whole public sector, the first of its kind in the world.

What that is doing is shining an unsparing light on the disparities faced by many people from different ethnic groups using public services in Britain – from health to education; employment to criminal justice.

Now of course, British Muslims belong to many different ethnic backgrounds – and those of you here tonight are a direct testament to the success stories which come out of the British Muslim community.

But what these figures in that audit show is that too many people are still left behind in this country – and that is something we cannot and will not let continue.

Prejudice and injustice

But while it is our mission to tackle these social policy challenges into the future – we know there are also more serious and very direct threats that face the Muslim community in the here and now.

Frankly, when I read letters or emails that encourage people in this country to participate in 'Punish a Muslim' day, and when I hear directly from British Muslims – people who are British citizens, who are paying taxes, who are working, who are active participants in our society – they tell me about the fear which that sort of comment and incitement causes to them and their family, I feel a mixture of outrage and disgust.

And when I see reports, particularly on social media, of regular incidents of anti-Muslim hate crime in our society, it gets me angry.

And when I hear and see, and again it's often online commentary where this is seen, divisive, xenophobic and racist language in political argument, whether it comes from the far left or the far right – I am not only utterly appalled but determined that we must work together among our different traditions of religion and ethnicity, and redouble efforts to overcome and defeat the forces of hatred and intolerance.

My message and this government's message is clear: that kind of bigotry and intolerance has no place in the United Kingdom, and we will stamp it out

wherever we find it.

And when I read other letters calling for people to take part in 'Love a Muslim' day in response to the bigotry, I am reassured that, no matter how long the struggle, the values of solidarity and unity will always prevail.

When I see those who commit hate crimes rightly punished, I am confident that our zero-tolerance attitude – whether from government or boarder society – is the correct one.

And when I hear racism in our politics condemned – from all sides of the democratic tradition – I have more faith than ever that, as my late colleague the Labour MP Jo Cox put it, what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

For it is the actions of those who call out and refuse to tolerate bigotry wherever they find it – and the actions of those who believe in the eternal principles of kindness, charity and compassion – that is what fills me with optimism.

Actions like those of Mohammed Mahmoud, the young imam, who ran towards and protected a man who had just driven his car into a group of worshippers outside Finsbury Park mosque in north London, nearly one year ago.

In his words he wanted to make sure the driver, Darren Osborne “answered for his crime” and sure enough, in February this year, that man Darren Osborne was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

That is justice. That is tolerance. That is the United Kingdom today at its best.

Inspirational Leaders

Mohammed Mahmoud is a true leading light in the British Muslim community, as are all gathered here this evening.

A strong country needs strong and vibrant communities, and those communities need leaders who inspire those around them.

And those here tonight, especially those we are celebrating and honouring are an inspiration and an example to us all.

Congratulations to all of those winning awards; thank you for everything you have done for this country; and please continue all your work to make this a better, fairer, more tolerant country still. One in which we can all feel we can live in peace and pride.

Thank you very much.