

# Faithful and Proud

**Maurice Irfan Coles**



## Young British Muslim Conference Report

**20<sup>th</sup> September 2005**  
**Walkers Stadium, Leicester**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**In the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate**

## PREFACE

This report summarises a conference held in Leicester in September 2005 attended by 120 young British Muslims. It contains these young peoples' views on a range of issues as recorded and reported by excellent facilitators and scribes who produced notes, which, when typed created to 23 pages of bullet points. I have edited their comments and where possible I have used the language of young people themselves. Editing, perforce, requires a selection process but I hope that I have produced a document that is close to the spirit of the interesting, diverse and dynamic views of the young Muslims present on the day. This report will form part of a longer document including supplementary information that will be published in due course.



Maurice Coles 27.09.05

## 1. PREAMBLE

This conference summary outlines the aims, the underpinning processes, main findings and recommended actions suggested by the young Muslims themselves. The conference, financed by the Home Office, and organised by Leicester City's School Development Support Agency was an outstanding success. It brought together over 120 Muslims predominantly aged between 16-19, from 10 state and independent schools from Leicester, Coventry and Birmingham.

It aimed to:

1. Explore some of the key issues that surround what it means to be a young Muslim growing up in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
2. Seek young Muslims' views on these issues
3. Discuss in more depth, identity, education, media, gender, racism and terrorism
4. Make a series of recommendations as to how their school/college, government (local and national), and communities might progress the agenda
5. Provide an enjoyable and high quality day for all participants

**The conference was unique in that its themes were chosen by a group of 16 young Muslims of both genders** drawn from the three cities who underwent two and a half days facilitator training based upon the principles of Philosophy for Children (P4C). These young people not only set the agenda, they facilitated almost all the 30 workshops provided throughout the day. Participants chose their workshops in advance from a list that included education, media, gender, role models/culture and identity, government and politics and terrorism.

The young facilitators decided upon their own stimuli, orchestrated the discussion, and helped their peers to come to conclusions about the issues. For wider reference, they were provided with a series of possible questions to aid discussion. They were supported by older adults who scribed each session, summed up where requested, but generally were not active participants in the discussions. The young facilitators organised each workshop around debate about the major issues, and then sought the views of their peers as to recommended actions.

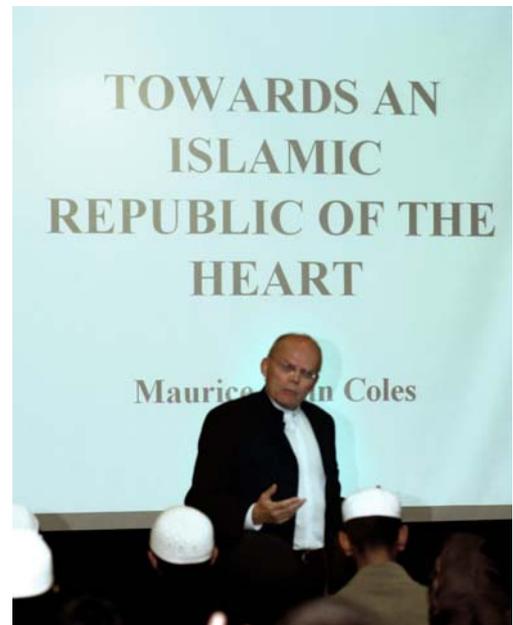


The conference was opened by Sheikh Mahmood Rashid from the Islamic Cultural Centre in Birmingham who began the day with a recitation from the Qu'ran. Two facilitators, Mahmuda Begum and Sulthana Aktar, from Broadway School in Birmingham welcomed the delegates and outlined the aims of the day. Andrew Cozens, Deputy Chief Executive of Leicester City Council extended the welcome on behalf of the City and stressed the government's orchestrated drive to seek the views of young people. Leicester City's Cabinet Lead for Education, Councillor Hussein Suleman, delivered a moving speech about his role as a senior councillor who was also a Muslim. He spoke with some passion about the sometimes

difficult relationship he had had with the media. He eloquently argued that **to be a good Muslim requires active involvement in the life and politics of the community.**

Maurice Irfan Coles' keynote was entitled 'Towards an Islamic Republic of the Heart'. He set the context and the style of the workshops and highlighted briefly some of the key issues that face British Muslims in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. **His basic argument was that the Qur'an encourages Muslims to take an active part in citizenship, to live their faith through good deeds, religious tolerance and healthy dialogue between all groups.**

The final plenary session brought together some of the key issues and some of the main recommended points for action. **All participants agreed that the conference would be a major failure if no action resulted from the stimulating workshop discussions.** The day was eloquently closed by Sheikh Rashid who read a range of prayers.



## 2. MAIN FINDINGS

Generally, young British Muslims involved in the conference:

1. Were keen to integrate into British society whilst retaining their strong Islamic faith
2. Believed that such integration was compatible with their faith
3. Were proud to be British and Muslim
4. Were critical of political processes, which they did not understand and from which they felt excluded
5. Wanted help and support to be actively involved in these processes
6. Were very reflective and honest about themselves, their religious and cultural identities and the communities in which they lived
7. Greatly mistrusted the media but wanted to be actively involved in changing it
8. Were critical of aspects of the teaching/education they received in mainstream schools and colleges, and in mosques and madrasahs
9. Were critical of aspects of government foreign policy

10. Wanted much more debate and discourse both as Muslims but, as if not more importantly, with their non-Muslim peers
11. Wanted schools/colleges to be braver in tackling contentious issues like racism, Islamophobia, religious education, the position of women and terror, but within a wider context that involves all groups not just Muslims.

### 3. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### FOR MUSLIMS THEMSELVES:

1. Be reflective
2. Discuss issues of faith and faith interpretation
3. Become more politically involved
4. Discuss the position of women in Islam
5. Take part in conferences like this one where openness and honesty prevail
6. Produce up-to-date guidance on the Islamic view of issues such as 9/11 and 7/7
7. Become more involved in the mainstream media
8. Speak up
9. Encourage madrassahs/mosques to involve young people more.



#### FOR EDUCATORS:

1. Re-examine the teaching of religious education in **all** schools, stressing teaching about **all faiths**
2. Offer an age appropriate curriculum which deals with issues like racism, terror and other contentious and sensitive areas
3. Discuss, in mosques and madrasahs, the nature of the teaching offered
4. Provide teacher/school workforce with accurate information about the true nature of Islam
5. Undertake more research and disseminate the findings about the differences between Islamic practices that are based on culture as opposed to those sanctioned Qur'anically and through the sunnah
6. Promote education and understanding of many of these issues with parents
7. Promote a wider understanding of Islam for **all** non Muslims.

#### FOR THE MEDIA:

1. Be more circumspect about the way Muslims are portrayed
2. Be conscious of and avoid using negative Muslim stereotypes, which reinforce prejudice and racism
3. Support the creation of a media unit.

#### FOR GOVERNMENT (LOCAL AND NATIONAL):

1. Fund conferences that deal with these issues in other parts of the country
2. Fund a major conference(s) that involve young people in discourse with key people in the media
3. Be more aware of impact of foreign policy on Muslims world-wide
4. Change aspects of British foreign policy.

## 4. THE THEMES EXPLORED

### 4.1 TERRORISM

Commentary:

This workshop was the most heavily subscribed, narrowly followed by media. The tragic events of 7/7 undoubtedly contributed to this. Six workshops ran in the course of the day and students discussed a range of questions designed to elicit their understanding of the causes and Quranic justification (if any) of such actions. Some participants were unclear as to the nature, definition and causes of terrorism. Many argued that they, their parents, and their communities were as surprised, saddened, shocked and bewildered as the non-Muslim communities at the events of 9/11 and 7/7. Others, whilst totally condemning the actions of the ‘extremists’, felt they could go some way to understanding the frustration of the powerless. There was general agreement, however, that the so-called ‘Islamic terrorism’:

1. Was utterly un-Islamic
2. Was at fundamental odds with their values and the way they lived their lives
3. Contained a perverted ‘logic’ that distorted Islam
4. Was aided by a lack of genuine understanding and knowledge of Quranic values
5. Was directly connected to American and British foreign policy and to ‘hurts’ inflicted on the ummah (the Muslim community)
6. Was based upon a sense of powerlessness and an inability to influence events. ‘If you do not listen to the people, what is the point of democracy,’ argued one participant:
7. Was fuelled by media coverage that re-enforced negative images of Muslims. “The media has created the Muslim monster.”
8. Was not committed by lunatics but by those who had a very different ideology from mainstream Islamic thought
9. Was based upon a ‘misused’ and ‘misguided’ interpretation of the Jihad.

Groups varied considerably concerning where, when and even if there was discussion about terror. Generally, it was not discussed and certainly not taught. **Many argued that they were “scared to talk about terrorism” because of the way Muslims were already stereotyped and they were concerned that even a rational, objective discussion might leave them open to being labelled ‘terrorist’.**

In the present climate many mosques and madrassahs, were **“afraid to mention the ‘T’ word”**, because there appeared to be a “dangerous assumption that all Muslims are in agreement with terrorism.” The issue and problem was that any discussion would be driven underground.

The overwhelming voice was for **better teaching about ALL faiths at primary and secondary phase with Islam forming one component.** This teaching must involve genuine interaction and discussion between faith groups and not just be a simple transmission of facts about religion. Focused interaction, it was believed, would help dispel stereotypes and promote cohesion. In addition, **students wanted schools and colleges to tackle contentious issues like terrorism as part of the curriculum.**



## Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:

### The Media

1. Hold a Muslim/interfaith conference with the media to discuss all the issues raised
2. Regulate media coverage
3. Create a media unit
4. Encourage more Muslims to work in the media
5. Promote a better understanding of Muslim issues

### Education

1. Teach about terrorism to all groups. Focus on wider notions of terrorism, causes, actions and reactions. Do not just focus on so-called 'Islamic' terrorism
2. Educate the wider public about Islam as a religion of peace
3. Challenge the radical elements and Qu'ranic misconceptions, and provide the scholarly arguments that demonstrate the true teaching of Islam
4. Hold a dedicated conference that allows young Muslims to voice their opposition to terrorist acts

### Government

1. Change aspects of British foreign policy
2. Consult with Muslims on a range of issues
3. 'Encourage government representatives to understand Muslims better'.

## 4.2 THE MEDIA

Commentary:

**A key recurring theme in practically all the workshops, regardless of workshop focus, was young British Muslim mistrust of the media.** This mistrust ranged from a genuine questioning sense of, 'Why does the media portray Islam in the way it does?' though a harder-edged, 'we can't trust them; news is entertainment. It's all about money', to a full-blown conspiracy theory that government and media are anti-Muslim so they create false, sensationalised stories that demonizes Muslims.



**This overriding mistrust was tempered by a belief that Muslims themselves must become much more involved in all issues, but especially with the media itself.** 'We are partly to blame', said one participant, 'because we stick to our own'. The desire was **not** for a separate Muslim press that would further reinforce this sense of segregation and isolation, but for a clear, fairer mainstream understanding of Islam, backed up by non-stereotypical images. Young Muslims urged dialogue and openness between all sections of the media, the mosques, young people themselves and the various and varied community leaders.

In particular, very strong views were expressed about:

1. The number of stereotypically negative images, with the Muslim as terrorist and suicide bomber
2. The lack of positive news stories about Muslims (no participants could think of one!!!)
3. The sensationalising of ‘Muslim’ stories that led to truth distortion
4. The dangerous use of language like, ‘extremist’ and ‘fundamentalism’, and even the use of the word, ‘Muslim’. ‘If you use the word Muslim, it makes a story more dramatic’
5. The role of the media generally, especially the power of television and the press, which they believed, had made people suspicious of Muslims, who now are ‘always looking over their shoulders’.

### **Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:**

1. ‘It is up to Muslims to make the first steps’
2. Help more young Muslims to enter mainstream journalism and mainstream media
3. Encourage the mosques to have more dialogue with the media
4. Do not create a separate Muslim press but encourage Muslims to take part in an integrated press
5. Help the media to understand the true values of Islam
6. ‘Attract the media to the good news stories’
7. ‘Organise more conferences (like this one)’
8. Organise a conference with key media press people, but involve non- Muslims as well as Muslims
9. Support the recommendation for a government based Media Unit which would monitor coverage of Muslim issues.

## **4.3 EDUCATION**

Commentary:

**Like the media issue, education in the mainstream schools and colleges, in madrassahs, in mosques, and in the home was a recurring theme that ran through all workshops.** Participants were clear that Islam held education in high regard. ‘Islam,’ argued one student ‘encourages education in order for people to work and to help communities.’ Notwithstanding this, participants’ perceptions were that, overall, there was low Muslim achievement in education. The importance of education, it was felt, was not always understood in the family and boys and girls were not always accorded equal treatment. Muslim girls, however, generally fared academically better than Muslim boys, perhaps because they were more ‘protected’ at home.

Islamic faith schools appeared to offer a more conducive environment for learning because Islam taught respect and stressed learning whereas, in some state schools, there was a high level of disrespect. Some students, especially in areas where Muslim faith schools were not available, were of the opinion that there ought to be more Islamic schools, and that these should receive equal treatment to other faith groups, like for example, the Catholic sector. Some state schools, however, especially those with majority Muslim students, were sensitive to Muslim needs, in areas like prayer rooms and Ramadan. Others showed little understanding about issues such as dress code and other faith requirements.



For Muslims, religion is a part of general upbringing. This was considered good nurturing. Likewise, religious expression was seen as important in schools. Students did not want to see a situation similar to France, where religious clothing is forbidden in state schools. **Ideally, many students wanted a school where all faiths groups mixed freely with facilities for all, and where all religions were taught.** Issues were also raised about the nature of learning in the madrassahs where discourse appeared to be actively discouraged.

#### **Students expressed major concerns about:**

1. **Teacher understanding of students' faith needs**
2. **Religious education, both the syllabus content and the teaching.** Insufficient time was given to teaching about all faiths, and often where Islam was taught, it tended to be concentrated on 'facts about' rather than any more contentious issues
3. **The lack of teaching about Islam in schools.** 'Mosques fill in the gaps'
4. **The unwillingness of schools and colleges to discuss the contentious issues that surround matters of faith**
5. **Student choice from Year 7.** Certain activities (mixed swimming for example) made students feel profoundly uncomfortable, but 'students don't feel they can say anything due to the lack of teacher understanding.'
6. **The lack of discussion in the mosques and madrassahs.** 'You learn the basic beliefs,' considered one student, 'but there is no real opportunity to ask questions and discuss.' 'You can't voice your opinion in some mosques,' reported another.

#### **Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:**

- 1) Help Muslim parents and families to recognise the value of education generally and to both girls and boys
- 2) Teach the school workforce about the religious needs of Muslims and other groups
- 3) Encourage student choice
- 4) Incorporate the teaching of all faiths in religious education, and teach these in all areas, even where 'deemed unnecessary, for example Islam in the furthest reaches of Scotland'
- 5) Provide more Islamic schools, or allocate more money for religious studies in state schools
- 6) Promote discussion about religion at an early age including discussion of contentious issues. Do not leave discourse about such issues until the 6th form
- 7) Support the teaching and learning of madrassahs.

## **4.4 GENDER**

### **Commentary:**

Conference organisers insisted from the outset that the young men and women would have equal representation on the facilitators' training programme. As it transpired, more young women than young men were trained because the schools and colleges left the choice to individual young people. **The girls were simply much keener than the boys!** No attempt was made, however, to ensure a gender balance in the choice of workshops. Generally, participants were given their first three choices. All workshops contained both genders and facilitator training and scribe support ensured that every participant was able to express his or her view. **There was certainly no shortage of female views and absolutely no reluctance on the part of the young women present to express their views openly and with rigour and passion.** Not everybody, however, was happy

with discussion in mixed settings. Two (presumably young men) participants who completed their evaluation forms at conference end, considered the involvement of young women in mixed settings, unIslamic.

The gender workshops tackled head-on some of the most contentious issues surrounding gender roles and responsibilities. Contentious, both within the wider Islamic world itself and within the multifaith, multicultural Western world where women who wear the Hijab or the veil are often stereotypically seen as oppressed. ‘Health’ warnings were issued about the danger of generalising, about making assumptions that being veiled meant you had no identity other than that which was imposed, and about the lack of debate and coverage concerning the pressures on young Muslim males to behave in certain ways. Most importantly, participants struggled with distinguishing between ‘Muslim’ customs that were the product of particular histories and cultures, and those that were genuinely based upon Qu’ran and accepted Hadith.

Participants discussed the reasons behind issues like the dress code and whether its foundations were Islamic or societal/cultural. For some, wearing the Hijab/veil was a symbol of their faith; a faith stance which, for many, was ‘difficult for our non-religious society to understand.’ Comparisons were made about hijab and nuns’ habits, which were equally a symbol of faith. Many questions were raised about motive, about the degree of coercion, about the actual role of women in Islam, the issue of polygamy and of political power. It was generally agreed that the media presented women in an oppressed light and, by implication, suggested that Islamic society was patriarchal. **It was, participants felt, an issue that went to the heart of the position and treatment of all women in our society and not merely to Muslim women.**

Generally, participants were clear that Islam (like other religions) preached equality of the sexes, but that there were some differences in the respective roles and responsibilities of men and women. In part, these were based upon obvious biological differences that related to child rearing practices. The Qu’ran provided clear guidelines for life but these were often not known or understood, especially by some parents. As one student put it, **‘If parents don’t fully understand the implications of being a Muslim, how are non-Muslims going to?’** Although the Qu’ran stressed that the principle of modesty applied equally to male and female, many parents had very different (and higher) expectations for their boys. ‘The younger generation,’ expressed one young participant, ‘has a larger role to play in challenging the views of parents.’

#### **Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:**

- 1) Encourage Muslims to be more reflective and to adapt (within a Muslim frame of reference) to this society
- 2) Develop an acceptance and understanding that religion and culture are not the same thing
- 3) Place the whole issue of the position of women, of discrimination and of oppression into discussion about women in all societies, not merely Muslim women
- 4) Emphasise the importance of choice in relation to dress
- 5) Understand and develop understanding about the respective roles of males and females
- 6) Educate people about the nature of Islam, especially in the schools
- 7) Gain people’s respect and encourage everybody to respect differences
- 8) Encourage the media to adopt a more positive approach to Islam/Muslims
- 9) Treat Muslims as individuals and not as stereotypes.



## 4.4 ROLE MODELS

Commentary:

**‘Role – model’ – a person looked at by others as an example in a particular role or situation**  
(Oxford English Dictionary)

All workshop participants were clear and unequivocal that the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) was the greatest role model in today’s society, with leaders and scholars who follow the Prophet also seen as role-models. In today’s society, however, the media and its portrayal of celebrities had a huge influence over young people’s choice. Celebrities, film stars and the like do influence the younger generation of Muslims, as they may aspire to be like them.

Workshop participants agreed that the following were the virtues of an ideal role model. The person should have:

1. Good character, interaction in general society, well educated, non-judgemental, compassionate, merciful, a leader, humble, respectful with a broad understanding of religion.
2. More than one role model from all aspects of their life. They should be individual in their identity but not break the boundaries of Islam!
3. Broad understanding of Islam
4. Etiquette qualities
5. Humility traits

Role models, students agreed, should be drawn from different cultures. Unfortunately there are few British role models. Student choice, in turn was influenced by the home, parents, teachers, our cultures and traditions. Each person has ‘individual identities’ governed by their upbringing and society. Each generation had different role models.

**Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:**

1. Provide more government funding to help young Muslims achieve in all spheres
2. Encourage and provide opportunities for young Muslims to enter politics and government
3. Arrange more conferences about Islam and its teaching to increase awareness
4. Improve the bond between the Government and the Muslim community through:
  - Improving communication
  - Educating one another
  - Listening to the needs of the community

## 4.5 CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Commentary :

These workshops went to the very heart of what it means to be a young Muslim growing up in Britain today. **The overriding view was that you could be British and be a Muslim and be proud of both.** Participants felt privileged to be born here, to be born into a tradition that allows them to practise their religion freely, to observe their dress code, and to build their places of worship. Being born in the UK, some students felt that they did not have ‘roots in India or

Pakistan’, **‘you feel a sense of belonging here.’** As one student said, ‘you can be British and Muslim-you are born here. British is your nationality...Being Muslim is your faith.’ This was echoed by another who said, **‘Clash of cultures? You can still be British and pray, be British and wear modest clothing. You can be both.’** ‘There shouldn’t be a distinction between British and being Muslim.’ That was not to say that existing in a world of multiple identities was easy, especially when the demands of youth culture, of parents, of schools and of faith appeared to conflict. It was particularly difficult for those who wanted to reconcile their behaviours under British law with the central principles underpinning Islamic law (sharhiah). This was a real debate for those who wanted to live a life based upon strict Islamic principles.

The student facilitators encouraged the groups to distinguish between the complex concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘religion.’ There was general agreement that culture and religion had become ‘mixed up’ and that many of their parents had brought cultural aspects from the Indian sub-continent that they attributed to Islam, which in fact may have no doctrinal basis at all. As one student put it, **‘People think they are doing something religious when in fact it is cultural;’** or as another succinctly said, **‘Culture is man made. Religion is God.’** Mindsets, participants argued, were different/more closed, if you were born in the sub-continent compared to the UK.

There was a genuine understanding and sympathy for parents who were fearful that their children would lose their identity in the complex mix of cultural values in the UK, but some parents clung to a cultural identity that owed more to the sub- continent than to Britain. Many young people ‘live’ the fusion of Asian and British cultures and exist in a world where you are influenced, for example, by youth culture, South Asian cultures, parental culture and Islam. Culture, it was generally agreed, is a mixture of all these influences. For Muslims, however, **‘Islam should be at the top of the list.’** **‘If you practise your religion as a Muslim, it won’t matter where you come from.’** The problem for some participants was that they felt under pressure to remove the hijab and to adopt ‘western’ customs like clubbing which they perceived clashed with their Islamic identity. ‘British’, one young Muslim argued, ‘is a label of location and society. **There are different aspects of British culture. You don’t have to agree with them all.**’ Generally, participants required much more debate about what was cultural and what was religious; a debate that they argued should involve their communities.

### **Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:**

1. Produce up-dated guidance on Islamic views of issues such as 9/11 and 7/7
2. Conduct seminars to explore the difference between culture and religion; involve the communities in this debate
3. Involve parents in this debate, as it is their responsibility to provide a religious upbringing
4. Encourage a more diverse range of mosque leaders
5. Hold workshops in schools and colleges ‘for people to discuss what is important about their religion and also to discuss their culture’
6. Promote more British Muslim role models
7. Encourage more ethnic minorities to enter government.



## 4.5 RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Commentary :

It was the general view that there had been a change for the worse since 9/11 and 7/7. This was partly attributed to media stereotypes, which in turn had fuelled the view that every Asian was a 'Paki' and therefore a Muslim, and therefore a terrorist. The simple way you look and the clothes you wear can trigger racism. There was a lack of knowledge amongst the public about Islam, as there was about the meaning of the term jihad. Similarly, there was a lack of understanding about different cultures in our society generally. 'The lack of education leads to racism.'

The education system was significantly criticized. It was, boldly said one participant, 'flawed.' It was institutionally racist argued another, and cited the example of differential responses to religious festivals. 'Eid is counted as absence, Christmas holidays are ok.' Generally, schools do not teach enough about the cultures that make up our society. 'Learning about others can bring peace'. Schools needed to spend more time discussing cultures, religions and beliefs. Students needed to learn pastoral social skills and citizenship 'This might eradicate discrimination.' People talking to each other openly would help. '**Things could improve if there were more discourse.**' **Participants were clear that racism and discrimination were not simply a Muslim issue. It affected everyone. All schools in all areas had to address racism and Islamophobia.**

Although government and media were heavily criticised, Young Muslims did express some trenchant criticisms about aspects related to how Muslims interpreted their faith. There are said one, 'divisions in Islam' 'Everyone,' argued another, 'has different interpretations of their faith and culture -it is between God and you ultimately.' 'Muslims have to fit in to some extent into British society.' They were aware of generational differences and of the importance of madrassahs in imparting knowledge of faith and Islamic values.

**Young British Muslims recommended the following actions:**

1. 'Tackle the issues when people are young, through education (appropriate to age) in a way that does not scare them'
2. Undertake a range of projects where young people create dramatic pieces for the media reflecting on the issues as young people see them
3. Undertake projects that involve different cultures
4. Encourage more Muslims to be involved in politics
5. Address the media issue
6. 'Accept the truth about the (London) bombings'
7. Listen to the views of Muslims and ACT!!!

## 4.6 GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Commentary:

This workshop scribe summed up on behalf of the groups in the following succinct and poignant way: 'It was obvious from the discussion during the conference that Muslim Youth feel completely let down, insecure and afraid of the things that are taking place in Britain and across the world and in particular against Muslims. **Many were defensive and had almost given up on the system.**

Young people felt that bombers/terrorist existed because government/authorities don't listen to the people.'

There was a degree of cynicism about government motive in deciding now to consult more widely. As one student put it, **'government does not take on the views of Muslims in Britain-they carry out discussions around the country because they have to be seen to be doing the 'right thing'.'** Young Muslims viewed local councillors and national politicians with equal suspicion. In their opinion, this and their fear of isolation, accounts for the lack of Muslims in politics. There was also, however, a frank admission that many of them had no understanding of political processes; no knowledge of how to make their voice heard even when they wanted to. The one example of potentially galvanising them into action, -opposition to the war in Iraq- had been stymied because many schools prohibited their students from attending the marches against the war. Generally, their parents had not taken an active part in politics, had preferred to stay in the background.

This generation, however, saw themselves in a very different light to their parents. **'The younger generation wants a voice and don't have the fear the older generation does -we need more opportunities.'** The younger generation also wanted a more active role in the way mosques are run. There were insufficient facilities for women and for younger people. The overall view from all workshops was that many young Muslims had a genuine desire to be involved in the mainstream political processes. For them, Islam prescribed a clear duty to become involved as active citizens in their country, which allowed them to practise their religion freely. 'We as Muslims should vote, our Muslim voice/vote counts,' argued one participant.

#### **Students recommended the following actions:**

1. 'Unite as Muslims to bring about change'
2. Help the government understand Islam
3. 'Find the balance between Western/Islamic ways of life so that we don't isolate ourselves'
4. 'Be actively involved in promoting Islam and engage in discussions at all levels, unless we speak out about it, no one will know if we are supporting/condemning these act at present.'
5. Government should promote the teaching of **all** religions in schools
6. Change the cultures of the way in which mosques are run
7. Make politics part of the education system
8. Encourage more Muslims to take part in politics



## 5. CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT

Participants' evaluations revealed that students found the conference overwhelming excellent. It provided them, probably for the first time, with a legitimate space to discuss issues that are very dear to their hearts and that, until this conference, they had not had the courage or opportunity to debate openly. They were proud to be British and proud to be Muslim, and saw no conflict between the two! They wanted their voice to be heard; wanted to give the lie to the myth that Islam equates to terrorism. They were keen to get their British Muslim message directly to the top; **'I think if Mr Blair was here he would be really proud of these people,'** confidently said Riyaz Bhim on BBC News that evening.



Why was it a success, and can it be repeated? It was a success because of the combination of young trained, Muslim facilitators, of scribes who had a clear brief, of inputs that set the tone of humour coupled with openness and seriousness, and most of all because discussion centred on Islamic faith and values in a British context. It can, and should be repeated in all areas where there are Muslims. This conference, hopefully, marks a watershed. A watershed between a period of tension and nervousness and one in which young British Muslims are confident to take their place in our dynamic multicultural, multi-faith democracy.



SDSA,  
1<sup>st</sup> Floor,  
Alliance House,  
6 Bishop Street,  
Leicester.  
LE1 6AF.

Tel: 0116 299 5944

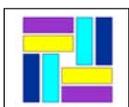


[www.sdsa.net](http://www.sdsa.net)

Birmingham Office  
62 Handsworth Wood Road,  
Handsworth Wood.  
Birmingham  
B20 2DT

Tel: 0777 338 9058

This conference was also supported by



**youthVOICE**  
"...encouraging young people to empower themselves..."

