

Pathways into Politics: Perspectives from British Muslim Political Leaders Parliamentary Roundtable Report 18th April 2018

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1. Introduction

On 18th April 2018, a parliamentary roundtable titled, 'Pathways into Politics: Perspectives from British Muslim Political Leaders' was facilitated in response to the demand from young Muslims for opportunities to actively engage established Muslim political leaders. The discussion enabled the sharing of expertise and experience of the challenges, opportunities and diverse pathways a career into politics can take. Chaired by the Rt Hon Dominic Grieve QC MP, it aimed to inspire 70 young Muslim leaders from across England at different stages of their professional careers including representatives from civil society organisations, community activists and those aspiring to a career in politics. Ahead of the local elections held on 3rd May 2018, four councillors and two Members of Parliament (MPs) from a range of parties shared their experiences of balancing the diverse needs of the constituents and communities they serve:

- **Nusrat Ghani MP (Conservative):** Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Transport.
- **Dominic Grieve QC MP (Conservative):** an MP for Beaconsfield since 1997 he has served as Attorney General for England and Wales and Advocate General for Northern Ireland from May 2010 to July 2014, in addition to Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.
- **Councillor Salma Arif (Labour):** One of the youngest councillors to be elected to Leeds City Council with over 70% of the vote.
- **Councillor Hashim Bhatti (Conservative):** The first British Pakistani to be selected by the Conservative Party in Windsor for the local council elections and Chair of the youth wing of the Conservative Muslim Forum.
- **Councillor Magid Magid (Green):** Deputy Lord Mayor of Sheffield and the first Green Party Councillor of Somali background to be elected in England.
- **Tara Hussain (Liberal Democrats):** At just 22 years old, an aspiring local politician who ran as a Local Council candidate for the Liberal Democrats in Tower Hamlets, East London.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Councillor Hashim Bhatti for helping to co-organise the event.

Executive Summary

All members of British society must feel that they are able to fully participate in political life. However, major challenges to wider BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) participation within local and national political leadership remain. Those from an Islamic faith background stressed that the available pathways into politics continue to appear to be extremely narrow, with the barriers high and access to support and positive role models low. These challenges are particularly acute for Muslim women. When inclusivity within public services and bodies is absent, they become unreflective of the communities they serve, compounding a broader sense of exclusion, isolation and religious, socio-economic and cultural disempowerment within BAME communities. Therefore, sincere efforts must be made to widen available pathways to strengthen the legitimacy of, and confidence in, British democracy.

2. Potential Barriers to the Political Journey

Participation in politics can be thought of as a 'political journey'. Facilitating engagement between young people and national and local political figures helped to demystify the beginning of this journey. Many young people try to actively engage in political processes in the UK; however, there are numerous barriers to this.

A Lack of Opportunity for Youth Development and Political Participation: Opportunities for young Muslims to try engaging in novel experiences, to find their voice, and to develop the skills and networks necessary for effective political engagement are lacking. It is important that new options are created that offer youth from a BAME background the opportunity to test themselves, make mistakes and build confidence in their abilities. Whilst many BAME youth regularly exercise their own agency and resourcefulness through volunteering and campaigning, wider barriers to their fuller political participation remain. For example, young people need options with the potential to lead them into sustainable employment in the long-term, rather than short-term, often unpaid or poorly paid opportunities.

Barriers to the Full Engagement of Muslim Women in Civil and Political Life: Many young Muslim women expressed concern about the internally and externally imposed barriers to pursuing a position in elected office. It was said that within some communities, women in leadership roles can go against expected community norms which marginalise female and youth voices, whilst empowering senior male voices. Some expressed their resentment that an external focus on what a woman wears, rather than on her individual strengths and talents, exacerbates other challenges, such as negative attitudes towards women, family pressure and patriarchy from within communities. It was said that wearing a hijab 'should not be an issue', but that the way it has been characterised by politicians, the media and society in general has become a subject of contention. Debate is often polarised between 'an assumption of oppression' and entrenched 'differences'. Furthermore, for those who wear the hijab and are 'visibly' Muslim, religiously and racially motivated hate crimes have become such a regular occurrence that it has become normalised in everyday life, fuelling the internal perception of difference and acting as a disincentive to run for office. Despite widespread agreement that choosing to wear a hijab should not affect one's ability to have a successful career in politics, the perception nonetheless continued to be that it inevitably does. It was noted that a veiled woman previously ran in the local council elections in Sheffield. Although she was unsuccessful, this was said to be nonetheless important and should be spotlighted to serve as inspiration to others.

An inclusive dialogue is therefore needed to address feelings of alienation and to ensure Muslim women, including those who wear Islamic female dress and those who do not, have the opportunity to explain and communicate the thought and rationale behind it.

Internally Imposed Social Exclusion: Whilst social exclusion is often perceived to be imposed on minority communities from majority communities, the State and/or its institutions, it can also be imposed on young people from within their own community. For example, there is a wariness of politics and officialdom within certain migrant communities who have fled conflict or state repression. Therefore, parents can discourage their children's political participation in the UK. Intense parental pressure is often put on young Muslims to become 'doctors, engineers and lawyers', whilst a career in politics holds less esteem and regard. There is also a lack of understanding and knowledge of how to access local and national statutory services, Government agencies and institutions. However, despite reluctance or hesitance amongst some, it was said that all communities in the UK will eventually have to engage with politics. This was highlighted by the example of a newer migrant community, which had been denied planning permission to build a mosque and thus was forced to open a dialogue with the local authority to appeal the decision.

A Lack of Dialogue on Contentious Issues - British Foreign Policy: For young Muslims, the legal, moral and ethical questions raised by British foreign policy and military intervention abroad, in particular in the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region, creates urgent questions that require objective informed answers. However, often the space to have such discussions is dwindling. Members of diasporic communities orientate their outlook of the wider world through a critical awareness of British foreign policy developments, thus creating everyday dilemmas in how they negotiate their diasporic identities vis-a-vis the British State. Questions coalesced around the foundations upon which British foreign policy and military interventions are based; for example, the legality of UK military action in Syria was identified as a core concern. Participants noted how useful it had been to hear the Government's legal basis of military intervention in Syria, and historical precedents – for example, the experience of Kosovo – to develop a more informed understanding of issues. Therefore, foreign policy debates should play an important role within formal political engagement and outreach efforts. Misunderstanding, misinformation and frustration will inevitably thrive in communities in the absence of informed dialogue.

3. Insights from Muslim Political Leaders

The Challenge of Leadership: Muslim leaders agreed that their Islamic spiritual and religious values are regularly underestimated, mistrusted and/or stigmatised in British political, media and social discourses. However, when their faith was challenged, for example by non-Muslim constituents, differences were overcome through persistence and an ability to positively re-orientate aspects of their faith, religious and cultural identity into contemporary political conversations. This enabled panellists to successfully forge new and inclusive spaces of belonging, status and influence within their constituencies and within local and national political establishments.

Building Strong Foundations Through Youth Development: Panellists' journeys into politics developed from experiences gleaned within different sectors, such as: law, media, voluntary, business and student activism. These foundations helped to develop interpersonal 'soft' skills, build professional networks and a greater confidence in identity. These foundations are important to develop and allow young leaders to draw on positive experiences which enable them to work within a diversity of different contexts and settings.

Building Resilience, Transcending Failure: It was also said that, 'if you want to get into politics, it won't be easy. Failure is likely, but you must try again because with failure comes great experience'. Failure is a common theme not just within political journeys, but also life journeys. However, the test for a young person is not solely the psychological ability to overcome failures, but also the ability to transcend failures. Building confidence, and developing an acceptance in one's own identity and self-worth is connected with the notion of building resilience to failure.

Developing Representative Youth Voices: Many felt that engagement by political and media Establishments continues to empower the 'wrong' community voices by focussing excessively on the 'familiar faces' who are often unrepresentative of communities. One consequence of the lack of independent and unified Muslim youth voices in politics is the inaccurate representation of youth issues, for example by 'community leaders' who claim to speak on their behalf. It was also recognised that due to the diversity of British Muslim communities even an 'elected Muslim political leader' does not necessarily equate to 'a Muslim community leader'. Therefore, it is important to facilitate more inclusive engagement with a diversity of young Muslim voices, with significant constituency.

Finding the Right Political Party: Young people must identify a political party which they feel best represents their values, experiences and outlook. However, ‘assimilation’ and/or compromising aspects of one’s identity for political favour, or ‘to fit in’ can inevitably be counter-productive.

Inclusive Political Engagement: The importance of inclusive engagement across diverse constituencies was highlighted. All stakeholders in a constituency must be engaged in order to comprehensively understand fundamental social, political and economic challenges within communities, such as housing, employment and welfare.

Local Political Leadership: Beginning a political journey as a local councillor is a good opportunity to build confidence in public speaking, tackling difficult local issues, and is a useful stepping stone to running as an MP. One panellist noted how he was required to overcome an Islamophobic campaign against him within his constituency in order to win his seat. He was able to do this by engaging widely with as many parts of his local community, as well as with civil society organisations, local businesses and by meeting voters face-to-face. Being a local councillor is also an opportunity to help to make local politics relevant to everyone, whilst also increasing BAME representation. Councillors spoke of their involvement in numerous leadership courses, designed to increase BAME diversity and to increase the representation of young Muslims in public life.¹ These have helped to catalyse their careers in politics by enabling them to meet institutional figures, civil servants and MPs. However, in many areas, access to and involvement in such courses is undermined by a lack of awareness amongst young people.

National Political Leadership: Young people found it valuable to discuss the process of becoming an MP with the panellists, who stressed that it is often long, imperfect and challenging. MPs discussed their varied experiences of party selection, their successes and failures, and how they were able to overcome challenges to their Islamic faith, ethnic and diasporic identities. Many young people perceived their faith or cultural background to be a barrier to a successful career in national politics. However, Nusrat Ghani MP noted how her Kashmiri farming background helped her to find common ground with British farmers in her constituency. She also found that it was her working-class background, rather than faith background, which created the most difficult challenges within her constituency. However, rather than promoting differences, her diversity in fact created a context in which she was able to create a dialogue and positive relationship across differences. Giving young people the opportunity to hear about such experiences from MPs was important in breaking down the growing disconnect between the national political level and the realities facing young people on the ground within underrepresented communities. The conversation highlighted that in order to attract more talented young BAME individuals to both local and national politics, more sincere engagement with different communities around questions of culture, religion and faith is necessary in order to identify areas of mutual interest and commonality.

¹ - Young Muslim Leadership Programme (YMLP): http://www.oxcis.ac.uk/event_10july17YMLP.html
- The Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme: <https://labour.org.uk/members/jo-cox-women-leadership/>
- Operation Black Vote: <http://www.obv.org.uk/>
- Work Experience opportunities on W4MP Jobs: <http://www.w4mpjobs.org/searchjobs.aspx?search=alljobs>

4. Youth Civic Activism and Advocacy

Where existing social and political arrangements are deemed inadequate, many young people engage with civil society organisations pushing for real change, whilst also developing their experience as volunteers, as facilitators of inter- and intra-faith dialogue, and in student politics. Young people with imagination, talent and drive are successfully facilitating new projects to build links across communities. For example, one young Muslim participant spoke of how he is breaking down barriers in understanding between communities through interfaith dialogue as a Muslim teacher teaching Jewish students to speak Hebrew. Others discussed their roles within national campaigning organisations advocating policy recommendations to the Government on issues such as Islamophobia. Young people also have the ability to educate, and challenge prejudice, misconceptions and a lack of understanding within their own communities and to develop new ways of thinking about issues such as sectarianism. Youth-led, substantive forms of engagement such as this should be spotlighted as positive and built upon to ensure their sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Elected BAME leaders have valuable insights into growing religious and minority communities and their countries of origin, which political leaders from majority communities may not. Young people who have grown up within diverse communities have a better understanding of local and increasingly rapid social and political developments than any outsider. Understanding communities is essential to identifying appropriate solutions, taking into consideration local nuances, to local challenges. Leveraging this understanding, these unique insights and faith backgrounds in useful ways has important implications for the promotion of positive social, cultural, economic and political change in the UK. Greater BAME and faith representation in political thinking and discussions helps to overcome policy challenges through an appreciation of the complexity and distinctiveness of different faith communities in the UK.

This offers institutions the opportunity to develop in a proactive, rather than reactive, way; for example, in response to: demographic developments within British Muslim communities within both newer and more established migrant communities, to combat the geographic 'North-South' divide between Westminster and communities outside of London, and to international developments. There can be no 'one size fits all' approach to these increasingly diverse populations.

Governmental institutions and political parties, therefore, must not view diversity as a problem to be managed, engagement as a 'tick box' requirement, or field BAME candidates 'tokenistically'. Rather, they must actively and sincerely incorporate BAME leaders and the political aspirations they represent within national and local thinking and decision making.

Hearing Muslim leaders share their stories helps to challenge misconceptions such as that there is no place for Muslims in politics in Britain. One young participant noted, "it was really encouraging to see a young, female, Muslim politician - *someone like me* - in a position of political power". Raising aspirations, pointing young people in the direction of opportunities for development, and giving them an active place within decision making processes, will help to address the discrimination and stigmatisation of faith currently faced. Without young Muslims engaging in the political process, the ability of the Government to solve sensitive community issues and to address legitimate social, political and economic grievances within disadvantaged British Muslim communities is undermined.

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