

## Sayeeda Warsi: Race equality speech

*Speaking at the Guardian race equality conference in London today, Shadow Minister for Community Cohesion, Sayeeda Warsi will say:*

“Last week I spent three extraordinary days in Khartoum. I went with my Labour colleague Lord Ahmed to try to get Gillian Gibbons out of jail – the primary school teacher who allowed her pupils to give the class teddy bear the name Mohammed.

It was extraordinary because we were dealing with a situation which, thankfully, could never happen in Britain.

And yet it had echoes of situations we do get in Britain.

First, although it was a crisis with national and international impact, it was sparked by a very local dispute – in this case between a school principal and a mischievous school secretary.

Second, the crisis developed because of cultural misunderstanding. They simply don't go in for teddy bears in Sudan and so some people wrongly thought Ms Gibbons was mocking the Prophet Mohammed.

And third, the crisis really took off because there were religious and political leaders in Sudan who were busting for a fight, and were prepared to exploit the issue for their own purposes.

### **Lessons for Sudan**

These three factors – local disputes; cultural misunderstandings; and hardliners stirring up trouble – these are very familiar to us in Britain.

I am glad we were able to play a role in ending the crisis. And before I discuss the lessons I brought from Sudan, let me suggest that our mission also had a lesson for Sudan.

Nazir Ahmed and I were not an official delegation. We had no powers to offer anything to the Sudanese Government in exchange for leniency in this case.

We were there as members of the British Parliament, and as British Muslims.

And I hope that as Muslims and as Parliamentarians in a democracy, we helped represent to the Sudanese government and people a very simple and very important principle.

That you can be a Muslim and believe in democracy and the rule of law.

We wanted, in a small way, to show the people of Sudan that Muslim politicians can have different values to those responsible, for instance, for what is happening in Darfur.

## **Exclusion**

But I have a hope closer to home too, which is what I want to talk about today.

I hope our mission to Sudan demonstrated to people in Britain, and in other western countries, that you can be a Muslim and hold firm to your country's values and interests – even if your country isn't Muslim in its constitution or its national religion.

I believe that diversity is a positive force – one of the great things about Britain. I am proud to be Muslim and British – and proud that Britain and Islam each accommodate the other.

This principle must be the basis of any attempt to build community cohesion in this country. None of the world's religions – not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, not Hinduism or Sikhism or Confucianism – none of the world's religions are incompatible with democracy, unless they choose to make themselves so.

A religion can make itself incompatible with democracy in two ways – either by demanding the exclusion of other cultures from the public space, or by voluntarily excluding itself from the public space.

Let me deal with these tendencies in turn.

## **Diversity within Britain**

The first tendency – to demand the exclusion of other cultures – is almost as old as politics. Every religion on earth has tried at different times to have a monopoly in particular countries.

The Church of England enjoyed a virtual monopoly in 18<sup>th</sup> century England – we had laws restricting the rights of Catholics, Jews and even Protestant dissenters.

And out of the struggle of those years came: the principle of tolerance and religious freedom under the rule of law. This principle is one of our country's greatest gifts to the world.

And that is why it so distresses me when I hear extremist groups like the BNP, who say you cannot be Black and British or Muslim and British. And it distresses me when I see a minority of people who claim to represent my own faith, Islam, arguing that Britain should be an Islamic state, either wholly or partly, or those who support opting-out of British law rather than demanding equal treatment under the law.

When Nazir Ahmed and I went to Sudan last week we were proud to do so as members of a House of Parliament which has bishops and the Chief Rabbi as fellow members. We do not want to belong to a political system which only gives room to one faith – even if that faith is our own.

## **Diversity within communities**

Let me turn to the other way in which a religion can make itself incompatible with democracy: by voluntarily excluding itself from the mainstream. Retreating into a theological corner of its own making. Telling people of the faith they must stay isolated in the corner if they want to be true believers.

Of course, this isn't just the fault of some religious leaders within the faith. Many believers now feel pushed into the corner – marginalised by legislation and language that creates a siege mentality.

Of course, the Government's security measures – whether we agree with them or not – are designed to protect all citizens, and are not part of some official campaign against Muslims. But proposals like 42 day detention – presented without evidence for its necessity – creates a victim culture which encourages rather than limits extremism.

In the same way, commentators who suggest that certain people's 'way of life' is incompatible with mainstream Britain, or the media stories like the Manchester United bomb plot that turn out simply to be wrong – are part of the problem.

That's why I say that politicians who want to engage with our minority faith or race communities have to do a lot more than the photocall outside the mosque or church or temple. You've got to go inside, sit down, talk and listen. You've got to understand the building you're posing in front of – and understand the extraordinary diversity within Britain's minority communities.

## **Culture and religion**

But that diversity also needs to be preserved from within – preserved against those who want to control everything that believers do.

I believe that as a nation – and for reasons I'll explain, British Muslims have the foremost responsibility here – we need to make a vital distinction, and to act on it.

The distinction is between the cultural and the religious.

This distinction is vital because there is a growing tendency among some people to describe what are really social expectations – and often pretty dubious ones – as religious requirements.

There are people in Saudi Arabia who say women driving cars is unIslamic. In Somalia some say Muslim girls should be circumcised.

That's not the Islam I know.

But there are ideas we get here in Britain which are just as wrong.

Take forced marriages. Islam is unambiguous in its condemnation of forced marriage – it's not a religious requirement, it's a cultural outrage and Muslims reject it.

Or take honour killings, I even find this label offensive because there is nothing honourable about these murders and perpetrators of such crimes should not be allowed to hide behind any faith.

Or take the simple handshake between colleagues which stirred much debate last year, and yet when I was in Sudan last week, some of the most conservative religious leaders I met put out their hands for me to shake.

### **Freedom**

Confusing the cultural and the religious is wrong because it's divisive – it leads to separation as devout young people think it's their religious duty to cut themselves off from wider society.

If a woman wants to wear the face veil in her private life she should be free to do so. But she should be free to do so, as she is free to wear any other dress she feels appropriate. No one has a right to insist that she should wear the veil in her private life – just as no-one has a right to insist she should not.

And of course schools must be allowed to set their own rules on dress. And of course security or health and safety can mean it's necessary to ask a woman to remove a face veil, provided it's done sensitively – for example by a woman in a private space. And we shouldn't be scared to say this.

### **Cultural engagement**

But there's another, deeper reason why it's important not to confuse the cultural with the religious.

If an issue is religious, it is less appropriate for society and the state to monitor, regulate or comment on it – so long as its doctrines and practises are legal, of course.

My point is that, within the constraints of the law and basic humanity, the freedom of conscience is a cornerstone of liberal democracy – one of the things that places like Sudan are crying out for and which Britain is so rightly proud of.

But culture is different. Culture is in the sphere of criticism and commentary and, if necessary, of interference by politicians. I don't often quote Labour politicians but I think Mike O'Brien was spot on when he said that cultural sensitivity is not a reason for moral blindness.

I want us to respect religious doctrine. But I want us to be able to engage robustly with cultural opinions, where those opinions threaten a real separation between the communities of the UK.

I said that British Muslims have the foremost responsibility here. As long as the Muslim community remains in a victim culture, a siege mentality, they allow others to control the debate.

When it comes to Islam, the majority of Muslims understand the difference between culture and religion. It's not for others to tell Muslims what is and isn't Islam. It's for the community, and in that I include myself, to expound the truth about our faith – not let others interpret it for us. It is for us to be the change – not let others impose it on us.

So I've got a clear message to the hardliners and hotheads who claim to speak for British Muslims.

When you say that voting is un-Islamic, you're wrong.

When you say that women should not have access to education or employment; that women's equality is un-Islamic; or that women should not adopt leadership positions like politics, you're wrong, wrong, wrong.

When you say these things, you're putting forward a cultural argument, not a religious one, and while we should always be tolerant of religious faith, we can and must be utterly intolerant of cultural arguments that try to divide our country and our communities.

### **Guiding principles**

So let me set out what I believe the government's role should be: the priorities for ensuring cohesion in a diverse nation.

And I go back to the observations I made in Sudan.

First, cohesion must be local: problems and solutions are found in local circumstances, as much as in far-away national and international events.

Second, cohesion requires understanding: because what is perfectly innocent in one context – a teddy bear in a classroom, for instance – can cause offence in another. There can be no special pleading for different groups, and of course tolerance means learning to live with people and opinions you don't like – but for tolerance to work, there must be real sensitivity to how different groups see the world, and to how we use language.

And third, cohesion requires responsibility, and discernment: because there will always be hardliners or one sort or another, the sort of people for whom compromise and empathy and understanding are signs of weakness not signs of strength.

Let me take these principles in turn.

### **Local**

Cohesion is local. That means people learning to live alongside each other in neighbourhoods – not artificial national unity, achieved by buying off different groups with a bit of patronage here, a bit of money there.

I went with to Sudan with a Labour peer, and I was proud to be part of a bipartisan effort – party differences didn't matter on that mission.

But this is not to say that there are no differences between the parties when it comes to cohesion at home.

For me, cohesion means that where there is local diversity, different races and religions get along. Cohesion should never mean multiculturalism, in the way that this concept has been translated by Labour: the doctrine of separate identity, with each group encouraged to feel that identity requires the expression of difference to the point of hostility.

Multiculturalism has been manipulated to entrench the right to difference, a divisive concept, at the expense of the right to equal treatment despite difference, a unifying concept.

And the fact that cohesion is local, means Labour get it wrong when they go in the other direction too. After years of promoting top-down multiculturalism, Gordon Brown is now promoting top-down unity.

Of course, localism has to be in the context of a national consciousness – and that's why I want us to reverse the failed state multicultural approach and ensure there is sufficient English language teaching for new arrivals, and proper teaching of English history for our children so that they have a deep understanding of our great institutions and how they came to be as they are.

But to me, Britishness means the opposite of what it means to Gordon. I was bought up to believe that being British meant you didn't go on about it! It's not about planting flags on lawns, or inventing a new Veterans Day – as if we should celebrate our country by importing traditions from America.

Gordon is even consulting far and wide on six words, a motto believe it or not, that encapsulates our nation. Well let me tell him: you're searching for something you won't find.

Britishness is not something that can be put in words. It is about institutions, and traditions, and the shared values which are often felt more than spoken.

### **Cultural understanding**

Britishness is bottom-up. And that's vital for the second principle I mentioned: the importance of understanding.

Labour's use of patronage politics leads to reliance upon self appointed community leaders, mainly men. This has left many in our communities unheard.

Like the Asian women in Dewsbury who I met in the 2005 election, who told me I was the first politician to canvass their views. Women are the bedrock of our communities. But too often they have been forgotten and left behind.

I want to see far more real representation of Muslims and other communities in our country. Not because we need quotas on faith or race – but because to responsibly govern Britain we must encompass all of Britain in its governance.

I am pleased the Conservative Party is working so hard to engage with minority communities and I look forward to further discussions with many of the people here today.

### **Responsibility**

Finally, there is the principle of responsibility, the need to resist the siren call of the hardliners.

We must accept that we're in all in this together – but Muslims have an added responsibility to defeat extremism, because extremism is claimed in the name of Islam. It's also more personal to us because it's in our community that any backlash is also felt.

So the government and wider society needs to empower communities to tackle extremism. We must inspire people to feel part of the British system, and help them make the changes that are necessary through engaging with democracy.

I have suggested a voluntary support network, a national foundation to provide support and guidance, somewhere families and individuals can turn when they pick up on the signs of disenchantment with our country and its democratic ways and institutions.

Something that comes from the community, with an understanding of its culture and beliefs but as professional and dedicated as any charity.

A key question is to what degree political parties should engage with people and organisations who have extremist or separatist views.

My view is clear. Of course we should be willing to engage with individuals and groups who don't share our philosophy – including disillusioned and alienated young men who are vulnerable to Al Qaeda.

But engagement doesn't mean partnership. This Government clearly believes in partnership with national organisations that claim to represent communities.

This is wrong – firstly because it's patronising to suggest that diverse communities can be represented by single homogenous groups. It suggests that individuals –

particularly women – within those communities aren't capable of representing themselves.

And this approach is wrong because some such groups often hold ambiguous views on cohesion and integration. And as a responsible government, engagement must involve what diplomats call 'a robust exchange of views', in which the Government asserts without apology or concession, that the attitudes of certain groups are hindering a cohesive Britain.

The next Conservative Government will take instead a fresh, new and more localist approach – listening to individual voices and ideas, particularly from women and young people, and devolving power through local government to the grassroots.

### **Conclusion**

The unfortunate fact is that this is a polarised debate. I saw that myself when I was appointed to my present job.

Some blogs described me as an Islamist jihadist. Others called me a Zionist sell-out.

And that illustrates how his debate often works. We have a tendency to deal with everything in terms of soundbites – and to pigeon-hole people into clear and hostile categories.

Well, I'm probably a square peg in a round pigeon-hole. I represent the diversity there is in Britain today. And I think we should have an honest, grown-up debate, with real depth and understanding – but a debate which is also prepared to tackle those difficult issues that need to be tackled.

I hope I've tackled some of them today. Thank you."