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**New Neighbours, New Opportunities
The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility**

Tuesday, July 3, 2012

Mr. John Denham MP

'Multiculturalism and shared responsibility'

It is a real honour to speak at this international conference; and a privilege to have joined your discussions yesterday.

These debates about multiculturalism, inter-faith relations and social responsibility have much to learn from an organisation that has been wrestling with the issues over 60 years; able to see things not just in our immediate context, but as they have been in the past.

I've been engaged in issues of culture identity and faith throughout my political life.

Working with local faith communities on antipoverty strategies as a councillor. As a Home Office Minister I lead the enquiries into a series of riots that flared across northern England in the early summer of 2001.

I chaired the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee that looked at the community impact of international terrorism, crime amongst young black people, and the operation of the immigration system.

My city, Southampton, experienced one of the biggest and fastest migrations from the new A8 states of eastern Europe.

And as Secretary of State at Communities and Local Government towards the end of the Labour Government, I was responsible for community relations and for the Government's links with faith communities.

As well as tackling issues still echoing from 9/11 and 7/7 I also launched the first work targeted at those disadvantaged white working class communities most vulnerable to the far right.

I will draw on those experiences today.

I'm not, myself, a person of faith.

But as a politician I know the importance of faith in our society.

At the very least, something which is of such importance to so many millions of people is worthy of respect.

All citizens, all of us, expect our governments to respect us, even if we know they can't deliver all what each of us wants; people of faith have a right to expect no less.

More; these days all governments are concerned about how people behave – whether they are good or bad parents;

whether, wealthy or poor, they act responsibly;

whether they care for the environment or neglect it;

or, as at this conference, we are concerned about how people act towards each other.

None of these issues lend themselves to prescriptive legislation or simple acts of public spending.

Shaping behaviour is more subtle.

For many, faith is the biggest influence on how they act, and governments should not ignore it.

That's why I funded the interfaith network, and one of my more enjoyable experiences as Secretary of State I was meet and eating with the leaders of all the major faith communities - although the Chief Rabbi did tell me an even better place to meet the Jewish community was at its weddings.

I bring that sense of respect and understanding of your important role to this conference.

But one word of caution.

After the northern English riots of 2001, I asked an experience local authority leader, Ted Cantle, to lead the enquiry.

His report described communities – white British, mainly working class; poor British Pakistani, mainly with Kashmiri roots – that lived separate lives.

Barely meeting, let alone talking;

No longer often working together. The big factories that had once brought the migrants and locals side by side had closed;

Misunderstanding each other; each thinking the other community got privileged treatment by the authorities;

Each feeling their culture was under threat;

Having no common story of citizenship or of community.

That fragmentation that led Ted Cattle to coin the phrase '*community cohesion*' to describe what we needed, but what we had not got.

Ted's report described a complex problem. But it didn't get a universal welcome.

Because he challenged a lot of fixed ideas.

The problem is that people too often want to see every issue or human experience through the prism of their own experience and vision.

Traditional left wingers responded to the Cattle Report by saying the 'real' issue was class and exploitation.

Those working in race relations said it was 'really' about discrimination and prejudice.

Some women's organisations highlighted the exclusion of women.

Yes, and some faith organisations said it was really all about faith, attitudes to faith, and relations between faiths.

But it's never really all about one issue.

It is always really a complex and multi-dimensional problem in which faith is but one important element.

The central idea of the Cattle report was that we had to create the places and the spaces that brought people together to develop their shared sense, shared stories, of communities, citizenship and of the country.

Recognising, with sociologists like Putnam and Davey that belonging shapes behaviour more than believing

It was and remains a powerful idea.

But before it was even published we had the atrocity of 9/11.

The debate changed overnight.

Suddenly a focus on relations between people of different faiths and ethnicities became seen, with widespread and crass simplicity, as the problem and the responsibility of the Muslim community.

Overnight, all the complex differences of identity between Britons of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali or Arab origin were swept aside. Media, politics and public all insisted on a universal single Muslim identity.

This was profoundly unhelpful, unfair and counter-productive.

Everyone saying you are Muslim first, second and last with no other identity, played into the hands of that minority within those diverse communities who wanted to promote a singular and extremist view of Islam.

Most Muslim communities struggled.

As a community of any size it was less than 30 years old.

It was institutionally weak; it had no clear story about the position of Muslims in Britain.

Muslims faced discrimination and prejudice despite living in a country offering more religious freedom than many of their countries of origin.

The application of Islam to modern British life was under-developed

It found itself blamed for separatism and terrorism;

It suffered denial; and a susceptibility to all sorts of conspiracy stories.

After the British terrorist attacks of 7/7 things changed a lot.

The problem became more specific, urgent and close to home.

The reality of a small but dangerous problem that had to be tackled was accepted almost overnight.

Cooperation and dialogue at local and national level improved significantly.

We began to understand the differences and the links between catching criminal terrorists, undermining the ideological roots of violent extremism, and promoting community cohesion.

We saw, too, the importance of giving a positive voice to the alienated and impoverished white communities who were the vulnerable to the far right.

But at the same time, a cruder debate began to be framed.

Simply, was multiculturalism the problem?

Was this why our communities had become separate?

Had we failed to insist insistently enough on integration?

For some the debate is over. our Prime Minister David Cameron echoed Angela Merkel in saying recently said the 'doctrine of state multiculturalism has failed'.

Fortunately, we do not yet live in a country where something is true just because a Prime Minister says it is true.

Fortunately the positive influences of multiculturalism remain pervasive.

We routinely expect ethnic monitoring because we want to know about equal treatment. In contrast to France where a very strong adherence to the policy of strict integration makes unlawful to collect statistics in ethnicity on the grounds that you are either French or an illegal immigrant and non-citizen

Every local authority engages proactively with different faiths and ethnic groups.

In popular opinion, most people don't think it unBritish for a migrant to support the sports teams of their home country.

Non-white minorities are marginally more likely than the white majority to describe themselves as British.

In many ways, British life is marked by a day to day acceptance of difference and 'live and let live.

Popular culture is irreversibly multi-cultural. As is the failure of our football teams in the European championships.

To say this was wrong is as good as saying it should never have happened.

Our society would be so much less rich if it hadn't.

The problem is not that multiculturalism has failed; but that it was never all that we needed.

The policy makers who first promoted multiculturalism reassured the majority community that the country, their way of life would not change.

This wasn't true.

And while new communities properly took from multi-culturalism a right to respect, it was less clear what else they were expected to do, if anything, beyond obeying the law.

Multi-culturalism itself had little to say to our divided towns.

It gave us little response to the warning from the Equality and Human Rights Commission that the Britain was 'sleep-walking towards segregation'.

It proved a weak framework for working through the issues around terrorism and violent interpretations of Islam.

It did not help distinguish between positive action to help the disadvantaged and the divisive favouring of one poor community over another.

It gave no role, other than acceptance, to the majority community. But that majority's sense of identity was being challenged, particularly in an England that had also seen significant political devolution to Scotland and Wales.

But a simple call to 'integration' is not the necessary rebalancing of an disproportionate emphasis on multiculturalism.

Some elements, like the need to learn English or to obey the law are not in doubt.

But 'Integration' is heard, by everyone, to mean that there is an established order, an established culture, a way of doing things, that newer communities have to accept.

There are three problems with this.

First, it does not value the contribution from new communities from which we could all benefit; it means we don't recognize clearly enough how much of our existing order is, in fact, the product of past migrations. Multiculturalism's great strength was its recognition of this contribution.

Second, integration put obligations on the newcomer, not on those already here. An approach as one-sided as the multiculturalists who put all responsibility on established communities.

Third, and most fundamental, we can never pin down what the established order is because it is always changing.

There was a farcical moment in the last Government where CLG circulated a list of extremist un-British attitudes that would lead to Muslim organisations being denied funding or dialogue.

This included hostility to homosexuality.

Now, I happen to believe that the widespread acceptance of homosexuality is one of the great liberating social changes of my lifetime.

But anyone who thinks that tolerance of gays is an historic British value didn't grow up in the Britain where, in the year I was born, one of our war heroes killed himself rather than suffer legally sanctioned chemical castration for being homosexual.

There is a fundamental, inescapable, reason why we feel we know our national identities but find it so hard to write them down.

Whatever our country, our national identities, the stories we tell about ourselves, are always changing.

They are never fixed.

They are never timeless.

We tell and re-tell our stories in ways we chose. And we re-shape them in time and by the power of imagination.

We drop parts that no longer describe how we feel ourselves today.

For Britain, the assumptions of racial superiority and the civilising effects of Empire that were taught in schools not so long ago are no longer part of being British.

The call for a bland unhistorical integration misses this inescapable, unavoidable and rich dynamic and so can dilute or deny really vital contributions.

The British Jewish community has a powerful story of integration. But whenever I hear it told, I think it fails to capture just how much Britain is different and better, because of the role that individual Jews and the Jewish community have played in so many walks of life

All migration changes nations and communities to a greater or lesser extent.

We need to accept that there always has been and always will be migration.

Our national identities will change and develop.

The issue is not whether we can stop it or prevent; but how we handle it.

I'm the Parliamentary Private Secretary – a Parliamentary aide – to the Labour Leader Ed Miliband.

Ed Miliband said about himself recently 'It says a lot about me and a lot about Britain that very few people ever describe me as the first Jewish leader of the Labour Party'.

As for me, a clue is in the name.

Denham.

Den Ham.

In Old Saxon, the village in the clearing in the woods.

So with some romance a genealogist might trace 1300 or 1400 years of unbroken male lineage to my forbears who came here as invaders or settlers.

1300 years later, Ed Miliband's father travelled almost the same distance from the almost same part of Europe. Not as an invader or as a settler but as a refugee.

No one raises an eyebrow that his son and I work together. But that does tell us that, in contrast to my earlier observations, that some areas of British society are unracialised, unracially sensitive

But I would go little further.

Because what Ed and I are engaged on, with all our colleagues, including other children of migrants like Sadiq Khan and Chuka Umunna, as well as those of longer lineage, is our view of how we build a stronger nation and stronger communities. We want, we aspire, to help write the next chapter in the story of Britain and its nationalities.

I suggest it is the action of nation building; and the act of community building; that is missing from the narratives of both multiculturalism and integration.

Max Levitas, a 92 year old Jew, is a veteran of the Cable Street battle against the fascists of Oswald Mosely in the 1930s.

Reflecting on the lessons he told the New Statesman recently:

'integration - the term he used - means people demanding for themselves jobs, housing, and education for their kids. To ensure that whatever religion you have got, whatever your colour, you play a part in society'.

That, surely, is where the real social responsibility lies.

None of us can be content to live with our own; to be within our own communities; to simply adopt an attitude of live and let live. Nor will many of us be content, nor should we be encouraged, to protect our own while those nearby struggle with poor housing, low incomes or other need.

True social responsibility means shouldering the responsibility of building a stronger society together. Tackling the common issues we face.

And this has to happen at every level.

We can't build a stronger nation if our communities are divided and weak.

We won't bring our communities together without some sense of where we are going as a country. Of the story we want to tell about our national identity.

A story that faces the future because it reflects the past of all who share our society.

This is not a matter of choice. Humans will always create communities. We will always build nations. Just because we live in a relatively small place.

But unless we shoulder the responsibility to do it intentionally and positively, we will do it badly.

But what does this mean in practical terms. How can faith organisations, churches, synagogues, mosques and temples play their role in exercising the social responsibility that is needed to develop community and nation?

Many do already of course. In some countries the evidence suggests data a correlation between religious observance and civic engagement.

When we looked into the riots all those years ago, we saw that some places had disturbances, but others with similar demographics, similar street level tensions did not.

It wasn't a coincidence that areas that avoided trouble had the best developed inter-faith relations – in simple terms, faith community leaders already knew and trusted each other. None of the riot stricken places could draw on this institutional stress reliever.

We should not underestimate the importance of simply creating spaces in which people can come together, to work together, to share together their vision of the community they live in or want to share.

Shared experiences matter: like gathering together here in Manchester. I was struck to hear of one initiative in the English North West that was taking cross-community groups of young people to visit both Srebrenica and Auschwitz.

Dialogue;

Shared experience;

And common action on common problems.

One of the best British examples drawing on faith organisation members has been the London Citizens Living Wage campaign.

But this is not the only model, or the only issue, on which people of faith and people of none can find common ground in Britain in 2012.

Campaigns like the living wage, or, if I draw on my own campaigning experience in the 1980s, the campaign for Third World debt relief, not only bring people together locally but set national political agendas, change what politicians talk about, assert a morality that may challenge the existing orthodoxy.

Next, if national identities are reflected in the stories we tell about ourselves; who we are; where we come from, let's look at how faiths tell their story and manage their memories

Is it only of their experience, or of their relations with others? Or of one part of their community winning out against the multiple narratives that they know their tradition embraces?

Do we admit where we got it wrong?

And resist the temptation to tell others to do it our way?

Do we tell our stories fully?

Would some of the issues we are discussing today look a little different if the British story of the Second World War was not just of Dunkirk and D-Day but also of the 2.5 million members of the Indian Army - some grandfathers and great grandfathers of today's British citizens – who supported the Allies in the Second World War).

As the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote recently

'we shall understand why we do what we do and value what we value only as we try and see clearly some of the processes that have got us where we now are – with our present problems as well as our present virtues.

And because our cultural climate is not very friendly to taking the past seriously, it is all the more important to try and trace these processes – to try and discover how we have *learned* to be the way we are. Without this, we have very few landmarks for working out why this or that aspect of our life in British society might be worth holding on to, which bits of the picture were discovered slowly and with difficulty, which are fragile, which are likely to last.

I am sure there are things we forgot to remember, or about which we feel less comfortable, in all faith communities. Such omissions are shared by human communities wherever they are found and no matter how divinely inspired.

And finally, let's remember we are all on a journey as we build our communities and our nation.

Newer communities are on a different part of that journey than those who have been here a long time. And, despite the old saying, history rarely repeats itself nor can the exact footsteps of the previous journey be recaptured.

Those who came here as refugees – grateful for refuge but sharply aware many people didn't want them here – have started from a different place to those who may well still have the yellowing advert that asked them to come and work here and who thought they might be welcomed.

Current debates on integration are often unhelpfully focussed on how communities have failed to change and much less on how they have.

As a Minister I brought the Muslim Council of Britain back into formal dialogue with Government.

I didn't think they were always right; still less agreed with every member.

But I judged they were on the journey; from a "council of muslims in Britain", to a British muslim council.

In short support, focussing on the journey people are making, rather than tests of steps not taken, will be more productive.

To me, community and nation building go hand in hand. Local initiatives are essential. But we can't duck the big questions of where our countries are going.

And this focus of nation building will also provide the opening for majority identities - my Britishness, my Englishness - to find its history and its future.

Before I finish, I would like to make one more point about national stories and identities.

I started by warning about seeing every issue through one prism.

Our current debates have undoubtedly been triggered by migration.

But in history the key moments of our national story have only rarely been defined by migration.

They equally often have been about faith – the combination of Henry VIII's multiple marriages, and the rising tide of Protestantism didn't just cause the rift with Rome but was the trigger for a significant rewriting of the idea of Englishness.

They have been about empire and trade– the loss of the American colonies changed Britain's story about itself in the world; no longer colonising with our own people but seeing ourselves as a mercantile nation that believed it was making the world a better place

They have been about great social changes; parliamentary democracy, the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, trade union rights and the NHS.

They have been, of course, about wars won and lost

As we meet today, right across Europe in this time of economic crisis, stories are being told and retold about national sovereignty, national identity, power and responsibility.

This tendency is only accelerating. The global economy is changing the world more powerfully. More quickly and less predictably than ever.

So let's not think that we are just facing an inward looking debate amongst ourselves about how to live together; but also about how, together, we find our role in the world that is out there.

That is not to say we should allow international questions to become excuses for local social irresponsibility. It is to say that our common future in our own nation is one we need to forge together. And that task of re-imagining what might be possible is urgent in such a period of uncertainty.

In that latest stage of our national story, countries like Britain may find our very diversity may turn out to be not a weakness but a strength.