

Remarks by Dr. Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali, Chair of the Association
of Muslim Social Scientists (UK), at the British Council's
Reception Celebrating its work with the Muslim community
and the AMSS

9th June 2009, London

On behalf of the AMSS (UK) Executive Committee I would like to express our warm congratulations to Martin Davidson and the British Council as they celebrate 75 years of working to build cultural relations. I would also like to thank him for celebrating their relationship and work with the Muslim community and specifically with the AMSS.

We use the term cultural relations very easily but what does this mean in practice? The British Council defines it quintessentially as "building trust and understanding between people worldwide by enabling them to share ideas and knowledge." Long may they continue to do so, for it is largely by creating better understanding, strengthening ties and building long term positive relationships both nationally and internationally, can we develop a climate of mutual respect and trust. Incidentally, trust is not the word that come immediately to mind when we think of London underground right now. I threw my rail timetable out a long time ago.

The AMSS have always believed in creating partnerships and working with other organizations and groups, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Almost all our local and international conferences have been organized in partnership with others, the latest being the Muslim Youth conference organized jointly with the Dept of Theology at Chester University. The Annual Zaki Badawi Memorial Lectures have also been organized and published jointly, the first with Lambeth Palace, the second with the City Circle and the third last Friday with the British Council as well as with Westminster University and the City Circle. In fact many of you already know that the third lecture was given by Martin Rose, Director of the BC in Canada and Director of the Our Shared Europe project.

Such partnerships are extremely important and create better understanding, stronger bonds, and eventually a trusting relationship. The latter especially essential if we hope to make a lasting impact.

The landmark publication of the joint British Council/AMSS *British Muslim Media Guide* is a strong example of this. By working together and publishing it jointly, the final work carried a great deal of weight and credibility, and it was very well received across the board. Indeed, neither organisation could have achieved this on its own. If the AMSS had published it separately, the message would have been different and could have been seen as Muslim propaganda. If the BC had published it, again it would not have had the standing that it did, and would no doubt have been seen differently. Joint publication gave it such a credibility and impact in the UK, across Europe and in

the US that a number of organisations ventured into producing similar guides. CAIR in the United States followed suit, and I just received this afternoon the Spanish imitation of the Guide and I hope that we will see others in the future. As our Media Guide illustrated many cooks do not spoil the broth but in fact complement each other.

Admittedly, guides, similar to the one AMSS and the BC produced, may have a short life span and moreover may need to be updated after a couple of years but the impact and the momentum our Guide generated and continues to generate are extremely important . It has indeed opened many doors and possibilities.

The AMSS has always focused on the importance of both formal and informal education in addressing the challenges we face. In many of the various initiatives AMSS has taken, whether publications workshops or conferences, it has driven to promote the case for Education. The reasons for this are many but largely through education that we have a great opportunity. Right now widespread education reinforced by widespread ignorance of the Other is the strange paradox of our supposedly enlightened age. However, if shared histories are married to actively taught skills of critical thinking and awareness, as part of the national curricula, in both the East and the West, then we have the very real chance to realize the ideals of a thriving and peaceful civilization and ultimately an enlightened humanity.

However, thinking critically does not happen naturally, especially given the barrage of information and misinformation out there, but takes early training and nurturing on how to read outside the box, knowing that one should find alternative sources and learn how to find them, how to go through opposing opinions before deciding “yes, this is probably the correct version of things”. Not only do people not have the time these days, or the inclination, or the experience to do so, but they are being accustomed to want truth to appear in short sound bites, fast food, fast truth. This is a very strange and dangerous reality, a logic which underscores the fact that we do not live in an age of intelligent discrimination. Thinking critically or being intellectually aware is a skill, it therefore needs to be learned, nurtured, developed, and strengthened through training, and practice. In short it must be part of all education systems and should be integrated into school curricula. This is probably the most important and effective long-term solution through education which will greatly help curtail the influence of hate discourse by racists, xenophobes and extremists.

The new reality of today's Europe and indeed the World demands an intercultural dialogue which cultivates an understanding of the other based on respect and a pluralistic vision of a shared planet, shared values, and a shared humanity. We need to educate the younger generation to understand the value and importance of other cultures and faiths, and to instill respect for humanity in general.

It is this focus on education that prompted the AMSS Executive

Committee's decision to present this year's Building Bridges Award jointly to both the BC's "Our Shared Europe Project" and the "1001 Inventions."

We wish Martin Rose and his team working on the Our Shared Europe Project all the best and as I have mentioned to both him and Professor Mike Hardy on a number of occasions the AMSS and other organizations I am involved with are willing to work together with the BC and support this project in any way we can.

We also wish the BC another 75 years of continued success in its work and its various endeavours and projects.