

Notes for the Speech of Martin Davidson, British Council's CEO, at the Reception Celebrating the BC's work with the Muslim Community and the AMSS.

Spring Gardens, 9th June 2009

Check Against Delivery

- This reception is to honour and recognise the work that the British Council is doing with valued partners both in the UK and throughout our global network on building understanding and engagement between people. We are all aware of how vital this. Our Intercultural Dialogue Programme has forged significant partners in many communities not least our friends in the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) and in many other Muslim communities.
- This evening I wanted to express my real delight about the 'Building Bridges' award given by the AMSS to the Council last week, for *Our Shared Europe* (jointly with another fine project, *1001 Inventions*).
- I'd like to begin by welcoming Dr Anas Al Shaikh-Ali, Chairman of the AMSS in the UK and his colleagues; and at the same time to welcome all of you, colleagues and partners, Muslims and non-Muslims, to the British Council.
- This occasion is another stage in an excellent relationship that has really developed in the UK in recent years. Around the world we work in most Muslim countries, and a high proportion of my British Council colleagues around the world are Muslims.
- Four years ago I remember very well a landmark project, the publishing of the *Media Guide to British Muslims* – and that very successful project, also with the AMSS, has led directly to the project which the award celebrates.
- *Our Shared Europe* is a very ambitious attempt to change the way Europe thinks about itself. The European elections have seen the emergence in the European Parliament of a number of right wing parties whose agendas are broadly anti-immigration, and often more specifically anti-Muslim. It is more important than ever that we work to reinforce the consensus that underpins Europe, and to address the xenophobic agendas that so often surface in times of recession.
- The project will contribute strongly to achieving this, through large-scale work in education, youth, the arts, audiovisual, web, media and debate. The whole range of the British Council's proven competence and long experience – but deployed in the way we are now committed to working, through a large-scale, ambitious, multi-country and multi-regional project with the scale and weight to achieve real impact. Real change.
- Our fundamental aims in this as in all our work is to develop effective cultural relations – which is our shorthand for the trust that grows through long-term, mutual and honest relationships. The growing sense we all have, both at the British Council and (I believe) amongst our Muslim partners, of the Council as an organisation in which you and all British Muslims are shareholders, is a sign that we are building good cultural relations.

- So much of this work has grown out of a context which has placed emphasis on negatives, on challenges and on difficulties. Challenges and difficulties which are seen to arise from our living together in increasingly diverse communities. As we develop our engagement with and through partnerships in these communities, we want to re-energise our focus on the positives. Diversity brings great strength and richer communities and in a world which continues to be a very local place for most people, the power and positives of internationalism are clear to us.
- We feel a sense of responsibility, through cultural relations, to mobilise a serious contribution to this reality. We cannot do this alone, nor do we want to.
- It is very special for this contribution to be recognised by the 'Building Bridges' award. Bridges join separate places, but the best bridges are those which have become integral parts of both sides...
- I commend to you the *Our Shared Europe* project. I am confident that it will have great resonance and achieve great things. I believe it will show convincingly that –as the project's strap-line has it – *Muslims are an integral part of Europe's past, present and future.*
- And I call upon Dr Anas to say a few words: you are very welcome to the British Council, as a good friend and a valued and effective partner in our work.