

CONNECTIONS NOT COEXISTENCE – BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

I'm really pleased you are all here, I'm really relieved that I am here, in the right place, giving the right lecture to the right audience.

Because, believe it or not, tonight we have another Hinton Lecture happening right now a few miles from here. So I had real concerns about whether I was going to be at the right one.

The Royal Society of Engineering tonight are hosting their flagship annual Hinton lecture in memory of one Sir Christopher Hinton – I understand there is no relationship between the two.

They have the former CEO of EDF Energy talking about his life and career.

But tonight ladies and gentlemen you have me – so those of you who are at the wrong lecture – please do stay.

David Cameron, Ed Miliband, the last Archbishop of Canterbury and I sounds like the start of a very inappropriate joke – but they are in fact the diverse and esteemed company I now keep by delivering this lecture, the 20th Hinton Lecture in memory of Nicholas Hinton - a man whom sadly I only knew in name.

I was a newly qualified solicitor in my twenties when Nicholas died. I was idealistic and passionate about change and believed I could make the world a better place. Idealism and passion I'm told by those who knew Nick were very much a part of him.

But we have a few more things in common.

We both read law.

We both came second in the one Parliamentary election we ever fought.

And we both at times have become terribly frustrated by politicians and politics.

Nicholas Hinton was a giant of the voluntary sector in his roles in NACRO, NCVO, Save the Children, a champion of the sector, described as tough and honourable, he was a brave soul who left this world fighting for it to be better on a peace keeping mission in Croatia.

So when I was preparing for this lecture I wanted to say something that I hoped Nick would have supported.

I'm grateful to Sir Stuart Etherington for some background information, and I'm particularly grateful to Deborah and Josephine Hinton, who said that Nick was honest, blunt, challenging and always ready to fight for the underdog. And that's what they would like me to do today.

To be honest, blunt and challenging – I didn't need asking twice.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to talk today about the sense of unease that we have in Britain today, and particularly the unease between my country, Britain, and my faith, Islam.

But first, if you'll allow me, I'll give you a little history.

Growing up, I knew that we were different, I knew that that difference wasn't insurmountable – but it was tangible. Let me explain.

I grew up, I was born in Dewsbury, a small town in West Yorkshire, in 1971, one of 5 girls born to Pakistani immigrants who came here in the 1950s and 1960s.

We lived next door to the Goodlads, and I knew that we and the Goodlads were different. And there were two points of difference for me.

My mum grew her coriander and mint and spinach - the essential ingredients she needed for her daily cooking, round the back of the garden in a little piece of mud.

They had a greenhouse. They grew their tomatoes in a very civilised way. We also didn't have holidays and they did, and every summer they would pack up their belongings into this smart-looking caravan and go off to this magical place I only knew as Great Yarmouth.

Years later I went to Great Yarmouth and I realised that I probably hadn't missed out on as much as I thought I had. But I realised that when I grew up, there were two things I really wanted to do.

I wanted to grow my vegetables the right way that they should be in suburban England which was in a greenhouse, and I was going to buy a caravan and take my kids to Great Yarmouth. I haven't done either, but I still feel integrated.

In high school the difference became a little more serious
In the 70s and 80s "paki bashing" wasn't a socially uncomfortable word, it was a lived experience.

You could say what radicalised me, what prompted me to fight for racial justice, to march to rally to volunteer and to practice the law, was the colour of my skin. Race was the point of difference, the basis of othering, the focus of the far right and the failing in many a politician.

Who can forget that appalling election slogan from the 60s "if you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour"

But enter the 90s and many a young Asian had started to feel that they belonged and they mattered in this new yuppiefied Britain of huge mobile phones and buy to let properties.

I felt that as the daughter of an immigrant millworker I had done alright. As had many I grew up with.

We were integrated, living in the 'white' parts of town, and yes the occasional offensive note would still be pushed through the door, and the occasional egg will still be thrown at the window, but generally life was good.

I was a social mobility good news story and I didn't mix much in those spaces where racism was overt.

But not in my wildest thoughts could I have predicted that having overcome being a 'problem' black person, a 'problem' Asian person the likes of me were soon to become 'problem Muslims'.

The new bogeymen of the far right, the reason for difference, the basis of othering.

And how we came to be here is a lecture in itself. I would recommend reading the book that was nicely promoted by Peter, published by Penguin earlier this year, and currently reduced on Amazon.

In 2011 I tackled this issue head on. I said that "Islamaphobia had passed the dinner table test", found in the most respectable of settings. I was derided by many in the press. I think I had touched a nerve, it was their dinner tables and those of other respectable folk in think tanks, politics, and yes, even in the charitable sector.

Because ladies and gentlemen it's when the respectable rationalise bigotry, couch it in intellectual argument and present it as public interest that the rot of xenophobia sets in and starts to destroy society. It's when coexistence starts to become impossible and connections are never made.

And Islamaphobia sadly is Britain's latest bigotry blind spot.

And it is in this atmosphere that we need to move beyond coexistence and form connections.

Allow me to focus a little on the charitable sector and particularly what I call the Shawcross period – a period which right from the outset resulted in concerns of bias raised by many including a parliamentary select committee. William’s previous statements on Islam, Guantanamo, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iraq War and his associations with the likes of the Henry Jackson Society did not bode well.

His statement on “the risks of donor money leaking out to support terrorism”, led to a community under scrutiny despite there being as Tom Keating said in 2014 as part of a report by Demos, no evidence of this charge.

As many including the Prime Minister have said Muslims are among Britain’s most generous givers, topping polls on religious groups that donate to charity.

And yet a disproportionate number of Muslim charities have in recent years been subject to Charity Commission inquiries carried out under the Commission’s general power to investigate, section 46 of the Charities Act 2011, with Muslim charities making up nearly 40% of those investigated between December 2012 and May 2014.

Further disclosure related to terrorist and extremist-related allegations, primarily against Muslim charities, have risen markedly. Data relating to the period 2014-2015 shows the number of formal investigations by the Charity Commission relating to terrorist abuse of charities stood at 20 while legal disclosures between the Commission, police and other agencies on the issue stood at over 500.

Terrorist and extremist-related allegations, primarily of Muslim charities, now account for 22% of all disclosures, a disproportionate increase in allegations when the number of Muslim charities has remained more or less the same.

Despite the increase in focus on terrorism and extremism, a review of all published statutory inquiries between 2014 and 2016 into such charities shows that out of the 13 concluded inquiries only one relates to extremism in any form.

This view aligns with that of many leading experts in the charity sector, which is that extremist abuse of the charity sector has and remains negligible. Tom Keating, director of the Royal United Services Institute's Centre for Financial Crime and Security Studies, states: "the abuse of UK charities in support of terrorism is negligible. The standards are very high and awareness amongst the big charities of this issue is intense."

Data and evidence indicates an increasingly disproportionate focus on Muslim charities and supports claims that this focus is a distraction from real issues affecting the sector.

It is the implementation of what a colleague in Cabinet called the 'Al Capone' method of policing 'the Muslims'. I termed it McCarthyism.

Ladies and gentlemen I must pay tribute to Sir Stephen Bubb, former head of ACEVO, who has been a fearless advocate of the charitable sector and a tremendous friend to Muslim charities with his much needed support and guidance when they've come under fire in recent years.

He has been a bulwark against some of the questionable conduct of the Charity Commission and a lifeline for a cohort of Charity Commission employees who have struggled to ensure fairness, transparency and consistency of approach when dealing with charities with a 'Muslim' connection.

So how do we challenge the myths, the misunderstandings and the outright misinformation to create a sense of ease between all communities that make up Britain today?

I would argue that co-existence is no longer enough - we must advocate and encourage connections.

The samosa and tea in a draughty church hall have had their day. It's time to move towards an approach that opposes those that seek to divide and support and act in ways that connect

And I therefore have asks of all of us.

Firstly the diverse community of 3 million fellow co-religionists, British Muslims. As I have always said to them, Islam is like a river it takes the colour of the bed over which it flows it always has it always will.

My Islam flows over bed Britain, and therefore my Islamic identity must have a very clear British cultural reference point.

Much work is already being done to carve out and shape a very British Islam - and this work must be supported and encouraged. And the minority amongst these communities who preach separatism must be isolated and challenged, and the vast majority that want to live and engage in mixed communities, a fact supported by almost every poll that has been done, need to be afforded the opportunity to do so.

Because Integration must not become the privilege of the middle class, a pastime only available in the fashionable suburbs of town.

Secondly I have an ask of my fellow politicians.

Successive governments since the last Labour government have implemented a policy of disengagement when it comes to British Muslims.

A policy of disconnecting from British Muslim communities.

A policy where more and more individuals, activists, organisations are seen as beyond the pale, reasons for not being spoken to.

This policy must end. How can we expect communities to connect, for Britain to connect if the government of the day for over a decade, governments of different colours fail to connect with vast sections of its own citizens?

Post-truth politics, pseudo-academics, a disdain for evidence, attacking judges, belittling the rule of law, discrediting hard-won human rights and those who defend them, dismissing equalities principles as political correctness, government policy-making reduced to Twitter-friendly messages, policy which doesn't even meet our own stated values, shock-jock journos and 'alternative' news are now a part of the landscape that informs political discourse.

The politics of the last twenty four months proves that we can no longer take for granted our hard-fought liberties or the direction of travel.

Politicians must push back against the emerging fashion of distorted political claims, of falsehoods and emotively charged messages, campaigns targeted at appealing to primary instincts of fear and greed.

Mainstream politicians need to stop serving up lies because, as we are starting to learn to our detriment, fringe politicians are much more effective in this form of campaigning.

We let the genie out of the jar and we must firmly put it back. If we are worried about the direction of travel then we, as political parties, politicians and the press, need to stop and think how we contributed in laying that path.

We need to ask ourselves why voter turnouts continue to fall, why voters are put off by our naked electioneering, why not acting in the national interest means people stay at home on election day, whilst the marginalised and angry are incentivised to turn out only by extreme political messages.

Campaigns which green-light bigotry slowly destroy decency in our society and politicians from all sides must demand and implement a higher quality of public discourse. We must restart those connections.

And finally the rest of us.

To create connections we must have an understanding of different religions and the state of faith in the United Kingdom. Faith literacy is a must.

An honest analysis of who we are and how we got here as a nation is a good starting point. It's time to get a full and transparent picture of that journey.

An evidence based no-holds-barred account of the lurch towards extremism and violence in all its forms.

The brave need to step forward. In government, the media and the community we need to see individuals who are prepared to challenge the current 'accepted norm':

The journalist who will question an editorial bias.

The writer who will be scrupulous about the quest for fact.

The politician who will resist the temptation to grab a headline.

The activist who will square up to ideas which are divisive and the masses who will demand transparency and truth, and call out those who seek to divide.

We must demand facts and evidence from those who seek to lead our nations and those who seek to inform our nations.

Politicians and journalists who peddle false stories, perpetuate myth and feed and publish divisive headlines do so because we allow them to do so.

Each time we vote for a politician who tells lies and each time we buy a paper that has published false stories we feed the monster that slowly swallows decency in society. The decency that we need to ensure we gave connections.

We must challenge those who ratchet up the hate and challenge false stories about immigration, scaremongering about refugees and the now almost daily headlines tabloid papers and politicians reach for without fact and explanation.

Politicians have an annoying habit of saying “I did a speech on this – you must read it”. So forgive me, but I did a speech on this – only last week - the Leveson lecture. If you survive today please read it.

We must challenge the daily feeding of hate and fear. Let me give you an example one that I think you will all be familiar with.

The ‘Islamisation of Britain’, we’ve all heard it, a favourite theme of the far right, the scaremongering that instils the ‘fear of a Muslim takeover’ but without any factual basis.

5 per cent of Brits are Muslim, and less than 2 per cent of MPs are Muslim, and a number amongst these too would not define themselves as such.

A takeover of 95 per cent of the population by 5 per cent of its citizens or a democratic takeover of 98 per cent of our parliament by 2 per cent of its parliamentarians is simply implausible even for the conspiracy theorists.

And yet this headline is peddled. And I want to assure the rest of Britain that whatever we think and whatever the fear we have about these Muslims, successive polls on this suggest that Britain believes anywhere between 20-26% of Britain is Muslim.

Well, this may be news to you but British Muslims, like the rest of Brits, couldn’t organise a halal piss-up in a mocktail bar.

We must also tackle the underlying causes of a non-cohesive society, the alienation felt by majority and minority communities and the grievances cited.

We must address the economic inequalities that feed grievances, giving rise to citizens turning to extreme political or violent ‘solutions’. It means reducing the gap between the haves and the have-nots, those who can access opportunity and those for whom it is out of reach.

Income inequality in the UK is increasing: we are the third-most unequal country in Europe and the sixth-most unequal in a list of thirty OECD countries.¹

We have large variations geographically: the north–south divide in England continues to grow,² with children from poor homes in the north-east of England having little or no chance of going to universities like Oxbridge.³ The wealth gap has expanded: the top 10 per cent of Brits hold nearly 50 per cent of all wealth; the top 1 per cent hold nearly a quarter; social mobility has steadily declined; and we are experiencing ‘the worst decade for [growth in] living standards since the last war’.

I’m not sure I would have been who I am today had I been born today. Where you are born determines your life chances; family income, not talent, increasingly determines educational attainment; and the top jobs in all professions remain overwhelmingly occupied by those from wealthy and privileged homes.

Too many in our communities are simply not connected to the success that Britain has seen, they feel like they simply do not matter.

White boys from working-class homes, the group of young people least likely to go to university; families in northern towns such as Barnsley where I have my business, where heavy industry and the mines declined decades ago only to be replaced with low-skilled, low-paid temporary and agency work; single parents who hold down multiple jobs but still need to visit food banks; all victims of a more unequal society but all for whom the solution is presented through a vilification of ‘the other’.

Groups like the EDL, BNP and the more respectable UKIP offer a radical alternative to the mainstream parties who they claim have abandoned white working-class areas. Instead of any progressive alternatives, it presents ‘racial’ solutions to real problems. This is not new. We have been here before

Now more than ever we must as a nation remake the case for diversity. Peukert, a German historian on writing about Nazi Germany and the values needed to push back against fascist ideology, cites the following values:

Reverence for life, pleasure in diversity and contrariety, respect for what is alien, tolerance of what is unpalatable, scepticism about the feasibility and desirability of chiliastic schemes for a global new order, openness towards others and a willingness to learn even from those who call into question one's own principles of social virtue.

These ideals are as relevant today as they were then.

So, however twee it may seem, let's all try to implement these in our lives. Let's get to know our local communities better, become more than members of a group and interact as individuals. Let's understand the diversity that makes our nation, the nuance and detail of individual identities, rather than revert to lazy stereotypes.

Nadiya Hussein Begum, the 2015 winner of The Great British Bake Off, made women in hijabs more than women in hijabs.

Her humour, her personality, her sharing of her deepest thoughts, her anxieties, her tears of joy and her amazing ability to bake made her for all of us an individual.

This is a two-way process, as individuals reach out across their differences and find both how much they have in common and how rewarding experiencing that difference can be. And in meeting the other we will start to discover the very complex and multilayered identities that we in a globalized and interconnected world now hold.

As Nadiya Begum beautifully put it at the end of her amazing BBC journey through Bangladesh, 'I am British, I am Muslim, I am Bangladeshi and I am proud of all three.'⁴

Many Brits have these wonderfully complex and diverse identities. I am no exception.

My parents originate from Pakistan. When I was in government, in response to a request from William Hague, the then foreign secretary, Pakistan was the first foreign place I visited.

Pakistan and Pakistanis had celebrated my appointment to the cabinet. Attendance at my first cabinet meeting on that warm May morning in a pink shalwar kameez, a traditional Pakistani outfit, led to a frenzy of press interest in Pakistan and created the perfect backdrop against which to build a stronger and more honest relationship between our two countries.

I was a British minister who also felt like one of their own. It cut across the narrative of us and them of East and West, victim and aggressor, colonised and coloniser, Muslim and other. We had connections.

Diverse Britain has made us a healthier, wealthier nation, with immigrants responsible for founding one in seven of all UK companies,⁵ and public services like the NHS functioning because of them.

And the 'other' has proved invaluable for our security services, for police and the armed forces in the form of those who, because of their race, religion or origins, can provide policing and surveillance, both at home and abroad, in ways Anglo-Saxon Brits simply cannot.

And then there are new and expanding markets: something that fascinates me - the halal food and lifestyle industry and the Islamic finance market alone are estimated to reach £2.6 trillion each by 2020.⁶

And it is this space, this diversity, the stage where we can proudly showcase difference, and it is this stage that we must all protect and preserve.

We need a Britain where difference is seen as a source of strength, not as a source of suspicion, and where, in an ever-more globalized, competitive world, especially post-Brexit, this difference gives Brand Britannia a competitive edge. We need a nation that desires connections not coexistence a nation that shouts 'Hello, world' not growls 'Little island'.

We need to raise our vision to the horizon, to move on from the debate on British values, increasingly seen as a list of things that existed on these shores before the pesky foreigners arrived.

A single list of values which is reductively interpreted and mechanically applied, a list which is not only historically incorrect but also paradoxical. To define an initiative to unite us in a divisive way undermines its very purpose.

We need to champion a pride in our country, a confidence, an identity and sense of 'we' that is broader than our specific ethnic and religious group, and this national identity forming should be for all that make up the current 'us' and the current 'them'.

Let's stop talking about who we think we are and articulate who we want to be: not British values, but British ideals. We need ideals that are explicitly stated, consistently applied and universally accepted, demanding of all communities the same level of behaviour to the same standard, measured against aspirations that we've all contributed to. A national conversation is required to underpin this.

A conversation which will help form connections.

We must say what we believe and do what we say. If we preach human rights, we must practise them too; if we lecture the world on freedoms, we must implement them passionately at home and we must celebrate, not begrudgingly tolerate, our hard-won equalities framework.

These connections are possible if each one of us is prepared to take a few small steps of friendship towards 'the other'.

Let me give you a few practical steps to start with. Go visit a place of worship. Go see a Muslim/Jewish/Christian/Hindu comedian. The fantastic thing about this current phase that British Muslims are going through is that the comedy scene is thriving.

Ask your 'other-race/faith' friend that burning question you've dared not to ask them so far, and if you don't have an 'other' friend, make one. Celebrate an 'other' festival. Read a book by an 'other' author. There's a great one called 'The Enemy Within'.

Put yourself in the shoes of the 'other'. If an ethnic minority person moves into your street, don't white-flight out.

And if you've got a moment, think how well you would do in the Qur'an experiment performed by Dutch pranksters. Now if any of you have not done this I would advise you tonight to go home on Youtube type in the Qur'an experiment where two Dutch pranksters took a copy of the Bible and covered it in a copy of the sleeve of the Qur'an, and then read out various passages on women's rights and homosexuality of which people then said well this was why it was a uniquely violent religion which had no place in Christian Europe, only to be told it was the Bible

But most of all we must stand united against hate. In a better bygone era black, Asian, white, gay, straight, Jew, Muslim stood shoulder to shoulder in the fight against racism. We were all black once – and in today's world where Muslims are the new blacks - I'm asking you all to be Muslim, for a short while.

Finally ladies and gentlemen.

True connections are made when you are true to your own complex identity and open to another's complex identity.

Now I come from a generation of Asian women who had both their career and their husband chosen by their mother. I gave up law and divorced my first husband, so mum's not happy.

But I never managed to live out my passion to interpret the great English classics and give them an ethnic twist and put them on stage. That's what I really wanted to do, mum said I had to be a lawyer.

So when I was writing I chose to finally let the inner actor out and I wrote my soliloquy. Finally the moment where I would like to stand on stage and share with you who I am, so bear with me in finishing this lecture

I would describe myself as a Muslim; I would describe myself as a pragmatic practitioner. I'm not content with simply 'doing' religion.

There has to be a 'why': for me reason and religion go hand in hand.

The lawyer in me needs to see the evidence, and the politician in me needs to hear the argument.

And it's why belief for me is not a stagnant position, it's a journey not a destination, evolutionary not revolutionary and ultimately a source for daily reflection, self-evaluation at times of great success and a source of strength at times of distress.

My faith is about who I am, not about who you are.

It's a rulebook for me, not a forced lecture series for you.

Its strength is a source of peace for me not ammunition with which to fight you.

It's a ruler I have chosen to measure myself against, not a stick with which to beat you.

It allows me to question myself, not to judge you.

And recognizing myself, being sure of who I am, being comfortable in my identity, does not mean having to downgrade, erase or reject who you are.

Because I can only truly accept you for who you are if I am truly sure of who I am.