

• A NEW MUSLIM POLITICS?

For many years Britain's Muslim population, along with other communities which settled in Britain after the war, have been seeking political surrogates. Rather than being involved in the political process, they have sought to calculate which of the party labels represented the best of a bad lot for their own needs. The case of headmaster Roy Honeyford and the determined campaign for his displacement is one instance which signals a significant change underway amongst the ethnic minorities.

The Honeyford case did not begin with his now celebrated article in a right-wing Tory magazine, but rather with his obvious hostility to the spirit of Bradford's multi-cultural education policy. The vast majority of the parents who have been seeking his removal as head of Drummond Middle School are Muslims and in waging the campaign they have found support from the Left. There is nothing new in this. Ethnic communities have consistently found that on questions of racism, racial harassment, discrimination and immigration it is the Left which has been most ready to become active on their behalf. But the Left has often questioned whether this is a reliable indicator of the general political orientation of the minority communities, and especially the Muslims. Many on the Left see Islam as a reactionary force.

For Muslims there is a difference between accepting support on single issues, such as the Afia Begum immigration case, and deciding where one's particular world view finds its most appropriate political home. What the Honeyford controversy shows is that Muslims *are* prepared to organise for issues as they see them: to create a platform for being Muslims in Britain. But there is no obvious political home for this developing Muslim politics.

Britain's Muslims are predominantly, but not exclusively, from the Indian sub-continent. The first generation to arrive in this country in the 50s came from a village background, people steeped in traditional values which found their expression in a conservative Islam. For many such people it appeared the Tory party offered the most congenial expression of values they cherished. Themes of respect for authority, home and family, the denial of permissiveness in all its forms as well as emphasis on self reliance all found their echo in schools of Islamic thought. There is certainly a body of opinion amongst British Muslims which seeks to cling tenaciously to village ways and values of Islam in a hostile environment.

But an identification with the Tory party on the basis of political values would have to surmount the lessons of hard experience gained over the last 30 years during which the Tory party has increasingly been the home of Little Englander notions, of Britain as a place which cherishes its exclusive traditions to which all 'newcomers' must conform. Little scope there to be actively Muslim, actively British and actively political. Little scope also to overlook the political record of the Tory party on issues which particularly touch the Muslim community.

Labour party support in the Muslim community over the years has been promoted by the Left's willingness to take up issues which touch the daily lives of its members. Some would see Muhammad Ajeeb, the Asian Muslim mayor of Bradford as the first public sign of closer political links with the Labour party. But as the struggle over black sections indicates, the Labour party is far from sure it is ready to provide a full forum for such political action. While its record on issues relating to the Muslim community has been better than its rivals,



Pickers attempt to persuade boycott of Drummond School, where headmaster Ray Honeyford is accused of racism.

the current reticence shows it is not exemplary. Support for Muslims on particular issues does not imply an understanding of Muslims' desire to represent themselves and their politics. Single issue support does not necessarily create a political identifica-

tion over a broad range of issues.

Moreover many on the Left see Muslim radicalism as nothing but a traditionalist force. Such a judgement overlooks a strong, emerging theme of the Muslim response to living in Britain. All sections of the Muslim community share the view that Islam is misunderstood, falsely stereotyped and the recipient of prejudice and discrimination. A young generation has grown up on these lessons, but by living in Britain has actually had access to more information and debate about Islam than their contemporaries in many Muslim countries, or their parents' generation before they settled in Britain.

This has produced young people who are aware that Islam is not confined by the traditional interpretations of their elders. Young women reading the Quran have found it gives them rights and an outlook every bit as radical as feminism could wish. They have found there is within Islamic political thought a radical strand which unequivocally stands for social justice and critically questions the political status quo of both Britain and the western alliance.

If these young people look overseas they will see movements which are not easily labelled, often incorrectly lumped together as an Islamic revival, which suggest they have their own distinctive perspective on the modern world and a very particular contribution to make. Muslims living in the West are making an important contribution to the intellectual definition of the relevance of Islam in the modern world.

As social conditions in Britain worsen, as Muslims as part of the ethnic minorities suffer proportionately more than their white neighbours, and as the renewal of understanding of Islam spreads amongst the community, it would be far from surprising to find increasing numbers of Muslims joining common cause with the Left. It is a fundamental teaching of Islam that Muslims should endorse what is right and work to abolish what is evil. These words will have British definitions, conditioned by events in Britain as experienced by Muslims. If Muslims have in the past taken the view that the Left is the home of godlessness and therefore anathema, there will be those who increasingly remember that the basis of Islamic judgement is the willingness to take right action. For many Muslims it will mean going beyond glib party political labels, to develop a distinctive politics. For the Left this suggests the need to re-evaluate the political orientations of Britain's Muslims, and the Left's capacity to build broader political alliances.

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