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Muslims in UK Institutions: Effective Representation or Tokenism?

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Muslim representation in political parties, local government, and legislatures in Britain has been on the rise in the last decade. In this chapter we explore the perceptions, experiences, and political behavior of British Muslim members of city councils, political parties, and parliamentary chambers to understand whether they perceive that their presence in these institutions helps members of minority communities. We gauge whether they think of themselves as representing Muslims and whether they feel that current British Muslim representation is effective, provides services to a disadvantaged minority, or functions as a tool for conflict resolution in the context of rising tensions and misperceptions. We also use our findings to speak to key theoretical and policy debates on minority representation.

Our research consists of forty in-depth interviews with elected British Muslim officials (city councillors, members of the House of Commons [MPs], members of the European Parliament [MEPs], and Lords), activists, unsuccessful candidates, party officials, and organizational leaders in London during the spring of 2006.

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Like other authors in this volume, we do not consider “Muslim” to necessarily mean a religious identity, but an identity that may have religious, racial, political, or cultural dimensions (chapter 1). This chapter is, in part, about what British institutions and Muslim politicians, in all their diversity, make of this sociological reality. We therefore consider as “Muslim” someone who considers herself or himself to be Muslim or who has at least one parent from a Muslim background, unless he or she claims to adhere to another religion.

Until recently, minority issues in the UK have been discussed in racial terms (see chapter 4), but the religious identity of British Muslims has become more important to them, has attracted the interest of politicians, and has become an important part of the public discourse. Several studies confirm that “Muslim” identity has taken precedence over ethnic and other minority allegiances.¹ The 2001 riots in northern England, measures taken by the British government that threaten civil rights, and the 2003 antiwar protests against the involvement of British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq have catalyzed solidarity among British Muslims across ethnic lines. Since then, the attacks in London, police action, and other tense episodes must have further consolidated both identity and perceptions of British Muslims (chapter 8).

Despite the emergence of a prevalent Muslim identity, there are only few studies on political participation and representation of British Muslims. These studies focus on political representation of Muslims at the local level (Purdam 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001; Eade 1989). Others focus on the politics of mostly Muslim ethnic groups but not British Muslims in general (Anwar 1996, Eade 1989). The scholarship on representation still has to catch up with the transformation of minority identities in the UK, and this study addresses the old debates in the framework of a new salient minority identity, British Islam.² Does Muslim representation in political parties and elected office benefit the disadvantaged Muslim minority and society at large? Do British parties actively promote Muslim candidates or slow their promotion? In the case of British Muslims today, the answers hardly fall on one side or the other.

Trends in British Muslim Representation

British Muslim representation is increasing considerably on all levels. As of 2007, there are 13 British parliamentarians who are Muslim or come from a Muslim background—4 MPs out of 646, 7 life peers (Lords) out of more than 740, and 2 MEPs out of 78 British MEPs.³

The first Muslim MP, Mohammad Sarwar, was elected in the 1997 general elections from Govan, Glasgow. He was reelected in 2001 along with Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham Perry Barr). The number of Muslim MPs doubled again in the 2005 elections: Sadiq Khan and Shahid Malik joined Mahmood



and Sarwar, who were reelected. They are all members of the Labour Party. Sarwar and Mahmood were born outside the UK whereas Khan and Malik were born in the UK.

The first Muslim MEP (out of 87 British MEPs at the time) was Bashir Khanbhai, who was elected in 1999 from the Eastern Region as a Conservative Party candidate. Khanbhai did not get reelected after he was accused by the Conservative Party of misusing travel funds, accusations he ascribes to retaliation for speaking on minority issues and to racism.⁴ Syed Kamall (Conservative) and Sajjad Karim (Liberal Democrat) became Britain's two Muslim MEPs in 2004. Khanbhai was born in Tanzania, but Kamall and Karim were both born in the UK.

The first contemporary Muslim Lord, Nazir Ahmed (Labor), was elevated to the peerage in 1998. The other six Muslim Lords are Kishwer Falkner (Liberal Democrat), Iltaf Mohamed Sheikh (Conservative), Amirali Alibhai Bhatia (cross-bench), Waheed Alli, Pola Manzila Uddin, and Adam Hafejee Patel (all Labour).⁵ They are all of South Asian background (six of the seven are foreign-born), though Alli is of mixed background (Hindu mother) and Bhatia was born in Tanzania. Otherwise, they are quite diverse: two are women, they come from all three parties, some are socially conservative (Patel) while others are liberal (Falkner and Alli), some actively take leadership on Muslim minority issues (e.g., Ahmed) while some have a thin connection to Islam as either culture, religion, or identity (e.g., Alli).

All British Muslim parliamentarians have a long history of service as party activists before being nominated for their seats, put on their party's EU list, or introduced to the House of Lords.⁶ Most of them served as local councillors prior to becoming parliamentarians. Most have college or graduate degrees, and others are successful businesspeople.

There is little precise research on the numbers, attitudes, and characteristics of Muslim councillors because of the previous scholarly and policy focus on the ethnic, instead of religious, dimensions of minority politics.⁷

Purdam (2000) estimates that there were 160 Muslim councillors in Britain (153 Labour, six Liberal Democrat, and one Conservative) in May 1996. They were overwhelmingly South Asian men, and many more self-identified as "Muslim" or "British Muslim" than as "British" or by referring to their ethnic identity. They were mostly professionals and self-employed businessmen, 21 percent were unemployed, 12 percent were retired, and less than 5 percent were manual laborers. Almost all councillors spoke English well and have been in Britain for over thirty years. The London-based *The Muslim News* estimates that a total of 217 Muslim councillors were elected in Britain, including 63 in London boroughs, in the May 2000 local elections.⁸ We estimate that some 130 Muslim councillors have been elected to 32 London boroughs in the May 2006 elections based on a count of Muslim-sounding names. In one London borough, Tower Hamlets, where Bengalis make up a third or so of the population, 30 of 51 councillors are Muslim (25 Labour and 5 Liberal Democrat).



Muslim representation at the local level is now fairly close to parity in London. We estimate that almost 7 percent of councillors are Muslims; 8.2 percent of the city's population is Muslim according to the 2001 census. But does their presence on councils matter?

Does Local Muslim Political Representation Matter?

We interviewed 17 Muslim city councillors across London boroughs during the summer of 2006. We selected the councillors randomly based on their Muslim-sounding names. We conducted in-depth semistructured interviews that generally lasted between one and two hours to collect biographical information and to explore their perceptions, experiences, and political behavior as serving or retired city councillors.

The majority of the Muslim councillors we interviewed are first-generation immigrants. Eight are of Pakistani origin, 2 of Turkish origin, 3 of Indian origin, 3 of Bengali origin, and 1 of mixed background (Bengali and white British). Fourteen out of 17 were above 50 years old and the other three were 37 or 38 years old. Only 3 were born in England, and only 4 out of 17 councillors are female. Their educational backgrounds vary considerably: one ended his education at middle school, 2 finished high school, 5 had some form of training beyond high school but not a formal bachelor's degree, 4 finished college, 2 had master's-level education, and 2 had formal education beyond a master's degree. While the majority of the Muslim councillors (11) were from the Labour Party, the group also included 2 Conservatives, 3 Liberal Democrats, and 1 Labour member who defected to the Respect Party. Eleven said that they are Sunni Muslims, 4 said they are "Muslim" without specifying a sect, and 2 said they are Ahmadi. Eleven out of 17 responded positively when asked if they consider themselves to be religious. Those who identified themselves as non-religious Muslims indicated that Islam is more of a cultural identity and that their ethnic minority identity is more important to them than being "Muslim." One councillor described herself as a "cultural Muslim."

The Muslim councillors we interviewed tend to believe that they can offer Muslim constituents the kind of attention and assistance that they would otherwise not receive from elected officials. In all cases, councillors indicated that they get approached by Muslims from many ethnicities to take up their casework. Some even get approached by Muslims from other wards (constituents of other councillors) who feel more comfortable dealing with them than with their own councillors.

When asked why some Muslims approach them instead of other councillors, their most frequent answers were cultural affinity, language, understanding their particular needs, and trust. One councillor, for example, told us:

Because you are from the same background, when a family speaks about a large family living in a house, I would understand why. Some people do not understand why. It is the young child being raised by grandparents. They don't have to explain to me the reasons, which may be social or economic reasons. Or they simply want to live near an Islamic Center. I may suggest to them different avenues.

Some Muslim councillors believe that their intervention at key junctures averted discrimination against projects that were meant to serve the needs of the Muslim community. In one such case, after not being able to get a positive response from the council for five years, Yusuf Islam (a philanthropist who was known as the singer Cat Stevens before converting to Islam) contacted the only Muslim councillor in the Borough of Brent at the time for help in obtaining planning permission to establish an Islamic school. The councillor told us that the council committee blocking progress on the project granted permission to proceed after he intervened.

Another way in which Muslim councillors help Muslim constituents is by showing them how to effectively present their cases and lobby for their issues. This involves explaining to them the rules of the council, teaching them the proper specialized vocabulary, and coaching them in making their case. One councillor from the Borough of Walthamstow, for example, explained how he helped constituents obtain planning permission for a local mosque after their application was rejected based on technicalities.

Several Muslim councillors also served on advisory boards and councils that deal with minority issues and helped ease social tension and conflict between the police and the Muslim community. Most also mentioned that they hoped that their own service and activities will encourage civic involvement among Muslim youth. A few even stated that they actively work to get minority youth involved in the democratic process in the hope of developing a sense of belonging and decreasing feelings of marginalization and frustration. It is too early to tell and we have little research on the matter, but their example may mitigate the draw of extremists who attempt to recruit marginalized youth.

Councillors' responses indicated a high degree of professionalism and political socialization. Both those who identified themselves as religious and those who did not expressed interest in Muslim issues and have worked to help Muslim constituents in one way or another. However, they all made sure to explain that they are dedicated to assisting all their constituents and to ensure fairness and equality for all. All councillors emphasized that they represent all their constituents equally, and do not engage in favoritism. Some even emphasized that they want to make sure to avoid giving the impression that they engage in ethnic favoritism. One first-term Muslim councillor was very uncomfortable with Muslims approaching him instead of more senior (hence more experienced) councillors at a joint surgery (office hours). He even got into an argument with a

Somali Muslim family who insisted on speaking to him instead of the other two councillors from his ward.

The councillors generally seemed comfortable dealing with non-Muslim colleagues and party activists. They all spoke highly of non-Muslim colleagues with whom they shared their party's electoral list in their ward. Some spoke of early tensions with party activists who resisted the entry of minority candidates, but indicated that this has changed over time.⁹ Almost all expressed pride in representing ethnically mixed wards. One Muslim councillor, the one-time Hackney mayor Shuja Shaikh, for example, was particularly pleased with his strong and enduring relationship with the conservative Jews who make up the majority of his ward's population. He has been representing them effectively since 1974 in a mutually supportive relationship that helped him provide a government-funded housing agency for Muslims and an Islamic community center for the borough's growing Muslim population.

Still, there were some limitations. One devout Muslim councilwoman felt alienated because her non-Muslim colleagues gathered in pubs after council and committee meetings. She felt that her colleagues would bond and make important decisions in an informal environment that is not welcoming for her. Some also mentioned discrimination in important committees when it comes to issuing permits to build mosques or Islamic schools in contrast to Christian or Jewish ones.

In almost all cases, Muslim councillors mentioned that they collaborate on an ad hoc basis with other Muslim councillors across ethnic and party lines regarding Muslim issues. The one exception is a female councillor with mixed background (South Asian and white) who felt that Pakistani male colleagues did not consider her as one of their own and did not wish to collaborate with her. There is, however, no strong sense of solidarity or an organized effort to foster collaboration and learning among councillors. Some have mentioned that they talk with other Muslim councillors during meetings of the Pakistan Welfare Association or the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Only a few voiced a need or desire to have an organization for British Muslim councillors (one such organization unraveled several years ago). Most councillors get socialized into their roles by non-Muslim fellow elected officials from their party.

Almost all were proud to be minority elected officials. Most voluntarily shared with us experiences and memories that they felt were particularly significant in the context of minority representation: participating in decision making, having access to once opaque institutions, having met with the queen as mayors of their borough as few have done, and being able to help their communities. Several mentioned quite proudly how discourse and language in council and committee meetings have become much more respectful of minorities since they were elected. Their presence on the council decreases racist attitudes and language and



increases awareness among other elected officials of the existence and needs of Muslim citizens. As one councilman told us:

The very presence of a Muslim either as a councillor, or any other representative, makes a difference in the sense that the other people, the non-Muslims, become conscious of the Muslim representative's presence and also of the Muslim community. It has two effects. One is that the non-Muslims come to know about the requirements, needs, and demands of Muslims. Also, it deters them from being racist or anti-Muslim . . . they would not express in the open their prejudices, it deters them. And the other element is that gradual contact with the Muslim representative helps them to maintain continuous contact with the Muslim community and know more and more about it. It is a venue, an opportunity to learn more about Muslims. But it depends on the Muslim representative herself or himself. If the Muslim elected representative is positive, then he or she will receive a positive response from councillors and others.

Most are conscious of being perceived as a “Muslim” city councillor, and some expressed their desire to be able to redress negative stereotypes of Muslims in society by being good and fair at what they do. They also tend to be critical of the Muslim community: when asked to identify barriers to increased Muslim political representation, they mostly identified shortcomings within the Muslim community, rather than the system itself. Overall, these councillors came across as optimistic individuals who believe that Britain has much to offer to a new generation of Muslims with the right attitude.



Does Muslim Representation in British Parties and Legislatures Matter?

We interviewed 14 parliamentarians and party activists (4 MPs and MEPs, 4 Lords, and 6 party activists who unsuccessfully ran for seats in the Commons). We also interviewed leaders and officers of several Muslim organizations to get their input on the benefits of Muslim representation. We conducted in-depth semistructured interviews that generally lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes to collect biographical information and to explore their perceptions, experiences, and political behavior. We compared our interview findings with public records of the elected officials and other publicly available information. While the small number of Muslim parliamentarians and activists makes it difficult to make broad generalizations, the in-depth interviews did provide us with meaningful insights into the challenges and opportunities they face and the choices they make.

To gauge whether Muslim parliamentarians reflect the preferences and concerns of most British Muslims, we used as a reference the official positions of major Muslim organizations and answers from interviews with Muslim community leaders. British Muslims are particularly concerned with the protection of civil



rights and liberties; support for economic, educational, and political opportunities for minorities; equitable legislation against hate speech and discrimination; and a just and balanced foreign policy toward Muslim countries and populations, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and the Palestinians.

The key for British politicians to be elected to the House of Commons is to be selected by their party for a safe, closely contested, or even marginal district. This is also where the pressures to conform begin to be applied to Labour and Conservative candidates. The selection process is the product of the interaction between party power brokers at the constituency and national levels and differs in its details among parties (Geddes 1998). The prospective Muslim (and other minority) candidate generally has to convince both levels of party governance that he has the potential to be a suitable winning candidate to have a chance to compete for a safe seat. He needs to first convince the national party administration that he should be put on the national lists of those eligible to compete (a much more centralized process for the Tories than others) and to pass muster with the local constituency. Bias against Muslim candidates can operate at different stages: their access to information and understanding of the selection process, discrimination in the appointment to the lists, and hostility within constituencies. Still, all large parties have recently made some headway to address bias in their national lists. In the 2005 election, the Liberal Democrats fielded 23 Muslim candidates, the Conservatives fielded 15, Labour 13, and Respect 10. The total of 51 from the three large parties is an improvement over the 27 from 2001. In the case of Conservatives and, oddly at first blush, the Liberal Democrats, bias is greatest at the level of the constituency, with little effort by the party's leadership to counterbalance it. This is probably because of the existence of strongly anti-immigration Conservative bastions and, until recently, the Liberal Democrat reliance on mostly white voters and activists. This may explain why all of their Muslim candidates competed for unwinnable seats and why they field a large number of candidates (to counterbalance the perception that they do not discriminate against them). An alternative explanation is that they are sincerely launching a pool of Muslim candidates on a trajectory that will ultimately lead a number of them to become MPs after "they cut their teeth on unwinnable then marginal seats," as one Conservative activist told us. The Labour Party's more complex selection system and its strong desire to keep the loyalty of the minority vote, on the other hand, has allowed serious Muslim Labour candidates to be put forth in a few winnable constituencies. Sizable Muslim involvement in Labour is also older than in the other two parties, which makes it more likely that strong Muslim candidates with knowledge of inner party workings would emerge. Labour might very well have had more Muslim MPs if it had not suffered in the 2005 election because of Tony Blair's unpopular support for the American invasion of Iraq.

The candidates, parliamentarians, and activists we interviewed had several explanations for why none of the many Tory and Liberal Democrat Muslim candidates were put forth in winnable districts. The first is that they still had to "pay



their dues” to the party as political activists and candidates in unsafe districts before being given the chance to compete for safe ones. One senior Muslim Liberal Democrat activist blamed Muslim candidates from the same party for failing to apply for competitive seats early enough to have a chance to represent these constituencies. Off the record, others spoke of bastions of anti-Muslim attitudes within their own parties that hinder advancement.¹⁰ One interviewee argued that those who speak forcefully on minority issues are ignored for important committee appointments in the Liberal Democrat party. Within Labour, some interviewees suspect that attacks during the first election of Mohammad Sarwar had anti-Muslim motivations.¹¹ Some have argued that the failed attempt at electoral fraud in the Labour Party election that was meant to keep Yasmin Qureshi from representing the party in the race for the Brent East constituency was one such instance of anti-Muslim racism.¹² A Labour Party investigation found that her rival’s supporters disqualified some of her valid votes and ultimately awarded her the nomination. Others mentioned the advantage of the incumbency in slowing the recruitment of Muslims—incumbents are more likely to be reselected for safe seats, thus providing too few choice seats for a new cohort that includes Muslims. It may very well be that all these factors matter and that increased acceptance of Muslims and the development of an eligible pool of Muslim candidates in all parties will lead to increased Muslim representation in coming years. The only way to gauge the sincerity of Liberal Democrat and Conservative party leaders on the local and national levels is to see whether a good number of the Muslim candidates who ran in marginal seats to gain experience and serve the party will be accepted as candidates in winnable or safe seats in coming elections.¹³

The strenuous multistep selection processes also explain in part why MPs have little discretion. For a Muslim to be among the first to make it to Parliament, he has to show repeatedly, perhaps in different election cycles, that he is not a candidate who would cause the party to lose votes or who would breach party discipline. Party faithful who conform to the leadership’s views, who please all the local and national veto players, are more likely to make it to Parliament. For example, two Conservative Party activists told us off the record that they felt “their future in the party would be over,” as one of them told us, if their views on the Arab-Israeli conflict were to be known because of the entrenched influence of a pro-Israel group within the party leadership. Labour MP Khalid Mahmood describes incentives as follows:

We are not representatives of Muslims, we represent our constituency. . . . We are here as British parliamentarians supporting our electorate. That’s what we are here for and we can’t forget that because those are the people who vote for us. . . . It is also true we work within our party because that is the party we get elected by. If I stand as Khalid Mahmood tomorrow, I’ll be lucky if I get 2,000 votes. I get those votes because I am a member of the Labour Party, because I



stand on a Labour Party ticket, because all the support behind me comes from that.

Still, the parties do strategically give some leeway to candidates in close races in which dissent from party policy could allow the candidate to win. They may also not be able to monitor positions closely during hectic elections. One case in point was the 2005 race in Brent East in which Labour fielded an antiwar female Muslim candidate, barrister Yasmin Qureshi, in the hope of regaining the district lost to the Liberal Democrat Sarah Teather in a 2003 by-election in which Iraq loomed large. Qureshi explains her opposition to her party's policies as follows:

Nobody has tried to stop me. A candidate for the war would have not had a chance of winning. I supported the Labour Party on all issues. It was on just two issues. All I said is that it was my personal views that the war was wrong and that the anti-terror laws were not workable . . . the more laws you make that are repressive the worse the situation gets. The element of control by the national party is exaggerated. There were 635 election campaigns. They didn't have time to sit there and guide people, to interfere in all of them.

Our interviews with activists from all three parties also suggest that they allow Muslim candidates in unwinnable and marginal districts to speak their mind and contradict party platforms in the hope of shoring up party support in those districts with large minority populations. The parties achieve local gains and incur no commitment costs because the candidates are not likely to get elected.

It may be unrealistic to expect much from most Muslim MPs—they are mostly backbenchers with little influence over policy making. Still, there is evidence that they are restricted by party control over committee appointments and promotions from playing an active role in conflict resolution or from expressing minority viewpoints in decisive policy debates on salient issues that deeply affect British Muslims, like terror laws and the war on Iraq. Several interviewees had little doubt that the quick advancement of the mild-spoken Shahid Malik—who was appointed to the powerful Home Affairs Select Committee and as parliamentary private secretary, in effect the first step on the government promotion ladder—when compared to the more assertive and critical Sadiq Khan is a case in point.¹⁴ Sadiq Khan, a civil rights lawyer by vocation, broke vocally with Labour on the issue of anti-terrorism laws that would have allowed the government to detain people without charges (presumably Muslims under the current circumstances) for ninety days. The remaining three Muslim MPs supported Tony Blair on this issue. Since then, however, Sadiq Khan has been appointed to the Public Accounts Select Committee and as parliamentary private secretary to Jack Straw.

An interesting example of the ability—which is, however, not absolute—of the Labour Party to constrain its Muslim MPs can be found in their positions on the war with Iraq. The war was unpopular in Britain and particularly unpopular

among British Muslims and their organizations. In late January 2003, every Muslim MP and Lord at the time spoke against the war.¹⁵ They were MPs Mohammad Sarwar and Khalid Mahmood, Lords Ahmed and Patel, and Baroness Uddin. Sarwar, the most established Muslim MP, who constantly wins by wide margins, voted against authorizing the war, but Khalid Mahmood abstained from voting. The Lords and Sarwar continued their vocal opposition to the war.

In spite of restrictions, the Muslim parliamentarians we interviewed feel they make government institutions more minority-friendly in some basic areas, particularly when it comes to constituency casework. They may also have a certain degree of indirect influence by interacting on a regular basis with more senior parliamentarians and government ministers in the halls of power. The four Muslim MPs, for example, met with Tony Blair in the wake of the July 2005 attacks in London to discuss concerns of a backlash against Muslims in Britain.¹⁶ And some reduce the incidence of Islamophobia and racism in Parliament by their mere presence or by speaking against it with their party's support. Shahid Malik, when he was a member of Labour's National Executive Committee and before he became an MP, spoke strongly against statements by Labour MP Ann Cryer that many believed verged on racism.¹⁷ In a speech he made after his election victory, he said, "Yes I am Muslim. For those who said it was not possible, then here I am. But, of course, I am also British, English, born in Lancashire and now an honorary Yorkshireman."¹⁸ He also criticized the racist British National Party (BNP) and vowed to help bring different communities in his constituency closer together. Muslim MPs also lend legitimacy to British Muslim organizations by joining them in voicing Muslim concerns in the media.¹⁹ They also feel that they understand Muslim issues better, can have empathy for fellow Muslims, and can break the language barrier with immigrant Muslim communities when needed.

Party control is also strong for British MEPs, but the selection process is less daunting on the regional level for Muslim candidates who are supported by their parties. This explains in part the election of Conservative and Liberal Democrat MEPs in the last election. Their attitudes toward minority affairs are strikingly different. Syed Kamall, the Conservative MEP, is very restrained while the Liberal Democrat Sajjad Karim is quite outspoken. Of course, Sajjad Karim's views on minority rights and on Tony Blair's support for American wars in the Middle East are consistent with those of his own party. Yet, he also speaks strongly on Muslim issues across the EU, including criticizing the French ban on headscarves in schools.²⁰

While the two MEPs self-identify as Muslims, they view their missions as Muslim representatives quite differently. The Liberal Democrat Karim finds it natural to speak forcefully on Muslim issues:

As equal citizens we first have a responsibility to make sure that we are properly representing Europe, the UK and our region and, secondly, that if I have



particular knowledge of a subject, that I display this particular knowledge. When it comes to the Islamic communities, I have such knowledge. It is my duty that I share that with other parliamentarians because that allows them to make more informed decisions. . . . At the moment I have real concerns about how some European governments are treating their Muslims, and if that means I am a lone voice, I will raise it. Otherwise they have nobody to do it.

Conversely, the Conservative Kamall does not feel that it is the place of a minority MEP to represent minority interests:

I don't feel that I represent Muslims anymore than I represent any other community. I feel I represent Muslims in that I give a positive impression of Muslims, in that I dispel stereotypes about Muslims. . . . As a Conservative, I'll make more of an effort to say that I represent everyone. I don't think this is necessarily the case for Labour and the Lib Dem people. I think they wave a flag. I am not a flag waver. I don't wear a badge that says I'm a Muslim. . . . It is very easy to get pigeonholed. . . . It doesn't do any good for Muslims in the long term . . . this is the case of Labour MPs and it's a shame because later on if they want to go higher in their career, people will pigeonhole them as Muslims only talking about Muslim issues. If you want to build bridges you have to talk about issues that concern everyone.

The first Muslim British MEP, Bashir Khanbhai, was an outspoken Conservative, but his treatment by his party may prove to some that such behavior would not be tolerated. After serving a term in the European Parliament, Khanbhai was sacked from the party list based on allegations that he had overcharged the European institution for his travel expenses. He insisted that he made an unintentional mistake and agreed to refund some \$15,000, and the Conservative Party agreed with him after an internal investigation. Michael Howard, the Conservative leader, declared the matter "closed."²¹ Later, grassroots pressure from within the Conservative Party and criticism from Labour caused Howard to reverse course and pull Khanbhai from the list. Khanbhai alleged that he was the victim of a racist campaign from within his party to oust him from politics.²² His detractors insisted that they were acting to stamp out corruption. Regardless of whether the Conservative rank and file attacked Khanbhai because of his views or religion, his ejection may prove a deterrent for Conservative Muslim activists and elected officials who want to speak strongly on Muslim issues.

From the perspective of members of the Muslim minority, in other words, Muslim MPs and MEPs from the two large parties are largely no different than non-Muslim ones. Party discipline, peer pressure, and the threat of retaliation generally prevent them, with few exceptions, from advocating on behalf of minority rights and positions on foreign policy, even if they wish to do so. Indeed, many non-Muslim Liberal Democrats and the one Respect parliamentarian are



far more outspoken on issues of Muslim civil rights and the British misadventure in Iraq than most Muslim MPs and MEPs.

The situation is different for Muslim life peers. Their life tenure provides them with the opportunity to defend minority interests if they choose to do so. Not all opt to do so actively, however, for a number of reasons. Some engage in self-censorship out of loyalty to their party—most are, after all, longtime party activists and loyalists. Some, like Lord Patel, a devout Muslim whose main focus is to manage British hajj operations by chairing the British Hajj Delegation, are not activists by nature and prefer to focus on causes dear to them instead of being outspoken on a broad range of issues. Some working peers may not want to speak against party policies if they are interested in appointments to significant committees.

All Lords with Muslim heritage (except for Lord Alli and a Church of England cleric of Pakistani Shia ancestry) clearly self-identify as Muslim. It seems that being “a Muslim” or an advocate on Muslim issues has become more significant for the life peers across the board because of the way societal and state relations with the Muslim minority have evolved. Baroness Falkner explains:

I am not a particularly practicing Muslim. . . . I am a cultural Muslim . . . it changed over time . . . once I was politically active and engaged in issues to do with social justice and had a closer look at the Muslim community, it raised my awareness not only of the Muslim community but of all ethnic minorities, so I started defining myself as a member of an ethnic minority and, over time, as a Muslim. It particularly changed when I came here [the House of Lords] where I was much clearer about my identity as a Muslim because I saw so much legislation that was deleterious to the interests of Muslims. . . . It was important to have a voice to advance the interests of my community or to defend their interests.

Baroness Falkner does, however, more so than others, clearly specify that she cares about all other minority matters and general societal interests. Lords in general seem to accept a specialized minority role more than MPs and MEPs. Life peers across parties feel comfortable advocating on behalf of Muslim minorities, often, in the case of Labour, speaking against their party’s policies. As Lord Patel puts it:

Here [in the House of Lords], we are totally independent. We are not going to be elected by anybody. We are here for our lifetime. Over there [the House of Commons], their term is five years, they have strong whips, the whips may tell their constituencies not to select them. Still, during the preparation for the Iraq war, 140 Labour MPs opposed the war. They are not 100% politicians. . . . [On the terrorism law,] I told them [Labour leaders], as a matter of conscience, I’m not going to vote with you, and they agreed. We’ve got a completely different scenario in this House . . . even though we belong to a party, we vote our con-

science. We are those who scrutinize. We check their legislation word by word, sentence by sentence, and assess what is good for everybody, the nation, the community. . . . It wasn't, so I didn't vote for them.

Lord Nazir Ahmed has similar thoughts:

If I agreed like my Muslim colleagues in the other place [chamber] who have been supporting the government on terror laws, ID card laws, and asylum, immigration, and nationality laws, then I may have gotten into the government but it is important to live with my conscience. . . . If you can't make a contribution to the debate you shouldn't be here.

Lord Ahmed is one of the most active and outspoken of the Muslim peers. Much of his activism before being elevated to the peerage was also focused on Muslim and South Asian causes. These include founding the now defunct British Muslim Councillors Forum and assisting several Muslim professional associations. He is often called upon by the media and others to speak on issues relevant to the Muslim minority. As a Lord, he started an interfaith organization, led the first British Hajj Delegation—a position later filled by Lord Patel—and started an ambitious program to train imams in Britain and place them in prisons and the military as well as in mosques.

Similarly, Baroness Pola Manzila Uddin openly criticizes her party's policies and attitude toward British Muslims.²³ The Conservative life peer Mohamed Itaf Sheikh, who was appointed in 2006, stated that he intends to be assertive on Muslim issues. He is also dedicated to grooming other Muslims to help them get elected or get appointed to meaningful positions.²⁴ The Liberal Democrat Baroness Kishwer Falkner also became more outspoken on Muslim issues after these issues became salient.

Most Muslim Lords generally coordinate among each other on issues of importance to Muslims, even though Lord Ahmed reports diminishing coordination recently. There is some distance between Lord Patel and Baroness Falkner on issues of religion. Muslim Lords often seek and get the support of Lord Alli based on common heritage, even though he does not consider himself a believer. Lord Sheikh had just been raised to the peerage at the time of the interviews so it was not clear whether he would cooperate with colleagues to the left on such issues. Lords find it difficult to cooperate with Muslim MPs because of the strictures on the MPs' behavior that we discuss above.

Muslim Lords also clearly believe that they have a certain ability to influence decision makers on critical policies. Lord Patel, who generally shuns the media, says:

We don't get enough time to speak in the chamber, so instead we go to different committees, we ask for meetings to speak with cabinet ministers and other



ministers, to voice our concerns and we try to convince them to change the policy.

Baroness Falkner also feels that her intervention matters:

We all knew that [the terrorism bill] will affect Muslims more than anyone else. It was an almost Muslim-specific law. I spent a lot of time in the chamber arguing, meeting people on the government side, using lobbying techniques and personal conversations to convince them not to do it. Speaking to people on the joint committee on human rights . . . I did a lot of behind-the-scene work, including with Labour, Conservatives, and crossbenchers, to help them see the point of view why this legislation is so bad.

But Lord Ahmed is clearly conscious of the limitations:

I'm not a member of government, I'm a backbencher. I can only raise questions. I can say things but I cannot deliver . . . when there are raids like Forest Gate [violent police raids that targeted innocent British Muslims], I can raise concerns. I completely support the police, but they have to be professional.

Muslim Lords feel that they help the Muslim minority on immigration issues by writing letters of support, and by helping its members understand the benefits of engaging the parties and state institutions. They also use their posts and experience to advise Muslim organizations on how to function more effectively. Lord Patel, for example, was advising the Muslim Council of Britain to establish grassroots civic organizations that would strengthen Muslim involvement on the local level and make this minority more important for parties and politicians. Some, like Baroness Falkner, do not hesitate to use their public position to criticize shortcomings within the Muslim community and to push for harmonization of attitudes with the rest of society:

One of our duties is to say the difficult things to our communities . . . it is easier to hear things from our own, from within the *Ummah* (Islamdom). . . . Western Muslims are here and are here to stay and we are becoming more assertive, as we should. So far, so good. If we want to be assertive, we must be equal citizens. For me the best way to achieve this is to share core values. Core values are above all a respect for democracy and institutional liberalism. That includes human rights. That includes the rights of gays and gay Muslims, which I support. We have to be evenhanded in our respect for human rights across the board.

She does not, however, consider herself to have enough support and legitimacy within the British Muslim community to induce change.

Lord Ahmed is both vocal in addressing shortcomings within the Muslim community, with an eye on remedying them, and perceived to be a genuine



representative of the community by several mainstream organizational leaders. He is highly critical of “preachers of hate” as well as of high rates of involvement in crime and underachievement. He believes, however, that Muslim parliamentarians can bridge differences and help the Muslim minority better than others under the right circumstances:

A Muslim member of Parliament understands the community's problem . . . only women can understand women's issues. Only Muslims understand feelings in the community, what turns them [British Muslims] on and off, what annoys them, how they need to be respected. . . . There are non-Muslim MPs who support Muslims and there are Muslim MPs who have not supported the Muslim community because of their own careers but they lose the respect of the community, they must be balanced.

Consequences for Academic Debates and Policy

The literature on British ethnic minority political participation is highly divided on the benefits of such participation for members of the minorities and society at large. Some (Kepele 1997; Sikand 1998) argue that the political mobilization of minorities based on ethnic ties and kinship networks furthers segregation by reinforcing ethnic and religious identities. It therefore impedes the integration of immigrants and harms both minorities and British society at large by furthering social fragmentation, particularly in the case of European Muslims. Koopmans and Statham (1999, 679) also argue that ethnic minority political participation seeks to further minority interests at the exclusion of broader societal interests, particularly in the case of Muslims.²⁵ In contrast, others, like Anwar (1986) and Adolino (1997), argue that effective ethnic minority political participation facilitates the integration process for immigrants by making them feel part of the system.

It seems to us, based on the interviews we conducted and on our broader research, that Muslim minority representation in British parties and elected office benefits British society, even if it triggers Islamophobic impulses within parties and society at first. Muslim elected officials can better assist an alienated segment of society and, in the process, alleviate bottled-up resentment. They also reduce counterproductive racism and discrimination in government institutions and mediate effectively when tensions rise between members of the Muslim minority and government agencies. They assist members of the minority who do not know how to deal effectively with government institutions. They also encourage civic involvement among Muslim youth and may even provide alternative role models rather than extremists who shun democratic institutions. They themselves become socialized into their profession and develop a strong ethos of fairness and service to all their constituents, Muslim or not. They build multi-ethnic coalitions.



tions within the electorate, within their parties, and within legislatures and city councils. By serving, they develop a sense of institutional ownership. There is little doubt that Britain benefits from developing a class of Muslim professionals with a sense of ownership and belonging that helps reduce societal tension. British parties may want to increase recruitment of Muslims at all levels of government. But to reach its full potential for the minority, Muslim representation needs to be more effective.

We find mixed evidence in the debate between demographic theorists and new social representation theorists. The former believe that “what matters is not just the policy outcome but who takes the decisions. By this standard, a Parliament which does not ‘look like Britain’, no matter how much it claims to speak on behalf of its constituents, remains fundamentally unrepresentative” (Norris and Lovenduski 1997, 186). Critics of this approach argue that strong emphasis on descriptive representation runs the risk of substituting tokenism or symbolic representation to more meaningful, substantive, or effective representation. Demographic theorists respond by asserting that descriptive representation naturally brings with it substantive representation, more or less, because women represent women better and blacks represent blacks better.²⁶

Muslim minority representation benefits British Muslims, but in complicated and mixed ways. The benefits on the local level are clear. In the House of Lords, Muslim life peers have the autonomy and the platform to speak in defense of minority rights on critical issues of policy. In the House of Commons and the European Parliament, however, things are more complex. Muslim MPs and MEPs from the two large parties are largely no different than non-Muslim ones from the perspective of members of the Muslim minority. Party discipline generally prevents them, with few exceptions, from advocating on behalf of minority rights and positions on foreign policy, even if they wish to do so. The one MEP from the less restrictive Liberal Democrat party is more autonomous and expressive on such issues. The strictures of the Labour and Conservative parties are such that the majority Muslim population of a Tower Hamlets constituency voted for George Galloway from the Respect Party over two minority rivals (including a Muslim) in 2005 because they recognized that the outspoken Scot would represent them more effectively. Of course, Muslim MPs could become more outspoken as they consolidate electoral support, develop strong networks within their parties, assume government and party leadership positions, and increase in numbers.

To sum up, Muslim representation in the Labour or the Conservative parties currently does not help Muslim minorities much. The leaders of Labour and the Conservatives may want to provide their Muslim MPs with more autonomy if they wish to attract the Muslim vote and have their Muslim candidates gain greater legitimacy among minority constituencies. They do not need to look far

for an example of the electoral benefits this would bring: Lord Nazir Ahmed, who developed such legitimacy by speaking forcefully on issues of interest for the Muslim minority, actively recruits Muslims for Labour. They may also wish to empower them to effectively institutionalize conflict resolution at the national level. Britain would benefit if Muslim Labour and Conservative MPs and MEPs become as effective at the national level as Muslim councillors are at the local level.

Most British Muslim elected officials are still from Labour, but other parties are catching up.²⁷ Official programs to recruit Muslim politicians to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties still have to bear fruit but might very well produce able politicians who will be allowed to compete for safe seats. All three parties now have wings dedicated to attract Muslims: Muslim Friends of Labour, the Conservative Muslim Forum, and a Muslim forum within the Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (EMLD) group. Parties that cater to minority needs like Respect also threaten to woo critical swing voters from Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The stakes are high because Muslims made up more than 10 percent of the electorate in forty highly competitive constituencies in 2005 and will become even more important in future elections as their proportion of the population increases. The three larger parties cannot afford to, and do not, ignore the Muslim minority anymore.

Integrating the Muslim minority in post-9/11 Britain is critical for security and to address its needs and vulnerability. The terrorist attacks of July 7, 2005, and other similar attempts by disenfranchised youth desperate and angry enough to find meaning in suicide attacks on civilians highlight the security risks. Their anger and desperation are rooted in the stagnation and discrimination that affect large swaths of the British Muslim population. Two and a half times more Pakistani and Bengali men are unemployed than whites. Muslim men earn on average 68 percent of what white men earn. Muslims make up 7 percent of the prison population.²⁸ The British Muslim community has also become more vulnerable to popular and institutionalized discrimination. Enhanced power given to law enforcement by the terrorism laws, increased arrests of South Asians, discrimination in immigration procedures against Muslim non-citizens, statements against Muslim attire by Labour officials such as Jack Straw, and local electoral successes by the Islamophobic British National Party all feed an environment of fear and vulnerability. This is the time to devise effective ways to reduce tensions, consolidate the role of British institutions, and institutionalize conflict resolution.

Increased and more autonomous British Muslim representation would play a major role in conflict resolution in post-7/7 Britain. Muslims are strongly under-represented in the House of Commons, which would need to have nineteen to twenty-four Muslim MPs to reflect their current proportion in British society. Both Tories and Labour should allow Muslim and other minority MPs and MEPs

more independence on issues of relevance to minority populations such as civil rights and liberties, religious freedom, religious schools, and foreign policy in the Muslim world. This would give them legitimacy among British Muslims in comparison to other community leaders who shun the democratic process. It would also institutionalize conflict resolution and avert arbitrary or poorly constructed policies that would stoke resentment and trigger cycles of violence and restrictions on minority rights.

Notes

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1. Michael (2004) argues that second- and third-generation British Asians from predominantly Muslim countries self-identify mostly as British Muslim, while Purdam (2000, 55) reports that more Muslim councillors self-identify as Muslim than Pakistani or British. Werbner (2002, 51) also argues that Muslim identity has solidified particularly after the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War protests.

2. Recent examples of studies of Muslim minority politics include Purdam 1996, 2000, 2001; Radcliffe 2004; Werbner 2000; Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins 2002.

3. There were apparently two British Muslim parliamentarians in earlier times: the nineteenth-century peer Lord Stanley of Adderley and Lord Headley, who converted to Islam in 1913.

4. Nicholas Watt, May 13, 2004, "Embarrassment for Howard as Party Jettisons Candidate," *The Guardian*. Available at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/conservatives/story/0,9061,1215471,00.html> (accessed April 20, 2007).

5. Many organizations and scholars do not count Lord Alli in their lists of Muslim parliamentarians because only one of his parents is Muslim and because of his openly gay lifestyle. He does say, however, that Islam is important to his identity because some of his family members, including a brother, are Muslims.

6. This is generally true of most parliamentarians. See Geddes 1998 for more details.

7. Messina (1989, 174) reports that the number of non-white councillors in London boroughs increased from 35 in 1978 to 79 in 1984 to over 130 in 1986. Le Lohé (1998, 86–87) estimates that in the late 1990s, 215 out of 1,917 London city councillors (11.2%) were from ethnic minorities—144 South Asians, 66 Afro-Caribbeans, and 5 other (Vietnamese, Lebanese, Turkish Cypriots); of the 215, 194 were Labour, 15 Conservative, and 6 Liberal Democrat. Le Lohé also finds high rates of success among Labour Asian candidates: 130 out of 179 Asian candidates succeeded, a rate of 72.6% that compares favorably with Labour's overall success rate of 54.5%. Conservative and Liberal Democrat Asian candidates did less well. Eleven of 93 Conservative Asian candidates succeeded, an 11.8% success rate compared to an overall success rate of 29.1%. For Liberal Democrats, the Asian success rate was 7% whereas their overall success rate was 20%. Overall in the UK, there appear to have been some 350 ethnic minority councillors in the late 1990s, a rate of some 1.6% (Geddes 1998, 153; and Adolino 1998, 175). For research on early British Pakistani candidates, see Anwar 1996, chapter 8. See Garbaye (2005) on the growth in the number of minority representatives.

8. Hamed Chapman and Ahmed Versi, "Over 200 Muslim Local Councillors," *Muslim News*, May 25, 2001 (issue 145). Available through <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/> (accessed April 22, 2007).

9. Things seem to have improved considerably for minority candidates, at least in London, since Purdam (2001, 147) found that "there are also incumbent problems of discrimination,



exclusion and stereotyping. This research suggests that there is a general feeling among Muslim councilors that Muslims have been unfairly accused of illegal practices of recruitment and have been treated unfairly within their local parties to an extent that goes beyond simple party and candidate competition.”

10. See Geddes 1998 for a discussion of earlier instances of discrimination toward minorities in the selection process.

11. See also Anne McElvoy, “Ethnic Entryism,” *Spectator*, May 31, 1997; Stephen Goodwin, “Parliament: Muslim Community Welcomes the Rehabilitation of Sarwar,” *Independent*, March 27, 1999; Ron McKay, “It’s Cost Him £400,000 to Clear His Name, Now Sarwar’s Out for Revenge,” *Sunday Herald*, March 28, 1999.

12. Ben Leapman, “My Sim to Be the First Asian Woman MP,” *Evening Standard*, February 27, 2004, p. 24.

13. The most popular model to analyze the recruitment of minorities into British politics focuses on supply (from within the minority) and demand (from the parties). Researchers generally agree that both supply-side (talent, education, resources, etc.) and demand-side factors (discrimination, lack of openings, etc.) affect the recruitment of minorities. See, inter alia, Jewson and Mason 1986; Lovenduski and Norris 1989, 1994; Geddes 1998. Both types of factors seem to be relevant in the case of British Muslims.

14. Neil Hudson, “Blair Gives Job on Top Committee,” *Yorkshire Evening Post*, July 30, 2005.

15. Jeevan Vasagar and Vikram Dodd, “Threat of War: Muslim Labour Peers and MPs against War,” *Guardian Home Pages*, January 30, 2003, p. 4.

16. Catherine MacLeod, “Blair’s Plea to Win Hearts of UK Muslims,” *The Herald* (Glasgow), July 14, 2005, p. 2.

17. Pat Hurst and Alistair Keely, “Race Row as MP Warns of ‘Asian Ghettos Rife with Drug Dealing,’” *Press Association News*, July 6, 2002. Incidentally, Baroness Uddin also criticized Cryer in the House of Lords for wanting to restrict marriage by UK Asians with non-English speakers from the subcontinent. Andrew Evans, “Minister Backs MP after Asians Comment,” *Press Association News*, July 19, 2001.

18. Neil Hudson, “Shahid’s Historic Night,” *Yorkshire Evening Post*, May 6, 2005.

19. See, for example, “British Muslim Groups Have Written to the Prime Minister Calling for ‘Urgent’ Changes to UK Foreign Policy,” *BBC News*, August 12, 2006, online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4786159.stm (accessed May 10, 2007).

20. “MEP Hits Out over French Hijab Ban,” UK Newsquest Regional Press, *This Is Lancashire*, September 25, 2004.

21. “Howard under Fire over Eastern Region Tory MEP’s Expenses Fiddle,” *Telegraph*, May 11, 2004.

22. Geoff Meade, “Ex-Tory MEP Claimed ‘Undue’ Travel Expenses,” *Press Association*, November 23, 2004.

23. “The Kiss of Death,” *Economist*, August 14, 2004, vol. 372, no. 8388.

24. Elham Asaad Buaras, “Tories Get First Muslim Parliamentarian,” *Muslim News*, May 26, 2006, p. 14.

25. Similarly, Duyvenc de Wit and Koopmans (2005, 71) state that “too much emphasis on, and facilitation of, cultural difference may be detrimental to integration.”

26. See Norris (1997, 6–7) for a more detailed discussion of this debate.

27. *The Guardian* reports on May 31, 2004, that Muslim support for Labour dropped from 75% to 38% and that the Liberal Democrats increased their support from 15% to 36% since the 2001 election because of the Iraq War. “Muslims Told Not to Vote for Labour,” *Guardian*, May 31, 2004. A July 2005 ICM poll of British Muslims found that 26% of them were inclined to vote for Labour, 19% for the Liberal Democrats, and 5% for the Conservatives. ICM, “Muslim Poll,” July 2005. Available at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2005/07/26/Muslim-Poll.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2007).

28. For a summary of those and other such statistics, see *The Guardian*, "Muslim Britain: The Statistics." June 17, 2002. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,738875,00.html> (accessed April 22, 2007). A series of ICM/*Guardian* surveys document increased perceptions of threat and discrimination by British Muslims (Polling the Nations).

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