

Dr. Richard Stone

New diverse cultures in the United Kingdom;
On Racism, Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism

Friends we started off this afternoon with Dick Taverne, Richard Taverne, then we had Richard Rampton and now you have Richard Stone so that makes me Richard the third, which is perhaps a little unfortunate if you follow Shakespeare but perhaps if you follow some other people, it is not such a bad place to be in. I just did want to correct Richard 'the first' on one small point. Not correct, but add. When you were talking Dick about the Torah and what it says about the settlers, and the land "the land is for you" as Jews. I as a Jew just want to add that I am aware that the Torah says "You shall have the land of milk and honey, for you are a just people". In other words, it is conditional. You don't have it unless you are just. So that is something that we Jews have to take very close to our hearts these days.

But what I want to talk about is racism, anti-semitism and Islamophobia (in that order). In talking about racism I am going to use the word black in its political sense which means people that are likely to have suffered discrimination because of the colour of their skin. Although some white people say that black people have some racism against white people, but the real racism in this country, certainly in Europe is anti-black racism. And this is built on the history of slavery and of colonialism and the main racism in this country is anti-black racism.

Now the main thing that I want to get across, that is the theme is that racism is not in the head of black people, it is in the head of white people. And that black people can do very little to reduce racism. Black people try to reduce racism as Jews try to reduce anti-semitism and Muslims Islamophobia. You get ticked off for trying to push your case too hard. You can't take a joke when there is a racist joke or an anti-semitic or an Islamophobic joke. You can't take a joke. It is very difficult to plead your own cause.

The change actually when it comes to racism has to come from people outside Black and Asian communities which are the communities we are particularly talking about. And the change has to come really in the minds and actions of those people who have power in the white communities, mainly white middle class middle aged men like me. So we have a heavy responsibility for making these changes. The business about discrimination is to do with an abuse of power. It is the power of the people who have more power in exercising the abuse of that power against people with less power.

The same applies when it comes to anti-Semitism and in particular the new sharp end of racism, which I have discovered in the last ten years on the Islamophobia Commission and in other interaction with Muslims; which is Islamophobia. It's the new sharp end of racism in my opinion. And bearing in mind what Maryam was saying earlier on, the Director of Tolerance International; also in discrimination of women as well, of course as white middle class men. We have a very big responsibility my friends.

I just wanted to read you, as an example of what goes on in the country today, and how this shows itself, is the leader in the Daily Telegraph this morning, and this says:

“We must make Muslims loyal subjects once more”.

“We must make Muslims loyal subjects once more”.

That’s the strapline at the top. Actually the article is not as nasty as that seems. I just want to take apart the idea that:

“We must not make Muslims loyal subjects once more”.

Firstly I wanted to say that the internal workings of a minority community are not for those outside to deal with. Though what we can provide outside that community sometimes is support; especially in providing a neutral space, a sensitive neutral space for people within that community, which is what actually what we’ve been doing in the Runnymede Islamophobia Commission on and off for the last ten years.

So in a way I think that it is better for non- Muslims to make every effort to engage with Muslims and don’t go round making Muslims more loyal subjects once more.

We should be offering that support and if we can also the neutral spaces if we can for non-Muslims to come and get across internal divisions. We should be supporting voices, which are usually excluded such as women and younger people, as Maryam was saying earlier on. I incidentally thought of volunteering for a sex-change operation so that we would at least have two women speakers here today. But I have to tell you that my wife wouldn’t allow me to have that.

I think it is actually wrong to demand that “you must change” which is in effect what Muslims are saying. It reminds me of a lot of the programmes that the government has been having in the last five to ten years, certainly after the twin towers, on integration. Which is that:

‘You must integrate more with us’.

A lot of it has been that way round.

My experience of having been introduced to Muslim communities by a number of people that are here today (over the last ten years) is that Muslim people in this country contribute enormously. Their efforts of integration are huge. The massive contribution of Muslims is not recognised.

In fact I think contribution is a much better word than integration. Let’s talk about contribution rather than integration. I think it is almost offensive to talk about integration to people who try to integrate but the problem is when you ask people, the first respectful question is:

"Tell me about how you and your family contribute to this society. What have you and your community actually done for Britain?"

And the answers are phenomenal.

Who actually knows how many counsellors there are in this Community that are of Muslim background?

We know that there are a very small number of MPs.

How many doctors are Muslim in this country?

How many consultants are Muslims? How many Barristers?

How many lawyers?

How many young people in the City that contribute to the City Circle that many of you may know about?

-contributing hugely to this country. And yet the government effectively have been saying, like the Daily Telegraph:

"We must make, this is 'we' white people must make Muslims loyal subjects once more".

All the Muslims that I have ever met, all of them that is, except one or two people are very loyal subjects to this country and contribute enormously to the country.

So the first question is: "Tell me about your contribution?"

The next question, if you're going to respect a minority is to say:

"Do you find blocks to your attempts to contribute to this society?"

And when I ask this question in many parts of this country;

The answers are: "Yes we do face blocks.

Then when you've heard about these blocks you say, "Then, tell me about them."

When you've heard about them, then I think you are entitled to say:

"Are some of these blocks put in your way because of your colour or because of your religion? Tell me about them."

And you will start hearing stories, which are quite disgraceful. In the first phase of the Islamophobia Commission from 1996 to 1997, the thing that struck me most as a non-Muslim in the Commission introduced by non-Muslims to our Muslim communities around was what you may describe as low-level Islamophobia. People being spat on, on their way to and

from the mosque. Name-calling. Children, girls in school being told that they can only do gymnastics in knickers and vests, wherein the dress code for observant Muslims is of course to cover up. Now I have had to tell some Local Education Authorities and their head teachers in schools:

"Olympic athletes train in track suits. Why can't you have your girls training in track suits?"

So I think that there is an awful lot of that low-level racism against Muslims, which you might describe as Islamophobia.

And I then ask people,

"Well look, all this is going on: Why don't you report it to the authorities?"

And do you know what people said to me again and again in different parts of the country?

"Ah but that's how British people are".

I was devastated by that. Really to think that two million Muslim people in this country are willing to think that, that's how British people are; are basically institutionally Islamophobic. The fact that people really are not even aware of how horrible they are acting to people.

Finally when you have gained the confidence of these people and you have listened and listened and listened, and you want to make change and you actually want to work alongside people. You want to try and make change and to try and support people who are suffering these types of discriminations. Finally you might actually ask about the dreadfully difficult problem of a handful of young educated men who successfully hide their evil intent, which is so contrary to the peaceful inner jihad of Islam. If you get round to that maybe on the third visit, when it is the time to ask that question; not to come in like the media and other surveys do, starting with the handful of people:

"What are you doing to prevent extremism in your community?"

I think that should be the last question not the first.

Then we must also remember that those families of the young men who had blown themselves up or were threatening to do so. Almost all of them would have said that they didn't know what was happening with their young brothers or sons as the case may be.

You must remember how these people have been suicide bombers. That these families have lost one of their beloved sons just as much as the families who had those killed in the same blast. So I commend Tolerance International today on convening today's event. I have to say I hope that Tolerance International will take the lead from its Director Maryam Al-Alami to increase the voice of women to modify the tendency of many men to dominate the discourse in religious committees and in religious communities.

Thank you very much.