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Jack Gilbert

LGBT Advisory Group to MPS
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Our ref: MGLA130904-8797

Date: 27 October 2004

Dear Mr Gilbert

Thank you for your letter of 9 September.

I note that you released your letter and briefed the media shortly after writing to me and before your proposed meeting. As you have chosen to conduct this discussion through the media, I consider that a meeting is unnecessary in these circumstances.

Yusuf Al-Qaradawi was invited to City Hall to speak at a conference opposing the ban on the Muslim headscarf (hijab) in schools in France and some other European countries. The ban also extends to what the French government called prominent religious symbols in which it includes, for example, the Sikh turban.

I did not invite Dr Qaradawi to Britain. Along with representatives of Human Rights Watch, the Sikh community, the Commission of the Bishops' Conference of the European Community, the Green Party and a whole range of Muslim organisations, I did share a platform with Dr Qaradawi at the conference to support the cultural and religious rights of Muslim women, and others such as the Sikh community, affected by the French ban.

You suggest that I should have consulted you prior to sharing a platform with Dr Qaradawi. I don't agree. I would not consult Muslim organisations before meeting a leader of the Jewish community or a leader of the Hindu community or of the Sikh community or the Christian churches. Nor would I consult Jewish organisations, for example, before deciding whether to meet a leader of the lesbian and gay rights movement.

Your assertion that this represents renegeing on any commitment I made prior to my election is simply wrong – I made no such commitment then and I have no intention of doing so in the future.

You are also wrong to suggest that my decision-making process is anything other than transparent. As the Mayor of London, all of my decisions are subject to formal scrutiny by the London Assembly and they are made in an open and transparent fashion. My advisers advise and I, as elected Mayor, decide.

I reported on my decision to share a platform with Dr Qaradawi to the London Assembly and we had a full discussion on the matter. My statement to the Assembly is available on the GLA website and I am attaching a copy for your information.

It is regrettable that you do not address the substantive purpose of the conference at City Hall – to defend the cultural and religious rights of Muslim women and everyone else affected by the new French law. I believe that one of the most effective ways to promote the harmonious community relations to which you refer is to show solidarity and support different communities when their rights are under attack.

I hope that all of the signatories to your letter will join me in calling for the right to wear the hijab and religious symbols in French schools to be restored.

Peter Tatchell is one of the signatories to your letter. I would like to put on the record the fact that he and his colleagues in Outrage, have made a number of statements about this conference which are entirely factually false.

He claimed in a New Statesman article that no-one at the conference supported the right of women not to wear the hijab. In reality, one of the most prominent Muslim speakers, Professor Tariq Ramadan made clear: 'It is against the Islamic teaching to force a woman to wear the Hijab, because it is an act of faith. So we are against compulsion, and this has to be said clearly. We are against anyone who is trying to force a woman to wear the Hijab against her conscience or her free will.' He re-iterated: 'Freedom of worship means if you want to wear it, wear it; if you don't want, don't wear it.'

Similarly Peter Tatchell and Outrage also claimed that the conference was an exercise in 'clerical misogyny' when in fact the great majority of delegates were women. They said that not one liberal speaker was invited when, as I have already indicated, the liberal part of the spectrum was well represented on the speakers' panel.

You should understand that I cannot and do not speak for Dr Qaradawi. He is responsible for his own views. We would strongly disagree on a number of issues, including homosexuality. If you wish to discuss his views, you should address your correspondence to him.

However, the fact that I do not agree with the views of Dr Qaradawi or other religious leaders on some issues will not stop me from continuing a dialogue or sharing a platform with them on issues upon which we agree – as in opposing the ban on the hijab – the purpose of the conference.

Having said that, I would nonetheless point out that it is a matter of public record that when Dr Al-Qaradawi was here he rebutted virtually all of the allegations against him which you repeat in your letter – specifically publicly opposing anti-Semitism and violence against women or lesbian or gay people. Similarly, the allegation you repeat that he blames rape victims for not dressing sufficiently modestly was shown to be nothing to do with him.

There is a new allegation in your letter – that Dr Al-Qaradawi 'endorses' the 'intimidation of the Hindu and Sikh communities through means such as targeted proselytism.' This is the first time I have heard this allegation and I would like to see the evidence for it and what is involved.

It may be that you are referring to the extremist group Al-Muhajiroun – whose extremist teachings Dr Qaradawi condemns. If that is the case, you should know that I have refused this group permission to hold its rallies in Trafalgar Square because of its racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric against other communities. When they defied this ban I successfully took legal action against them.

On suicide bombing, Dr Qaradawi stated the view that, in the specific conditions of Palestine illegally occupied by Israel, where some of the Palestinians, faced with a modern, fully equipped army, have resorted to turning their bodies into bombs, he believes this is justified in these unique circumstances.

My own view is that neither suicide bombing nor the attacks on civilians by Israeli tanks, missiles and planes will provide a solution to this conflict. The only way forward is for Israel to comply with the United Nations resolutions requiring it to withdraw from the territories it is illegally occupying so that a Palestinian state can be established and for the two states to co-exist peacefully within secure borders.

However, if you wish to say that I should not share a platform with anyone who seeks to justify suicide bombing by Palestinians, but that I should be indifferent to Israel blowing the bodies of women and children apart with modern missiles, bombs, tank shells and bullets while illegally occupying their land and destroying their homes – I can tell you that I regard such double standards to be pure moral hypocrisy.

If you wish to say that I should not share a platform with Dr Qaradawi for this reason, to be consistent you would also have to say that I should equally not share a platform with supporters of Israel's military occupation of Palestinian land.

My view is as outlined above. I will promote dialogue and peace in the Middle East by continuing to speak both with supporters of the Palestinians and with supporters of the state of Israel. Nothing will be served by refusing such a dialogue.

Yours sincerely

Ken Livingstone
Mayor of London