MEND Submission to
The House of Lords Select Commitee Hearing on Citizenship and Civil Engagement

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House of Lords

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Submission from MEND: Muslim Engagement and Development

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1.0 Introduction and Methodology

1.1 MEND is a not-for-profit company that seeks to empower and encourage British Muslims within local communities to be more actively involved in British media and politics. For too long, British Muslims have remained on the margins of public and political debate about their religion and place in modern Britain and the level of Muslim participation in media and politics remains woefully low. As such, MEND seeks to enable British Muslims to engage more effectively with political and media institutions and play a greater role in British politics and society by instilling confidence, competence and awareness within them. Enhancing mainstream participation of communities that are under-represented and vulnerable is an important step towards deepening and strengthening our democracy.

1.2 This submission was composed through the use of focus groups conducted with Muslim women and men in London, as well as through observations made through previous MEND research projects and engagements with Muslim communities across the country.

1.3 Having explored the questions posed by the committee, this submission concludes that the greatest challenge to engendering a sense of citizenship and belonging for minority communities is the current atmosphere of hatred and mistrust that has escalated over recent years. In a climate lacking in respect, stigmatised communities do not feel valued by society and thus individuals may become vulnerable to exclusion from wider society and potentially insecure in their civic identities.

1.4 In addressing the existing toxic atmosphere, it is imperative that there is immediate action taken to tackle the impacts of both unfair media coverage and the impacts of the far-right, through strengthening existing hate crime legislation and through better media regulation on a Leveson compliant basis. This atmosphere should also be challenged through the development of teaching materials to educate young people on Islamophobia, racism, and antisemitism; and through greater emphasis on PSRE/PSHE in schools in order to prepare young people for life in a diverse society.

1.5 Secondly, in successfully fostering a shared national identity, we need to focus on creating a shared national narrative. This can be achieved through greater teaching regarding a shared history, contributions of minority communities and shared values of respect, as well as through greater visibility of positive representations of BME individuals in broadcasting.

1.6 Meanwhile, greater civic and political engagement can be achieved through better teaching of politics at a younger age through the education system, and through lowering the voting age. Such engagement will naturally lead to a greater sense of inclusion and belonging, thus furthering the solidarity of citizenship.

1.7 Finally, the government's stance towards dealing only with certain representative bodies is being interpreted within Muslim communities as patronising and insincere. In

engaging with organisations which have no grassroots presence and which are often viewed with deep suspicion by British Muslims, the government is failing to involve communities in decisions regarding their own futures – thus effectively excluding them from the political process.

2.0 What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

2.1 Within the focus groups, the core of citizenship was described to be identity and belonging. However, there is a sense of frustration throughout Muslim communities, due to the way in which terms such as "Britishness" and "British values" have been used almost obsessively through our political and media discourses as a mechanism for branding minority groups generally, and Muslims specifically, as disloyal and outside of what it means to be British.

2.2 Concerning Muslim communities specifically, political attempts to increase patriotism by emphasising "British values" have been used to construct ideas of Britishness as something directly oppositional to what it means to be Muslim. Such statements falsely advertise to wider society that Muslims are making a conscious decision to reject British values and incorrectly implies that they are unwilling to engage in dialogue. This myth continues to be perpetuated, despite evidence showing that British Muslims are as patriotic, if not more patriotic, than other social and religious groups. Furthermore, considering the divisive ways in which "Britishness" may be used, this usage has created a perception that Muslims – having been branded as disloyal by certain segments of society – are thus undeserving of the entitlements embodied within citizenship. As such, despite remaining ill-defined at best, these terms and other similarly stigmatising discourses have been used divisively to create barriers between Muslim communities and wider society, and serve to make some British Muslims feel excluded and insecure in their own identities.

2.3 Stemming from this, participants within the focus groups highlighted a need to promote an understanding of "Britishness" that is inclusive of a multitude of identities. As many respondents articulated, there is no conflict between citizenship and identity. Rather, for all people (regardless of religion, ethnic background, gender or socio-economic status), citizenship is an innate part of identity – identities which are naturally multifaceted and not necessarily in conflict.

2.4 However, from a logistical standpoint, citizenship is a guarantee of certain rights and entitlements. In this light, many observed a generational difference in perspectives to citizenship. It was noted that immigrants or asylum seekers may understandably be interested in citizenship for practical reasons, such as employment, human rights, or educational opportunities. Consequently, first generation individuals may feel a more explicit sense of citizenship, whereas for individuals born and raised in Britain, this sense is more implicit and internalised – a taken for granted aspect of their identities.

2.5 Civic engagement, as understood within the focus groups, was deemed to be engagement with society outside of paid employment, such as through social organisations, political parties, charity work, and community projects. Ultimately, it is about being a social actor within the local community and within wider society.

3.0 Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people's identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

3.1 Membership and belonging is built upon inclusiveness. As such strengthening individual affiliations to a common British identity is dependent upon the acceptance of and respect for differences. Indeed, the history of Britain is characterised by the British

Empire, and is thus a history of difference. Through colonialism and migration from former colonies, British identity is not homogenous – nor should it be expected to be.

3.2 An atmosphere of mutual respect is an expectation of a liberal society. Indeed, an atmosphere wherein individuals feel valued and respected is the only one in which a sense of belonging may be fostered and maintained. Consequently, preserving minority rights as enshrined within the Human Rights Act should be at the forefront of any government strategy aimed at respecting diversity.

3.3 The general feeling emerging from the focus groups is that citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process would not have a great deal of impact. This is due to the sense that they create an in-organic and forced identity construction. Instead, what is needed is a better teaching and understanding of a joint history. For example, greater focus should be given to teaching about the contributions made by minority communities in building Britain today. During the Second World War, over 2.5 million men and women from the Indian sub-continent formed the largest volunteer force ever seen in history and fought on behalf of Britain. Yet, the general public's knowledge of such contributions and shared history remains minimal at best.

3.4 In terms of pride in being or becoming British, this is definitely something that participants within the focus groups believe should be encouraged. However, particular emphasis was placed upon certain aspects of being British; in particular, tolerance, respect, good manners, understanding and empathy – in other words, encouraging attributes of a good social actor.

4.0 Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

4.1 A right is given to the individual citizen through laws that protect individuals for the common good. A responsibility is the individual's interpretation of those rights. As such, focus group participants were very clear that rights should have the force of law, while responsibilities are reciprocal duties. Beyond compliance with the laws of the land, there should not be any enforcement of responsibilities for several reasons. Firstly, this would involve defining what the exact responsibilities are. Amongst Muslim communities there is considerable unease at this prospect, due to the potentially dangerous precedent set for promoting narratives resulting in non-inclusiveness. Secondly, there is a problem of monitoring and enforcing such responsibilities. Considering already existing community tensions, advertising the enforcement of thus far ill-defined responsibilities carries the potential for exacerbating these tensions and resulting in vigilantism and violence against already vulnerable and stigmatised communities.

5.0 Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

5.1 Within the focus groups, there was a general consensus that the current laws do facilitate active participation through the rights to association and membership and the right to lobby and interact with the political sphere.

5.2 However, although the current laws facilitate active political participation, it must be recognised that discriminatory aspects of some counter-terrorism legislation in particular have fostered a sense of distrust in the political establishment amongst parts of the Muslim community, and has thus acted as a barrier to fuller active political engagement.

5.3 Within the focus groups, there was also a call for greater transparency over funding in order to facilitate trust of this country's political representation. Furthermore, while the

voting registration process is felt to be effective, there is a need to recalibrate the election process through the implementation of proportional representation, in order to promote trust within the political system.

5.4 Lowering the voting age would also be instrumental in encouraging active civic engagement from a young age. In turn, a greater level of civic engagement fosters a sense of inclusion and personal social value, thereby promoting a heightened feeling of national belonging.

6.0 What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

6.1 As discussed previously (see 3.3), specific citizenship classes are unnecessary within education. However, other methods of encouraging good citizenship need to be implemented throughout the education system. For example, through developing teaching materials to educate young people on Islamophobia, racism, and antisemitism, and through prioritising PSRE and PSHE within the national curriculum, we are able to better prepare young people for life in a pluralist and diverse society. A second area for potentially engendering greater citizenship, is through better political education in order to teach young people the importance and mechanisms of civic and political engagement, their place in society, and how to access their rights as engaged citizens (also see 5.4).

7.0 How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

7.1 At present, there are barriers to civic engagement created through a lack of trust between individuals (of all religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds) and their political representatives. This situation needs to be challenged through transparency and through engaging with all communities and community representatives honestly. Indeed, a recent Citizens UK report highlighted the need for the government to interact with a wider representative range of Muslim organisations. Thus far, the effects of the government's stance towards dealing only with certain representative bodies has being interpreted within communities as patronising and insincere.

7.2 Since 2010, successive governments have effectively boycotted mainstream Muslim organisations. Whilst the government has refused to engage with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) or MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development), it has chosen to associate with organisations created by government agencies such as the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) which have no grassroots presence and are often viewed with deep suspicion by British Muslims. This is particularly surprising considering that MCB have more affiliates than any other Muslim organisation in the UK and therefore the largest mandate to represent British Muslims; over 90 percent of Islamic societies are affiliated with FOSIS; and that MEND has the largest national grassroots Muslim presence in the UK.

8.0 What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect the citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened?

8.1 The basic values that all British citizens should support are the principle of universal humanity; respect, understanding, empathy, and good manners to name but a few. However, as discussed throughout this report (see 1.1, 2.1, 2.2), the toxic atmosphere

created by hatred and division is threatening these values which all British citizens should be fighting to uphold. This threat is specifically coming from far-right politicians, journalists and commentators; and sensationalist, misleading and exploitative media reporting.

8.2 Once again, some of the impacts of these threats can be mitigated through strengthening existing hate crime legislation; through working with social media companies to protect free speech while developing an efficient strategy to tackle hate speech online; through considering primary legislation to deal with social media offences and hate speech online; through better PSRE and PSHE education; and through the development of teaching materials to educate young people on Islamophobia, racism, and antisemitism (see 1.4 and 6.1).

8.3 A further mechanism to prevent the erosion of these common values is to initiate media reform and the full implementation of the Royal Charter on a Leveson compliant regulator. The overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Muslims within the media is detrimental to any integration strategy based on creating and maintaining common-ground and a sense of collective British identity. Furthermore, such negative misrepresentations are incredibly harmful to social cohesion strategies, as irresponsible and sensationalist reporting works to propagate stereotypes and further fuel an atmosphere of hatred. This is particularly so considering the tendency within some parts of the media to promote an "us vs them" dichotomy in reporting stories about Muslims. This is clearly a mechanism for stoking tensions and division, and excludes Muslims from the perceived national identity of "us". In tackling this alarming trend, the current system of press regulation by IPSO is seen as weak and ineffective by many minority groups, including Muslims. As such Leveson compliant media reform serves to protect vulnerable communities from the scapegoating and stigmatisation that has characterised media over recent times - scapegoating and stigmatisation which can only damage individuals' sense of belonging to a national community.

8.4 This media reform should also be further supported by industry initiatives to promote positive, diverse representations of Muslims and minorities within the mainstream media and broadcasting. It is imperative that minority communities are included within the national narrative in order to facilitate and maintain a sense of belonging and national membership. As Riz Ahmed, warned during Channel 4's annual diversity lecture at the House of Commons in March 2017, the lack of diverse voices and stories displayed in broadcasting led those from minority backgrounds to "switch off and retreat to fringe narratives, to bubbles online and sometimes even off to Syria... If we fail to represent, we are in danger of losing people to extremism... In the mind of the Isis recruit, he's the next James Bond, right? Have you seen some of those Isis propaganda videos? They are cut like action movies. Where is the counter-narrative? Where are we telling these kids they can be heroes in our stories, that they are valued?"[1]

9.0 Recommendations

9.1 Having surveyed the questions posed by the House of Lords' Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, this MEND report offers a series of recommendations to further strengthen citizenship and civic engagement within Muslim communities. However, while these recommendations are specifically relevant to British Muslims, many of these conclusions are also relevant for minority communities and the wider British public generally.

9.2 In terms of promoting and fostering a greater sense of national belonging and citizenship amongst Muslim communities, perhaps the greatest challenge is posed by the atmosphere of hatred that is fuelled by far-right politicians, journalists and commentators, as well as sensationalist, misleading and exploitative media reporting. Consequently, the immediate need is to tackle the impacts of both unfair media coverage and the impacts of

[1] Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Riz Ahmed warns lack of diversity on TV will drive young to Isis," The Guardian, March 02, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/mar/02/riz-ahmed-warns-lack-of-diversity-on-tv-will-drive-young-to-isis.

the far-right through strengthened legislation, and through greater encouragement of universal human values of respect and understanding.

9.3 Furthermore, we need to focus on creating a shared national narrative. This can be achieved through greater teaching regarding a shared history, contributions of minority communities and shared values of respect, as well as through greater visibility of positive representations of BME individuals in broadcasting.

9.4 Greater civic and political engagement can be achieved through better teaching of politics at a younger age through the education system, and through lowering the voting age. Such engagement will naturally lead to a greater sense of inclusion and belonging, thus furthering the solidarity of citizenship.

9.5 MEND maintains that, in light of present challenges, the government also needs to:

- Commit to proactively engage with a broad and representative spectrum of the British Muslim community (See 1.7, 7.1 and 7.2)

- Commit to a review of the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act as advised by the Law Commission's "Hate crime: the case for extending the existing offences" report and introduce legislation to extend legal protection to cover religion, homophobia and disability hate crime (See 1.4 and 8.2).

- Commit to (a) working with social media companies to protect free speech while developing an efficient strategy to tackle hate speech online (b) consider primary legislation to deal with social media offences and hate speech online (See 1.4 and 8.2).

- Commit to developing teaching materials to educate young people on Islamophobia, racism, and antisemitism; to prioritise religious education in the national curriculum to prepare young people for life in a religiously plural society (see 1.4, 6.1 and 8.2).

- Commit to media reform and the full implementation of the Royal Charter on a Leveson compliant regulator; support industry initiatives to promote positive, diverse representations of Muslims and minorities in the mainstream media (see 1.4 and 8.3).

- Commit to improving ethnic diversity in all sectors of business, politics and media through schemes encouraging BME recruitment, mentoring and promotion, as well as through greater diversity within broadcasting (see 1.5 and 8.4).

- Commit to preserving the Human Rights Act and the protection of minority rights including rights to religious slaughter, circumcision and wearing of religious dress or symbols (see 3.2).

- Commit to fostering social cohesion and community resilience to all forms of extremism; support de-radicalisation programmes that work with Muslim communities not against them (see 5.2).

- Commit to repealing the current statutory Prevent duty, and replacing this with a more effective, evidence based and non-discriminatory counter-terrorism strategy by engaging with Muslim communities (see 5.2).

- Commit to curbing the encroachment of counter-terrorism policies on civil liberties by reviewing all counter-terrorism legislation enacted since 2000 (see 5.2).