

FAITH IN A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

**Report on the
1999 National Meeting of
The Inter Faith Network
for the UK**

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1999 National Meeting of The Inter Faith Network for the UK

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Who speaks for a faith community perspective in the new Regional Development Chambers/Assemblies in England?

**Revd David Rayner,
Secretary of the Inner Cities Religious Council
of the
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions**

May I thank Bishop Roy for his kind introduction and also the Inter Faith Network for this opportunity. I have only recently taken up the post of Secretary for the Inner Cities Religious Council and most of my belongings are still in the vicarage in Smethwick where I was staying last night so it's like coming home! I am also grateful for the opportunity to reflect out loud on this topic of the new regional structures. I stress that it is indeed reflection out loud. Those who have tried to grapple with the issues to do with regionalisation would, I think, agree that in some places there is more anguish than light. Certainly, I have found some of the issues rather elusive. I am glad to have this chance to try and put some thoughts together in order to bring some clarity in my own mind as this issue is one that could be increasingly important to the agenda and the work programme of the Inner Cities Religious Council.

I will first describe the general context and comment on the specific structures which are being put in place. The key words for the context in which regionalisation is taking place seem to me to be "devolution" and "democracy". Wales and Scotland already have their new forms of governance and this is part of the process of decentralising from both Westminster and Whitehall. It is intended to place greater powers of decision making at the local level.

There are eight regions in England, with London making a somewhat different ninth. The regions correspond to the areas previously administered by the regional Government Offices. Here in Birmingham we are in the area administered by the Government Office in the West Midlands. The regions represent a kind of tier of activity. That activity is economic, strategic, administrative and to some extent political; a tier of activity between central government and local authorities. When we come to look shortly in greater detail at what is now going on, it is very important to remember that. It shows that the Government thinks that there is a need for some additional input at this regional level, something that cannot be provided by Westminster and Whitehall on the one hand, or by local authorities, like Birmingham City Council, on the other. Two contexts seem to me to inform this process of regionalisation. By that I mean that devolution is not simply motivated by noble political ideals of democracy. There is a context for it.

The first is a recognition of the increasing importance of regions in the European Union. If you look at, say, the structure of the government in Germany, the Lander, which correspond pretty much to what we are now calling the "regions" in England, have a defined political and economic role in the governance of the whole State. It is clear that each of the Lander governments, and they are governments, is in a strong position to influence policy within its boundaries and to help shape overall national policies. The principle of subsidiarity is enshrined within the German Constitution. That is to say, German political life is shaped by judgements about the appropriate level at which decisions should be taken. There is a

presumption in favour of the local, unless there is a good reason for the decision to be made higher up the hierarchy of government. That is the European context.

The second context is a more pragmatic one, namely the clear inequalities that show up statistically between the different regions of England: unemployment figures, skill levels; most recently housing and housing developments, house prices and the availability of appropriate planning permissions for building new homes. These are all significant regional inequalities that affect the design of policy. The emerging regional structures are a recognition that these questions need to be addressed in ways that previously have not been possible, at least not with sufficient clarity, either by central or by local government. That seems to me to be the general context but I would be glad to hear other people's perspectives on this.

In terms of the actual structures which are now being put in place, there are two key documents: a White Paper issued in December 1997 called *Building Partnerships for Prosperity*, and the Regional Development Agencies Act which was passed in December 1998. It is important to recognise that out of these documents, and particularly out of the Act itself, three structures emerge. The first is a structure clearly defined by legislation which already exists in eight of the regions: that is the Regional Development Agency. There are two others rather less clearly defined, and deliberately so, Regional Chambers and Regional Assemblies.

The core functions of the Regional Development Agencies are economic. They are:-

- Coordinating regional regeneration
- Taking forward the Government's competitiveness agenda in the regions
- Taking the lead on regional inward investment
- Developing a regional skills action plan, to ensure that skills training matches the needs of the labour market
- Taking a leading role on European funding

As you can tell, they are very technical, clearly defined roles. The roles of the Chambers, or the Assemblies, are somewhat different, and rather less well defined. Ultimately, there is a possibility that Assemblies will actually be elected and will be a form of regional government in the proper sense of the term. That is to say, they will have a democratic mandate. The Regional Development Agency does not have a clearly defined relationship with the Chamber and/or Assembly. It is described in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Bulletin as follows:

“There is a manifesto commitment to support Regional Chambers established by local authorities, and to provide eventually for directly elected Regional Assemblies to be set up where there is a demand for them. Good progress is already being made on Chambers without legislation. We [the Government] are supporting the voluntary groupings of local authorities which have already formed. The Regional Development Agencies Act provides for these RDAs to take account of the views of designated Regional Chambers and to give the Chambers an account of their activities. The exact relationship is explored in the White Paper”.

I want to emphasise the local authority role in the Chambers and the Assemblies. There is a stakeholder role for other important organisations in the Assembly and a role for the Secretary of State, who can designate as members anybody whom he or she deems appropriate. Each Chamber or Assembly may be differently constituted in different regions; indeed, this is virtually certainly to be the case. It is also important to remember that the Government Offices continue in being at the regional level. Some of the functions of the Government Offices are being transferred to the Regional Development Agency, but some of the staff of the offices remain where they were.

That is a brief overview of the new structures. So where do the faith communities fit in to this? Very different patterns have emerged in each region. In some regions there is already representation in Chambers or Assemblies. In most cases the lead in this has been taken by the Churches and almost always by the Church of England. There is varying awareness across the regions of the multi-faith agenda. An excellent analysis by an Anglican colleague postulates a kind of spectrum for the sorts of model of representation that are emerging, ranging through monopoly, competition, inclusion, advocacy, enablement to partnership. That is describing the relationship of the Church with other faith communities. It will not surprise you to know that the one that he thinks is the best model is “partnership” and I think that it is fair to say that in most regions, that is the ideal to which the Churches are moving.

What are the issues for faith communities in all this? I think there is an assumption on the part of the liberal political establishment that it is possible simply to group faith communities together so that in some simplistic way you can in each region, almost out of thin air, conjure up a forum that is transparently democratic which will appoint one or more appropriate representatives to each Chamber or Assembly or Agency as seems fit. How far will that be compatible with *The Local Inter Faith Guide's* emphasis on respecting integrities? One of the aspects of the *Guide* I want to commend is its admirable caution and restraint. That could easily be compromised if faith communities simply respond quickly to this liberal agenda, and do not take time to reflect with one another about the appropriate method for determining this representation.

One of the first questions which arises is the different level of resource, organisation and experience within each of the faith communities. It is almost inevitable that those that have been around longest are going to be the best equipped to respond. The Anglican Church inevitably has the kind of network that is necessary. The Christian Churches generally and the Jewish community, who have been used to taking part in the political life of this country for so long, are going to be better able to respond quickly. So there are inherent inequalities. It seems to me that in responding to this external political agenda, faith communities need to keep a close eye on their own agenda, not hastily adopting patterns that may at a later stage cause friction or misunderstanding between them.

Second, there is the question of the appropriate level at which representation should be sought. As I have indicated, the Regional Development Agencies have very technical responsibilities. I wonder how appropriate it is for faith communities as faith communities to seek representation there. Maybe the Regional Chamber or Assembly is the better place to seek that representation. My own view is that faith communities are probably best equipped at the level of local and neighbourhood renewal and community development. That is their

main strength. Involvement in regional structures is best sought only if it strengthens this local and neighbourhood level of involvement. I must emphasize that I make this last remark only in the context of this reflection on regionalisation. I take for granted the role of faith communities in commenting at a national level on values in public life and on policy. The Inner Cities Religious Council is one focus of this function and I would certainly not want to underplay the importance of this role.

I have tried to show that behind the apparently straightforward question of how, or why, faith communities can be represented in regional structures there are all sorts of complexities. That is as you would expect. That is where we are. Maybe this political agenda will be a catalyst, an opportunity to address the inter faith, the multi-faith, issues with greater clarity, as the relationship of faith communities to one another and their role in public life changes in our changing society.

I have to say that my assumption all the way through is that inter faith cooperation is a “good thing”, as they say in *1066 and All That*, and I would like it to remain so and not to be driven too much by a public agenda which I do not think any of us fully understand yet, and while we are still ourselves trying to feel our way forward in terms of inter faith cooperation and multi faith representation. So just a word of caution.

Mr Raj Kumar Bali
President of the Derby Geeta Bhawan and
a member of the East Midlands Regional Assembly

David Rayner has already explained the general framework within which these new developments in government structures at a regional level are taking place across England. Following meetings initiated by the Leicester Council of Faiths, to which a variety of inter faith organisations from across the East Midlands were invited, I was chosen to be a member of the East Midlands Regional Assembly. This is a daunting task since the Assembly includes many experienced politicians and business people but it is a welcome opportunity to discuss with them issues of mutual concern.

Let me tell you a little more about how our Assembly sees its role. The East Midlands Regional Assembly was launched on 17 December 1998 following 12 months of preparation and consultation. In line with Regional Chambers or Assemblies established in all English regions, its membership is made up of two-thirds local authority Councillors and one-third partners from a range of sectors. The Assembly was deliberately created to be large and inclusive and has 100 members representing local government, business, voluntary sector, trade unions, faith communities, environmental groups, further and higher education, the cultural sector, social housing providers, health and police representatives.

The Assembly works as a regional partnership, potentially paving the way for a directly elected regional tier of government in the future. Its purposes, as set out in its Constitution, are that:

- The Regional Assembly shall be the pre-eminent voice for the East Midlands region, providing an opportunity for regional stakeholders to develop a clear vision for the future of the region.
- The Assembly will work with the East Midlands Regional Development Agency [which is an executive body set up by the Government itself], and other regional partners to promote the delivery of the region's agreed vision.
- The Assembly's Integrated Regional Strategy (IRS) will aim to boost the social, economic and environmental quality of life for all the people of the East Midlands.

The Assembly sees its main priorities over the coming six months as being:

- Raising the profile of the Assembly and developing excellent two way communication with the wide range of regional partners.
- Providing opportunities for regional partners to influence the various plans which are unfolding to improve the economic, environmental and social quality of life for all of the region's population.
- Providing opportunities for regional discussion on health issues and the wider constitutional implications of the government's proposals to devolve power to the regions.

The Assembly is developing a framework document which has four key themes:

- Improving the economic performance of the region to provide a wide range of job opportunities and to improve the quality of life across the East Midlands.
- Achieving social inclusion throughout the East Midlands to combat any inequality and provide a genuine opportunity for all to be able to access jobs, services and facilities.
- Conserving and improving the quality of the region's environment and managing the use of natural resources.
- Managing the distribution and location of activities and the provision of infrastructure in order to encourage sustainable patterns of development and to support regeneration.

Most members of the Assembly are from rural areas in the East Midlands but so far most of the focus on economic development has related to urban areas. However, there is a general concern about the need to protect the rural environment. The Assembly has set up task forces relating to various functional areas, including health, education and the environment.

Many of the issues with which the Assembly is dealing are new to me. So I ask myself: What can I contribute from a faith community perspective? How far can I manage to brief myself on the issues which arise? How can I realistically seek to represent the concerns of the many different faith communities in the East Midlands area when the structures do not exist to provide a framework for this, both in terms of consultation and in reporting back on developments in the Assembly? Nonetheless, as I see it, my task is, as far as I am able to do so, to bring to the work of the Assembly the values and concerns of the faith communities in our region.

In the subsequent discussion the following points were made:-

- (a) Many of the issues relating to faith community involvement in economic and social regeneration will in future be dealt with by the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in their respective countries. It is important not to talk about “regional government” in England at this stage. What the Government is setting up are “regional structures” and the future shape of these is still quite fluid.
- (b) Many people who do not belong to a faith tradition do not seem to appreciate the value of the contribution which faith communities can make to the development of their areas or to recognise that they represent a substantial resource for those seeking to promote community development, because of the access to, and knowledge of, local communities which they have.
- (c) Faith permeates every aspect of life, including economic development, education, health and the environment. There is, however, always a risk that faith community representatives are asked to become involved on a token basis and that their contributions are not taken as seriously as they should be.
- (d) Often participation by faith communities in public life has in practice meant the involvement of Church of England or at best some Christian ecumenical grouping. There is a need for faith communities as a whole to participate in public life but this will inevitably affect how they relate to one another and the kind of structures which are needed. It is at present very difficult to demonstrate that one individual can claim to represent “the faith communities” in a Regional Chamber/Assembly on a democratically elected basis.
- (e) There is a need for transparency in the selection of faith community and other representatives sit as members of Regional Development Chambers/Assemblies. Public bodies may erroneously believe that they can simply turn to the “faith communities”, whether collectively or individually, and find some representative framework which can generate a “representative”. But this is not the case.
- (f) In South West England a meeting was convened by the Church of England of representatives of different Christian denominations and of other faiths to discuss the selection of a representative to fill on behalf of all the faith communities the single seat available in that case. The meeting agreed to nominate a Church of England representative. It was, however, also agreed to keep the group in being so that the representative could report to it from time to time to canvass views on current issues under discussion in the Regional Assembly.
- (g) In the case of the East Midlands Regional Assembly, the Leicester Council of Faiths had tried to contact all local inter faith organisations in the East Midlands area listed in *Religions in the UK*. It was hoped to find some way to maintain the linking group on a standing basis. The Christian nominee had been chosen at an earlier stage.

- (h) There is also a problem over providing appropriate support for faith community representatives serving in a Regional Assembly. Clearly local authority representatives can turn to their own local authority structures for briefing and advice and the same is true of many of the non-local authority members.
- (i) There are no visible mechanisms to ensure financial support to help Assembly members with the briefing and administrative support they need. There have been suggestions for making use of lottery money, but not surprisingly a number of faith communities would not be happy with this. It seems unreasonable to expect under-funded voluntary organisations to find ways of resourcing these representatives. The whole question of helping to fund faith community involvement in public policy processes is very much a live issue. Faith communities have been pressing the Government on it for some time in discussions in the Inner Cities Religious Council. A member of the Policy Action Teams reporting to the Social Exclusion Unit in the Cabinet Office have identified this issue of resources as a problem, but the Government has been reluctant to be seen to be financing “religious activity” from public resources.
- (j) It will be important for the research project on religious discrimination commissioned by the Home Office to look at institutional discrimination as well as discrimination against individuals.

How will faith issues inform the work of the new Scottish Parliament?

Sister Isabel Smyth
Secretary of the Scottish Inter Faith Consultative Group
and
Dr Salah Beltagui
of the Glasgow Muslim community and
the Scottish Inter Faith Consultative Group

Sister Isabel Smyth

As you know, Thursday, 1 July, was a great day in the history of Scotland. Iain Crichton Smith described it as ‘the beginning of a new song for Scotland’. This was the day on which we witnessed the State Opening of the Scottish Parliament and the transfer of power from Westminster to Scotland, as far as home affairs are concerned. It was a day of great rejoicing and in his welcome address Sir David Steel spoke of Scotland having a sense of being a nation again and being able, once again, to determine its own affairs.

Much was made of the fact that in Scotland we believe that sovereignty lies, not with the monarch, but with the people and that the handing over of sovereignty was to the people of Scotland and not to the Parliament. We were told that day that this new Parliament was to be founded on egalitarian values and characterised by wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity. These four words are intertwined with the thistle on the mace presented to the Scottish Parliament by Her Majesty the Queen and we were told that these were four values which will be important to the Parliament – as it strives “to do right by the people of Scotland and contribute to the common weal.”

There was a great sense of optimism last Thursday – a new sense of Scottish identity. This is something we have talked a lot about since the referendum of two years ago. But scratch beneath the surface and it is a different matter. Scotland, especially the central belt where most of the population live, is deeply sectarian. This is what the composer James MacMillan calls ‘Scotland’s shame’. It is not just that we have two football teams who are fiercely opposed to one another but we also have our marching season in Glasgow, when Orange marchers practise every weekend in June in preparation for the large march to Belfast on 12 July. Sectarianism comes to the surface very easily in Scotland. For example, last year the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland debated the place of Catholic schools in Scottish society and the reactions to this revealed the polarisation that still remains, notwithstanding the progress which has been made in Christian ecumenism through the ecumenical instrument of ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland).

This bigotry extends to those of different cultures and faiths. A recent report from the Commission for Racial Equality has shown that black people in Scotland are more than three times as likely to be victims of racist incidents as black people in the rest of the UK and that racist incidents recorded in central Scotland are fifteen times as high as those in London.

In Scotland today there is a sense of optimism, a new sense of what it means to be Scottish. There is a real desire and determination to make this Parliament work, but at the same time a realisation that we are far from the ideal of a truly inclusive and participative society. It is this realisation that makes the setting up of a Scottish Inter Faith Council so important, and this we hope to do in October. It is vital that people of faith work together if Scotland is to be all that it claims to want to be.

Dr Salah Beltagui

Muslims, like other minority communities, have seen the Scottish Parliament as a unique opportunity to make their wishes heard and taken into account in the decision-making process, not just on issues which are specific to Muslims but in all issues where the community can offer some alternative or different ideas for consideration. But all this depends on how the Parliament listens to the voice of the people. From many discussions with fellow Muslims and with others, it is clear that people in Scotland are looking for a new Parliament that is free from some of the old traditions and which is also more approachable and accessible to the people.

It is hoped that there will be a greater degree of communication between the Muslim community and the new Parliament to deal with the many issues and problems which face the community, even with the limitations of keeping some powers with London. For example, provision for the prevention of discrimination on grounds of religious identity is missing from the present legislation on equal opportunities which will remain in the hands of the Westminster Parliament under its reserve powers. The Government is proposing to have a question about religious identity in the next census in England, but not in Scotland. There is an opportunity here for the Scottish Parliament to remedy some of these anomalies or at least to promote and monitor the implementation of existing legislation.

Representation in the Scottish Parliament through members of the major political parties is very disappointing. In the absence of any MSP (Members of Scottish Parliament) from the Muslim or other minority faith communities, the success of the new Parliament in dealing with Muslims and other minority communities will depend on how well it keeps contact with these communities and promotes dialogue and stimulates discussion on matters of importance to them. So, in the absence of direct representation in the Parliament, we are looking for other channels of representation, and with that in mind, we in the Muslim community have been active in supporting plans for the Scottish Inter Faith Council.

Sister Isabel Smyth

Let me say a little about the setting up of the Scottish Inter Faith Council. It has been a long time coming to birth. Discussions about a "Scottish network" have been taking place since 1992. In 1994 I undertook to explore this idea with a whole range of people from faith communities and inter faith groups. What I found was a lot of interest in inter faith work in Scotland but a certain hesitancy, because of a concern that this might direct too much time

and energy away from existing inter faith initiatives and faith communities' own commitments. What emerged at that time was what we called the Scottish Inter Faith Consultative Group which was located within the framework of the UK Network and was formed from representatives of bodies which have membership in Scotland and which were already affiliated to the Network. This was expanded to make sure there was a fair representation of all the major faiths in Scotland and to include other organisations with a concern for inter faith relations there.

However, with the birth of the Scottish Parliament and this new sense of Scottish identity it now seems appropriate to formalise this and to set up a Scottish Inter Faith Council. This Council will have a structure very similar to that of the UK Inter Faith Network and hopefully will include among its member bodies the main faith traditions to be found in Scotland – Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh. It will also include local inter faith groups (each of our major cities in Scotland has one of these) and educational organisations, such as the Scottish Joint Committee on Religion and Moral Education, which are committed to a multi-faith approach to religious education. Two bodies which are not members of the Inter Faith Network but are likely to be among the founding members of the SIFC are the Brahma Kumaris and the Unitarians, both of which have had a long involvement in inter faith work in Scotland. We did have a request from the Pagan Federation but we thought it appropriate to turn this down at this juncture. This did, however, make us realise the need for criteria to decide which groups should be accepted as members of the Council once it is set up.

At the moment we envisage having a Council which will meet about twice a year and an Executive which will carry forward the work of the Council between meetings. Ideally we would like to have someone working full time but for this we need funding and at the moment we are entirely penniless, not even having money for a stamp! However, we do have the possibility of a desk in the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow which would at least give us an address. Once we are established as a Scottish charity we can then begin to apply for funding.

We hope that the new Council will be a focus for discussion about national concerns and we have already been used by the Scottish Office as a contact point because in Scotland there is in many cases no single body which represents a given faith community. For example, there is as yet no one body representative of Scottish Jewry or Scottish Muslims. So it is often very difficult for the Scottish Office to know how best to contact the different faith communities.

We have been invited to a question and answer time with the Prime Minister and consulted on who might be invited from faith communities to the opening of the Parliament. We ourselves were allowed a representative at the opening ceremony, which was a great privilege since the invitations were like gold dust and a lot of people were upset at being omitted from the guest list.

As the Scottish Parliament settles down to business it will be important to develop mechanisms for communicating with it. Some of these are already in place and Dr Beltagui will speak about these.

Dr Salah Beltagui

In the preparations for setting up the Scottish Parliament the Constitution Steering Group (the CSG) in the Scottish Office adopted four key principles to guide their work against which the Scottish Parliament could be assessed. These were:

- the Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the Scottish Executive.
- the Scottish Executive should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament and the Parliament and Executive should be accountable to the people of Scotland.
- the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open and responsive, and develop procedures which would make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation.
- the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointments should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all.

One of the ways approved by the CSG for encouraging participation and access in the new political process was the setting up of a Civic Forum. The CSG recommended that this Forum should be established within civic society to act as a facilitative body which would be an additional mechanism in the consultation process but which would not replace bilateral discussions between the Parliament and individual organisations.

A large number of organisations have registered their interest with the Forum and these include a number of religious organisations, including the Scottish Inter Faith Consultative Group. The Civic Forum to some extent follows on from the People and Parliament organisation chaired by Canon Kenyon Wright which in the consultation process leading up to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament had identified some key questions such as: Who are we? How can we affect the work of the new Parliament? How can we as individuals and as communities affect what is going on in the new Parliament? A key issue is “What does it mean to be Scottish?” I share the view that Scottish identity should be based on civic, not ethnic, identity.

Sister Isabel Smyth

Although the Scottish Parliament has only been in existence for a short time, it has already shown its commitment to the multi-faith nature of Scottish society in its debate on prayers in Parliament. During that debate many MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) spoke about the need for a period of reflection that reflected the “open, inclusive and consultative nature” of the Parliament and a “new model of prayer to embrace all the cultures and faiths in Scotland”. A motion has already been passed to have some kind of prayer at the beginning of each session of Parliament. It is hoped that this will express the rich diversity of faiths in

Scotland and remind Parliamentarians that they are at the service of others. The practicalities of this need to be worked out and there is a meeting about this tomorrow. Dr Beltagui and another representative of the Scottish Inter Faith Consultative Group will be present at that. This does show that the multi-faith nature of Scottish society has already been accepted by the new Parliament.

I have also heard from the Scottish Office that the Church of Scotland has decided to donate a new Bible to the new Parliament and I hope that the possibility will be explored of other faith communities donating copies of their scriptures as well.

We are at a very interesting point in our history in Scotland. There is much work to be done and a great opportunity for the Scottish Inter Faith Council when it is set up. Hopefully, with God's help, we shall make the most of it.

I would like to finish with the poem by Iain Crichton-Smith which was read at the opening of the Scottish Parliament and whose title I quoted at the beginning of my contribution:

The Beginning of a New Song

Let our three-voiced country
sing in a new world
joining the other rivers without dogma,
but with friendliness to all around her.

Let her new river shine on a day
that is fresh and glittering and contemporary;

Let it be true to itself and to its origins
inventive, original, philosophical,
its institutions mirror its beauty;
then without shame we can esteem ourselves.

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In the subsequent discussion the following points were made:

- (a) Interest was expressed (and welcomed) in the possibility of other faith groups, such as the Zoroastrians, so far unrepresented in the planning process of the Scottish Inter Faith Council, becoming involved in this. It was noted with pleasure that the Unitarian Church is already involved.
- (b) It was recognised that there are difficult issues over the question of whether to admit Pagans and other non-mainstream groups to membership of the new Council, on which differing views were expressed. Similar issues are arising over the membership of local inter faith organisations. It was noted that in planning the Scottish Inter Faith Council it has been decided to restrict its initial membership to those who have been involved from the outset in the planning process. Once the Council has been set up, other groups can then apply for membership.
- (c) The debate about whether prayers should be said at the start of sessions of the new Parliament was an interesting one, which parallels similar arguments elsewhere, including local authority Councils such as Derby, and points to the value of providing some “space for the sacred”.
- (d) It is anticipated that the Scottish Inter Faith Council will wish in due course to become a member body of the Inter Faith Network for the UK. The Network has helped to fund the planning process for the Council and its support in the process has been much appreciated.

Proposals for Reform of the House of Lords: A Place for Faith?

Mr Jon Sacker

Director of External Issues at the Board of Deputies of British Jews

Introduction

In this presentation I propose to look at the development, role and composition of the House of Lords, talk briefly about the White Paper and the Royal Commission, comment on the submission of the Board of Deputies and finally raise some of the knotty problems which face those who wish to widen the faith representation in a reformed Second Chamber.

Present Role and Composition of the House of Lords

The House of Lords is the original chamber of Parliament, predating the Commons. Its origins can be traced back to Saxon times, when it was the custom of the king to call the leading men of the country to advise him at court. The pattern of the two-chamber Parliament was developed in the 14th century.

Although the Commons established comparatively early its right to determine the resources the Government should have available to it, the House of Lords continued through the patronage of individual lords in other matters to be the dominant House into the 18th century. It was the consequences of the industrial revolution that finally established the pre-eminence of the Commons, as industry replaced land as the main source of wealth. Although the most important offices of state were regularly held by members of the House of Lords well into the late 19th century, the Commons continued to establish its dominance as the elected chamber. The widening of the franchise in the 20th century, coupled with governments with a different political base, led to greater pressure for reform of the House of Lords. Two reforms of the House of Lords were carried, to its powers in 1911 and 1949, and to its composition in 1958 which allowed the introduction of life peers.

The structure of the House of Lords is complex. The introduction of life peers, who now form about 40 per cent of the House, has had a marked effect on its composition. At 4 January 1999, the make up of the House of Lords was:

Life peers	510	(of whom 7 were on leave of absence)
Hereditary peers - of first creation	9	
- by succession	750	(of whom 67 were without a Writ of Summons and 56 were on leave of absence)
Archbishops and Bishops	26	
TOTAL	1,295	

The only groups with a direct and legally guaranteed representation in the House of Lords are the Church of England and the Law and there are special constitutional reasons for both these. For every other interest group, representation is a matter of chance. It is up to individual peers, once members of the House of Lords, to decide what interests they will promote.

Bishops

Bishops have always been members of the House of Lords. Originally they were summoned in their dual role as major landowners and as the King's counsellors. In more modern times, the presence of the Bishops became increasingly associated with the establishment of the Church of England, although in law the two are quite separate. The establishment of the Church of England rests upon Parliament's powers over its legislation and the requirement for the Sovereign as its Supreme Governor to be in communion with it. The Bishops and Archbishops now sit by virtue of the Bishops Act of 1878, which provides for the two Archbishops, the Bishops of London, Winchester and Durham, and the next 21 most senior diocesan Bishops to have a seat in the House of Lords. The Bishops are the only true *ex officio* members of the House of Lords, as they retire from the House on retirement from their see. Since clergymen of the Churches of England, Scotland and Ireland, and Roman Catholic priests, are not able to be members of the House of Commons, the presence of Bishops in the House of Lords was, before the introduction of life peers, the only significant non-lay representation of the principal religious denominations in Parliament.

Law Lords

The position of the House of Lords as the Supreme Court of the realm also comes from the House's origins as the King's Council. Until 1876, the judicial functions of the Lords had to be provided by those who happened to be members of it, or hereditary peerages had to be conferred to bring suitably qualified men into the House. At that point, concern about the lack of available expertise led to the innovation of conferring life peerages specifically for judicial work in the Lords, so that those who did not feel they had the resources to maintain the estate and dignity of a peerage through future generations could still be appointed. There are 12 active Law Lords at any one time, but retired Law Lords are still able to act judicially up to the age of 75, and all Law Lords are members of the House for life.

Functions

The Parliamentary functions of the Lords are, broadly defined, fourfold:

1. To generate, debate, amend and approve proposed legislation;
2. To scrutinise the Government's actions by Parliamentary Questions to Ministers and debates;
3. To undertake specialist investigation through their Select Committees;
4. To act as a general forum for debate on matters of public interest.

The House of Lords is distinct from the House of Commons in four key areas:

1. The House of Lords has no influence over the choice of who is to form the Government;

2. The House of Lords has no powers over taxation and spending, which are the exclusive preserve of the House of Commons;
3. The House of Lords has no constituency representative functions;
4. The House of Lords' powers over legislation are constrained by the Parliament Acts.

The House of Lords also acts through its Appellate Committee, as the highest court of appeal in the country.

Government Manifesto and The White Paper of January 1999

The Government set out its approach to reform of the House of Lords in its manifesto: "The House of Lords must be reformed. As an initial, self-contained reform, not dependent on further reform in the future, the rights of the hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute. This will be the first step in a process of reform to make the House of Lords more democratic and representative. The legislative powers of the House of Lords will remain unaltered.

The system of appointment of life peers to the House of Lords will be reviewed. Our objective will be to ensure that over time party appointees as life peers more accurately reflect the proportion of votes cast at the previous general election. We are committed to maintaining an independent cross-bench presence of life peers. No one political party should seek a majority in the House of Lords.

A Committee of both Houses of Parliament will be appointed to undertake a wide-ranging review of possible further change and then to bring forward proposals for reform."

The Government published a White Paper in January 1999 which set out its views in greater detail.

Royal Commission

On 18 February of this year a Royal Commission was appointed whose terms of reference were:

"Having regard to the need to maintain the position of the House of Commons as the pre-eminent chamber of Parliament and taking particular account of the present nature of the constitutional settlement, including the newly devolved institutions, the impact of the Human Rights Act and developing relations with the European Union:

to consider and make recommendations on the role and functions of a Second Chamber; to make recommendations on the method or combination of methods of composition required to constitute a Second Chamber fit for that role and those functions; to report by 31 December 1999."

The Commissioners are drawn from a range of backgrounds and include politicians, academics and clergy. They published a Consultation Paper in March 1999, inviting initial comments by the 1 June and defined the issues they wished to address as:

1. Role and functions;
2. Powers;
3. Procedures; and
4. Composition;

The possible criteria for a modern Second Chamber which they put forward are that it should:

- be conducive to a stable overall constitutional settlement;
- complement the work of the House of Commons;
- assist Parliament as a whole to provide better scrutiny of the Executive;
- contribute to better Government.

One of the specific questions they asked was on organised religion:

“The Lords Spiritual membership of the House of Lords is a manifestation of the particular relationship between the Church of England, the Crown and Parliament. Should the reformed Second Chamber continue to have a formal religious component?” They continued: “A number of religious leaders, Jewish, Muslim and other, are on public record as supporting the role of the Church of England in our national life, one expression of this being the presence of Bishops in the House of Lords, on the grounds that this provides an umbrella safe-guarding the place of all the major world faiths in our society and enabling them to make a respected contribution to public life. The Commission would welcome views on this.”

They went on to say: “Given the fact that by history and culture the United Kingdom is still predominantly Christian and that, in contrast to the 16th century, all Christian denominations now work very closely together at both a local and national level, should there be a wider range of Christian leaders in the Second Chamber not simply on a personal basis, as some are at present, but in a representative capacity? If so, how could such representation best be achieved? Given the fact that the major world faiths are now a valued part of our society, their members comprising at least 5 per cent of the population, should religious leaders of these faiths be members of the Second Chamber not simply on a personal basis, as some are at present, but in a representative capacity? If so, how could such representation best be achieved?” It was to this issue which the Board of Deputies addressed their response.

The Board of Deputies' Response

The Board of Deputies of British Jews is the democratic representative body of British Jewry. Our role is as the secular body of British Jewry and we do not comment directly on religious matters.

For the record there are currently two peers who are members of the Board of Deputies. The Jewish community has no official religious representation in the House of Lords, although there have been Jewish peers since the late Nineteenth Century. The first Jewish peer, Baron (Nathan-Meyer) Rothschild, was appointed to the House of Lords in 1885 and there are currently some 8 Hereditary and 32 Life Peers. Of these one, Lord Jakobovits, is a Rabbi: he is the emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. Jewish peers are all members of the House of Lords ad personam: they do not serve as representatives of the Jewish faith.

The Board argued in its submission to the Royal Commission that in a country which has long been proud to recognise the strong religious basis which underpins its moral and ethical life, it is important that such teachings inform the decision-making of the leaders of the United Kingdom. It follows from this that there is a strong case for arguing that the faith communities of the United Kingdom should be represented within the new Second Chamber.

We recognise that the Church of England, as the established Church, has a particular and unique place within the governance of the United Kingdom. But in view of the way in which the country has now become a diverse multi-cultural and multi-faith society, we suggest that there is a case for considering whether, and if so how, other major faith communities of the United Kingdom should be guaranteed representation in the reformed second chamber.

We recognise that if this were to be done it would raise a number of difficult issues. Those to which we drew attention are:

- Whether individuals should serve as members of the Second Chamber in an individual or in a representative character;
- If representatives are sought from faith communities, should they be religious or secular leaders, or both?
- Who would decide on the choice of the representatives?
- Whether representation should be in proportion to the size of the faith community.

The structures of representation within the Jewish community are different from those within the Church of England. While the General Synod brings together clergy and laity within an official structure, the Jewish community has no such body.

Within the religious structures of the British Jewish community there are a number of different strands of belief. These are reflected in a range of synagogal groupings which embrace most

sections of the community, from the ultra-Orthodox communities through to the Progressive communities. Not all sections of the community recognise the religious authority of the Chief Rabbi or that of any other single religious leader.

It is important that, if a member of the Second Chamber is appointed as a representative of a community, the person should have legitimacy within that community. The Board argued that in reality it will be difficult to achieve this in practice.

While we believe that it is important that the reformed Second Chamber should reflect the make up of British society, we doubt that it is possible to do this by any method of strict proportionality, not least because there is currently no authoritative Census data on which to base estimates of the size of the various faith communities.

It is our belief that to attempt to appoint official representatives from the faith communities could be divisive within the communities and cause more harm than good. We would recommend instead that, whatever method is used for deciding the balance of members of the reformed Second Chamber, due regard is given to their religious background, thereby ensuring that the composition of the Chamber as a whole is broadly representative of the multi-faith landscape of the United Kingdom in the new Millennium.

Some Problems

I would like to end by reiterating what we saw as the key issues that would need to be recognised if there is to be religious representation in the reformed Second Chamber.

- whether individuals should serve as members of the Second Chamber in an individual or in a representative character.
- If representatives are sought from faith communities, should they be religious or secular leaders, or both?
- who would decide on the choice of the representatives?
- whether representation should be in proportion to the size of the faith community.

The problem for those of us who believe that faith communities should be represented is: “Who are the representatives?” The question was put most eloquently recently by Clifford Longley writing in *the Daily Telegraph*. He said “*The Free Churches dislike what they call ‘Prelacy’ and change their leadership personnel every year or two to avoid it. The Muslims and Hindus are not fully organised at a national level, though they are getting better at it. Progressive Jews do not accept Rabbi Sack’s leadership, and will want a peer of their own. Nor will the organised atheists want to be left out.*” (25 June 1999)

But if we do not at least begin to suggest what the answers to these questions are, who will?

In subsequent discussion the following points were made:-

- (a) It did not appear that faith communities other than the Christian Churches and the Jewish community had yet submitted formal evidence to the Royal Commission. It was noted that the only “religious” member of the Commission was the Anglican Bishop of Oxford, Rt Rev Richard Harries.
- (b) Many organisations were apparently unaware of the work of the Commission although the Network, at the request of the Commission, had sent information around about it to all its member bodies in early April. This had given details about how to give evidence to the Commission. While the Commission had asked for evidence by early June it would no doubt take account of any evidence which was submitted to it quickly.
- (c) Government documents are often in formal and somewhat opaque language and are as a result not easily accessible to the lay reader but the Commission’s consultative document did set out the issues clearly.
- (d) In response to a question about the advantages for faith communities in having representatives in the House of Lords, it was pointed out that the House has legislative powers which enable it to amend and delay legislation going through Parliament; a deliberative function in which there is a greater chance of initiating a debate through “calling for papers” on an issue; an interrogative function through its Select Committees which enables it to question Ministers and civil servants; and that it also has a judicial role, although this is not relevant in the present context.
- (e) If faith communities believe that faith should not be marginalised and has a great deal to offer to the ethical and moral well being of society then there is a need to have people drawn from the faith communities participating in public life, including the House of Lords. However, it might not be helpful to see membership in a Second Chamber as constituting formal “representation” or individuals in the House of Lords as in some sense being “delegates” of their communities. There are real difficulties in the notion of ‘representatives’, even if faith communities would expect their members in the House of Lords to reflect their concerns.
- (f) It was suggested that two questions have to be addressed: the first being whether faith communities want to see some form of “representation” or “participation” in a reformed Second Chamber; and second being how this could best be achieved?

Closing remarks by Bishop Roy Williamson, Network Co-Chair

I would like to offer some observations as someone who has sat in the House of Lords as a Church of England Bishop for ten years. As I see it, the door is increasingly open for people of faith to take part in the political process of this country with new governmental structures in Scotland, in Wales and in the English regions and possibly in the House of Lords. I spoke ten times in the House and on only one occasion did I see myself as speaking on behalf of the Church of England and its concerns. On four occasions I spoke on general social issues and on five occasions on behalf of the concerns of faiths other than my own. People of faith surely have values to bring to our society and will want to do so for the benefit of society as a whole, and not for the particular narrow interests of a particular community.

The Anglican Diocese of Southwark in which I served as Bishop contains two and a half million people who between them speak a hundred different languages. I could not hope to “represent” them in the House of Lords but I could make some contribution in the light of the knowledge which I had of their concerns.

The essential question we face is how can we best live together? Contributions made during the day show that we live in a time of opportunity, of challenge and of danger. There is a great opportunity for faiths to enter the “public square”. A great challenge also faces people of faith which could be a great danger for them because people of faith, as all people, ought to be able to show how they can live together. Faiths need to take action for the sake of society as a whole and not just for themselves. There is a need to stand up for the rights of others, to claim rights not just on behalf of ourselves but on behalf of others, defending and arguing for them.

In closing the meeting **Bishop Roy Williamson** offered thanks to the five main speakers, to all those who had contributed to the afternoon’s discussion and to the Network staff for their work in arranging the meeting.

The Inter Faith Network for the UK

The Inter Faith Network was founded in 1987. It works with its member bodies to promote good relations between the major faith communities, to combat inter religious prejudice and intolerance and to help make the UK a country marked by mutual understanding and respect between religions where all can practise their faith with integrity.

The Network:

- Provides information on faith communities and on inter faith affairs
- Advises the public and private sectors on multi faith projects and inter faith issues
- Publishes materials to help people working in the religious and inter faith sectors
- Fosters inter faith co-operation on social issues
- Holds regular national meetings of its member bodies where social and religious questions of concern to the different faith communities can be examined together and sets up multi faith working groups, seminars and conferences to pursue these where appropriate
- Links over 85 member organisations including representative bodies from the different faith communities; national inter faith organisations; local inter faith groups; academic institutions and bodies concerned with multi faith education.

The Network has also worked with other organisations, such as the Commission for Racial Equality, the Inner Cities Religious Council and the Universities of Exeter and York, on a number of its projects. Notably, it has worked with the Religious Resource and Research Centre at the University of Derby to produce the landmark publication *Religions in the UK: A Mutli Faith Directory*, the second edition of which was published in May 1997.

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