

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 16

Responding to Hostility

Extracts from an interview in The Times with Shahid Malik MP. The interview was conducted by Helen Rumbelow and Alice Mills. It can be accessed in its full version at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article_2237461.ece/

Mr Malik's path ... has been marked, from an early age, by learning how to respond to hostility – often racist, and on many occasions violent.

His father came to Burnley in 1965, a time and place that Mr Malik described as 'probably the most racist environment anybody could ever be brought up in'. He had been tempted from his post as headmaster of a large school in Pakistan by an offer from someone at the British Embassy, who said that Britain was looking for teachers. They lived in one of the poorest wards in the country, said Mr Malik, who was sometimes the only non-white boy in his class. 'That sometimes used to feel like thirty against one,' he said.

'This concept of Paki-bashing was something that was in vogue and a few times a week it would take place. Teachers were oblivious. Completely disinterested in it.'

Was he 'Paki-bashed'? 'I certainly was,' he said, reeling off incidents that ranged from being beaten 'pretty badly' by four skinheads in his first week at secondary school, to being stabbed in the leg with a chisel during woodwork after an argument about race. He had to go to hospital to get stitches. 'But nothing was done – quite incredibly.'

The reaction – or lack of it – from the school authorities was 'a real kind of eye-opener', but so, interestingly, was the reaction of Mr Malik. 'You just accepted it, and looking back on it I don't bear any grudges towards any of those people. The truth is that they were ignorant. And so really it wasn't their fault, they were just children.'

Did he ever wish that he could live in Pakistan instead? 'Never. No, I always thought of myself as very much British, very much that this is my country . . . I still say it's the best country in the world to live.'

It is obviously important for Mr Malik to show that he remains determinedly positive, that he tries to tolerate and understand – or at least not to generalize about – those who are against him. The day after he left hospital, during the unrest in 2001, he was out patrolling the streets with the police 'to show that the police aren't bad'.

In the years that followed, he struggled to find a seat. During this time he was the victim of a hit-and-run incident in a Burnley petrol station, his parents' family car was firebombed and, while walking the street, he was surrounded by 20 members of the extreme-right group Combat 18, who said that they were going to kill him.

Although his father was once Mayor of Burnley and was appointed, in the late-1960s, on to what was then the Race Relations Board (a precursor of the Commission for Racial Equality), his parents wanted him to give up politics.

They think it's thankless. In the autumn of 2003, the family were just saying to me, 'Listen, you've been through quite a lot, just stop it. You're not going to get a seat'. And I just thought, 'These people are mad. Of course I'm going to get there'.

Now, as one of the most powerful Muslims in the country, he faces attack from radical Islamists as well as racists. 'There are extremists who think of themselves as Muslims who see me as a hate figure, as the enemy.'

To say that his Dewsbury constituency is divided is something of an understatement. It has the highest British National Party vote in the country and was also the home of the leading suicide bomber from 7 July 2005, Mohammad Sidique Khan. 'It doesn't matter what I do, I'm going to annoy somebody,' he said. 'I have just got to do what I believe is right on these big issues, these issues of extremism and morality.'

Once he made it to the Commons, was there an end to his racist encounters? Not quite. He described one incident at Westminster. 'We're on the terrace, there was me and there were two female colleagues, white. And one of the security guys ignored both of them and came up to me and said, "Sir, have you got any ID?" I think you learn through experience to just be very patient and just be very relaxed about these things . . .'

