

# Executive Summary

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*British by Dissent* explores the meaning of dissent to young British Muslims and locates these meanings within a broader social context: dissent has been played out in the story of modern British history across faith, cultural and political groups.

Participants in the research provide an insight into their own understanding of the notion of 'dissent' and how this impacts their actions and views.

A key underlying question is about the nature of integration and how voices of dissent are articulating an integrated expression of their concerns around a host of issues.

The research explored how young British Muslims respond to social, economic, religious and public policy debates through various manifestations of dissent. Both the quantitative and qualitative research explored a number of themes, including:

- o Understanding of dissent
- o Forms, methods and actions of dissent
- o Motivations for engaging in dissent
- o Personal boundaries where dissent became unjustified
- o Impact of the discussion on an individuals' view of dissent

A discussion on the history of dissent in Britain as well as the development of Muslim organisations and Muslim faith based activism in the UK places the current research in its context.

## Key Findings

- 97% of survey respondents saw themselves as having contributed to dissent or social activism in some way.
- 84% agreed that dissent is important for a society to remain fair and just, and 76% held it is a healthy thing for society.
- The research shows a mainstream focus over and above a focus on more minority or individualist issues. 77.3% felt that British Muslims should focus on more general issues of social justice and equality, and a lower score of 50.7% said they should focus on issues that have a more direct link to British Muslims.
- The research shows that issues with a high national media coverage attracted the highest levels of engagement overall, followed by issues dealing with discrimination of any kind (women's rights, economic unfairness and social inequity, anti-Muslim hatred), and environmental concerns.
- Large sections of survey respondents did not identify with political parties or did not know what they did. 84.4% said this about the Conservative Party, 76.3% about the Liberal Democrats and 56% about the Labour Party.
- 64% said they did not identify with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) or did not know what they did.
- 73.4% said their faith encouraged and inspired their dissent, and 77.3% agreed dissenting made them feel good knowing their own involvement was making a positive difference.
- 86.7% were active on social media and over 30% were very active in this way. However, 13.3% were not active in this way.
- Only 10.7% agreed that dissenting is mainly about troublemaking and disruptive behaviour and only 20% agreed it is mainly a youth activity.

## Recommendations

There is a considerable and healthy appetite for a spectrum of dissent and activism, which should not be seen as ‘un-British’ or harmful to integration, but rather its opposite. Young British Muslims are channelling passion and energy towards more mainstream issues, seeing their engagement as a healthy and responsible thing in society.

Yet a wide gap exists between this position and the sense of appreciation young Muslims feel; a great many feel the government, Muslim institutions and the media do not acknowledge the positive, creative and constructive engagement they bring. Society is confusing dissent with disaffection and this runs counter to positive social inclusion.

The triangular relationship between ethics, faith and democracy can yield confidence in ideas that are conducive to the social good, but these developments often need deeper exploration in order to be realised more fully.

1. Political parties should consider the gap that exists between their work and the dismissive opinion held by young Muslims regarding their activities.

Parties should more actively seek to unpack and address the uncertainties, doubts and misgivings young Muslims may hold regarding direct involvement and membership. This would impact on both recruitment initiatives and broader engagement with formal politics.

2. Muslim organisations should develop targeted initiatives that promote the engagement of young Muslims with the Parliamentary process (following the model of programmes such as Christians in Parliament (CiP)).

To this end organisational support for scholarly and activist voices from across the Muslim spectrum who advocate positive democratic mainstream engagement should be prioritised, especially at times of direct challenge from religious voices that are anti-democratic.

3. Muslim charities should invest significantly in a domestic fund that can be used to facilitate and support the talents of young British Muslims working towards positive social change in mainstream British society.

4. Government and civil society (including Muslim institutions) should work in partnership to provide better training resources that can enhance the energy and efficacy of young Muslims to contribute to mainstream causes and the wider social good.
5. Muslims organisations should celebrate initiatives that work in, and bring a benefit to, mainstream society. They should promote and showcase role models and good practice initiative in partnership with other faith and no faith organisations.
6. Government should recognise that exercises seeking input and 'representation' from 'the Muslim community' should target a broad and diverse range of stakeholders along the lines of gender, age, denominations, targeted ethnicities (e.g. Somali), social class, sexual orientation and other forms of difference that can found within the diverse ecology of 'the community'.
7. Educational institutions should help create safe spaces for the exploration of dissent by young Muslims. Such programmes could seek to support initiatives and find ways of enhancing them, creating new partnerships and networks and linking with mainstream causes, initiatives and methods.