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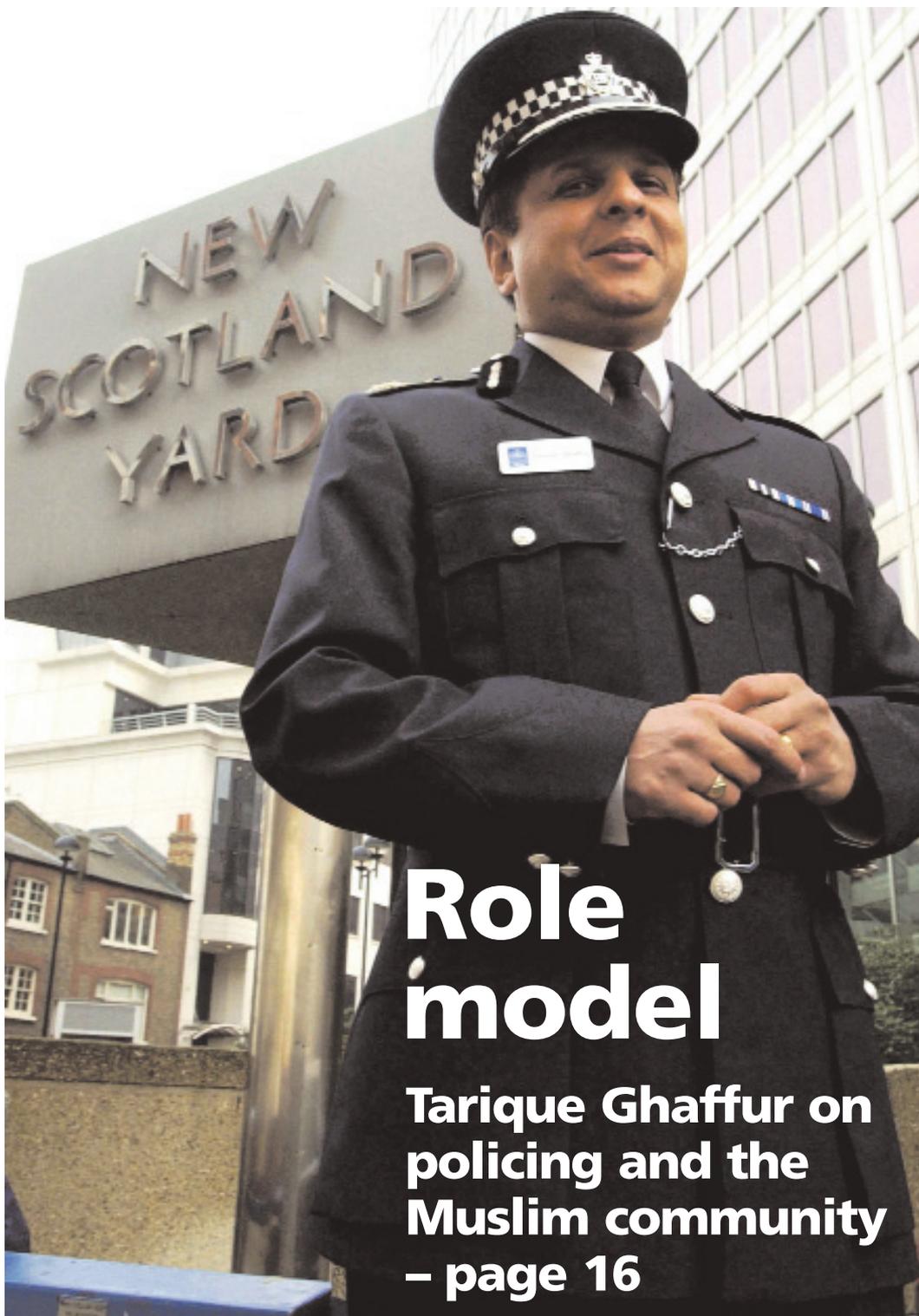
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A matter of leadership for Tarique Ghaffur

On a recent radio programme one of Tarique Ghaffur's Metropolitan police colleagues recalled when TG joined the Greater Manchester force in the '70s he was not allowed to enter by the front door. "Whilst this left TG shaken and disappointed he soon bounced back – for TG resilience runs deep," he observed.

Resilience is his trademark as a senior officer who became a deputy assistant commissioner the same year the Met was damned for its handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder with the inquiry report branding the service "institutionally racist". Today Ghaffur is the highest profile Muslim policeman at a time when police are under suspicion and scrutiny and when the government is asking Muslim leaders to root out extremists.

Through his access to black minority ethnic (BME) communities he has been spreading that message for years as Britain's senior Asian officer. More than anyone, he knows he must use all his influence to bring about change – inside and outside the police.

Addressing the National Black Police Association (NBPA) conference in August, Ghaffur called for a judicial review into the causes of extremism – an inquiry into why young Muslims turn to violence. He says the 7 July attacks "revealed some of the limitations of the policing response and there is a very real danger that the counter-terrorism label is also being used by other law enforcement agencies to the effect there is a real risk of criminalising minority communities. Just at the time we need the trust of these communities they may retreat into themselves."

He also told how racism had blighted his own career. He warned that UK policing must do more to tackle discrimination within the ranks. He believed ethnic minority officers face an ever-present "miasma" or "toxic fog" of "misperceptions and distorted accounts of their behaviour from colleagues". The assistant commissioner said he had "been deliberately excluded from groups, processes and decision-making on occasions. I have had creative ideas turned down, only for them to be subsequently suggested by colleagues and accepted."

Philosopher John Stuart Mill once said that "one person with belief is equal to a force of 99 who have only interests". It is being seen for his belief that distinguishes Ghaffur. Young officers who have worked with him mark him out as a leader ahead of being a manager. They said managers talk at people, directing and lecturing. Ghaffur has "more a dialogue approach by asking, requesting, listening then acting".

It has been a long haul from his teenage arrival in the UK with aspirations to be a doctor. "I joined the police not out of the fact that I wanted the

With ethnic minority officers facing an ever-present 'toxic fog' of distortion from colleagues, Metropolitan police assistant commissioner Tarique Ghaffur talks frankly to Lynda King Taylor about reform, reaching out to Muslim communities and how racism blighted his own career

police as a career. It was out of necessity because my family was kicked out of Uganda. We had no money and as the eldest I had to work," he says.

He was a curiosity – "I was not accepted into a police station then because people did not believe I was a police officer" – and he adds: "Even now when I go to talk to certain groups proudly wearing a British police uniform it causes a huge amount of intrigue as to who I am."

"In the Met we have 2,290 BME officers," he says. "Of new police officer recruits last month 25 per cent were from BME backgrounds; 38 per cent of police community support officers are from minorities dipping their toes in to see whether a career in policing is for them. About 22 per cent of the police staff are from minority backgrounds – that's just over 3,000 people. We are getting better at retaining those officers and progressing them into higher ranks. However a huge amount of work still needs to be done... particularly in the ranks."

What about accusations that standards are being lowered to allow minority group officers in to boost percentages? "That's a cultural and perception issue as opposed to reality," he says. "The standards for police officers are that they can go out there, arrest bad people and interface with communities. The standards are in understanding issues and having cultural knowledge that affects communities. I can assure you that a minority officer comes with those kinds of life skills, and often with an educational background that is proportionately higher than others. It's a perception and it is perpetuated by people who can't accept individuality and difference."

There is a desperate demand for community cohesion and citizen engagement. Ghaffur admits the 7 July bombings changed London for ever. "What constitutes a community is under challenge," he says. "If you look at London, 7.2 million people from various nationalities with 300-plus languages, people from all over the world living together, and in one housing estate you could have up to 40 nationalities. That makes a whole issue about what constitutes the identity of a community. To engage with all those citizens is complex.

"The police must reach out to those communities because quite clearly some feel isolated. There's a huge amount of fear and feeling that some are unnecessarily stigmatised and stereotyped."

He feels there are too few Muslim role models at the highest levels of civil service, police, local authorities, education, health or other executive levels. "I always see myself as a policeman, a person at the sharp end because I engage with all the communities, but I've come to realise as I've gone up the ranks how important role models are.

"We need to future-proof by developing significant role models. While there are 1.6 million Muslims in Britain, if you look at the country's most powerful people – in business, politics, academia, the media, arts and sport – you wouldn't know it."

He believes there should be at least 20 Muslim MPs – a major advance on the four elected in May 2005 – as part of a greater Muslim engagement in UK democracy at all levels. "This will require a significant shift in mindset," he says, "from harmful denial to a situation where the aim is for all communities to work in partnership with the police and other agencies."

In the aftermath of the July bombings there has been much debate about the perceived social and political re-engineering of the community. But Ghaffur says: "We must never lose sight of the overriding aspect of safety. Everyone wants to feel safe, irrespective of which community they belong to. To achieve this mutual safety, communities must work together to prevent another terrorist attack."

He is adamant that Muslims should be educated in how Islam can be applied practically in Britain today: "We need to persuade young Muslims that they can be Muslim and British, and that Islam is not regarded with hostility. When they are persuaded away by extremist groups with their distorted views of Islam, it is vital that infrastructure is put into place to conduct theological de-briefing to ensure balance.

"There are real issues around trust and confidence. We had three main approaches. The first was to listen to what the communities had to say in the aftermath of both 9/11 and 7/7, putting in



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RECOGNISED: Tarique Ghaffur CBE urges Muslims to be visibly active in the political and social activity of the country

neighbourhood officers and to ensure engagement with the mosques, temples and churches, insisting our boroughs have a direct dialogue with community leaders. Secondly, at New Scotland Yard we created a communities together helpline.

“Third, we ensured we worked with local authorities and others on community impact assessments and reviewed some of the risks those communities were facing. For example, we made sure that areas of risk – some of the temples and mosques – were given crime prevention advice but more importantly they were encouraged to report crime, often through anonymous hotlines. We also began to use our officers to actively participate in the minority media.”

“One of the key challenges facing many British Muslim communities is that of disadvantage,” he says. “The 2001 census found that Muslims are generally concentrated in areas of multiple deprivation with disproportionate rates of low academic achievement, unemployment, poor and overcrowded housing, illness and disability.”

There are what he calls “a lot of very angry young people who have a warped view about their religion, and that anger and ideology they believe in creates a vulnerability”.

He has had time to reflect on what happened post-July 2005 and to consider the various reactions: “It is important to underline the Muslim community’s almost universal condemnation of the bomb attacks. Equally, post-7/7 there has been a corresponding willingness and intelligence from Muslim communities to come forward. At the

same time, in the face of the global terrorist threat, the police have had to learn a number of important lessons. I remain optimistic about the operational capability of the police to tackle this new terrorist threat. However, I also see some unique and unresolved problems around the current ability of the Muslim community to engage in an effort to prevent another spate of bombings.”

Recent surveys have shown that while respect for Muslim society was higher in Britain than in other continental countries, British Muslims still felt more resentful, alienated and suspicious than Muslims polled in Germany, France and Spain. The findings highlight a lack of confidence in the police and its leadership.

Muslims are increasingly seen as a law and order issue, which has led to strong feelings of injustice, Ghaffur says. “Despite the moderate Muslim majority condemnation of terrorism, giving a platform to extremists makes good television. The result is that Muslims everywhere are seen through the same negative stereotypes, where terms such as ‘jihad’, ‘fatwa’ and ‘fundamentalist’ are now part of popular vocabulary.”

An equally important challenge for the Met is that elements of Muslim communities are in various stages of denial. “They remain inward looking and are still in survival mode, thinking and feeling victimised, disconnected and separated,” he says. “For some, there is an overriding preoccupation with conspiracy theories around the threat of terrorism and the significant political leverage of fear

attributed to the West. The persistence of an attitude of denial will undoubtedly be counter-productive to any lasting change.”

Right now he believes we are at a critical crossroads: “Of course government needs to take responsibility for tackling the underlying causes of disadvantage – around education, employment, health, youth and safety. Of course the police and other agencies need to work together with Muslims to build community capability and capacity, particularly in tackling extremism among Muslim youth. But the overriding critical requirement is for real sustainable leadership in Muslim communities themselves.”

He says we must not underestimate the role Muslims need to play in the process of generating goodwill in the wider community: “They need to be aware that they must first overcome the dangerous and prohibitive state of denial. Only then can they take the initiative to reach out to the society around them to dispel the myths. Muslim opinion leaders need to assist their communities to develop so that they can access established power structures. Equally, Muslims must be visibly active in the political, social, educational, economic and cultural activities of the country.”

It was Ghaffur’s cross-cultural communities that recommended he should receive his CBE. I suspect he would be proud to be a role model as our first Asian chief constable, provided the police service values his talents as much as the Londoners he currently serves.