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# Making a Presence: Imaginaries of Polity and Constituency in British Muslim Representative Politics

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## Abstract

In its current shape, British Muslim politics has been described as following a ‘democratic constellation’. The idea challenges conventional understandings of post-immigrant agency, especially assumptions underpinning political representation. Recent contributions to the study of representation draw attention to assertions of ‘presence’ or highlight ‘acts of representation’. Both of these perspectives struggle to capture the self-conscious calibration of representative claims that is characteristic for Muslim representative politics today. Developing an alternative account of representation, the paper draws attention to the making of images of Muslim constituencies in correspondence with an image of the British polity. It considers evidence from three cases: (i) the mobilization of Muslim constituents by the advocacy group Mend, (ii) Sadiq Khan’s campaign for the London Mayoralty, and (iii) educational guidance issued by the Muslim Council of Britain.

**Keywords:** British Muslim politics; political representation; politics of presence; social constructivism; Hannah Pitkin

## 1. Introduction

The idea of a ‘democratic constellation’ (Modood, 2013) in British Muslim politics invokes a series of intersecting changes. It points to the multiplication of political organisations with competing agendas, strategic orientations and outlooks on faith. It highlights new forms of engagement with mainstream politics as well as a problematization of group identity. There is now, Modood (2013: 134) suggests, a myriad of ‘organizations, networks, alliances and discourses in which there will be agreement and disagreement, in which group identity will be manifested by way of family resemblances rather than by the idea that one group means one voice’. Bolognani and Statham (2013: 246-7) identify a ‘new generation of skilled and media-savvy Muslims activists’ that, rather than looking inwards, inhabit an ‘associational infrastructure which looks towards the society of

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settlement. Cinalli and O’Flynn (2014: 447) see among Muslim civil society organisations complex ‘deliberative interventions [that] link them to a diverse range of actors, with variable mixtures of consensus, conflict, pragmatism and indifference.’ O’Toole et al. (2013: 17) argue that the ‘landscape of Muslim political and civic organisations has become increasingly diverse and complex over the last decade, with a variety of claims to speak for, or represent, Muslims being articulated.’

The representation of British Muslims in the democratic constellation evidently challenges conceptual tools that scholars apply to account for this type of agency. What used to be a mirror image of British Muslim interests and identities now seems to resemble the view through a kaleidoscope. O’Toole et al. (2013: 28) thus suggest that research into representation now needs to focus on ‘representative claims’ and the ‘pragmatic capacity of claims-makers to carry them out’. Developing the argument, Jones et al. (2015) introduce a number of ‘representational positions’—delegation, authority, expertise, and standing—that are no longer underpinned by invocations of Muslim unity. It is the policy-minded and expertise-driven presentation of issues, usually outside of conventional arenas of representative politics, that distinguishes Muslim political agency today. By contrast, it would appear that there is little space left for forms of representation that aim to mirror a unified community position, propose relationships of delegation and accountability or invoke a Muslim ‘presence’.

Considering the same circumstances, this paper offers a different reading. Rather than seeing representation exhausted by claims about policy expertise, it retains ‘presence’ as an important element of Muslim representational politics. But this view of ‘presence’ diverges from the conventional usage in theories of descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967: 60-91; Phillips, 1995). I draw attention to *images of the British polity and of Muslim constituencies* and suggest that representative politics can be understood as the making of a political presence that brings polity and constituency

images into alignment. With this modification, we are able to better understand the evident complexity of Muslim representational politics in the democratic constellation and grasp its potentials and dilemmas.

The paper develops this argument by working through understandings of representation in political theory, following up on Anne Phillips' (1995) and Michael Saward's (2010) influential modifications of Hannah Pitkin's (1967) seminal work. It then considers three instances of Muslim representative politics: (i) the mobilization of Muslim constituents in the context of the 2015 election; (ii) Sadiq Khan's mayoral campaign in 2016, and (iii) the negotiation of Muslim children's educational 'needs' as a case of representation outside of conventional political arenas. Without capturing the variety of forms that distinguish Muslim agency, the paper presents these instances in the form of snapshots that illustrate a conceptual argument. For each, it draws on statements by Muslim political actors as well as on a small number of interviews with civil society representatives. The paper concludes by considering implications for the study of multicultural politics in contemporary Britain.

## **2. The conceptual order of representation**

Hannah Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation* still provides the fundamental starting point for most contributions to the study of political representation. Pitkin (1967: 10) introduced distinct conceptions of representations as 'flash-bulb photographs of [a] structure taken from different angles'. These include formal representation, which aims for authorization and accountability. But it is Pitkin's discussion of descriptive, symbolic and substantive representation, and her dismissal of descriptive and symbolic types as inappropriate for the purpose of democratic governance, that continue to invite reflection and conceptual advances.

Since the publication of Pitkin's work, two types of advances have added new ways of glimpsing at representation's conceptual structure. Regarding *descriptive representation*, commentators now draw

attention to shared identities where representative democracy sets out to rectify the marginalization of groups.<sup>1</sup> Pitkin (1967: 89) had disavowed descriptive representation—representation as ‘being like you, not acting for you’—by suggesting that it was insufficiently attentive to the element of agency that representation ought to entail. Phillips (1995: 25), by contrast, has argued that the best prospect for marginalized groups lies in a ‘relationship between ideas and presence’. Pitkin’s concentration on ‘substantive acting-for’ risks perpetuating injustices. It disregards the obstacles that many agents face—women, people of colour, and a variety of marginalized groups—whose ability to represent themselves, as well as others, has usually been disavowed (Phillips, 2012). It does little to counter paternalism, and, as Phillips (1995: 43-44) drily remarks, ‘there is something distinctly odd about a democracy that accepts a responsibility for redressing disadvantage but never sees the disadvantaged as the appropriate people to carry this through’. This re-evaluation of ‘presence’ has been consequential for conceptions of representation. Childs and Lovenduski (2013: 490) summarize the state of the art in the field and suggest that ‘after Pitkin no one regarded descriptive representation as important, whilst after Phillips no one regarded it as unimportant’.

Recent advances also seek to defend the value of *symbolic representation* against Pitkin’s (1967: 100) dismissal.<sup>2</sup> Michael Saward (2006; 2010) draws attention to the form of the ‘representative act’, which he situates within an account of political life that is more comprehensive than the one that informs Pitkin’s emphasis on responsive agency. Conventional understandings of representation, Saward (2010: 123) suggests, isolate an often unidirectional relationship between representative and represented and thereby risk ‘freezing and overemphasizing a small number of moments in the wider flow of representative claim-making and reception’. By contrast, Saward (2006: 302) draws attention to the ‘making’ of representations, and to ‘the performing of claims to be representative’.<sup>3</sup>

With this lens representation comes to be seen as an ‘enacted idea, the product of myriad events and their interpretation’ (Saward 2010: 17). This view also entails an understanding of politics as an

activity of articulation and dispute by means of which representative claim are produced, validated or rejected.

Different from Pitkin's preference for substantive representation, constructivist scholarship draws attention to representative acts that appear markedly different in both shape and result. In particular, Squires (2008: 188) suggests that this perspective points towards the constitution of identity positions, rather than their reflection. Similarly, Disch (2015: 450) proposes that the 'constructivist turn' in scholarship on representation explores acts that 'constitute the represented as unified and (typically) as a bearer of interests and demands'. She draws attention to the constitutive role of symbols, and to the wide range of social arenas (see also Saward 2006: 298), where identities are being proposed, validated or dismissed as a legitimate carrier of representative claims. This addition to scholarship on representation directs us towards the making of identities and towards a comprehensive view on the political spaces, which are filled with symbolic stuff and moral grammars, in which representation plays out.

Although current work on representation often acknowledges the merit of both descriptive and symbolic advances, both tend to follow their separate conceptual tracks. Only limited attention has been paid to the implications of the 'constructivist turn' for the 'politics of presence'. There is also scarce concern among constructivist scholars—often enamoured with the mechanics of representative claims-making—for issues that Anne Phillips' important work raises, in particular why marginalized actors would seek to construe a 'presence' or have their 'presence' acknowledged in a particular way. This gap is particularly striking as descriptive and symbolic additions to Pitkin's order become all the more relevant if they are seen to work alongside each other, rather than being considered in separation. This would be the issue where the 'constructivist turn' engages with the

‘politics of presence’—that is, where the representative politics of marginalized populations is explored with an interest in the material and symbolic struggles that bring ‘presence’ about.

There is no lack of historical case material and contemporary examples for the experience of groups whose struggles are enmeshed with contestation about the terms of their collective standing. This is the case where the legitimacy of a group perspective is in doubt, either because this perspective still needs to be constituted or because the representability of important markers of group ‘difference’ is disputed. Examples include the struggle of indigenous populations, such as in the context of the Canadian Indian Act and Pierre Trudeau’s plan in the late 1960s to eliminate ‘Indian Status’ in favour of difference-blind equality. The articulation of indigenous identities in the mobilization against Trudeau and Jean Chrétien, drawing on existing tribal identities as well as claiming, and thereby *making*, a shared First Nation identity, illustrates successful representative articulations of this kind (see, for example, Blackburn, 2009 on the experience of the Nisga’a First Nation). Contemporary examples include mobilizations for equal rights on the basis of marginalized sexual identity positions and the building of coalitions that include transgender, queer or intersex identities through a process of representative claims-making (Haider-Markel, 2010).

Constitutive representation of this type, as the experience of indigenous struggles might imply, is perhaps not best understood as a matter of life or death. Different from how struggles over recognition have often been conceived, representation in this vein is difficult to consider either as ‘a vital human need’ (Taylor, 1992: 26) or as an experience that could reasonably be ‘undistorted’ (Honneth, 1995: 170).<sup>4</sup> It may constitute an important focus for political struggles, addressing the denial of collective standing that often underpins severe injustices. Indeed, such struggles may determine whether a group enters the stage as a new collective actor, or, if mobilization fails, they can imply that group ‘presence’ remains an unconfirmed possibility. This is most tangible in cases

where political claims on behalf of a group are being rejected because authorities are only prepared to engage with individual claimants—not an unfamiliar experience for Muslim organisations in Britain—or dispute the legitimacy of a group perspective altogether. But constitutive representation may equally be concerned with more mundane assertions of political identity, chiefly because it is not wedded to the ideal of authenticity (Taylor, 1991, 1992: 27). Group actors may ask to be viewed in a certain light, foregrounding more appealing qualities, especially those that resonate with prevalent moral frameworks of decency and virtuous citizenship. Such exchanges of constitutive claims are more playful and tentative, implying that the refusal to validate a desired self-description does not necessarily signal a form of disrespect, and is perhaps best viewed as a form of ubiquitous political manoeuvring. The following suggests that this perspective on political ‘presence’ offers an important vantage point on British Muslim politics.

### **3. Imaginaries of polity and constituency**

The preceding argument, pointing to the playfulness of representative claims, does not mean to suggest that there are no important issues at stake in British Muslim representative politics or that this politics would not face particular pressures. Any struggle for the acknowledgment of minority ‘presence’ will be particularly hard if there is dispute about classification, that is, about the criteria according to which the legitimacy of a group presence is to be judged. British Muslim politics illustrates such difficulties and the following considers challenges for representation that pertain to the nature of Muslim ‘difference’ and to the polity that allows for this ‘difference’ to become present.

First, the nature of Muslim group difference—the ‘corporeality’ of Muslims as Muslims—is acutely contested.<sup>5</sup> The place of ethno-religious culture as a basis for group differentiation, collective political agency or group rights has been consistently problematized. Academic commentators draw

attention to oppressive outcomes experienced by less powerful members (Okin, 1999), or to the rigidity that ethno-cultural differentiation allegedly implies (Gilroy, 2004). They bemoan the lack of analytical rigour in identity-based explanations of political behaviour or suggest that group-based requests, such as for recognition, are impossible to accommodate in ‘the liberal state’. Moreover, disputes over the applicability of racial, ethnic or religious schemes of classification towards Muslim ‘difference’ render this difference elusive and sustain the widespread denial of Islamophobia as racism (Meer, 2008).

The second reason for such difficulties relates to imaginaries of the political whole—the ‘polity’—that representative claims invoke.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, a welcoming attitude towards Muslim representative claims requires some endorsement of the legitimate presence of multiple ethno-religious identities, such as in a form of political multiculturalism, the commitment to associational pluralism or a (more basic) preference for non-interference. Such commitments can be derived from distinct philosophical traditions and historical precedents, some of which are more demanding than others. Regardless of their underpinning, they are open to dispute on the basis of more uniform and exclusionary imaginaries of the British polity. Today’s civilizational populism (Brubaker, 2017), which has a presence well beyond Britain’s political fringes, or the sovereigntist imagery of muscular liberalism (Dobbernack, 2017), leave little space for Muslim ‘presence’. In response to such images, Muslim disputants invoke a polity that is characterized by norms of equality and constitutional or moral principles that are conducive to their presence. In doing so, they invoke images that lend credibility to their representative claims. The pluralism intimated in the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain’s report—suggesting that Britain was a ‘community of citizens and a community of communities, both a liberal and a multicultural society’ (CMEB, 2000)—provides one template for this image-making. But, as will be argued below, ideas of meritocracy, cosmopolitanism and civic virtue also supply material for representative acts.

This addition of imaginaries expands constructivist understandings of representation. Constructivist scholars highlight the making of identities as part of the representative process. They point to moments when ‘representatives engage in constitutive practices’ (Squires, 2008: 200). Saward (2010) draws attention to ‘practices of constituting citizen identities’ (2008: 414) and operations in which ‘audiences are invoked and perhaps (fleetingly or otherwise) constituted, through claim and counterclaim’ (2010: 28). His suggestions appear to resonate with accounts of Muslim political agency in contemporary Britain, which—as Modood (1997: 290) already suggested in the Fourth Survey Report of Ethnic Minorities—consists of ‘counterposing “positive” images against traditional or dominant stereotypes’.

Yet this type of image-making lacks a crucial component if it is understood as the voluntaristic projection of a desired identity that is either accepted or rejected, depending on the plausibility of claim and the position of the claim-maker. Saward (2010: 46) suggests that representative claims must ‘tap into familiar, or at least recognizable or emergent, contextual frameworks’. But he does not consider the most plausible *political framework* for such claims, which is the *framework of politics*—that is, the rules, values and practices that constitute the polity. Such political imaginaries deserve additional interest.

To summarize my argument, then, the constitution of group identities through representative claims-making will often, perhaps most frequently, be accompanied by claims about the polity. These are best understood as images that render the political whole visible in a way that is hospitable to particular forms of group presence. This can be an image that allows foregrounding certain normative or procedural commitments that are characteristic for the polity and that necessitate the acceptance of group requests. Such images form part of the material that is invoked to demarcate a political group identity that has its claims of legitimate groupness validated. In unproblematic cases,

this validation may be tacit as the fit between polity image and representative claim is taken for granted. Yet where representative claims are genuinely constitutive in that they invoke a group position that is not widely accepted—that has not yet been brought about as a legitimately unified carrier of political demands—correspondence between the two becomes an important political objective. Following this understanding, constitutive representation is best understood as the making of constituency images alongside images of the polity in which the constituency in question has a legitimate presence. In struggles over representation, the two sorts of images need to be brought into some form of alignment to assert a presence that can redeem a representative claim.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Representative Politics in the Democratic Constellation**

Applying this suggestion to the context of interest in this paper, the argument here is that British Muslim politics in the democratic constellation can be understood as the struggle over polity and constituency images. As I will suggest in the following, such struggles are both productive and reactive: representational image-making responds to prevalent biases but also produces genuinely creative responses that are not merely a reflection of bias.

A prominent theme for critics of Muslims' political presence is that Muslim constituents respond to sectarian appeals 'not as primarily British citizens but solely as Muslims' (Pollard, 2012). Muslims are 'in thrall of powerful interests', ' beholden to community leaders' or 'block voters'—all of which are presented as antithetical to an image of legitimate political agency in the liberal polity (see Dobbernack et al., 2015 for an overview of themes). Countering such accusations, Muslim activists emphasize the 'maturity' of their constituents and thoughtful electoral choices by Muslim citizens who form their own views on the basis of calculated and mature political choices. In a similar vein, the MCB suggests, for example in its 2010 mobilization to the General Election, that 'the Muslim voter, like any other Briton, may well make discerning choices of which their 'Muslim identity', if

ever there was one, is only a part of a menu of considerations' (MCB, 2010). Factionalism continues to be an important issue that Muslim organisations address when they aim to project an image of Muslim constituents that defeats accusations of sectarian narrowmindedness.

Such portrayals of Muslim communities in Britain are not merely factual and informative, aimed at heightening public awareness of British Muslims, their internal composition and electoral weight. They are equally incitements, which present constituencies in a certain light, or showcase potentials that (it is claimed) will eventually be recognized once the constituency in question—appropriately educated and on its best behaviour—lives up to an inherent promise. They are also not merely reactive to prevalent experience of misrecognition, I suggest here, but outline a positive political presence for British Muslims.

The section illustrates this type of representative claims-making in the case of (i) Mend's electoral mobilization in the context of the general election 2015, (ii) Sadiq Khan's election as London Mayor in 2016, and (iii) the MCB's publication of a manual for the accommodation of Muslim pupils and its aftermath in the 'Trojan Horse' affair. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive account for each episode, but to consider a selected number of speech acts that illustrate representative claims-making and the role of constituency and polity images.

#### *i. Electoral mobilizations: MEND*

The 'Muslim Manifesto' that the community and advocacy organisation Mend (Muslim Engagement and Development) published in the run-up to the General Election 2015 illustrates a type of politics that is in tune with notions of active citizenship and democratic maturity. The document sets out a detailed commentary on important policy issues, drawn from the areas of religious equality, education, counter-terrorism and employment. Mend introduces these as 'areas that matter to or

have an impact on British Muslims’, to each of which it attached ‘policy asks’ as being in the interest of ‘the betterment of the community and its needs’ (MEND, 2015: 5).

Mend’s representative claims are highly qualified. There is no consultative mechanism that would support strong statements of formal legitimation through consultation. There is also no account of how organisational membership might reflect a particular cross-section of British Muslims that would render Mend’s policy claims representative. Instead, Mend is strongly committed to the idea of Muslim multiplicity, both as a description of community affairs and as a desirable condition for British Muslims. The upshot of this positioning is that Mend is able to deliver recommendations without making a strong case for their formal validation by Muslim constituents or (even) their resonance with actual Muslim communities. Its ‘policy asks’ will be received on the basis of Mend’s organisational reputation and its claim to political expertise.

But this does not mean that representation has been evacuated or that Mend’s representative politics would exhaust itself in claims to policy expertise. Mend’s advocacy effort conveys an image of Muslim communities and of the British polity that needs to be understood in the sense outlined above. Its account of Muslim communities draws attention to their demographic profile, such as the relative youth of British Muslims (Mend, 2015: 5). Mend gives a political reading of demographic facts, highlighting the large ‘number of first time voters’ (2015: 5) and growing ‘level of education [which] has improved significantly’ (Interview 1, 2015). The manifesto also draws attention to the fact that Muslims are significantly more likely to subscribe to an ‘official identification with a “British-only” identity’ (Mend, 2015: 5). The democratic competence of British Muslims and their civic virtues as active British citizens are the central message here. The corresponding image is one of Britain as an inspired civic polity.

The consideration of Muslim foreign policy concerns in the manifesto also illustrates this type of representative invocation. In British Muslim civil society, the conflicts in Bosnia, Iraq, Syria and Palestine have often been brought into view as instances of oppression towards co-religionists in the global *ummah*. This presentation of injustices does not (necessarily) amount to religious parochialism or disregard for the oppression of non-Muslims. Yet this is how it can be perceived and Mend, in the framing of its foreign policy ‘asks’, responds to this perception. It claims that Muslims are now ‘more likely to talk about human rights and the rule of law or the rule of international law’ (2015, Interview 2). This represents a shift that should be understood in terms of ‘maturity’, as one of Mend’s two advocacy leads argues:

I don’t know whether or not this is something say about the level of maturity of Muslim civil society is that you take.... Your reference points change as you become more confident about why this matters to you and how it is that you seek redress of grievance and how it is that you communicate this particular issue to a wider body of people within society that also hold views that are very similar to you own. (2015, Interview 2)

The speaker paints a picture of Muslim constituencies as increasingly mature and highlights the increasing ‘confidence’ of constituents who, for example, ‘challenge MPs about their records and the way they have been dealing with things that matter to Muslim communities’ (2015, Interview 2). These are descriptions of a British Muslim condition but they are equally presented as forms of incitement, pointing towards desired expressions of active citizenship. This includes the idea, for example, that ‘you can keep your Muslim identity, that is not an issue, but you need to fulfil your citizenship role’ (2015, Interview 1). A corresponding account of the UK as a liberal polity, valuing the civic contribution that Muslim citizens make, provides the background for this representative invocation.

## *ii. Mayoral politics: Sadiq Khan’s election*

The election to the London mayoralty in 2016 stands out as a particularly toxic episode of anti-Muslim politics. The accusation that the Labour candidate, Sadiq Khan, had forged ties with Islamic extremists largely drew on tenuous family connections, Khan's professional background as a defence lawyer, and his constituency work as Member of Parliament for Tooting. In an editorial adorned with the image of the blown-out No 30 bus from the 7/7 attacks, Khan's opponent, Zac Goldsmith, warned about the fallout from a possible Labour victory: 'we will have handed control of the Met, and with it control over national counter-terrorism policy, to a party whose candidate and current leadership have, whether intentionally or not, repeatedly legitimised those with extremist views' (Goldsmith, 2016). In publicized talking points and direct mail sent to Jewish, Indian and Tamil constituents, Goldsmith's campaign sought to draw attention to Khan's 'divisive and radical politics' (Cecil, 2015) by offering—Khan's team counter-claimed—coded references to Khan's Muslim background.

The deployment of Khan's religious identity by his opponents did not, of course, prevent his election. Demographic change has turned London into a difficult terrain for Tory candidates (Beckett, 2016). Yet a strategic effort by Khan's team to dispute the characterisation of their candidate as risky and parochial Muslim will have played a role, too (Bienkov, 2016). The 2016 campaign for the London mayoralty is instructive, then, for the stigma attached to Khan's background but also for the strategic effort expended at defeating stigma and asserting a Muslim presence, albeit in highly qualified terms.

Similar to previous electoral campaigns in London, attacks on Khan in 2016 also centred on alleged ties with 'toxic' Muslim civil society groups and individuals. Critics accused Khan of courting a 'Muslim vote' (see Hopkins, 2016; Stone, 2016). Yet Khan also had to embark on careful manoeuvring when accounting for his own background. He suggested that he would not want to be

seen ‘solely defined by [his] faith’ (Khan, 2016a) and invoked religion as one among a number of identities as ‘a Londoner, a son and a father’ (Khan, 2016a). Alternative narratives centred on the experience of upward mobility—with Khan (2016b) suggesting he ‘never dreamed that someone like me could be elected as Mayor of London’—as well as on London’s cosmopolitan character: ‘The Khan story is a London story’ (Economist, 2016).

In some respects, this positioning appears to amount to a disavowal of Muslim representation, and Khan’s statements about his faith were certainly registered by some Muslim activists as such (e.g., Salih, 2016). But it is noteworthy that this disavowal, and Khan’s emphasis on the multiplicity of his personal identities, continues to make space for a Muslim presence. It invokes a conception of London as distinctive for its commitment to cosmopolitanism and social mobility, and it is such commitments that make a Muslim presence thinkable. Goldsmith’s attack on Khan, conversely, could be portrayed as a denigration of distinctive attributes of the city.

The polity image that Khan invoked—here: an image of London that prioritizes the city’s cosmopolitan qualities and meritocratic commitments—thus aligns with attributes that he claims for London’s Muslim inhabitants as well as for himself. Where Mend draws attention to British Muslims’ democratic engagement in a polity that valorizes ‘active citizenship’, Khan invokes an aspirational image of the city in correspondence with a vibrant imagery of its resident Muslims. Although this response turned out to be effective during the mayoral campaign, it also limits the scope for political claims that it can possibly underpin. The following considers a problematic instance of representative image-making to reinforce this point.

### *iii. Representing pupils’ ‘needs’: the MCB’s educational guidance*

Invocations of a Muslim constituency, or in this case of Muslim pupils’ religious ‘needs’, run into trouble if they align with images that no longer appeal or that are heavily contested. In the case of

Mend, the democratic constellation, with its corresponding canon of civic virtues, provides a widely acceptable framework. The cosmopolitan and aspirational values that Khan invoked as characteristic for London also seem beyond reproach and align with an account of the Muslim presence in the city. Other representative acts, however, especially invocations of liberal rights or multicultural respect, turn out to be more problematic.

This is evident in the case of educational guidance that the MCB (2007) issued on the accommodation of Muslim students in state schools. The report, authored by Tahir Alam as the chair of the MCB's Education Committee, was immediately challenged for its portrayal of Muslim collective needs and accused, for example, of "Arabising" Britain's predominantly South Asian Muslims' (Godson, 2007). Competing guidance issued by British Muslims for Secular Democracy (BMSD, 2010: 6, capitals in original) offered a contrast by stressing that '[p]ractices and beliefs that define groups and individuals are precious, but they cannot become the sole basis for policies and politics. CULTURE IS DYNAMIC, not static and set in stone forever.' The MCB had made no such claims about culture, but it had emphasized a number of important requests—dealing with the acceptance of religious dress and participation in swimming lessons, for example—that 'frequently arise as concerns for Muslim pupils and parents within schools' (MCB, 2007: 19).

The dispute over the guidance is relevant as the MCB's booklet was picked up in the course of the so-called Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham, which saw authorities identify a conspiracy among Muslim educationalist—allegedly guided by Alam—to 'infiltrate' schools in order to pursue a dangerous agenda of religious indoctrination (Miah, 2014; Dobbernack, 2017). A report by Peter Clarke, a former counter-terrorism official appointed by the then-Education Minister, Michael Gove, made prominent reference to MCB guidance notes. Clarke (2014: 48) alleged that the MCB report assumed 'the many Muslim pupils in the UK to be a cohesive group defined by their religion,

[and that it] urges schools to do more to respond ‘positively to the educational concerns and aspirations of Muslim pupils and their parents’. Mirroring sensationalist reporting on the case, Clarke considered these requests to be part of an intricate conspiracy that should be viewed through the government’s prism of radicalisation and as a security threat.

In an interview, Tahir Alam justified the guidance notes in the following terms:

[We were] just saying practically what schools should do to make a Muslim child feel comfortable... it is not asking to make the school into a Muslim school, you know? It’s not asking for that, although I could ask for that, of course, on the basis of the principle that we are right to educate our children according to the wishes of their parents, not according to the wishes of some guy who’s never seen the child and never seen the parent either... But I’m not really talking about that, I’m saying that if schools are, you know, serving the Muslim community, they should make, you know, every effort to accommodate them, in a way that respects them, values them, and so on. That’s the basic principle of respect. That’s all the document is saying, very basic things. (Interview, 6 April 2011)

Alam requests the accommodation of Muslim pupils’ needs as a matter of due respect to children’s and parental religious choices. He considers the suggestions in the booklet as ‘very practical, very mild’ and contrasts them with more far-ranging demands that could also be legitimately put forward in the context of British education, such as for the introduction of more Muslim faith schools. The pursuit of religious accommodation in state schools, as well as efforts to increase the number of Muslim school governors, are merely concerned with making British schools live up to their inherent promise of fairness and equality: ‘In a democratic society institutions should reflect the communities they serve, it is about having fairer representation’ (Alam cited in McKinney, 2015). Alam has since been subject to a ban excluding him, and a number of fellow educationalists, from any involvement with British educational establishments (Holmwood, 2015).<sup>8</sup>

The Trojan Horse case illustrates sensationalism in the press and the impact of an ever-expanding counter-terrorist apparatus (Ragazzi, 2016). But it also shows an economy of representative claims-making and the vulnerability of positions that invoke the Muslim presence in ways that invite

disapproval. Alam's consternation about resistance to requests for respectful treatment of Muslim pupils—claims that he considers to be fairly minimal—reinforces the point: it is not the substance of requests for accommodations of religious sensitivities that would explain their vulnerability, but the polity and constituency images that underpin them. This is the idea of Britain as a 'community of communities' that is hospitable to minority 'difference', which it recognizes or respects. It is also an image of the liberal polity that recognizes and accommodates citizen's religious choices. The 'passive tolerance' that Cameron (2011) invokes as a negative has been challenged by the more activist imagery of 'muscular liberalism'. The claim that liberal or multicultural commitments require the accommodation of Muslim religious practice is vulnerable because the scope of such commitments, at least as a matter of public discourse, is in doubt.

## **5. Discussion**

The material from three instances that I have presented here, though it only provides for a very incomplete account, suggests that there is still space for asserting a Muslim 'presence' in British politics. The three episodes also indicate that this 'presence' is responsive to considerable pressure and that, to underpin successful mobilizations and representative claims, representative acts may need to draw on a range of new images and attributes. Earlier claims to reflect the 'full spectrum of Muslim life in Britain' (Muslim Parliament, 1990: 5) are no longer heard. But the polity and constituency images that Muslim actors invoke also show signs of adaptation. Rather than invoking liberal or multicultural polity images that could support rights-based claims, there is a heightened presence of alternative symbolic forms—of the civic polity, the meritocratic economy, or the cosmopolitan city—which allow a Muslim presence to be asserted. All of these polity images are problematic, drawing on a selective reading of social reality and cementing, rather than challenging, the individualizing grasp of neoliberal order. The promise of upward mobility that 'the Khan story' embodies evidently fails to capture the precarious and stagnant reality of employment for many

Muslim Londoners; the cosmopolitan vibrancy that distinguishes the city, though it leaves some space for religious pluralism, is an equally imperfect account. Yet despite their incompleteness, such polity images provide a starting for Muslim representative politics.

This is equally the case for the democratic constellation, which makes images available that allow for reactive and creative acts of representation. It provides a repertoire of virtues and practices that serve to sketch out a Muslim civic presence, which allows countering accusations of sectarianism, ethnic parochialism and democratic immaturity. It invokes an ideal of active citizenship that resonates with the civic purposes that now loom large also in the government's agenda of British values, which has been launched in the aftermath of the Trojan Horse affair (Cameron, 2014). Accusations levelled against British Muslims for 'clinging to grievances' can thus be countered, and British Muslims can be portrayed as model citizens of the civic polity.

The resultant politics is both empowering and constraining. The democratic constellation allows Muslim actors to defeat widespread biases and to carve out a positive political presence. But it also cements a special status for Muslim agency, which it subjects to evaluation according to exceptionally high standards. Political mobilizations by other groups do not usually have to pass similar tests of civicness. The critique of Muslim groupness that representative claims are subjected to, often taking issue with alleged essentialism or uniformity, reflects similar double standards, to which the emphasis on multiplicity in the democratic constellation provides a response. Yet as a matter of representative politics, such 'test[s] of coherence', Sagar (2000: 218) rightly suggests, are 'unrealistically tough'.

It deserves mentioning that such dilemmas of representation do not singularly affect Muslims. They mirror a disembedding that is visible across Western democracies, which experience fragmentation and the de-coupling of representative organisations from social milieus (Mair, 2013; Tomey, 2015).

Powerful actors that used to dominate political arenas can now less plausibly claim to speak on behalf of social constituencies, and social democratic parties or women's organisations struggle with similar challenges when aiming to bundle and articulate a working class or women's view. Castiglione (2012: 518-9) speaks in this context about the crisis of a 'standard model' of political representation that focuses on principal-agent relationships, is territorially bounded, concerned with demarcated spaces of deliberation (e.g., parliaments), and highlights clear channels of influence and responsiveness. It is possible that creative responses to challenges of representative claims-making, such as images that demarcate a positive presence, will be more widely noted. This concern with symbolic agency may be considered as a regrettable supplement— 'emotional, affective, irrational' (Pitkin 1967, 100)—to representative politics. But without considering it we are likely to miss out on important political acts not least by less powerful actors that seek to project a 'presence' in the face of significant pressure.

## **6. Conclusion**

The paper has suggested that Muslim representative politics today is characterized by hesitancy about claims that invoke an idea of 'presence' and a collective voice. There is a careful manoeuvring evident among actors that appeal to notions of Muslim groupness and the disavowal of activism that is deemed problematic for adhering to simplistic conceptions of group identity. An emphasis on complexity, as well as on the unpredictability of collective political choices, characterizes this agency. This is even the case for representative organisations, such as Mend, that could be expected to propagate an assertive, faith-based politics and invoke a unified voice as part of their ambition to increase British Muslims' political weight.

As a description of new circumstances, then, the democratic constellation entails a diagnostic dimension that captures growing levels of complexity in civil society and the decline of political

forms that were distinctive for previous eras. But it also points in the direction of a forward-looking, aspirational politics in two intersecting ways. It invokes an image of the inspired, civic polity and portrays British Muslims as its ideal members. The paper has suggested that this ‘making’ of a democratic political presence, which works with images of both the British polity and its Muslim citizens, provides a useful template to conceptualize acts of political representation.

Conceptualizing representation along these lines, it is simply not the case that Muslim representative politics has been evacuated in favour of mostly technical claims about policy expertise. We still need to study assertions of ‘presence’, although these are often calibrated invocations of democratic maturity, policy expertise, cosmopolitanism or meritocracy. Understanding representation as a type of political-symbolic agency that seeks to align constituency and polity, I have argued here, supplements both constructivist perspectives and conceptions of descriptive representation. It adds a political dimension to Saward’s (2010) work and it directs studies of representation that follow Phillips’ (1995) important contribution towards symbolic orders that enable and constrain assertions of ‘presence’.

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## Endnotes:

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- 1 Clearly, Pitkin was strongly committed to an idea of political unity that now appears problematic. The need to question formal democratic procedures that invoke a 'unified public' (Young 2000, 183-5), often at the expense of expressions of 'difference,' has become more widely recognized. Similarly, Pitkin's suggestion that the 'representative system must look after the public interest and be responsive to public opinion' (1967, 224) invites questions about boundaries and exclusions in the public sphere. The articulation of political concerns envisaged in the representative process—their aggregation into shared, public concerns—needs to account for legacies of subordination that make it more difficult for *some* contributions to qualify as legitimate representative claims.
  - 2 Pitkin (1967, 100) considered symbolic representation as resting on 'emotional, affective, irrational psychological responses rather than on rationally justifiable criteria' and as potentially dangerous. There is some ambiguity in her work whether this danger consists of a dangerous

subjectivism if symbolic invocations become paramount or if her concern is about populist invocations of society as an organic whole, which she appears to consider as a necessary outcome of symbolic representation.

- 3 Seward follows elements of Ernesto Laclau's suggestions regarding articulations of equivalence and difference in political rhetoric. For Laclau (2005, 158), representation is a relationship in which the 'represented depends on the representative for the constitution of his or her own identity.'
- 4 Challenged representation does not automatically constitute a 'harm' as acts of representation, at least in circumstances of competitive politics, can hardly expect to receive validation without dispute. The contested framing of collective identities forms part of the manoeuvring that constitutes everyday politics. Links of equivalence that actors put forward in their claim to represent complex sections in society will be open to dispute. This is the case for interests and identity groups that propose to speak on behalf of any social constituency. It is not surprising, then, that of the idea of a 'Muslim vote', of a 'Muslim perspective' or of 'Muslim interests' are often thought to be problematic. But exempting Muslim organisations from such contestation of their collective claims cements a special status, rather than making space for them in a pluralized domain of interest- and identity-based politics.
- 5 This is captured well by Tyrer and Sayyid (2012, 355) in their reference to Muslims as 'ghosts' that are 'alternately unreal or terrifyingly hyperreal'. Muslims are 'paradoxically racialized as being incompletely racialized, and constructed as being excessively different (yet at the same time not really there)' (2012, 364, see also Sayyid 2003, 1). Interestingly, this paradox of Muslim 'difference' tracks a paradox that distinguishes any the representative claim, which after all deals with 'things' that are 'simultaneously present and not present' (Pitkin 1967, 9).
- 6 I use 'images' and 'imaginaries' interchangeably. For a discussion of 'social imaginaries', see Dobbernack (2014, 33-38).
- 7 'Alignment' is reminiscent of the literature on framing in social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000). But a more useful backdrop for my argument is provided by pragmatic theories of value and especially by work on 'moral grammars', which Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 66) conceive of as 'bodies of prescriptive rules that make it possible to build a harmonious polity and as models of the shared competence required of persons in order for agreement to be possible'. For reasons of space, I do not pursue this here.
- 8 At the time of writing, a number of these bans have been overturned in the courts, including in one case that found egregious abuses of justice by lawyers acting for the Department for Education (Moorhead, 2017), leading to acquittals for three former principals and two senior teachers that had been employed in schools that were implicated in the 'Trojan Horse' affair. More legal challenges are pending.