THE NEW STATESMAN

Long reads 16 August 2011

Q&A: Shabana Mahmood MP

"There are some very well-to-do people that did some stupid stuff in my city."

By Sophie Elmhirst

What's the mood like now in Birmingham?

People want to send a clear signal that they're proud of their home city. They want to draw a line under what happened. Obviously in the Winson Green area, where the three deaths occurred, people are still shocked — it's going to take time for it to sink in, once the media and everybody else have gone away.

Were you worried about a violent retaliation after the deaths?

There was a very real concern. I am clear that the intervention of Tariq Jahan was instrumental in preventing any further trouble. When he said, "I lost my son. Step forward if you want to lose your sons. Otherwise, calm down and go home" — that was really powerful, particularly because he was able to talk directly to some of the young men who were angry and distraught. Obviously they had enough respect for his message and his loss to listen and behave in a responsible way. He is an absolute hero.

Is part of that dignity something which is implicit in Islam?

He's behaved in a way that is an example not just to Muslims but to all of us. It is in keeping with the respectful, dignified spirit of Ramadan, a peaceful month for people to reflect and to foster their connection with God. I can't pay enough tribute to him.

Having grown up in Birmingham, how did you feel when the trouble broke out?

phone shops in the city centre. Some of them would have been well-behaved kids or people who had not been in trouble with the police before and now they're going to wake up to serious criminal records that will potentially affect the rest of their lives.

Many things have been blamed for the riots — what's your view?

I don't think there's any one reason. There are some very well-to-do people that did some stupid stuff in my city. Trying to process all of that requires a lot of soul-searching. I'd be a bit worried about trying to pigeonhole it, when actually it's a combination of lots of very different factors — poverty, education, drug and gang culture, alcohol, and all the rest.

What about Cameron's diagnosis of a "sickness" in society?

Some of the behaviour of some people was sickening — I would describe it in that way. But we've got to be careful not to come at it from ideological perspectives. We need to be out there talking to people to try and make sense of it all.

What's your strategy now?

I'm home and I'm going to be here for the rest of the summer. In one of the meetings we had on Wednesday with local residents, lots of whom had been on Dudley Road when the murders happened, there was a lot of anger — people raised concerns about the police presence in the area, the response time, the delay in getting an ambulance to the scene. That's a dialogue I'm going to carry on having with the local community and the police, because if there are lessons to learn, they need to be learned.

What do you think the role of the family is in all this?

Once the disorder started, one of the first things I called for was for parents to phone their kids and get them home and out of the trouble. We need to have a dialogue about parenting and family more generally, but not everybody who was involved comes from a broken home. One of the things we should keep in mind through all of this, particularly when you talk about a lot of the ethnic-minority

Do you think immigrant communities have a stronger sense of solidarity than British-born communities?

I think there are cultural elements that bind together different communities. In the South Asian community, there's the religious binding, but beyond that people consider themselves almost relatives when they all hail from the same part of the same region of Pakistan or India or Kashmir. In the African-Caribbean community, churches are very strong, they're rooted in their community and they're good at getting people together.

You were one of the first Muslim women to be elected as a member of parliament. What role did your family play in that?

My family are key to everything I've ever done in my life. My parents are incredibly supportive, and have always wanted me to achieve to the best of my ability. There was no question of my brother getting more of a chance in life than me. I have a twin brother and we're both the eldest, so whenever an opportunity came along it had to be for both of us. I came to the decision that I wanted to run for election, and my family rode in behind me straight away and were out there campaigning for me.

Did you encounter opposition from your wider community to the idea of you running?

I didn't get as much flack as I thought I might. The community elders got behind me and thought it was a breath of fresh air.

Why did you want to go into politics?

I've always been a political person. I grew up in a Labour family, and both my parents are longstanding Labour Party members. My dad's a real activist and is currently chair of Birmingham Labour Party, so this is what I've grown up with.

Where did their politics come from?

society. And then there was a strong belief in social justice because we found opportunities in this country that would not have been available to us in the village that we hail from in Kashmir and then Pakistan. It's that sense that everyone should have the same opportunity to make the best of themselves. That's what I've grown up with and that's what I want to see made available to everyone in my constituency.

You represent the area you grew up in. Was that important to you?

I'm a Brummie, and representing a Birmingham constituency — having lived here my whole life, having gone to school here — is really important to me. Serving the community that I've grown up in and that I want to see do better is my reason for being in politics.

Have you ever experienced Islamophobia?

Unsurprisingly for someone who is both Asian and Muslim, I have suffered racism and Islamophobia, name-calling and that kind of stuff. But equally, putting myself up for election, I might have expected more. Over the entire the campaign I received only one abusive email and one abusive text message. On the campaign trail, no matter who I was talking to, I was given a good reception.

For the most part, our communities in Birmingham are strong and live together peacefully, but we could focus on doing more to let our different communities get to know one other. That's how you understand that people's fundamental concerns are the same — they want to get on in life, they want access to good education, good health. Those are the things that unite pretty much all of my constituents.

Is there anything you regret?

I try to live without regrets.

Is there a plan?

There's no big plan, but once I decide to do something I'm a real planner.

Hell no. What would be the point, if we weren't optimistic? Every day I meet people who make me feel positive.

Topics in this article : Shabana Mahmood

Sophie Elmhirst is a freelance writer and former features editor at the New Statesman.

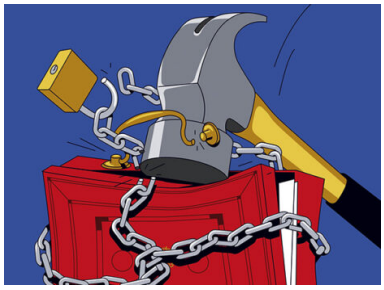
Related

Cover Story

Exclusive: Andy Burnham's plan for Britain

Special Report

Born in chains



Cover Story

Just raise tax

More from this author

See All

Sophie Elmhirst

Things can only get meta: Kirsty Gunn's Infidelities reviewed

More of this topic

Cover Story

Exclusive: Andy Burnham's plan for Britain

Special Report

Born in chains

Cover Story

Just raise tax

Recent Podcasts

Politics podcast

The spectre of Farage looms over Labour conference

Today 10:51 am

Starmer has a lot to prove at Labour conference

Politics podcast

Who does the Tony Blair Institute really work for?

Reviewing politics and culture since 1913