

Parliamentary Debate on the British Sikh Community

In an earlier issue of this Journal (Vol. 7, No 2, Fall, 2000) we reported on the first parliamentary debate on the *Punjabi community in Britain*. We now reproduce the first Parliament debate on the *Sikh Community* which took place on Wednesday 13th March 2013 in Westminster Hall with Albert Owen in the Chair. The full debate is reproduced below. These debates are important as they not only provide the context, they also tell us about the nature of interactions between MPs and their Sikh constituents, their knowledge and perceptions about them. Furthermore, they provide important insights on the electoral pulse of the time as elections were nearing, on the nature of lobbying by Sikhs groups and discourses within Sikh community.

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9.30 am

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, I think for the first time.

I pay tribute to the inspiration behind the debate, which was that of the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) who runs the all-party group for British Sikhs, and to the excellent work of that group in Parliament and the way in which it has helped to recognise the contribution of the Sikh community to our country. I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Paul Uppal) and the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma); they have probably put in more effort for the Sikh community than any other Members, and their work has been over a considerable number of years in their own communities and in the wider country.

I want to concentrate on the success of the British Sikh community; I do not intend to dwell on politics in India and what is happening there. I want to highlight how the successful work of the Sikh community has evolved in this country over the years, which I will illustrate by highlighting a few areas in my own constituency.

Sikhs make up the largest ethnic minority group in Dartford and they have integrated into the community so that today they form an integral part of the local population. The local gurdwara, Hargobind, is a lively, bustling and welcoming place. I mentioned the temple in my maiden speech, because it sits right next door to our Baptist church on Highfield road in Dartford. Both congregations enjoy extremely cordial relationships with each other; there is

absolutely no hint of friction whatever, which is very much a testimony to our good race relations in the area.

Mr Lee Scott (Ilford North) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that because of the racial harmony experienced not only in his constituency but in constituencies such as mine we must commend the Sikh community for how it works together with all other communities? I have many communities in my constituency living in peace and harmony and working together, and I congratulate the Sikh community on its leadership and input.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but an extra point is that the good relationship does not happen accidentally; it takes a lot of hard work from the indigenous population and the Sikh community. It is absolutely essential for everyone to play their role and not to take for granted the good relationships that exist between the Sikhs and every other part of the community.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important and timely debate. Does he agree that the temples, or gurdwaras as we call them, are not only places to worship? They are places to promote equality and even secularism and to bring health and education to the community, so that every community can get involved and receive the benefit.

Gareth Johnson: That is an important point. In my experience, what has always been obvious from the moment I have walked through the door of a Sikh temple is the welcoming nature and community spirit that exist there. The Sikhs who worship in gurdwaras do not say, "This is just for us Sikhs. It is not for anyone else to become involved. This is a closed shop that no one else can enter into." What is so obvious is the open-door policy, for everyone to come in and celebrate Sikhism, which is perhaps a lesson to every other religion in the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the attention of the House. He mentioned the Baptist church and the Sikh temple working together; the Sikh community and Baptist churches also worked together to put on record their opinion of and opposition to the Marriages (Same Sex Couples) Bill. Does he feel that that is a supreme example of two different religions working together to oppose something that they see as wrong?

Gareth Johnson: Forgive me, but I will not concentrate on the issue of gay marriage today. We have had that debate in the main Chamber. I certainly pay

tribute, however, to the existence of common political ground between various religions; it is heartening to see those two religions working together for a common interest.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I will not go down the avenue of gay marriages either. For many years, certainly in Coventry, I have dealt with the Sikh community, as leader of Coventry city council and as an MP. To return to the point made earlier by the hon. Gentleman, one of the things that strikes people when they go to a temple, if they do not know much about the Sikh community, is the way that they share food with the rest of the community—that is open to the community. People should bear it in mind that one of the major contributions of the Sikh community, certainly in Coventry and probably nationally, is that it gets involved with other faiths—in the Council of Churches, for example. More importantly, it makes a major contribution to education, medical science, medical ethics and so forth. The Sikhs punch above their weight, frankly. We should acknowledge that.

Gareth Johnson: That is an excellent point. My local Sikh temple is very much a community hub. I worked with a Sikh by the name of Jatinder Sokhal in a firm of solicitors before being elected to this place; he said that, when he was studying at university and could not even afford to feed himself, he went down to his local Sikh temple, was welcomed and fed. The benevolence, therefore, in many Sikh temples is something that we should remark upon.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He has just made a point that is very true in my home city of Southampton. The students know that if they wish to get not only wonderful food but free food, the gurdwara is the place to go for it. Every year, the Southampton Council of Faiths holds an annual peace walk, which has almost become a frenzy of competitive feeding, as the different religions compete to ensure that those enjoying the peace walk and the different religions coming together get the best food at whichever religious building they attend.

Gareth Johnson: That is absolutely right. A source of pride in the temple is how well its members can provide for the community and how hospitable they can be. That is very much to their credit.

I will now make some progress—

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Johnson: I will give way and then make some progress.

Jonathan Ashworth: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on, I must bring Leicester into this part of the discussion. We are a proudly diverse city, strong and vibrant today thanks in part to the contribution of our Sikh community. I pay tribute to the Leicestershire Sikh Alliance and to the many gurdwaras in Leicester, some of which host me for regular advice surgeries. Given that the Sikh community has played such a prominent role not only in cities such as Leicester and Wolverhampton but in British history, does he agree that the Sikh contribution to the first and second world wars should be given greater prominence in our national debate as we look towards the commemorations of the first world war?

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I pay tribute to his work in his local Sikh community. Those of the Sikh religion have undoubtedly made a disproportionately large contribution to the British armed forces and to the first and second world wars, in which they served with huge distinction. Today, there are many Sikhs in the British Army. Later in my speech, I will talk about the Guardsman who has been able to serve without a bearskin, which illustrates the selfless manner in which many Sikhs have served this country. It is something we should be grateful for.

Recently, I had the pleasure of attending a gurdwara in Gravesend, for the wedding of Mr Avtar Sandhu's daughter. The ceremony was held in the gurdwara Nanak, which is the largest Sikh temple not just in Europe, but outside India. What struck me about the building was not just its beauty, but the way in which it was built. If anyone is looking for an example of the big society in action, the building of that Sikh temple is a classic one. Sikh carpenters and bricklayers who attended the temple to pray spent their spare time building it. It was fantastic that they attended the temple, and then changed into their work clothes and worked extremely hard to finish off an enormous project that has brought together the whole Sikh community in that area.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I must add Milton Keynes to the list of communities in this country with a large and vibrant Sikh community. His point about the big society is important. In 2007, the Sikh community in Milton Keynes built and opened a large gurdwara, which now provides a wide range of services, such as a weekly over-50s lunch club which binds together members of the community.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I pay tribute to his work with the Sikh community in Milton Keynes. He gives another example of how Sikh temples are not just places of worship, but a hub where the whole community can congregate and do good work for the benefit of others.

The strong work ethic in the Sikh community is worthy of note. Sikhs have been disproportionately successful in business in this country. They have a deserved reputation for having a strong work ethic. I believe that Sikhs are second only to Jews in how financially productive they are as a religious group. Their belief in hard work and the importance of the family has been the reason for their success in the United Kingdom. A cursory look at *The Sunday Times* rich list throws up a clear and disproportionately high number of successful Sikhs. Their determination to strive for success is a trait that is very much to their credit.

There are many success stories of Sikh integration into the British way of life, but we must ensure that we do not become complacent. In the House in 2010, I raised the searching of turbans at British airports with the then Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond). That issue is important for the Sikh community. We need to preserve security on aeroplanes, but we should recognise the significant impact on a Sikh of searching a turban, and we must ensure that all other measures, such as scanning, are used before doing so. EU regulations have not been appropriate in the past, and I pay tribute to the Department for Transport's work on tackling the issue with the seriousness it deserves. It seems that common sense will now prevail.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I pay huge tribute to the enormous contribution the Sikh community has made to life in Dudley over so many years. A hard-working professional constituent who is a respected member of our community was travelling back from Spain with his company. His employers could vouch for him, but he was humiliated at the airport in Spain where the security guards insisted that he remove his turban. There had been no scanning, and there were no facilities for retying his turban—the necessary equipment was in his suitcase and already on the plane. That was absolutely unacceptable treatment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should do much more with the European Community to put pressure on other countries, especially Spain, so that constituents are not treated like that in future?

Gareth Johnson: That is an extremely important point, and the case that the hon. Gentleman mentions is worrying.

Paul Uppal (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): It is important to update colleagues. A recent European directive specifies that scanning is compulsory for Sikhs at airports. Many people have tried to take credit for that, but the British Government really can because they campaigned on the matter. It illustrates that we can have a proactive rather than a reactive relationship with Europe.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend's intervention may provide a more accurate response to the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) than I can give.

The past humiliation of Sikhs has been at the root of the issue. We all accept that we must ensure adequate security on aeroplanes, but that need not involve humiliation by searching turbans, which form an integral part of their religion.

On general security matters, it is worth noting the extraordinarily low crime rates in the Sikh community. Before I became a Member of Parliament I worked in magistrates courts. When accompanying a group of magistrates around Feltham young offenders institution, they referred to religious worship. It became apparent that there were no facilities for Sikhs to pray, and that worried the magistrates, but the prison officer who was accompanying us said that there were no Sikhs in the institution who wanted to pray. The number at the time was so low that the institution was not required to provide those facilities. That may have changed now, but it illustrates clearly the compliance with the law in the Sikh community, and that should be celebrated.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) referred to the contribution by the Sikh community to the British Army. Many Sikhs have served with distinction in the Army through numerous conflicts and we recently witnessed the first Guardsman wearing a turban instead of a bearskin. That throws up a difficult debate about respect for the turban on one hand, and respect for the traditions of the Guards on the other. The British Army has clearly shown respect for the turban by allowing it to be worn without a bearskin, and I hope that that encourages other Sikhs who are considering joining the Army.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend and enjoying his examples of the challenges and success of the Sikh community, including their distinction in the armed forces. The Sikh community that I represent in Hiltonbury in Chandler's Ford is very effective at campaigning on issues closer to home. A number of constituents have contacted me about poor bus services, which is relevant to all our constituents whatever their faith. The bus service from Hiltonbury to Southampton, where they must travel to attend temple, is very poor, but they are successful at many different levels, not just on global issues.

Gareth Johnson: I commend my hon. Friend on managing to connect service in the Army with bus services. That is a phenomenal achievement, as is his contribution to the Sikh community in Winchester, which will be delighted to hear that it may get a better bus service as a result of his representation.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): On the Sikh contribution to the British Army, yesterday was Commonwealth day and I was at the Commonwealth gates with some children from my constituency who were celebrating the Commonwealth armed forces' contribution to battles in the first and second world wars. Will the hon. Gentleman work with me to ensure that the history curriculum properly reflects the contribution of many Sikh soldiers to the freedom of Britain?

Gareth Johnson: That is correct, and I believe that a ten-minute rule Bill made the same point yesterday. It is absolutely true that Sikhs and other members of the Commonwealth have served this country not only with distinction, but with great selflessness, which has been the most remarkable aspect of the service that they have diligently given to this country. However, we should be aware that the Sikh community in the UK still faces significant challenges. We have been very positive during the debate, as we should be, about the contribution that the Sikhs have made to British society, but let us not forget the challenges that Sikhs face.

It is important to recognise the challenge of the caste system that still exists, or the prejudice—I should perhaps be more specific about it—that is widespread. It is not unfair to say that it can often go further than simple classism; it is a deep-rooted bias of perhaps the most unpleasant kind. The sad aspect of the issue is that the problem is not born outside the Sikh religion, but very often generated within the Sikh community. I have had Sikhs come to my surgery, for example, who are so frustrated and who feel that they are being held back because of prejudices that have been imposed on them. The problem is perhaps little understood by the wider community, but it needs to be tackled.

Gavin Barwell (Croydon Central) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this important issue. He has rightly identified the positive contribution that Sikhs have made to our economy and our armed forces. I want to turn his attention to the issue of political service. In our hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Paul Uppal), we have a Sikh Member of this House, and my seat on Croydon council, which I vacated to become an MP, was taken by Jeet Bains, the first Sikh councillor in Croydon. Does he agree that it would be great to see more Sikhs represented on our local councils and here in this House, taking a wider role in public service?

Gareth Johnson: Yes it would, and what is remarkable is the disproportionate way that Sikhs have generally contributed to public life and punched above their weight in many ways. They have had an impact in this place, with my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West and the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall. Many members of the Sikh community have made a significant contribution to the British way of life through politics and other means. I pay tribute to Jeet Bains for being that first councillor, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) mentioned, and for the significant contribution that he is able to make.

Mr Virendra Sharma: Last week, the House of Lords agreed to an amendment to add caste to the Equality Act 2010. Will the hon. Gentleman work with us and campaign for the Government to keep that change to the Equality Act, so that we can act against the caste system as we did against race in the Race Relations Act 1976?

Gareth Johnson: I know that the Government are looking at that very carefully to see if anything can be done to prevent such prejudice, which certainly exists in some quarters.

Part of the issue is the ignorance of some aspects of the Sikh religion, which can often be behind the prejudices that we see. The typical response to the kirpan illustrates that well. I struggle to find the reasons why we have so many problems with Sikhs wearing a kirpan. The only explanation I can come up with is that it may be to do with the hundreds of years of Englishmen fearing Scotsmen wearing the sgian dubh. The fear of Scotsmen wearing that dagger might be behind what is very often a fearful reaction to Sikhs wearing the kirpan. Perhaps my race needs to move on. We should see the kirpan in its correct context and be less obstructive towards its use.

In conclusion, I do not claim—and have not claimed, throughout this debate—to be any kind of expert on the Sikh religion, but I have seen over the years the enormous, positive impact that Sikhs have had, not only in my constituency, but across the UK. There are still undoubtedly many issues that need to be resolved, yet I want to pay tribute to British Sikhs today for all that they have achieved. Their contribution amounts to so much more than their numbers, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity of introducing a debate that recognises that.

9.55 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): A lot of people want to speak so I will try to be as brief as possible. We are here to celebrate the role of the Sikh community and the contribution that they have made to our community and society. It is also time to give a few thanks as well. We held a conference in 1997, where we brought the Sikh community, the Punjabi community, together to set the agenda for sub-groups of Parliament and the issues that they wanted us to address. I want to run through a few of those and say thanks to a few people.

First, the whole concept of Sikhism is based not only on community, but on family. One issue that we addressed was the inability of families to be united, purely because the visa system was not working properly. I want to thank those Members of Parliament and others—and the Sikh community overall—who campaigned for the opening of the visa office in Jalandhar and the work that was done to free that up. However, the issues on visas remain. We still have constituents coming to us who have not been treated fairly or properly, and who have then been exploited by agents as well.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early in his comments. Does he agree that there is not simply a problem with visas? A number of Sikh members of our communities have lived in the UK for many years, but due to the refusal of the Indian high commission to issue passports,

they are effectively stranded in the UK and unable to visit their families in India.

John McDonnell: The hon. Lady is absolutely spot on, and that is one of the issues that we need to work together on. I know that members of the all-party group are working on that now. I have to say that the new Government regulations with regard to students do not help, in terms of maintaining that flow and connection with the Punjab itself and the Punjabi community overall.

The second issue, briefly, is education. I am not a supporter of religious schools; I believe that people should be educated together, but I understand that while we have religious schools, no group should be discriminated against. That is why I supported the establishment of Guru Nanak school, the first Sikh school in my constituency. The resources that have gone into it from successive Governments and from the community overall have made it, frankly, the best school in the country. The educational results are phenomenally good. In addition, the whole ethos of the school, thanks to the head teacher, Rajinder Sandhu, is that everybody is welcomed into the school. In fact, when my son did not attend, I got a bit of stick, and he did not attend because, if he had, I would have been accused of preferential treatment for trying to get my son into such a school. The school says, "We open our doors to everyone, not just Sikhs", but in addition, "We send our students out into the wider community and we invite other schools to work with us." It has secured a partnership right across the community, and I want to commend the school, the head teacher and others, for their hard work.

On behalf of the House, I also send our condolences to the family of Poonam Bhattal. Some Members will know that the young girl lost her life on a school trip to Switzerland. Her funeral was last week, and her death has devastated the school and the wider community. I hope that we find the truth of what happened to her. I know the school cared for her very deeply and that the family has suffered badly. I would like to send our condolences to them.

The third issue is culture. The point that came up was that we need to maintain the Sikh culture and the Punjabi language. How should we do that? One of the ideas was to use modern media, and radio in particular. One of the first community radio stations to be given a licence was Desi radio in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). It has been a tremendous success, as a result of the community coming together and, to be frank, because of some heroes and heroines. Ajit Khera, who has been the chair of Desi radio all the way through, has demonstrated how a community can be welded together and how radio can be used, particularly with regard to the promotion of language and culture.

A number of historical projects have been launched by the UK Punjab Heritage Association. Many hon. Members will have visited the exhibition that it held at the School of Oriental and African Studies and elsewhere with regard to the Golden Temple—the Darbar Sahib. I thought that what that did was to introduce the concept of the Khalsa Panth, the Sikh culture and its history and

achievements to a much wider circle of people than just the Sikh community here. I am very pleased that last week the heritage lottery fund announced that it is now funding the same group to do a longer project. Hundreds of thousands of pounds are being invested. The project involves working with schools and is entitled “Empire, Faith and War: The Sikhs and World War One”.

I sometimes get anxious about the militaristic impression of the Sikhs. The Sikhs themselves became warriors at one point, yes. Why? Not because they were imperialists or invaders, but because they wanted to protect the Khalsa; they wanted to protect their own community. They transferred that commitment on, into their commitment to serving Britain as well, and that was done in partnership; it never involved acceptance of subjugation. Again, I congratulate the association on the work that it has done.

One of the fundamental issues that has been raised time and time again with us is human rights, and we cannot avoid the issue. We had discussion after discussion about what happened in the atrocities in the 1980s and the injustices that took place, many of which have never been addressed. I do not believe that any discussion on the Sikh community should not involve discussion of the need that there still is to bring to book the people who committed those atrocities during that period, because we have never found the ultimate truth and many of them have never been brought to justice.

In addition, there have been injustices here. We have mentioned the wearing of the kirpan and other religious duties. Injustices still go on. We still get individual constituents who have been turned away at the London Eye, from concerts at Wembley and so on. Madame Tussauds was another example. We tried to ensure that at least some standard guidelines were issued, and to a certain extent, when it comes to public service, we have achieved that. The problem occurs when the individual private contractors are not taking note and not reflecting the culture of diversity in our society. More work needs to be done on that. I echo the point that has been raised. I know that the all-party group recently sent a delegation to Europe. We need to ensure that we are educating our European partners well on how to address that issue.

We had a debate in the House of Commons Chamber a couple of weeks ago with regard to the death penalty. I was impressed by the unanimity across the Chamber. We were saying to the Government of India, as a friend, respecting their sovereignty and independence as a separate democratic nation, that we urge them to abolish the death penalty. We cannot be in a situation in which Balwant Singh Rajoana and Professor Bhullar are still on death row after all these years and at any time could be executed. I repeat to the Indian Government: please lift that threat. I have a final plea with regard to Professor Bhullar in particular. My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) and I are meeting his family tomorrow. He is very ill at the moment. I would welcome the Indian Government allowing independent medical support to go in to assess his condition and provide him with additional attention to ensure that his medical needs are properly addressed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on bringing this debate to the House today and I concur with what he said. We are

celebrating the achievements of the Sikh community and thanking all those who have worked with us to address the issues and the agenda that they have set with us. There is also a new agenda for the coming period. A new generation are coming up, with new ideas and new initiatives that we need to ensure we can support. I am pleased that the all-party group for the Sikh community is in place. I am pleased with the work that has been done in the past by the all-party group for the Punjabi community. I pledge my support for that continuing work, as I am sure other hon. Members will do in this debate.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Before I call Paul Uppal, I just say to hon. Members that a number have indicated that they want to speak. If each Member takes five minutes, we will get everyone in. I call Paul Uppal.

10.4 am

Paul Uppal (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): Thank you, Mr Owen. It is a pleasure to speak under your stewardship. I will try to be brief, but the nature of this debate is unique, so if you will indulge me a little, sir, I will try to skip through some of the points that I want to make.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing the debate. I was going to open the first paragraph of this speech in Punjabi, but I was told by *Hansard* that that would create a few difficulties. I was inspired in that by Hardeep Singh Kohli, who did a piece for Channel 4 many years ago called “In Search of the Tartan Turban”. He was fretting about how he was going to do a comic gig in a working-class pub in Glasgow. It was going to be a really tough gig, and he was wondering how he was going to do it. He did the first 30 seconds in Punjabi, and hon. Members can imagine the laughter spreading round the pub, but let us be honest: this is not a working-class pub in Glasgow and I am no Hardeep Singh Kohli—that was a slight digression.

If hon. Members do not mind, I would like to paint a backdrop of the spiritual background and the canvas of Sikh philosophy, as I think that many other speakers in the debate will be talking about the contribution of Sikhs in business and other aspects of life and the role that they play in the community. I want to highlight a few of these points, because I believe that it will help hon. Members in all parts of the Chamber to engage with the debate if they get an idea of what Sikhi is and Sikh philosophy. I do not mean that as a rebuke to any Member who is genuine about taking part in the debate today. However, a big part of being Punjabi and a big part of being Sikh is always to be big-hearted and to say it as you see it. That is central to the cultural background.

My own experience, having been a Member for the past few years and reading the e-mails that come into my inbox, is that messages come in saying, “This e-mail represents the message of the Sikh community”, “This is the view of the Sikh community” or “This is what the Sikh community are thinking.” Speaking candidly, I know that sometimes individuals will say, “I will deliver

the Sikh vote in my ward”, “I will deliver the Sikh vote for this street” or “I will deliver the Sikh vote in this constituency.” I have to say to all hon. Members that that is absolute tosh. The Sikh community are no different from anyone else.

It is the case, particularly among young Sikhs—I am heartened by what I have learned through my interaction with them—that the issues that Sikhs talk about are the issues that everyone else cares about, such as the education of their children and how they want to advance, but central to them is their passionate belief about what defines them as Sikh. That drives them through their careers, in the community, in business and in many other aspects of life.

The term “Sikh” means someone who dedicates themselves to become a “disciple and seeker” or, to put it another way, to learn to be a student towards spiritual enlightenment. There were 10 Sikh gurus, and the idea of each respective guru was to be an embodiment of scholarly learning, wisdom and discipline. These traits were passed on from guru to guru, starting from the first guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who lived from 1469 to 1539 and who taught that this can be done through a variety of measures. The first thing is Kirat Karo—the writers should not worry; I will provide them with the written version. That means earning one’s livelihood through honest means, while remembering God—a way of adopting personal responsibility, if you like. The second is Vand Chhako—sharing with others. A striking feature of Sikhism is the idea of Seva. That is the idea of always sharing what we have. The final thing is Naam Japo—constant remembrance of the Lord and always being humble and modest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) congratulated me on being a Sikh Member of Parliament. I am the only Sikh sitting in the House at the moment. My personal belief is that this is why we do not see more Sikhs coming forward into politics: to be a Sikh, one must always be humble and contained within oneself and always be modest. I have to tell hon. Members that that does not always fit well with politics. As we know, this business is often about self-promotion, and that goes across a central element of Sikhi, which is always to be modest. When I get home on a Thursday evening and my wife is waiting for me, the first thing to do is to bath the three children, read them their stories and always remember who you are. That is the essence of Sikhism.

Sikhs are taught that there are five sinful temptations that take us away from the ethos of Sikhism: Kam, which is lust; Krodh, which is rage; Lobh, which is greed, Moh, which is attachment; and Ahankar, or ego, which I have just alluded to and which is a bit of a stumbling block for many Sikhs in terms of coming into politics.

The first guru was anxious to establish a new central concept of faith that would be open to all, preaching a concept of equality at a time when India was scarred by caste, gender and feudal inequalities. He took in concepts from both Islam and Hinduism and he famously said:

“Na koi Hindu na koi Musalman”—“There is no Hindu or Muslim.”

He said that we are all human beings in front of God. Very early on, there was that message of equality and talk about that concept, which was very attractive to many Indians at that time.

I want to elaborate on the principle that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford alluded to, and make another link between buses and military history. The battle of Saragarhi has not been mentioned in 115 years, and now it has been mentioned in Westminster twice in 24 hours, so there you go—it is like buses coming all at once. That element of history beautifully encapsulates the Sikh philosophy. It was a battle in which 21 Sikhs fought against 10,000 armed Afghans. The battle of Saragarhi, fought by the young men of the 36th Sikhs in 1897, was the epitome of raw courage, sheer grit and unshakable determination.

Saragarhi was a signalling post between Fort Lockhart and Fort Gulistan on the Samana ridge, in what now is the North West Frontier Province between Pakistan and Afghanistan. On September 12 1897, about 10,000 Afghan tribesmen swarmed towards Saragarhi, while another group cut off all links. For the next six hours, the small detachment of 21 men stood firm and repulsed all attacks. The Sikhs fought to the last man. All 21 men were posthumously awarded the Indian order of merit—the highest gallantry award given to Indian ranks in those days and equivalent to the Victoria Cross. When the gallantry of Saragarhi was recounted in the British Parliament, the account drew a standing ovation from the Members of Parliament present and was brought to the notice of Queen Victoria. I highlight that battle, because it illustrates not only Sikh courage, but a second element of Sikhi—in no other community in the world would such a battle occur and nobody talk about it. Only the Sikhs would do something like that. I have gone into such detail because it encapsulates the beautiful concepts and ideology of the Sikh spirit. After his death, Guru Gobind Singh, the final guru, dictated that all Sikh thinking should be embodied in the Guru Granth Sahib. It is often referred to as the Sikh’s holy book, but it is much more than that. It is a blueprint for how we should conduct our lives in a modest, humble and wise manner.

I shall highlight a few elements of what the Government have done. I know, because I was in the room, that Sikhs now celebrate Vaisakhi at No. 10. I recommended it to the Prime Minister at the time and saw how animated he was by the idea. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford and the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) highlighted searches of the Sikh turban at airports, and I commend the British Government for the work they have done on that. It is absolutely fantastic.

The Prime Minister recently became the first serving British Prime Minister to visit Amritsar, and I was lucky enough to accompany him on that visit. There were some poor people there from Uttar Pradesh, and when the Prime Minister went through the Golden Temple—the Harmandir Sahib—I could see that the people who organised the trip were anxious to take him away from

them, but he indicated that he wanted to meet them. As was highlighted earlier in the debate, there are four doors in a Sikh temple—one on each side—which mean that it is open to all faiths and communities. The Prime Minister met those incredibly poor people, and I can tell hon. Members how humbling it was for him. That, again, encapsulates the idea of Sikhism.

I do not always agree with the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who mentioned Sikh schools. One is coming to my constituency. It will very much have a Sikh ethos, which will encapsulate all the ideas I have mentioned—it is about responsibility and what we give back to society as a whole.

It is with an element of personal sadness that I acknowledge there are not more Sikhs involved in Parliament, but I hope that talking about the concept of Sikhism will encourage more Sikhs to come forward. My parents are here today, because they came for yesterday's ten-minute rule Bill debate and the debate today. This will annoy my family incredibly, because my wife is always admonishing me for name-checking whenever I make such speeches, but my oldest daughter encapsulated my feelings on Sikhism quite wonderfully when she said, "Dad we have such a cool faith, why don't we talk about it much more?" I hope that in some small way, by making this speech this morning, I have helped that process.

10.13 am

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I have not brought my sgian dubh, but I will make a few points in the debate.

According to the recent census, the city I represent, Wolverhampton, has 22,000 Sikhs—the second biggest concentration of those who are of the Sikh faith in the country. Most of the Sikh community in Wolverhampton have their family roots around the city of Jalandhar in Punjab, which I have had the honour of visiting. I also had the honour of visiting the Golden Temple some years ago—a truly humbling and profound experience that I will never forget.

The story of Sikhism in Wolverhampton begins in earnest with the generation who came in the 1950s and '60s to work in places such as Bilston steel and other heavy engineering works. The national story of course goes back much further than that, as we have heard, with brave Sikh service in two world wars. For those early immigrants in Wolverhampton, life was not easy. They were often packed into crowded living conditions, separated from family and friends and doing heavy physical work. They sometimes met with friendship and good experiences, but they also sometimes met with discrimination, perhaps even hostility and certainly a lack of understanding. That has changed a lot over time, and the community today is a very successful and established part of city life.

There are many gurdwaras in my constituency and throughout the city. The annual Vaisakhi celebration is a major part of its cultural life. Thousands of

people take part in the nagar kirtan—the parade—which goes through the streets of my constituency, in a very well organised and joyful celebration of the Sikh faith. Our city will probably be for ever associated with Enoch Powell, but the story of the community and our history since he spoke shows that he was wrong: the Sikh community in Wolverhampton is a success and Wolverhampton's multi-faith, multi-religious community is a success.

We have proved that such successes can be achieved, provided there is commitment all round, and a great many people can take credit for that success. Walking down Dudley road in my constituency, I can see its physical evidence. I can walk past sari shops and Bollywood films for hire. I can eat the finest Punjabi food. I can walk into the new Lakshmi restaurant—a great investment by Major Singh. We can see the impact of the community on the cultural and economic life of the city of Wolverhampton.

Paul Uppal: I cannot resist: it says something about the common sense of the people of Wolverhampton that in 1950 they returned Enoch Powell to the House with a majority of 691, but they returned somebody of Sikh descent in 2010 for exactly the same constituency with a majority of 691. Rest assured, I will not make a speech about race relations in 18 years.

Mr McFadden: I wonder what the majority will be at the next election. The voters will decide.

The community is a success in Wolverhampton and around the country, but we should not pretend that there are no issues in the community or challenges for it. Public health issues, which are not confined to the Sikh community, certainly affect it. People are sometimes reluctant to face up to hidden illnesses, including mental illness. There is always the challenge of freedom and greater independence for our younger generation, who ask for more choice and more decision-making power than perhaps their parents and grandparents enjoyed.

We have heard about searches of turbans—the *dastar*—at airports, about which a great many Members on both sides of the House campaigned, as did Sikh organisations. I acknowledge the good efforts of the Department for Transport in working with the European Union and other Governments to reach a successful conclusion. The result is that the European Commission now says that swab and wand technology used in UK airports can be used throughout the Community. I am a strong believer in good, tough, strong security at our airports. My Sikh constituents agree that it is essential, but if we can achieve it in a way that respects people's faith, so much the better, particularly because freedom of movement is a founding principle of the EU. The UK Government's engagement with the issue has produced a far better result than we saw on bank bonuses and other issues. If there is a lesson in that, it is that positive engagement with the EU, rather than withdrawal or turning up so late that we cannot influence the debate, produces results.

The community is a success in the UK, but it sometimes has a strange relationship with India. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, that in large part stems from the events of 1984, when many Sikhs lost their lives. The pain of that experience and the lasting sense of injustice among the Sikh community are very real. There is a lasting desire for greater transparency and honesty in the story of what happened.

If the community's relationship with India is strained, its relationship with the UK has been a good one. That is a tribute to the Sikh community and its efforts. It is also a tribute to cities such as Wolverhampton and to our country that a community such as the Sikhs and many others over the years can come to the UK, make a new life, put down roots and be part of the country's success. My own parents came from Donegal in the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s, and the huge Irish community in Scotland has also been successful. It is a tribute to the UK that we have been open to that over the years.

Far too often today, the debate about immigration is couched in terms of limits, dangers and negative stories about what people can bring to our shores. If we take a wider lesson from today's debate, it should be that what a community such as the Sikhs, who are fantastic, enterprising and educationally aspirational, with values of faith, family and community, has brought to the UK shows that immigration can be a positive part of our national story, and I hope it is in the future.

10.21 am

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I, too, begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this debate, giving us the opportunity to recognise the achievements of British Sikhs in our communities and across the country. I will be as brief as possible.

I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Paul Uppal) and the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) on their words; it is important to give them the opportunity to say what they needed to say. I am proud to represent Warwick and Leamington, which has one of the largest Sikh communities in the country. It also has one of the largest and—I even dare to say—most magnificent gurdwaras in the country. There is a danger of starting off a bit of competition, but I assure hon. Members that if they visit, they will have the opportunity to agree with me. I look forward to visiting that gurdwara again this weekend.

Warwick district, which is largely made up of my constituency, has more than 5,000 Sikhs. After Christianity, Sikhism is the largest religious denomination. Living in Warwick and Leamington has made me conscious of the importance of our community in every aspect of our lives. Throughout my

time as the Member of Parliament, I have always sought to support people who want to give something back.

I have always been impressed by how important public service is to the identity of Sikhs and how serving others is woven into their way of life. Sikhs are always seeking to do more and finding new ways of contributing, and I am grateful for their work in my community and for the time that they give up and the money that they donate to important local projects.

Every year, we host the Leamington Mela festival, which is always well attended by local residents and is well organised by the local Sikh community. Not only does it provide a chance for residents to sample a wonderful array of food and see excellent live entertainment, but it helps to bring people together and reinforce our community's sense of identity. Our community also has a Sikh community centre, which provides a range of services and a place for local residents, particularly older people, to come together.

There are similar stories across the country of the contributions that British Sikhs make. They are an example of the positive impact that immigration can have on our country: enhancing our local and national life, providing new perspectives and ensuring that our communities remain vibrant and welcoming places in which to live. With thousands of people from across the world settling in our country every year, we need to show the benefits of making the effort to play a full and active part in our public life.

I am glad that the Prime Minister has made every effort to understand and listen to the concerns of British Sikhs. I am also pleased to have attended Diwali celebrations at No. 10 with Sikhs from my community. However, we can and should do more.

The Government should take the opportunity to work with organisations such as the Sikh Council UK, which seeks to act as a national advocate for British Sikhs. We should recognise the potential of working with democratically elected bodies such as the council, so that Sikhs feels that their voice is being heard. I would welcome the Prime Minister and Communities Secretary to have regular meetings with the council and other Sikh organisations in our country, so that we can explain Government policy and take on board the points made by the British Sikh community.

We should also recognise the important contribution that Sikhs make to our local economy. My community has many Sikh entrepreneurs who have started a range of businesses that have contributed millions of pounds to our local economy. The British Asian Business and Professionals Association is a fantastic group and works tremendously hard in Warwick and Leamington.

At a time when we are looking to get our economy moving again and building links with emerging markets, we should recognise the skills of British Sikhs in the business world and ensure that we are giving the right support to the next generation, so that we continue to make the most of the Sikh community's potential.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be done to tackle discrimination against Sikh workers in the workplace? Particularly, the Government could do more to ensure that employers understand the special protections for wearers of the Sikh turban.

Chris White: I agree with the hon. Lady that more work needs to be done on that aspect, and conversations and debates on it will be worthwhile. British Sikhs are seeking to contribute not only locally or nationally, but internationally. Like many hon. Members, I have received a number of petitions from constituents about the treatment of minorities in India and the campaign to abolish the death penalty. I hope that the Government will listen to those concerns and ensure that they communicate with British Sikhs about our country's foreign policy.

There is always a danger in such debates that we parcel up our communities into different sections. I believe that British Sikhs have many of the same concerns as everyone else, and we have mentioned some of them in the debate, starting with buses. I believe that British Sikhs have a strong sense of their identity, both as Sikhs and as British citizens, and it is right that Parliament takes the time to recognise that. We should build on that and ensure that British Sikhs feel that their work is appreciated.

I am proud to represent a diverse community in Warwick and Leamington. I am confident that Sikhs will continue to make their unique contribution to our community for many years to come, and I hope to do what I can to support them.

10.27 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I start by saying—I am not going to speak in Punjabi—sat sri akal to hon. Members present and everyone watching at home and in the Public Gallery.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this debate. He did so after we circulated an e-mail to many members of the all-party group, asking them to apply for such a debate because we felt that one was timely. By the attendance here, I think we were absolutely right.

My involvement with the Sikh community in the United Kingdom started in 1988, when I was elected chair of the race equality committee of Leeds city council. Almost immediately following that—one year into my tenure as a Leeds councillor, which I held for 10 years—I was approached by a leading member of the Leeds Sikh community, Mr Thandi, who was a market trader and a great exponent of the virtues of the Sikh faith. He wanted to educate me about what Sikhism meant for him, his community, the city of Leeds and the whole of Great Britain. That he did, and he did it well. He became a close friend and was a member of the Labour party. In 1992, he kindly agreed, with his wife, to be included in my election manifesto for that year. Sadly, I did not

win, but to my even greater sadness, he died just two days before the general election.

My memory of Mr Thandi has carried me through all my work on Leeds city council and as Member of Parliament since. I do not represent such a huge Sikh community as hon. Members from Wolverhampton, Birmingham or even London do, but I still have three gurdwaras in my constituency, which are well attended. One of them is in a new building—it was built in 1997, so I suppose it is not so new now—and I was privileged not only to dig the first sod of earth for that temple on Chapeltown road, but to be present at its opening as the newly elected Member of Parliament.

Over the years, I have got to know many members of the Leeds Sikh community, including Dr and Mrs Kalsi. Dr Kalsi has written a very good book about Sikhism and what it means, which I commend to anyone who wants to know more about the faith, although, with a Member such as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Paul Uppal) among us, perhaps we do not need to read it. My friend Prem Singh Duggal was president of the Chapeltown road gurdwara and helped me to understand so much about the Sikh faith, and one of the immediate past presidents, Mr Inderjit Singh Gill, always invites me to the Sikh sports events that regularly take place in the city.

I have attended the Vaisakhi celebrations in what is now called Millennium square in the centre of Leeds. It was not always called that—it was just the square outside Leeds civic hall.

Mr McFadden: We are pressed for time, but I want to remind my hon. Friend and the House that I will be happy again to host the House of Commons Vaisakhi celebrations on 22 April, to which all right hon. and hon. Members are most cordially invited.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my dear right hon. Friend for that intervention. He has organised that event for the second or third year running, and I thank him for taking on that work and making sure that Vaisakhi is celebrated in the House for everyone involved. It is always a joyous and colourful occasion to celebrate not only the contribution of the Sikh community in the city of Leeds and in Great Britain, but to celebrate the start of spring, although it usually rains actually. Extraordinary colour and life is brought to the centre of the city of Leeds and throughout so many of our towns and cities in the United Kingdom to celebrate that festival, and there is always wonderful food as well. One thing that has always impressed me is the equality between men and women, who celebrate together, not separated. They joyously celebrate humanity, as well as their own faith and belief.

Since 1997, I have tried to bring together the Sikh community in Leeds and the Jewish community that I represent. There are probably about equal numbers of them now, as the Jewish community has declined somewhat and the Sikh community has grown. As hon. Members have said, the values of those communities are very similar. When I walked into the newly built Jewish

community centre—the Marjorie and Arnold Ziff centre —on Stonegate road in north Leeds with members of the Sikh community to discuss how we might set up a Sikh elderly housing association and a welfare board, just as the Jewish community had done so many decades earlier, there was a great deal of celebration, with elderly Jewish people embracing many of our Sikh friends who had come along to discuss that with them.

Paul Uppal: On that theme, I am a trustee of a Sikh temple that donated a significant amount of money to a local Methodist church, which is very much in line with that collaborative approach. As was highlighted earlier, the Sikh community works very well with other religious communities and all-faith organisations wherever there is a Sikh presence.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment. The values of family, education and hard work bring the Sikh community together with so many others, including the Jewish community in my constituency—and long may that continue.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentioned sporting activities earlier. I draw his attention—I am sure it is the same in Leeds—to the excellent work done by Sikh organisations and individuals in athletics and sport, not just with the introduction of kabaddi into British society, but with the Singh Saba football club in my constituency and the 100 year old marathon runner Fauja Singh, who has just retired from running marathons.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We were all absolutely staggered at that gentleman—his constituent—deciding at 100 years of age that the time had finally come to stop doing marathons. I wish we could all do that when we are 100 years old, but I doubt that that will be the case.

In 2006, as a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, I visited Amritsar for the first time with my hon. Friend and the former Member for Hyndburn, Greg Pope. We were a small delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee on our way to Lahore in Pakistan, and we stopped at Amritsar for a day and a night. It was one of the most enlightening and incredible experiences that I have ever had.

That of course pre-dated the visit of the Prime Minister, whom I congratulate on being the first British Prime Minister to go to the Golden Temple. My hon. Friend and I were there before him—of course, we are not Prime Ministers. We walked there, as he did, in our suits, barefoot with a head covering, and we admired the peace and spirituality of that holy of holiest places for the Sikh faith. That permeated through to us all. We watched hundreds of people together, preparing food for the langar, which is the free meal given every day to anyone who cares to call in and ask for it. We also experienced the serenity, the sense of spirituality and faith that that place emanates and, of course, its absolute beauty.

Time is short, so I will conclude with some brief remarks. In 2010, we reformed the all-party group on British Sikhs. I was elected to chair that group, following the defeat of my good friend Rob Marris, the predecessor of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West. Through that role, we have achieved a few things. I backed, although I was not able to go to Brussels, the lobby of the European Union. The Sikh Federation UK has supported our group so well, and I want to pay tribute to it for its work, together with that of the Sikh Council UK. Those two organisations ensure that British Sikhs are well represented. I want to thank all the hon. Members on the all-party group who are here today and those who are unable to join us.

Finally, I want to dedicate my few words to a very dear and close friend, the late Marsha Singh, who was the Member for Bradford West. Marsha was a good friend, and during his life he encapsulated all the values of Sikhism and of being a British Sikh. He died at a very young age and will be sadly missed, but I am sure that the values he lived for will live on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. We have just a few minutes to go; three Members wish to catch my eye; and Anas Sarwar is the first.

10.36 am

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow Central) (Lab): I will be as quick as possible, because of the time pressure. I first congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this important debate.

I put on the record my thanks for all the tremendous support that the Sikh community in Glasgow has given me and my family over a long period. I give them a genuine thank you for that. My constituency is home to one of the largest Sikh communities in Scotland. More than half of the gurdwaras in Scotland are based in Glasgow Central, and the Central Gurdwara is currently being built there. It is the first purpose-built gurdwara in Scotland, and will house 2,000 people every week for Sunday services in the temple. It is a tremendous building, which I encourage all Members to come and visit at any time.

I want to make some quick points about the tremendous contribution that the Sikh community has made to the success of the United Kingdom both in terms of business success—they contribute tremendously to our economy and GDP, and to our public services, particularly to our national health service as doctors, nurses and the like—and in terms of celebrating and vastly broadening our culture in the UK, not only in cuisine, but with cultural events, such as Vaisakhi. I say a massive thank you for that.

More importantly, I thank first and second-generation and now third-generation Sikhs—I too am from a third-generation migrant community—for the tremendous contribution of the first generation in coming here, making the

UK their home, and being accepted and recognised as one of their own within the United Kingdom, and the second generation in having built up really successful businesses and faith organisations, while recognising the connection that they still had with the mother country, particularly through charity and in giving in difficult circumstances. The third generation in particular—they see themselves not as Indians or Pakistanis, but genuinely as Scots or Brits—see this country as their own. That is really important, particularly as we come to the debate about the place of Scotland within the United Kingdom, in which I am sure the Sikh community will play a crucial role.

I want to raise a couple of concerns that have been mentioned to me. One is about equality in relation to the turban and the kirpan. Recently, a high street operator refused to employ someone because they wore the kirpan, and in court, someone was expelled from a jury for wearing one. Such things were protected by the equality legislation introduced by the last Government, and we must ensure that education takes place, so that such situations do not occur again.

One of the largest letter-writing campaigns that I have ever experienced as a Member of Parliament has been about the death penalty in India. We must work alongside this Government and the Indian Government to ensure that we are fighting for justice and fairness right around the world.

I will not say much else—I was given only three minutes but I realise that I have gone on to four—other than that we must recognise the tremendous contribution of the Sikh community and ensure that our Parliaments and council chambers reflect society. All political parties must work together to ensure that we have representation of Sikhs in council chambers, the Scottish Parliament and at Westminster.

10.40 am

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Briefly, I am proud that we have an incredibly strong Sikh community in Wolverhampton; we have the second largest concentration of Sikhs in the country. I pay tribute to the Sikh community for the contribution it makes socially, culturally and economically, and to my predecessor, Ken Purchase who, alongside other Members of Parliament and councillors, has worked so hard over the past three or four decades with the Sikh community and other communities to foster mutual understanding, tolerance and community relations. That success is particularly impressive given that we unfortunately inherited that infamous speech of Enoch Powell, which, thankfully, now seems like a distant memory. None the less, it is important to reflect on the progress that we have made since that time, given that there was such awful discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s and later. We have come a very long way, and the debate is an opportunity to celebrate both the progress that we have made in fostering those community relations as well as the fantastic contribution of the Sikh community.

I would love to have given a bit more of a taster of the fantastic Vaisakhi celebrations that take place in West park every year; the procession from the Well lane gurdwara in my constituency to Willenhall and all the other community events. The community embraces people and is very open, as the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who secured this debate, said. The gurdwaras that we visit are so welcoming and open, and I want to put on record my thanks to the community.

10.42 am

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Owen. Let me congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this important debate. It is unusual and actually very nice to participate in a debate that unites the House. We should celebrate, and congratulate ourselves on, that fact.

Fiona Mactaggart: On that point about the unity of the House, it is worth while also mentioning that in the debate on the abolition of the death penalty in India, there was a similar unity in the main Chamber.

Chris Williamson: I concur with my hon. Friend. I was present for part of that debate. Regrettably, I had a commitment at the beginning and at the end of it, so I was not able to contribute, but none the less, I, too, was struck by the unity of purpose.

John McDonnell: It was a sin of omission by me, but that unity was brought about by the mobilisation of the community by the Kesri Lehar campaign. We should pay tribute to all those involved. More than 100,000 petitioners brought that campaign to the House.

Chris Williamson: I concur with my hon. Friend on that point. I received a proportion of that petition at the gurdwara in Derby a couple of weeks ago.

There is not time to touch on everybody's contribution today, but all have been first class. I will, if I may, focus on just one or two. Let me start with the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Paul Uppal) who talked about Sikhism's core values. It is important to stress those values and I thank him for outlining them. I wanted to touch on them myself. It is worth reiterating the fact that within Sikhism, there is a recognition of the equality of women and of all people and a commitment to hard work, to sharing with others and to standing up for people and protecting them.

That notion of sharing is something from which I have benefited on many occasions when I have been privileged to visit the local gurdwaras in Derby. As one of the three vegans in the House of Commons, it is nice to go to an

event where all of the food on offer is vegetarian, so it is always a wonderful experience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talked about the death penalty that still pertains in India. He mentioned the cases of a couple of individuals and pointed out that we will be meeting the family of Professor Bhullar, who is languishing on death row, to discuss his case.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I am sorry that I will not get the chance to contribute in more detail. Does he agree that when we listen to all the contributions here, and read the history and philosophy of Sikhism, we understand that when a true Sikh leaves their country of origin to go to other countries, they carry with them their social values, the teachings of the guru and the traditions of the past? That is why when they go to other countries, their contribution to the society is based on the teachings of the guru.

Chris Williamson: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. All communities could learn a significant lesson from the way in which the Sikh community conducts itself.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) also made an important contribution. He talked about how the Sikh community illustrates the benefits of immigration. He made the point that very often the immigration debate is a negative one, and that we should celebrate and recognise the benefits of immigration, which can be seen in the contribution of the Sikh community.

There is very little time left, but I want to say one or two other things. It is important to stress the fact that the British Sikh story goes back more than 200 years, and that there is a long, honourable and close relationship between the Sikh community and Great Britain, which is clearly illustrated in the Sikh contribution to our armed forces. Let me relate a personal story here. My dad served in the Enniskillens during world war two and was in north Africa and at Monte Cassino. Serving alongside him in the campaign to defeat fascism were Sikh soldiers, who served with great valour and distinction in the terrible battle that saw the loss of so many young lives.

In view of the shortness of time, Mr Owen, it is important to say one or two final words about the contribution of the Sikh community to the economy, and about the benefits of immigration to the UK. The Sikhs have made a huge economic contribution to the nation, creating many jobs and wealth for Great Britain. I also want to mention here cohesion and integration, which is a topic that I am currently working on. The Sikh community is a model of cohesion and integration and we could learn many lessons on the way in which it has conducted itself in the UK.

In conclusion, I have a few questions for the Minister. If he cannot deal with them today in his contribution, perhaps he could write to me afterwards.

Before this debate, I received a briefing note from the Sikh community relating to a number of issues, one of which was about celebrating the Sikh contribution to the UK in the school curriculum. Will the Minister confirm whether that is something that is being considered? As we move towards the 100th anniversary of the beginning of world war one, another request related to the contribution of the Sikh community to that war. It would be appropriate to ensure that the contribution that Sikhs made in that war was recognised and perhaps the Minister could confirm, one way or another, whether that will be the case.

The Sikh Council UK has also asked that the Government formally consult with it on Government policy relating to a range of issues. I wonder whether the Minister might be able to comment on that request.

Hon. Members have touched on issues that persist to this day about employment, whereby Sikhs are still discriminated against and find problems in the workplace in relation to the turban. As a former construction worker myself, I know that that is something that has been addressed on construction sites, but there are still a number of ongoing cases. I think that one relates to a lorry driver who is in danger of losing his job, and there have been a number of other incidents as well. I wonder whether the Minister could say a little about dealing with those employment rights issues for the Sikh community.

Another issue that I have been told there is concern about in the Sikh community is in relation to the funding for Sikh organisations. The feeling is that it is increasingly difficult for voluntary organisations in the Sikh community to obtain funding for their activities from the national lottery, other trust funds and so on. Could the Minister say anything about that issue?

My final question relates to the issue of security at airports. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West for clarifying the latest situation in terms of the EU regulations on this issue. Could the Minister give us any information about whether the Government will continue to monitor this situation? It is good news that the regulations have been updated, but it is important that we continue to monitor the situation to ensure that those more enlightened regulations are actually being implemented on the ground.

10.51 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Don Foster): Mr Owen, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this debate, and I join him in congratulating the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and all other members of the all-party group on British Sikhs. And to respond immediately to the hon. Member for

Derby North (Chris Williamson), I am more than happy to have a meeting with the Sikh Council UK.

May I also just say that, with time so short, I will not have the opportunity to reflect on the contributions of so many Members who have spoken today? However, it has been absolutely clear that the speakers in the debate, from all parties, have gone out of their way to celebrate the enormous contribution that members of the British Sikh community make to this country. I am delighted to be able to join them by making a similar expression of praise, thanks and congratulations to the Sikh community for its contribution.

It is not very hard to see the enormous value that individual Sikhs bring to our community. There are successful Sikhs all around us, including, obviously, my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Paul Uppal). There is also Lord Singh of Wimbledon, the first practising turbaned Sikh in Parliament, and there are Sikhs high up in the legal profession, including Judge Mota Singh and Rabinder Singh, QC, who has been made a member of the Supreme Court. And there are noted Sikh sportsmen: obviously Monty Panesar; and the 101-year-old marathon runner Fauja Singh.

We know that, according to the 2011 census, there are about 423,000 Sikhs in Britain, which is just under 1% of the population. However, as so many Members have already said, Sikhs are punching well above their weight: in both national and local government; in the professions; and in industry and commerce.

Mr Virendra Sharma: The Minister has just mentioned many professions, but there is also the medical profession. Two of my constituents, Professor Jaspal Singh Kooner and Dr Amarjit Singh Sethi, are leading cardiologists at Ealing hospital and they have contributed enormously to the medical profession.

Mr Foster: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I am sure that there are other professions that I have also missed out in which there have been major contributions from members of the British Sikh community.

As other Members have mentioned, Sikhs are also renowned for their military skills, with a proud record of service in the British Army in two world wars. I want to make it absolutely clear that we certainly hope that we will see that contribution reflected in the commemoration of the anniversary of world war one which will be happening shortly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West called Sikhism a “cool” religion. As he explained, there are good reasons within Sikhism why individuals are called to serve their local communities and British society in general, because the faith requires believers to put others before self and to stand up for the vulnerable. If someone goes to a gurdwara anywhere in the world, they can get a free meal. Sikhism recognises the existence of injustices, and it reminds Sikhs of their individual and corporate

responsibilities to work for a fairer society. That is why Sikhs are often in the forefront of serving their communities. There is a community centre in Handsworth that is run by Sikhs, which is a particularly good example of that service.

As we have heard from a number of other hon. Members from all parties, Sikhs continue to be prominent in the field of education. The five Sikh schools that we have—one each in Hayes and Southall in London, one in Slough and two in Birmingham—are doing a fantastic job. Three of the five are rated by Ofsted as being outstanding.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred to the Guru Nanak Sikh academy in Hayes, which is doing some fantastic work, including providing a number of free courses for members of the community. In addition, the chairman of that academy has founded a number of institutions in India to help the poor and underprivileged there.

Sikhs are also very much at the heart of inter-faith activity in this country, because Sikhism teaches the equality of all human beings, including the total equality of women, and Sikh gurus require their followers to show respect for different faiths and different ways of life. That is why we can note with great pleasure and pride the contribution of Sikhs to bodies such as the Inter Faith Network for the UK and in initiatives such as the inter-faith week and the Near Neighbours programme. Sikhs were also very active in 2012's Year of Service activities, with a range of project around the theme of "bringing sweetness". We also look forward to Sikhs participating enthusiastically in Together in Service, a new three-year project that is designed to encourage, celebrate and link up faith-based volunteering, which will begin later this year.

As we have heard, this Government believe—as previous Governments did—that not only should everyone be free to follow their faith freely so long as they do not interfere with the freedom of others, but that religious faith and the fact that it motivates believers to carry out good work are things to be actively celebrated.

We have already heard how, with cross-party support, Vaisakhi is marked in Parliament and at No. 10 with receptions. We have also heard about the huge attendances at Nagar Kirtans, with the processional singing of hymns through the community.

Freedom of worship is core to the British way of life. Public displays of religious belief, such as the wearing of faith symbols and clothing or the maintenance of dietary codes, are all vital aspects of religious freedom and we are keen to do all we can to support that freedom. The previous Government did excellent work in this field, but we recognise that there have been problems. As we have heard, some European countries have all too often required Sikhs to remove their turbans during airport security screening, which Sikhs find offensive. Until last month, the European regulations required the hand-searching of turbans if a wearer caused the metal detector to go off. I am delighted that, as a result of work done in this country, we have now been able to make the change to enable the alternative system of passing electronic swabs over the surface of headwear to be used. As requested, we are now

working very closely with our European colleagues to persuade them to adopt the same system.

We are also looking at a number of the other issues that have been raised today. For example, I was interested to hear the concern raised about a member of the Sikh community not being allowed to serve on a jury because he was wearing the kirpan. If the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Anas Sarwar), who raised that particular case, can provide me with details about it, I would like to take it up.

The issue of hard hats was also raised and I assure hon. Members that my Department is now working with all the other agencies involved with that particular issue to see if we can make progress and enable Sikh turban-wearers not to have to wear hard hats in certain places of work.

I am delighted to be able to sum up this debate, which has shown how much cross-party support there is for the huge contribution that is made by the Sikh community in this country. British Sikhs are among some of our greatest business men and professionals, and they are a peaceful, high-achieving community from whom we all have much to learn. This has been an excellent debate. I am delighted to have participated in it briefly, and I wish everybody a happy Vaisakhi.