HIGH PROFILES

Salma Yaqoob

The co-founder of the Respect Party interviewed by ***Huw Spanner*** at her home in Birmingham

21 July 2016

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Just Being Honest

Salma Yaqoob

cut her teeth as an anti-war campaigner and for nine years led the Respect Party, which she co-founded in 2004. Over the years, she has been courted by the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and Labour.

Huw Spanner found her at home in Birmingham on 21 July 2016.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **ANDREW FIRTH**

You started out as a psychotherapist but, through the Stop the War movement, you became a politician –

I've never regarded myself as a politician. For me, it's not a career.

OK, you found yourself in politics. Has that changed your perception of politicians?

Yes, but in opposite ways. When I first entered politics, there was that naive belief, you know, that if you mobilise, if you put your case, the system will respond. I suppose I now know how entrenched the interests are and how difficult it is to get change. I'm still an idealist but I've become more cynical.

Also, I now know how little, actually, many politicians care. You meet them and you

realise that for them it is a game: it is very much about their personal ambition, and about what's expedient at the time. They come across on TV as quite passionate and they seem to believe in the arguments they put forward and the vast majority of people watching take it in good faith; but they're just going through the motions. That's really disturbing when you see it up close.

At the same time, I can honestly say that [on Birmingham City Council] I've seen people of all parties work really hard because they believe it will bring about something better.

How do you see politics in this country? Is it about class struggle, or the 1 per cent against the 99; or is it just about who can manage things better?

For me, there is no doubt that democracy has been captured by an elite who have the means, whether it's through their influence or their money, to get things done that perpetuate their advantage. When they advocate freedom, it's freedom for them, really, but they coat it in such a way it looks like they're championing the little person.

In 2014, you clashed on *Question Time* on BBC1 with Iain Duncan Smith.[1] Many people on the left saw him almost as a monster –

OK, I don't like to personalise things in that way – I think that's part of what is not good about our politics. I give people the benefit of the doubt and I understand that some can be well-meaning even if their policy means that poverty increases, the suicide rate goes up – they'd have wanted to avoid that if they'd known about it.

But then we are all capable of looking away…

You don't give Tony Blair the benefit of the doubt when he insists he meant well in Iraq.

I don't buy his argument: I was sincere and so it's OK – you know, don't judge me harshly. After all the evidence has come out, the fact that he's still using that line shows a degree of callousness that I think is morally *sad*.

A Muslim does something on the other side of the world and I get wheeled out – 'What do you think about it?' – because I happen to wear a headscarf

You are one of seven children. Where do you come in the pecking order?

I'm second-eldest.

Are you a typical second child?

I probably am, actually. Gosh, it's hard to analyse yourself! My older sister is definitely the eldest and she has that respect. Being second, I would say I am like the glue in the family. I'm the problem solver, the bridge builder – but also the mate. Normally in Urdu when you talk to an older sister, you don't say their name, as a sign of respect you call them *Baji*, which means 'Sister'; but I get called 'Sally'. I have enough authority to fix things, I suppose, but at the same time I'm one of them…

You said you didn't think of yourself as a politician. Which of your identities do you see as essential to who you are and which are just accidents of birth or life history?

The majority of my time, in my head, I'm Mum. That's how I judge myself – you know, is what I'm doing going to impact on my children, and my partner, in a good or bad way?

Being a woman happens to be what I was born with. I happened to be born into a Muslim family. I happened to be born into Pakistani heritage. They are all part of me, and there are parts of them which I embrace; but all of it I question constantly, as I always have, in terms of how I bring up my children and how I think about my place in society.

Sometimes, me being a Muslim – I just wish it was invisible. A Muslim does something on the other side of the world and I get kind of wheeled out – 'What do you think about it?' – because I happen to wear a headscarf. I have this tussle about it because a part of me is like 'It's got nothing to do with me. I don't expect you, as a white man, to understand everything another white man might do'; but at the same time I have to deal with the reality of the world right now, that people are genuinely fearful of Muslims – and some of it may be exaggerated and politicians have used it for their own agendas, but there *are* Muslims in the world who are doing terrible things – and as a human being and a citizen anything I can do that allays fears or brings down barriers I see as my responsibility. I shouldn't have to do it, but it has to be done.

And is Islam just the faith you happened to be born into or is it something you have embraced?

So, I happened to be born a Muslim and as I was growing up and seeing a lot of cultural practices and thinking that was Islam – women being treated like second-class citizens, so many of my cousins having arranged marriages – I rebelled. I really didn't want to be associated with that.

I started to read up about the faith and when I read what the Qur'an said and I read about the Prophet's life, it was a real contrast. So, I went to my parents and said: 'Actually, *this* is what it says.' That's how I argued to go to university, for example – because my parents were first-generation [immigrants] and in those days it was very unusual for Pakistani girls to go to university. They had their stereotypes, like, you know, a girl who goes to uni is going to run away with a guy and bring shame on the family. So, I showed them some religious traditions that said that seeking knowledge and getting an education are compulsory and, actually, educating girls is really stressed by the Prophet. And my dad said: OK.

He used to be a teacher in Pakistan, before he came here and worked in the Royal Mail, and he really valued education and impressed on all of us, girls and boys, that it is the way forward. I never saw him without a book in his hand. Also, he had become more of a practising Muslim and had learnt more about the faith and he was very conscious that the Prophet brought equality.

Did you explore any other religions?

I did read the Bible and I used to meet with a local priest and ask him questions; and I read up about Judaism and Hinduism and Buddhism. And the more I read, the more it was apparent to me that the fundamental values are the same, but the people in power

put their interpretation on them, whether it's in families or the wider society. And I remember reluctantly being most convinced by what I read about Islam. I remember thinking, 'Gosh, yes. That feels right to me' – but kind of also feeling, 'But I didn't want to feel like that!'

What sort of age were you?

I was still very young – like, early teens.

But I've always felt a connection with God, in myself – but also really questioning him, saying: 'But *why*?'

Jews and Christians, if asked about the harsher laws in the Bible – for example, that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned to death – will say: Well, of course that was then and this is now and our understanding of God has developed in the centuries since. How would you respond to people who say that Islam is trying to take us back to 'then', to a harsher, less enlightened age?

I think it's exactly the same challenge for all of us, because those verses *are* in the Bible, they *are* in the Torah and they *are* in the Qur'an, and I certainly am not comfortable with that, you know? I have actively campaigned against countries like Iran and Saudi where they do this, because I see it as deeply, deeply hypocritical.

There's a mechanism in Islam, called *ijtihad*, where you're always questioning [the teaching] and applying [it] in the context. So, it's about: What do you apply? How do you apply it? Islam in itself is not rigid – but some people try to take their interpretation of religion and impose it on a whole society. You know, if you want to live your life a certain way between you and God, whether it's very strict or not, do it! But don't try to impose it on everyone else!

For me it comes down to a few basic things. There's a verse in the Qur'an which says: Stand up for justice even if it goes against yourself or your kin

You seem to have a strong sense of social justice. Is that derived from your parents, too?

I would credit them in the sense that when we were watching the news – we had a strict upbringing and were not allowed to watch films and so on, in order to protect us – my dad would be saying: Look at the people in the world that are suffering! I suppose the difference between us was that he saw himself as an immigrant, as a guest, and so he saw it as our place to stay quiet.

After '9/11', when I decided to join the anti-war movement, he found that quite difficult. One part of him was: Look, the misunderstanding is so great now, and the fear and the hatred. If you start saying anything against the Government, we'll be seen as traitors. And I do understand that sentiment.

So, where does the bolshiness in you come from? Is it just temperament, or can you trace it back to particular things in your childhood?

I think a bit of both. You know, you can do a lot of reading and think, 'Oh, that's interesting!' but for me it comes down to just a few basic things. There's a verse in the Qur'an – surah 4, verse 135 – which says: Stand up for justice even if it goes against yourself or your parents or your kin, rich or poor.[2] And that applies even at home. When

the kids are fighting, it's like: Just be honest! Stand up for justice even if it goes against yourself.

My mum always said: 'You can't be doing all this activism. What about your kids? You're being a really bad mum!' So, I have the guilt from that. But I'd say: Look, it doesn't say 'Stand up for justice when it's convenient.' It doesn't say 'Stand up for justice when your mortgage is paid off and you're financially secure.' It doesn't say 'Stand up for justice when your kids have grown up.' We can all do the right thing when it's easy, but the test comes when actually you might have to pay a personal price.

Also, while I might look like I'm railing against the Government, actually I really, really love and cherish the freedoms we have in this country and so for me it's like giving a friend constructive criticism. If you're always saying everything's fine, that's a false friendship – because I want what's good for all of us, not just for me or my family. In fact, I can't think of anything I've really got passionate about where I feel that I'm the one who's going to benefit.

I don't know whether this is a legitimate question, but –

All questions are legitimate!

If your politics are shaped by Islam, is that more a matter of finding principles in the Qur'an or of following Muhammad's example, or about having a relationship with God and responding to him?

It's them all, up to a point, because they are all connected. For me, the most important thing is the relationship with God – and in that I have my tussles as well as the love and the awe. Every day, I try to be the best that I can be, very conscious that I have my weaknesses and my faults; and that's a very private inner journey, inner struggle, trying to be brutally honest with myself and knowing that – well, believing that I am in the presence of God at all times and do I measure up to that?

Then, I believe that we have been given guidance as to, well, this is what good looks like – you know, being kind, being honest, all of those things – and so my politics is about: how does that translate into a society? And that's not fixed, because within Islam itself there's a breadth about the 'how' bit, so we can argue and debate and be pragmatic.

So, I am wherever I am on the political spectrum, Baroness Warsi[3] is in the Tory party, there are senior Lib Dems who are Muslims, and Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London[, is in the Labour Party]. So, I'm not saying that *this* is a Muslim approach to politics, because there will be many Muslims who disagree with my stance. There'll be Muslims who think I'm not Muslim enough, you know, so I'll get the fatwas. On the other hand, there are people who think I'm really strict, so…

I read that you got involved in politics after you were spat at in the street. Is that one of those stories that has grown in the telling?

Yeah – but it was out of that sense of real helplessness and fear after '9/11'. The Bosnian experience was still quite raw for many of us Muslims here, especially because it was white Europeans [who in 1995 had massacred more than 8,000 Muslims in Srebrenica] and we were – were brown and were an immigrant community. It seems far-fetched but the fear and hatred were something I had not experienced before and it was like: Something like that could happen here as well.

At the same time, I was thinking: How is bombing Afghanistan going to achieve peace, or a resolution of what happened on '9/11'? It seemed obvious to me that it was going to make things worse, not better. And then that [injunction] 'Stand up for justice' – what does that mean, then? What is my responsibility?

It's the hardest thing, when your country's going to war, to stand against that, because of course you're seen as unpatriotic. But people got the message

Many people found the huge demonstration in London of 15 February 2003 in the end disillusioning, because it apparently achieved nothing. Obviously, it didn't have that effect on you.

I totally understand the disillusionment, but I was part of building the anti-war movement, so I didn't come in just at the march. I had to co-ordinate 200 coaches from Birmingham alone. At the beginning, it was hard to get even a roomful of people and I saw how it built up over time – in that environment, within a few years getting [up to 1.5 million people to] march was absolutely huge. You know, it's the hardest thing, when your country's going to war, to stand against that, because of course you're seen as unpatriotic. But people got the message – and it wasn't about themselves, it was about people on the other side of the world who were of a different race, a different religion.

Were you not disheartened when Britain went to war anyway?

I separated my emotional reaction from my logical one. Emotionally, of course, it was really demoralising, but for me it was politics, as in that's what they wanted people to do: to feel disillusioned and give up. So, don't give them that! And for that reason I've kept going.

Also, from my reading of history any genuine progress has not come about through just one or two marches but through the persistence of people – which is the hardest thing. And again that's part of the test for me – my inner struggle, as well as the political one. Life isn't a Hollywood film and sometimes the victories come after a long, long time. Those who have power will not just give it up. Look at the Civil Rights Movement – they had so many setbacks. Look at the violence of the suffragettes' struggle.

So, I don't regret going on marches – I think it was the right thing to do. It might not have stopped the war but it certainly helped people in the Middle East to know that British people cared for them. I honestly believe that [but for that demonstration] we would have seen more terrorist atrocities on the streets of this country. And it also inspired a lot of the democracy movements – like, people have actually said to me in Tunisia and Egypt that it inspired them, years later, to come out [onto the streets]. But the establishment will never say: You guys did a good thing and this is the effect it's had – and that's part of their weaponry, to make you feel powerless, because if you feel powerless you won't bother to challenge them.

You appeared on one edition of *Question Time*, at Wootton Bassett in 2009, with a

lot of 'big beasts': Lord Ashdown, William Hague, General Sir Richard Dannatt, Bill Rammell and Piers Morgan.[4] What struck me, watching that, was the respect they all showed you. Why do you think that was?

The majority of my experience has been the opposite.

Being slapped down?

Yeah! You know, who's this uppity immigrant woman telling us anything?

That programme was actually unique in lots of ways. They normally have five people on, but this time they had six. And normally *Question Time* is about lots of issues, but this was about only one. When they asked me, I was, like, terrified to be given the responsibility of carrying the anti-war argument – they could have had Tony Benn on, or… – and when they told me who else was going to be on the panel, the cynical part of me said: So, to defend the anti-war position they're getting a brown Muslim woman with a headscarf, so it's 'the other'. That's the politics of it. And they did it in such an emotionally loaded place, where [the bodies of British servicemen and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan were repatriated]. I was very aware that there would be people there who had lost loved ones.

So, it was a really hard thing to do – I was literally shaking before I went on. I braced myself for a hostile environment, and when I first spoke there was complete silence. It just so happened that as the questions came and I answered them, people [in the audience] started saying, 'I agree with Salma.'

You said on that programme that you would be proud to have your sons defend this country. What would they be fighting for exactly?

It's always people.

Ideally, I would like to be a pacifist but I think there *are* times when physical intervention may be necessary because without it a greater harm would be caused. I don't believe in blind patriotism, as in 'My country, right or wrong', because I think that's part of that false division between people and I dislike it, whether people do it in the name of faith or tribe or…

And yet in 2011 you were vilified when you didn't stand up when a young soldier who had been awarded the George Cross came into Birmingham's council chamber.[5] I could understand that if he had won his medal for killing people, but he'd got it for saving lives. Were you in two minds about that?

Yeah. Being chair of the Stop the War Coalition in Birmingham I would have felt hypocritical if I'd stood up, because I thought it was a political ploy. What the Government was doing, time and time again, was wheel the soldiers out and of course then everybody says, 'Well done, guys!' and the subtext of that is: The war is good. And my instinct was, you know, I don't want to be condoning this – and my protest was against the politicians doing that. We were supposed to be debating a budget cut and they just walked him in.

You spoke to him afterwards, I believe.

Yeah, because, again, I don't like to personalise. And, to be fair to him, he said if it had been a Christian who had stayed sitting down, there wouldn't have been such a furore.

On a political level, maybe it wasn't the wisest thing to do. If it caused more harm, more misunderstanding, I've got no problem saying: That was a wrong judgement. You know, I am human, I can make wrong decisions.

I always wanted Respect to be a broad coalition – I wanted it to be what I thought the Labour Party had been, could be and should be

You were in your early thirties when you initiated Respect in 2004.[6] I've read a little of the history of the party and it didn't seem to be marked by much mutual respect. Were you dismayed by that whole experience?

I always wanted Respect to be a genuinely broad coalition – I wanted it to be what I thought the Labour Party had been, could be and should be. I suppose most of Jeremy Corbyn's political platform is what we were advocating – it wasn't any more radical or far-fetched than that. And it was about trying to bring some of the energy from the anti-war movement into domestic politics. Pensioners in this country were dying of cold and young people faced a future of debt as a result of tuition fees – and most of the politicians in the House of Commons had benefited from a free education! So, for me it was, like, making the link that some of the very people who at home seem to have benefited most economically are the ones who are also benefiting from wars abroad. And because Labour at that time had fully embraced both neoliberalism and imperialism, there just wasn't much space for even a discussion of this kind of politics.

I had an initial conversation with the *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot[7] and he invited some people round and we said: What do we think? Where next, domestically as well as with regard to the war? I organised a series of conferences up and down the country called 'British Politics at the Crossroads' to ask the question: Do we want to have another political party? Will people agree on a set of principles around civil liberties, the rule of law, environmental stuff, trade union stuff, workers' rights? Do we have enough overlap, whatever else we differ on?

Is it possible for a political party, or an individual politician, to be 'one-nation', or is it inevitable that you will side with one class or sector of society against another?

The answer is 'Yes, it is possible' and I think not only is it possible, that's what we *should* be doing. We should be trying to minimise conflict. When you're trying to stand up for justice, it's wrong to pretend that there isn't a 'side' at times, because that would be just colluding. But even while you're engaged in that conflict, how you do things is important. So, don't demonise. I think we've all got good and bad capacities and instincts, so I'd really want not to be judgemental, and certainly not to contribute to any hostility. There is enough of that in the world.

I think there are ways we can have a more just world and actually it doesn't have to be painful [for anyone]. That's the irony, I think – there is plenty to go around. It's finite, yes, so we do have to think about how we share it; but it doesn't mean it has to be mayhem –

It doesn't need to be punitive?

Yes. That, I think, is the wrong approach, because that *is* the politics of envy.

We should talk about another big beast. Can you say a little about your relationship with George Galloway,[8] [Respect's only MP,] and why things broke down?

It really is whatever's in the public sphere. There is nothing more to it. Again, I don't like to personalise…

Were you disillusioned by how it all worked out?

I can get frustrated and upset by it, but I refuse to be disillusioned.

When you quit Respect in 2012, the Green MP Caroline Lucas tweeted: 'Really hope Salma Yaqoob's resignation … doesn't mean she's leaving politics – we need her

clarity and vision.' You stood for Parliament in 2005 and 2010. Do you still hope to sit in the House of Commons?

I haven't got any kind of personal ambition. For me, it is always about what is an effective platform. That's why I agreed to do *Question Time* – it's about: how can you influence and shape things for the better?

And, if anything, up till now my politics has always been a sideline, as it were, because I've got to work, I've got to look after kids, all the rest of it.

Should people of faith really believe in democracy? I don't know about the Qur'an, but it's almost an axiom in the Bible that whatever path the majority of people choose is likely to be the wrong one.

That's where the Islamic view of humankind differs from the Christian view, that we are born in original sin and our nature tends towards evil. As a Muslim, I believe that all children are born innocent, because in our version of [the story of] Adam and Eve they repented and were forgiven.

(The Bible also says that women are given the pains of childbirth as a punishment for Eve's sin, which I find, obviously, upsetting. The Qur'an teaches that childbirth is a reason to be more respectful of women, because it says: In pain upon pain did your mother bear you, and so your mother is deserving threefold the respect of your father.[9] That was one of the reasons, when I was reading the Qur'an, I was like: Oh! OK...)

The way I see it, God has given us a choice even to believe in him or not, and so who are we to restrict another human being's free choice? If God has given us that, so be it

In Islam, the *fitra*, the primordial state, is a good one. We have a capacity for evil, so we can go either way, and the *jihad* (which just means 'struggle') is not to annihilate our lower instincts – our vanity, our greed and so on – because that would be going against human nature, but to master them.

In a sense, there's a stronger foundation for democracy in Islam than in Christianity?

I would say so. It could be undemocratic in the sense that some people don't believe in pluralism – they say: 'God has told us this is the way, so this should be the only way.' But the way I see it is that God has given us a choice even to believe in him or not, and so who are we to restrict another human being's free choice? If God has given us that, so be it. I wouldn't like to live in Saudi or Iran and not have a choice. I think a pluralist society is more interesting and healthy. So, if you want to cover up, do and if you don't...

That's why I think Britain's good. In France, they're fundamentalist secularists. We have a secular space here, but, you know, we have an established church, we have bishops in the House of Lords, which on paper could look quite theocratic, but – I don't know if it's just the British way, but I think on the whole we've got the balance right.

Our constitution is a bit of a bodge, isn't it?

But I think there's a virtue in that, because I think we are bodges ourselves. As soon as you come along with any utopia, tempting as it is, it always leads to trouble, I think. It leads to totalitarianism. Long live the fudge!

How do you feel about young people from Britain going out to Syria to join Daesh?

I think it's really disturbing and frightening and sad – but also not totally unpredictable. That's why it's so important, I think, to have a political space to be able to differ, to engage, to challenge ideas, to have dialogue, rather than driving things underground so that people resort to violence. People have to feel like they can make a difference. I'm very conscious of saying I'm against, you know, wars abroad, but as a mother and as a Muslim citizen I'm also thinking: How can we create an environment where violence cannot grow?

You're still working as a psychotherapist. If you had Britain on your couch, what searching question would you be trying to get it to address in order to work towards wholeness?

I wouldn't even ask anything, I would just want to pay a compliment. I would say: Thank you. And just hold on to your good stuff – the greyness and the self-reflection and the humble accommodation with a dose of humorous cynicism. I think that is what makes this country great.

 This interview was posted on highprofiles.info on 30 October 2016.

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1 See bit.ly/2dPEfmt. Iain Duncan Smith was then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

2 quran.com/4/135

3 Interviewed for High Profile in July 2009 (bit.ly/2fdn5Ls)

4 See bbc.in/2feT8jh.

5 See, for example, dailym.ai/2eYjDFX.

6 The party was originally called 'Respect – the Unity Coalition'. Its short name is an acronym standing for 'respect, equality, socialism, peace, environment, community, trade unionism'.

7 Interviewed for High Profile in June 2001 (bit.ly/1SgzhXO)

8 Interviewed for High Profile in June 2005 (bit.ly/1qaYwEr)

9 This conflates Qur'an 31:14 (quran.com/31/14) with a hadith (see sunnah.com/bukhari/78/2).

Biography

Salma Yaqoob was born in Bradford in 1971 but raised in Birmingham, where she was educated at King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls. She studied human and applied psychology at Aston University, and then completed a postgraduate diploma in integrative psychotherapy and counselling at Birmingham City University.

She became politically active in the aftermath of '9/11'. In 2003, she co-founded the Birmingham Stop the War Coalition, which she has chaired to date.

In 2004, she co-founded the Respect Party with – briefly – George Monbiot. She led the party until her resignation in 2012. In the 2005 general election, she stood as its candidate for Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath, finishing second with 27.5% of the vote.

In 2006, she was elected to Birmingham City Council with 49.4% of the vote in her ward. In the same year, she won the Lloyds TSB Asian Jewel Award for excellence in public service, while *Harper's Bazaar* named her among the top 30 British 'women shaping Britain'.

In 2009, she was listed by the *Daily Telegraph* among the 'top 100 left-wingers' in Britain and was also included in the *Guardian*'s 'Muslim Women Power List'.

She stood in the 2010 general election as the Respect candidate for Birmingham Hall Green, again coming second despite an 11.7% swing from Labour and the endorsement of both the retiring Labour MP and the leader of the Green Party, Caroline Lucas. During the campaign, she was offered a choice of two 'safe' seats by Labour, one in Birmingham and one in the Black Country. She was re-elected to the city council, but stood down in 2011 due to ill health.

She resigned from Respect in 2012.

In 2015, she applied to join the Labour Party but was rejected by the local constituency executive committee.

She is currently employed as a community engagement senior manager at the Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust. In April 2014, she was appointed independent chair of the stakeholder council of Birmingham South Central Clinical Commissioning Group. She also runs a part-time psychotherapy practice.

She leads the group Hands Off Birmingham Schools, set up in 2014 in response to the Operation Trojan Horse controversy.

She has made several appearances on BBC1's *Question Time* since 2006, as well as on *The Politics Show*, *This Week*, *Daily Politics*, *10 o'Clock Live* and *Frost over the World*.

She has an honorary doctorate from Birmingham City University.

She has three sons from her first marriage. She remarried in 2016.

Up-to-date as at 30 October 2016