

It is good that Britain is debating what it means to be British because our Prime Minister and his government appear to have forgotten.

They imposed detention without trial until it was ruled unlawful. Although Control Orders can still be imposed without ever telling the suspect of the evidence against them, let alone the case going to court. Now the Government wants to ban an organisation that the respected Muslim Council of Britain considers an "avowedly non-violent" group and it wants to introduce ID cards. ID cards play into the hands of a national nightmare - a fear of Big Brother surveillance instilled in us by George Orwell in his book "1984" and never forgotten - except by those now in power.

Not only have they forgotten what it means to be British, but they have also forgotten the lessons of Northern Ireland. One of the most powerful signs that Catholic rebellion in Northern Ireland might just have a point was the image of Gerry Adams on the TV while his words were read by an actor.

Broadcast of his voice was banned. Yet what Blair proposes is far wider.

The last thing we need is hastily introduced legislation that further alienates Muslims outraged by the seemingly never-ending conflict between Palestine and Israel, the occupation of Iraq, and the indifference of the British media to the daily carnage in that country. These are not a handful of fanatics. Many, many non-Muslims in the UK feel outrage over the same issues.

Clearly we need definite lines the sand over what is acceptable behaviour. Free speech must be supported at all costs. It is the bedrock of the democratic society we want to defend and it includes the freedom to offend. The violent protests against that play set in a Sikh temple should have been condemned far more loudly and the play should have continued its run. People should not feel constrained in speaking out against enforced marriage just because it is part of another's cultural tradition. I would even support the right on the BNP to march in Leicester. To have free speech, we need a common language. People coming to Britain should have to take lessons in English. If they decide never to use it outside the classroom, that is their rightful choice.

But protection of free speech should not extend to words encouraging violence. That contravenes another British principle of live and let live - you conduct yourself how you wish provided it does not harm me. If preachers living here are advocating jihad against Britain, then it is legitimate to stop them. Do we really not have laws covering those basic principles after centuries of legislation?

Utilising what we already have will reduce the fear of Muslims that they are being picked on by their own government. Blair must listen to moderate Muslims. He has divided this country enough.