Jack Straw versus Jack Frost

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THE US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice's recent visit to northwest England was met by a decidedly chilly reception that - according to the UK Independent - "appeared to have a cooling effect on the previously cosy relationship" she had shared with the British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw.

Whether or not that was indeed the case, there seems little doubt that her visit was dogged by controversy almost from beginning to end. While the numbers of demonstrators were lower than expected, they nevertheless made their presence felt, doggedly pursuing Dr Rice from one location to another; and ultimately, the protesters successfully disrupted her programme.

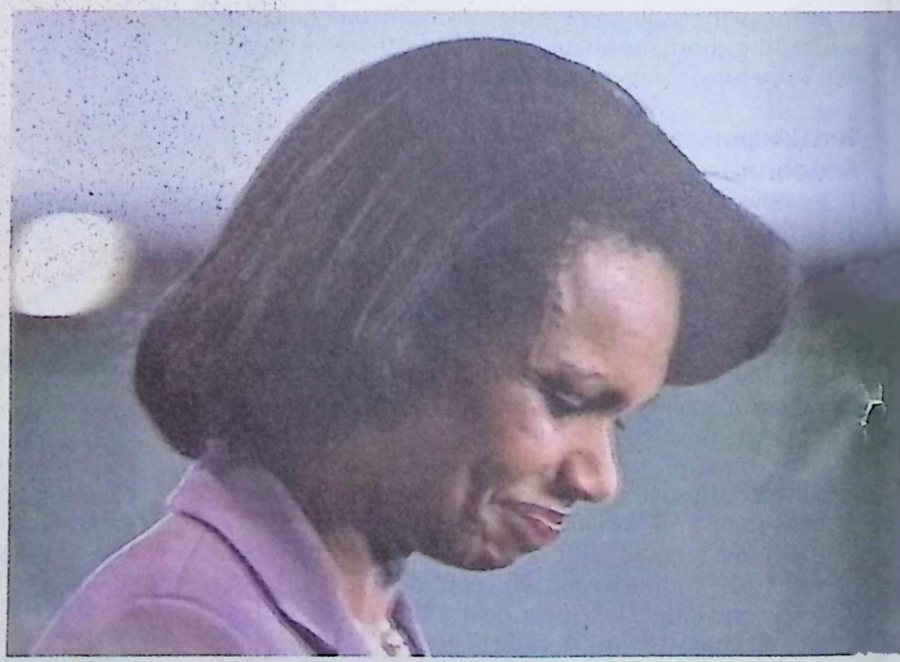
Things were relatively calm before the Masjide Al Hidayah mosque, in the heart of Mr Straw's Blackburn constituency, withdrew its invitation to Dr Rice. Although a member of the mosque's governing committee insisted that the visit wasn't canceled because they didn't like Condoleezza Rice, another committee member admitted that their initial decision to accept Mr Straw's request had to be reversed when the level of opposition to Dr Rice's visit became evident. He said, "The young members of the mosque... took a stand and the committee had to accept that they should've consulted members first".

This divide between older community leaders and younger members of the community only confirms existing worries over the lack of understanding between different generations within the British Muslim community. While Dr Rice and Mr. Straw spoke with some local Muslim leaders at the town hall, others - such as Abu Musa, a 27 year-old computer technician - held the view that "The Muslim leaders don't represent this community. They're just self-interested."

Several of the mosque's members stated that the committee had initially decided to accept Mr Straw's request to visit without consulting members (resulting in the subsequent withdrawal of the invitation), and this lack of consultation appears to have been a consistent theme of Dr Rice's visit - perhaps also mirroring the lack of consultation between the UK government, and the people of that country, in whose unwilling name the government's invasion of Iraq first took place...

There was fierce opposition from parents protesting outside the multiracial Pleckgate High School in Blackburn, who complained that the head teacher, Robin Campbell, had failed to consult them before agreeing to Dr Rice's visit! Some felt torn about whether to send their children to school that day. One mother, protesting alongside her two daughters aged 12 and 13, stated that she did not want her children to be "preached at" by Dr Rice. But another parent of two teenagers, said that, although he had come out to protest, his children were at school because he wouldn't "let a couple of warmongers" deprive them of an education.

The trip caused controversy at all levels. In Liverpool, a local newspaper column compared the visit to one by the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley in the 1930s. In a situation where it was recently revealed that Britain's casualties of the war in Iraq total 6700, with around 4000 requiring medical evacuation to the UK, the hostility is perhaps not that unexpected. As Peter Kilfoyle, a former defence minister from Liverpool said, "The first thing that strikes me is when Jack Straw and Condoleezza Rice are strutting around here, perhaps they should be looking at these figures... They show that we are paying a far higher price than we realized for... not a very productive role in Iraq." (UK



Rice - losing brownie points in the UK.