

Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

Contents

Home Affairs

Israel

Foreign Affairs

Relevant Legislation

Consultations

Home Affairs

House of Lords Oral Answers

Islamophobia

Baroness Finn (Conservative): To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the potential consequences of adopting an official definition of Islamophobia.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Wales Office (Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth): My Lords, we remain deeply concerned at hatred directed against British Muslims and others because of their faith or heritage. This is utterly unacceptable and does not reflect the values of our country. We know that some have suggested that establishing a definition of Islamophobia could strengthen efforts to confront bigotry and division. Any such approach would need to be considered carefully to ensure that this would have the positive effect intended.

Baroness Finn: The formal definition of anti-Semitism is carefully but narrowly drawn and has helped to focus minds and resources on this pernicious hatred. How will my noble friend ensure that a formal definition of Islamophobia, if introduced, has a similar impact but is narrowly and carefully drawn so as to avoid creating a wider threat to free speech?

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: My Lords, it would be useful for my noble friend to look at the debate we had before Christmas, on 20 December, on this issue. I will certainly provide her with the link. It illustrated some of the difficulties that exist. It took some time to establish the definition for anti-Semitism. As I said, we would need to proceed with great care. In the interim, there is clearly an issue of hatred and bigotry directed against Muslims that we must confront. ...

Lord Singh of Wimbledon (Crossbench): My Lords, there is no common statistical basis whatsoever suggesting that members of any one faith suffer more discrimination than others. Emotive words like Islamophobia are simply unhelpful pleas for special consideration. Does the Minister agree that the Government have a basic responsibility to ignore all special pleading and ensure that all faiths and beliefs are equally protected?

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: My Lords, I would first say to the noble Lord—who contributed to the debate on this issue on 20 December—that of course all faiths, heritages and races should be protected, and indeed are protected. I would also

gently say to him that the statistics show numerically that there are far more attacks and bigotry in relation to the Muslim community than any other.

Baroness Hussein-Ece (Liberal Democrat): My Lords, the Minister has acknowledged that hate crimes against Muslims have risen dramatically. The Government's own figures show a rise of 40%, almost equal to that of anti-Semitism. Will the Government accept that it is becoming increasingly normalised? We have commentators and columnists who think it is perfectly proper to argue that racism and hate speech against Muslims is acceptable and, in fact, should be normalised. Will the Government carefully consider the definition from and work done by the APPG on British Muslims, after consulting 800 community organisations, 80 academics and more than 60 parliamentarians, on offering that protection, and send out a strong signal that they intend to offer some protection? It is not special pleading; it is about reducing hate crime in the same way done for British Jews as well.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: My Lords, I share the ambition to ensure that the incidence of hate crime comes down. There is evidence of better reporting; that is one reason, although not the only reason, why the statistics show an increase. It is worth mentioning that. It is important to confront this wherever we look. The noble Baroness will be aware that we recently renewed the hate crime action plan, which is now going forward to 2020. I very much value the work done by the APPG and by others on this issue. Of course the Government will look at this in the round, as we will the other evidence and the very valuable debate we had just before Christmas.

Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Labour Co-op): My Lords, will the noble Lord go further and join me in congratulating the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims on producing this report and its definition of Islamophobia? It makes clear that Islamophobia is rooted in racism—racism that targets Muslimness or perceived Muslimness. Its report and definition have been endorsed by British Muslims for Secular Democracy, the Muslim Women's Network UK, the Muslim Council of Great Britain and, as the noble Baroness, Lady Hussein-Ece, said, by more than 800 other organisations. Will he commit to working inside government to get a definition adopted without delay?

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: My Lords, I say to the noble Lord, who I do not think was present at the debate in question, that there are split views on this issue. It is not quite as straightforward as he suggests. Of course we want to work with the APPG and others, and we are certainly committed to any way of confronting and bringing down bigotry and hatred. But I want to make sure that we get this right, and that means not rushing it. I appreciate that the noble Lord will be part of that endeavour and look forward to his support in that.

Baroness Uddin (Non-affiliated): My Lords, I say to the Minister, with due respect, that there was not such division as he suggests. However, as he may be aware, those of us who have spoken in the debate since the Islamophobia debate on 20 December have received some unsavoury intimidation. Does he agree that any definition that seeks to protect a community must be rooted in that community? Does he therefore agree that any attempts to undermine the community's agency is in itself a part of that problem? To the House, I say that those of us who have worked tremendously hard over years and decades will not tolerate any division between us while we fight Islamophobia, other prejudices and anti-Semitism.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: My Lords, first, if the noble Baroness goes back to that debate, she will find that there were certainly Muslim contributors who had different views. I am not saying that they did not want to confront Muslim hatred and Islamophobia—they did—but there are certainly different approaches that we would have to look at. I share her view about making sure that, in a shared endeavour, we bring down anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia and confront them both.

The Archbishop of York: My Lords, on the overall question of definitions, sometimes it is much easier to do things when we handle them as concepts. In the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, we struggled with the question of racism, particularly when it is found in institutions, so we ended up saying: “The concept that we apply to this case of institutional racism is this”. That is much easier than a definition because a definition can restrict what you want to say. Is it not better to learn from what the Stephen Lawrence inquiry did? We in that inquiry also struggled with the question of homophobic incidents in many other places. In the end, we adopted the word “concept” as opposed to a definition, because a definition is always contingent on who speaks and who does what. May I advise that it might be worth while visiting the way in which the Stephen Lawrence inquiry handled the question of institutional racism?

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: My Lords, the most reverend Primate is right and I take his advice on this very seriously. There is obviously major work to be done here and I will certainly revisit issues relating to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and how we learned from what came forward there. It is vital that we get this right; I am sure we all share in that ambition. It is about making sure that we do it, not about rushing to judgment and coming to a set conclusion without looking at the evidence. I am keen to see the evidence and to act on it.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2019-01-14/debates/5AAEA536-F95C-434E-9331-529C93639C53/Islamophobia>

The debate referred to above can be read at

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2018-12-20/debates/2F954D45-1962-4256-A492-22EBF6AEF8F0/Islamophobia>

The report referred to above can be read at

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

TOP

Israel

House of Commons Written Answer

Palestinians: Overseas Aid

Alex Sobel (Labour Co-op) [205409] To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, if his Department will make an estimate of the proportion of expenditure from the Palestinian Authority Martyrs Fund that has funded terrorism in each year for which information is available.

Alistair Burt: The UK understands that approximately \$172 million was spent on payments to the ‘Martyrs Fund’ in 2016. The fund makes payments to Palestinian families who have a family member that has died or been wounded ‘whilst resisting the occupation’. We do not hesitate to raise instances of incitement with the Palestinian Authority and we use our strong partnership to lobby them to make sure payments from the Martyrs Fund cover only family members’ needs. We also want the system to be more transparent. No UK aid is used for prisoner payments or the fund you reference.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-01-04/205409/>

TOP

Foreign Affairs

House of Commons Written Answer

Christianity

John Hayes (Conservative) [205199] To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what steps his Department is taking to secure religious freedom for Christians throughout the world.

Mark field: Freedom of Religion or Belief is an important part of the work done by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We regularly raise this issue with international counterparts both at ministerial and senior official levels and in multilateral forums.

The respected NGO, Open Doors, estimates that 215 million Christians experience high or extreme levels of persecution around the world. To ensure that the United Kingdom is using its influence to support Christians in the best possible way, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs commissioned an independent, global review into the persecution of Christians on 26th December 2018. This review will be led by the Bishop of Truro, the Right Reverend Philip Mounstephen will report by Easter the additional practical steps the government can take to support persecuted Christians. Further information can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-announces-global-review-into-persecution-of-christians>

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-01-04/205199/>

TOP

Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Bill

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/holocaustreturnofculturalobjectsamendment.html>

International Development Assistance (Palestinian National Authority Schools) Bill

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/internationaldevelopmentassistancepalestiniannationalauthoritieschools.html>

Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment) Bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/marriageact1949amendment.html>

Online Forums Bill

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/onlineforums.html>

Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/organdonationdeemedconsent.html>

Palestinian Statehood (Recognition) Bill

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/palestinianstatehoodrecognition.html>

Scottish Parliament

Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Bill

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/Bills/108681.aspx>

TOP

Consultations

** new or updated today

** closes today

Connected communities – Tackling loneliness and social isolation (Wales)

(closing date 15 January 2019)

<https://beta.gov.wales/connected-communities-tackling-loneliness-and-social-isolation>

** closes tomorrow

The Macpherson Report: Twenty Years On (closing date 16 January 2019)

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/macpherson-report-twenty-years-on-inquiry-17-19/>

Extremism in England and Wales (closing date 31 January 2019)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/extremism-in-england-and-wales-call-for-evidence>

Racial harassment in higher education (closing date 15 February 2019)

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/inquiries-and-investigations/racial-harassment-higher-education-our-inquiry>

Draft guidance to challenge bullying in schools [Wales only] (closing date 15 February 2019)

<https://beta.gov.wales/draft-guidance-challenge-bullying-schools>

One Scotland: Hate Has No Home Here (closing date 24 February 2019)

<https://consult.gov.scot/hate-crime/consultation-on-scottish-hate-crime-legislation/>

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission – Draft Strategic Plan 2019-22

(closing date 15 March 2019)

<http://www.nihrc.org/news/detail/ni-human-rights-commission-draft-strategic-plan-2019-2022-consultation>

Scottish charity law (closing date 1 April 2019)

<https://tinyurl.com/y9ln88df>

TOP

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC029438