



Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

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House of Commons Debate

Antisemitism: Bristol University

col 252 Christian Wakeford (Conservative): It is profoundly troubling that in 2022 I have to rise and publicly speak about the hatred being directed towards Jewish students on university campuses. What should also be alarming to colleagues in this House and all those in wider society is the amount of parliamentary time that has been dedicated to the issue over the previous two years. ...

Most Jewish students will enjoy an incident-free and happy time on campus, but I have heard testimony from many Jewish students and their families. When embarking on university careers, Jewish students and staff should feel safe, secure and supported. When issues arise, procedures should be in place and complaints investigated and acted on. Tragically, in many instances, that is not the case.

I have chosen to focus this debate on Bristol University because of the fact that it has shown a consistent disregard for the welfare of its Jewish students ... Many will know about the abhorrent and racist views of Professor David Miller. However, there have been other instances of troubling behaviour that have not been addressed. Just yesterday, a Jewish academic shared on Twitter a screenshot of the university's equality, diversity and inclusion training on religion and belief. The scenario explained that the best candidate for the job was Jewish and would therefore need to leave early on Fridays for shabbats, when there was a team meeting. If the participant answered the scenario by saying that there should be a flexible approach to hire the best candidate, they were told: "Might not be a good idea." Essentially, this training is teaching participants not to hire an observant Jew. The actions of David Miller will be familiar to most. Members will have read the numerous newspaper articles and heard the exasperation of Jewish students who were left exhausted and frustrated when raising these serious issues with the university authorities. ...

Miller conducted a module called "Harms of the Powerful", including a PowerPoint slide with a fanciful diagram featuring a web of Jewish organisations placed under or subservient to the Israeli Government. The topic of the week in his February 2019 lecture was Islamophobia, and the slide was part of Professor Miller's explanation of his theory that the Zionist movement is part of a global network that promotes and encourages hatred

of Muslims and of Islam. The PowerPoint presentation he used included mainstream UK Jewish organisations and leaders in that diagram, implying that they were part of an alleged Islamophobic network.

col 253 One Jewish student present put it like this: “As a Jewish student I felt uncomfortable and intimidated in his class. I know and understand what he says is false, it is clear however that a number of students in the class believe him, just because he is an academic”.

The same student said: “I fear that if he found out that I was Jewish this would negatively affect my experience throughout this unit”.

A different Jewish student in his class stated: “I don’t think it is right that I should have to sit in a lecture or seminar in fear. Fear that he will offend me personally or for fear that he is going to spread hatred and misinformation to other students who, in turn, can pass on these false ideas”.

The Community Security Trust, which monitors hate crime on behalf of the Jewish community, submitted a complaint to the university in March 2019. It was informed that “the University does not have a formal process for responding to complaints from third parties”.

The university insisted that to look into matters further, a complaint would have to be submitted by a named individual. The students who had made contact with the CST insisted on their anonymity being preserved. As a result, Bristol University falsely asserted that it had received no complaints. ...

Andrew Percy (Conservative): ... It is not just students who have problems ... More than 100 parliamentarians from seven parties have written to Bristol University. The APPG has written numerous times, and although we have had responses, they have been lacking in detail and in the information that we have asked for. Most recently, we asked the university to share with us the details of the training that it says it is offering on antisemitism. ... The students should never have been put in such a position, but when 100 parliamentarians from seven parties are also ignored, that really tells us that Bristol is not putting the emphasis it should put on this important issue. ...

Christian Wakeford: ... It is an absolute disgrace that for more than two years, such antisemitic racist views were allowed to continue. What is more abhorrent is that even when she came in front of the Select Committee on Education, a representative of the university tried to hide behind the fact of having had a conversation and a dialogue with the Bristol Jewish Society—JSoc—as if that were the solution to all the problems. ...

col 254 It is appalling that students felt that they had to choose whether to complain against an academic teaching racist conspiracy theory because they would inevitably face a backlash. The University of Bristol Jewish Society submitted its own complaint. In responding, the academic charged with reviewing the matter wrote in June 2019 that the internationally agreed definition of antisemitism, which the university later adopted, “is a somewhat controversial definition, with some believing that it is imprecise and can be used to conflate criticism of the policies of the Israeli government and of Zionism with antisemitism”.

Instead, he decided to use “a simpler and, I hope, less controversial definition of antisemitism as hostility towards Jews as Jews”.

He then ruled, regarding Professor Miller’s lecture, that “I cannot find any evidence in the material before me that these views are underlain by hostility to Jews as Jews ... I am unable, therefore, to find grounds upon which Professor Miller should be subjected to disciplinary action”. ...

In 2019, the then Member for Bassetlaw, now Lord Mann, wrote to the university on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, asking it to review its disciplinary processes and consult antisemitism experts, but the institution refused. Following Bristol’s adoption of the IHRA’s definition in December 2019, a further complaint was made by CST, following further appalling, untrue and potentially dangerous allegations about the

organisations, but this too was treated with utter disdain. The complaint followed Miller's comments in an online meeting in which he described CST as "people who must only be faced and defeated".

CST is an organisation that looks after children going to school and people going about their daily worship and their daily Jewish life. To describe it as an organisation that must be defeated is absolutely abhorrent.

Matthew Offord (Conservative): ... I am shocked by some of the comments made by Professor Miller. He claims that CST is actually controlled by the Israeli Government, but I can assure the whole House that that is certainly not the case. One thing that CST does, certainly in the London Borough of Barnet, is keep our citizens safe.

Christian Wakeford: ... When challenged on his comments by *Jewish News*, Professor Miller said that CST "is an organisation that exists to run point for a hostile foreign government in the UK...This is a straightforward story of influence-peddling by a foreign state."

Julian Lewis (Conservative): I seem to recall that the previous title of CST was the Defence Department of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, so if CST is being accused of being an agent of the Israeli Government, presumably the accuser is saying the same about the Board of Deputies of British Jews. That gets pretty close to antisemitism in my book.

col 255 **Christian Wakeford:** Again, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the PowerPoint document in which not only the Board of Deputies but the Jewish representative councils, the Jewish Leadership Council and so many different community organisations were all highlighted as being part of a Zionist conspiracy, which is a blatant falsehood. That comment alone from Professor Miller is blatantly antisemitic. ...

Andrew Percy: I am sorry to labour the point, but it is such an important point because that argument is an antisemitic trope that is used against anybody who dares to call this issue out or question it. It has been used against the APPG. We have been accused of being in the pay of Zionists, and videos have been produced accusing the group's members of being on the take from the Israeli Government or paid for by Zionists. That is a regular occurrence and something that these people use time and time again against anybody who dares to question them: to accuse them of being in the pay of a foreign Government or some other shady characters in the background. It is pure and simple antisemitism. ...

Christian Wakeford: ... Seemingly encouraged by the lack of an official response to the complaints, Professor Miller carried on articulating his problematic views. He claimed that an interfaith cookery class was looking to normalise Zionism among Muslims. He also argued that "Britain is in the grip of an assault on its public sphere by the state of Israel and its advocates" ...

On the abuse of Jewish students on campus, he claimed: "There is a real question of abuse here—of Jewish students on British campuses being used as political pawns by a violent, racist foreign regime engaged in ethnic cleansing". ...

One would have thought any one of those ridiculous theories would be enough for instant dismissal, but the lack of action emboldened Professor Miller. Even a letter signed by 700 academics, which stated that they "believe that Prof. Miller's depiction of Jewish students as Israeli-directed agents of a campaign of censorship is false, outrageous, and breaks all academic norms regarding the acceptable treatment of students", was ignored.

col 256 Professor Miller also had the audacity to criticise the Jewish Society and Jewish students for calling out antisemitism. ...

The highest echelons of the university were well aware of Miller's hateful views, and an unproductive meeting was held with the vice-chancellor and Jewish students. This was 165 days since Professor Miller had attacked Jewish students, and no guarantees were given on timescales or when the university would fulfil its basic duty of care to its Jewish

students. Only on 1 October was news received that he would no longer be employed by the university. Giving evidence to the Select Committee on Education later that month, Professor Jessop mentioned that several training programmes were being run at the university, including on inclusion, Islamophobia and antisemitism. A letter from the APPG in October asking for details of the training was ignored. ...

Andrew Percy: ... it is important to state that one of the defences used by the university was free speech. ... free speech does not extend to racist language or the peddling of racist myths. It is shameful that the university used that as a defence. ...

col 257 Christian Wakeford: ... I have two substantive questions for the Minister. First, any improvement at Bristol University will involve training. Will he undertake to write to the university to find out what training is being undertaken, who has provided it and what quality assurance has been applied? Secondly, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, as the Antisemitism Policy Trust pointed out, risks failing the Miller test by giving academics recourse to the courts when expressing themselves within their area of expertise—and we know how Miller describes that. Will he meet again with me the trust, the CST, the UJS and others on how the Bill can be amended to prevent that from happening? ...

The Minister for School Standards (Robin Walker): ... it is profoundly troubling that we should have to have this debate at all. It feels especially poignant given that Holocaust Memorial Day is just a few weeks away. ...

... there is no place for antisemitism in our society. The Government are clear that racism and religious hatred of any kind should not be tolerated. Universities and other higher education providers should be at the forefront of tackling antisemitism, and must make sure that higher education is a genuinely fulfilling and welcoming experience for everyone.

... within just a few weeks of his appointment, the Secretary of State for Education visited Auschwitz ... During his visit, he warned that if universities failed to consider the views of Jewish students, the risk was “obvious”, adding that antisemitism is not simply a historic debate; it is a present danger and a scourge that exists, sadly, on our campuses. ...

Eliminating antisemitism from our society, including our world-leading university sector, is one of our key priorities. We have been clear that we expect providers to take a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism in all its forms. The Government have taken decisive and long-standing action to tackle antisemitism in higher education. The working definition of antisemitism developed by the IHRA is one important tool for identifying and tackling antisemitism. Adopting it sends a strong signal that higher education providers take the issue seriously.

col 258 Christian Wakeford: ... adopting IHRA is clearly just a badge. What can the Minister and the Department do to make sure that adoption is only part of the journey and that the definition is truly enforced as well?

Robin Walker: ... I absolutely recognise that it is only a step on the journey and not the destination itself. ...

Last month, in response, the OfS published a list of providers that have adopted the definition along with case studies of where it is being used most effectively. I am pleased to see the progress made ... with a marked increase in the number of providers adopting the definition from about 30 to more than 200, including the vast majority of universities.

Although that progress has been made, we are acutely aware that adoption of the definition is just a first step towards eradicating antisemitism in higher education. The Community Security Trust recently published statistics indicating that there is still much work to do. ...

Matthew Offord: ... [the Minister] will be aware that of the about 8,500 Jewish students at UK universities, about one in five suffers antisemitic abuse.

Robin Walker: Which is clearly far too many. I was going to say that while I welcome the fact that the CST found that the vast majority of Jewish students have a strongly positive experience at university, it is deeply troubling to hear that there were about 111 antisemitic

incidents in the sector in the 2020-21 academic year. ...

Those worrying statistics follow the CST report on campus antisemitism between 2018 and 2020 that named six cities with five or more recorded incidents throughout the period, of which Bristol was one. It is even more concerning that many of the institutions named by the CST had already adopted the IHRA definition. ...

col 259 We know from the statistics mentioned that while our work to increase adoption of the IHRA definition is important, it is not enough on its own. That is why the Government have provided, via the Office for Students, £4.7 million to support 119 projects with a particular focus on harassment and hate crime, including 11 projects targeted at tackling religion-based hate crime. ...

In relation to steps that the OfS is taking on tackling antisemitism, as well as publishing on 10 November the list of providers that have adopted the IHRA definition, it has published supportive guidance for providers. In 2019, Universities UK published a briefing note on tackling antisemitism, with which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education has urged all providers to engage seriously. ...

... the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill ... will strengthen existing freedom of speech duties and introduce clear consequences for where these duties are breached. ...

I am absolutely clear that the Bill does not give a green light to antisemitism and Holocaust denial. In particular, any attempt to deny the scale or occurrence of the Holocaust is morally reprehensible and has no basis in fact. ...

The Bill will protect the freedom of speech of Jewish students, staff and visiting speakers, which has at times been under threat, as we saw recently with incidents in our universities. It will stop universities using security costs as a spurious attempt to cancel mainstream speakers, such as has been the case when a society attempted to invite the Israeli ambassador, and it will mean that universities and student unions have to take genuine action against those who use violence or threats of violence to shut down speech, including that of Jewish students.

col 260 In addition to the Bill, there needs to be cultural change, and we welcome initiatives by universities, academics and students to drive this, but as we have seen historically on issues such as gender equality, race discrimination and human rights, cultural change occurs more readily when backed by appropriate legislation. ...

... my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education has said publicly on a number of occasions that the views of Professor Miller, in particular his accusations against Jewish students, are ill-founded and wholly reprehensible, and the Government wholeheartedly reject them.

My right hon. Friend met representatives of the University of Bristol in May 2021 not to intervene in its investigation, but to seek their reassurance that the university recognises its obligations to protect Jewish students from harassment and hate crime, and to support them if they feel in any way threatened. She also wrote to the university twice to ensure that it was supporting Jewish students and staff who may have felt threatened at the time. ...

Tackling antisemitism is a priority for me, for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education and for the Government. We are keen to hear from Jewish groups about what more can be done to make Jewish students and staff feel safe on campus. ...

col 261 ... the Secretary of State for Education and the Minister for Higher and Further Education will be leading a summit specifically focused on tackling antisemitism in higher education. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that he intends to bring together key stakeholders from the sector to examine what more can be done to make Jewish students and staff feel safe on campus. This event will encourage discussion about what more can be done to eradicate the scourge that is antisemitism, and to agree concrete actions that providers can take to keep their Jewish students safe from it. ...

col 262 My ministerial colleagues have worked closely with the Union of Jewish Students, which provides training on how to recognise and tackle antisemitism. I urge the University

of Bristol to consider how it can learn more from those who are directly affected, and I know the UJS would be keen to support such work. My hon. Friend asked whether the UJS can be part of a meeting with him, the CST and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education; as I mentioned earlier, she is happy to commit to that. ... universities are serious in their commitment to tackling antisemitism, but there remains work to be done ... For our part, we will continue to work across Government to ensure that racism and religious hatred of any kind are not tolerated anywhere, including in our world-leading universities.

To read the full transcript see

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-01-06/debates/32C6D7D4-4C53-40A5-A16C-756D55EDF359/AntisemitismBristolUniversity>

Bristol University's statement that Prof Miller was no longer employed by the university, referred to above, can be read at

<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2021/october/prof-miller-statement.html>

Prof Jessop's evidence referred to above can be read at

<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2893/html/>

The list of providers that have adopted the IHRA definition, referred to above, can be read at

https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/183eb089-cd37-4d33-9986-32c28a52a18c/providers-adopting-ihra-working-definition-of-antisemitism-jan_2022.pdf

The case studies referred to above are available from

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/prevent-and-address-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/tackling-antisemitism/>

The CST statistics referred to above can be read at

<https://cst.org.uk/data/file/3/6/Antisemitism%20on%20University%20Campuses.1615558987.pdf>

An updated version of the briefing referred to above can be read at

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/tackling-antisemitism-practical-guide.pdf>

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Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2867>

Assisted Dying Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2875>

Charities Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2877>

Education (Assemblies) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2878>

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2862>

Israel Arms Trade (Prohibition) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3025>

Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3017>

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2900>

Nationality and Borders Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3023>

Online Safety Bill (Draft)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill>

Palestine Statehood (Recognition) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2942>

Northern Ireland Assembly

Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2017-2022-mandate/primary-legislation---bills-2017---2022-mandate/organ-and-tissue-donation-deemed-consent-bill/>

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Consultations

** new or updated today

Animal Welfare – revision of EU legislation (Food Safety) (closing date 21 January 2022)

https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12950-Animal-welfare-revision-of-EU-legislation/public-consultation_en

Outdoor marriages and civil partnerships (closing date 24 January 2022)

<https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/outdoor-marriages-civil-partnerships/>

Marriage Law (Northern Ireland) (closing date 18 February 2022)

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/consultations/public-consultation-marriage-law>

Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill of Rights (closing date 8 March 2022)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/human-rights-act-reform-a-modern-bill-of-rights>

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