

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

Chairman's Report 2005-2006

At the last Annual General Meeting in Glasgow in December 2005, we were addressed by Murray Tosh, Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament. In the course of his talk about the working of the Scottish parliament, he described SCoJeC as “a role model for other communities ... *Ephraim and Leah are very familiar figures around the Parliament and are very effective at putting your view. It's thanks to them that there is now provision for religious divorce included in the Family Law Bill*”.

I would like to highlight one item out of the many that I could have chosen from Ephraim and Leah's reports because they illustrate the importance of “networking” and being seen to be part of the political process.

Family Law Bill

At the time of the 2005 AGM, I was able to report on the progress of the proposed new Family Law Bill. At that time, the delicately constructed clause we had been promoting to enable Sheriffs to delay a civil divorce if the parties had not yet obtained a religious divorce (*Get*) had been added to the Bill at Stage 2, and all that was required was for the Bill to go before the entire Scottish Parliament for final approval. This seemed only a formality, but then without warning, at the last moment, one MSP decided to put forward an amendment to delete the clause altogether! Fortunately, our team of Ephraim and Leah had their eyes on the ball and using the many contacts built up over the years lobbied hard to retain our clause in the bill, and it was finally agreed by 108 votes to 7 with 1 abstention. Commenting on the new legislation, Hugh Henry, Deputy Justice Minister said, “I am proud that we were able to address an anomaly that existed for certain people in the Jewish faith” And Stewart Stevenson the SNP spokesman said “We have addressed an historic wrong in relation to the power of some Jewish men ... over Jewish wives, and that is welcome”.

However, even after the new legislation was on the statute book, it was found that the proposed secondary legislation and Statutory Instruments did not achieve the purpose of the Clause, or even the requirements of other faith groups, and once again Ephraim and Leah had to sit down with the civil servants to persuade them of the need for amendment. The great strength of the Scottish Parliament is that it does involve local communities, and the fact that legislation of direct benefit to our community is now enshrined in Scots' Law is a tremendous achievement, but we should not underestimate the untiring efforts of Ephraim and Leah.

The importance of networking can also be seen in our relationship with the Churches, other faith groups and the Scottish Trade Unions. Regular contacts are maintained, regular meetings are held not just in times of crisis but all the year round. Only last Sunday, Philip Mason and I attended a service in the Sikh Temple in Leith to show our solidarity with one of their members who was assaulted because of his religion.

My only regret after three years in the chair is that our funding is not secure. We run on a “shoestring budget”; there is no waste, and yet we are never confident that we can make ends meet. The Board of Deputies, the Scottish Executive and BEMIS fully appreciate the work we do and see fit to support us financially and do so generously. Yet the members of the Scottish Jewish Community who are after all are the main beneficiaries of our work are not as supportive financially as they might be. As one who was brought up from an early age to appreciate the value of good relations with the Churches, the Schools, the Universities and Local Government, I find it difficult to understand why the Scottish Council is not given the highest priority.

Thanks

The Scottish Council would not be able to do a fraction of its work without the dedicated and constant efforts of Ephraim and Leah. In addition, both of them contribute financially, Ephraim because he gives his services as Director voluntarily and Leah, because she works far more hours than we could afford to pay her. We are grateful to those who support us financially, especially the Glasgow Community and Bloch Trusts, the various Scottish Synagogues, the Board of Deputies and the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council. I have been greatly assisted by my predecessor Dr Kenneth Collins who as the President of Glasgow Jewish Representative Council is vice Chairman of SCoJeC. Thanks are due to the Edinburgh Vice Chairman, Dr Philip Mason, formerly President of the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation, and his successor Mrs Hilary Rifkind, Chairman of the Board of Management of the EHC, as well as to Mr Daniel Clapham, the Hon Treasurer. The community is indebted to these dedicated individuals who give freely of their time and experience.

John A. Cosgrove (Chair)