

# **Draft Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

## **Scottish Parliament, Committee room 3**

**21<sup>st</sup> February 2018**

### **Present**

John Mason: MSP for Shettleston  
Murdo Fraser MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife  
Ephraim Borowski: Scojec  
Alexander Kerr: Officer for John Mason MSP  
Mirella Yandoli: Church of Scotland  
Gordon Macdonald: CARE  
Kieran Turner: Evangelical Alliance  
David Robertson: Free Church  
Shaheen Baber: Police Scotland  
Sacha Ponniah: Police Scotland  
Edward Green: Edinburgh Hebrew  
Danielle Bett: Scojec  
Brian Miller: Baptist Union of Scotland  
Anne Edwards: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints  
Evelyn Liston: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints  
Lorraine McMahon: Aid to the Church in Need  
Linda Oxburgh: Release International  
Brian Oxburgh: Church of Scotland  
Sue Lieberman: Sukkat Shalom Edinburgh  
Laurent Vernet: Methodist Church  
Ruth Donaldson: Christian Solidarity Worldwide  
Mary Divine  
Sheena Anderson

### **Apologies**

Fraser Sutherland: Humanist  
Nigel Kenny: Christian  
Malcolm Macleod: Steadfast Global  
Maurice Golden MSP  
James Fraser: Release International  
R Charles Warren: St Andrews University  
Anthony Horan  
Gordon Lindhurst MSP  
John Sutherland

## **Inquorate**

Although there was a high turnout for the meeting there were only two MSPs present making the meeting inquorate.

## **Welcome**

John Mason MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting and this was followed by round table introductions.

## **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held in November were approved.

## **Brief Report from 2017**

The report of the group's activities in 2017 were circulated among those in attendance.

## **AGM**

The group held their annual general meeting, during which Murdo Fraser MSP nominated John Mason MSP to be re-appointed as convenor of the group. Having accepted this reappointment, John Mason MSP nominated Murdo Fraser MSP to be re-appointed as vice-convenor. John Mason MSP also nominated Interfaith Scotland to be re-appointed as secretariat for the group.

## **General meeting**

Ephraim Borowski from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) delivered an engaging presentation on contemporary antisemitism. Below is a brief outline of his presentation;

The general message is not that it is terrible being Jewish in Scotland. But in recent years there has been a very worrying increase in the level of antisemitism in the country, with the result that many Jewish people report they are actively considering emigrating from Scotland.

The word should be written 'antisemitism', it should not include a hyphen. This is because there is no such thing as 'Semitism'. The term was made up as a deliberate euphemism for hatred. The term 'semitic' is the name of a large language group. Antisemitism does not require the presence of Jew.

Antisemitism without Jew is now most prevalent in Arab world. In recent years many Arab countries have seen a massive reduction in the size of the Jewish population. Several countries have restored their historic synagogues with pride, despite there being no Jew to make use of it.

What is most concerning is when Jews are treated differently than everyone else. When they are singled out. For example the Macpherson principle states that if victim or witness says that a crime was racist then it has to be taken at a prima facie level as racist (although not necessarily in court). That principle is only challenged in the context of antisemitism. People saying that some action or statement is not antisemitism. This is others trying to define the Jewish communities hurt. 'Meta-antisemitism' is when a person repeats the offence and denies that it is antisemitism.

Antisemitism is not a matter of ideology. Not about a big picture of how society should be ordered. It starts with the hatred and the person then fits in anywhere they find the appropriate degree of hatred.

If you are attuned to picking them out there are daily stories of antisemitism from across Europe. In virtually every European country there are major growing concerns about rising hostility. Many leaving France for Israel, UK and US. Community feels vulnerable. Only one community requires guards at its schools. 1382 antisem incidents in uk in 2017, some can be put down to better reporting, some better info sharing between cst and police. Scotland had 16 incidents last year. You would expect about 120 from UK figure. Not necessarily that scotland is a more welcoming place. It only has about 2% of jewish pop of UK. Mostly the Jewish community used to feel that scotland was a good place to be Jewish but for many that has reversed. Many Jews actively discuss leaving Scotland because they feel alienated, vulnerable and not at home. There are still very few serious assaults but much verbal and online abuse.

John Mason welcomed the robustness of the presentation.

### **Brief dialogue and discussion with the presenter**

There was brief discussion following the presentation about the tendency for confusion between a statement or action between anti-Jewish versus anti-Israel. There was also discussion about the role of governments. Particular examples included the Icelandic government move to outlaw male circumcision and the ban on Kosher (and halal) slaughter Switzerland.

### **Date of Next meeting**

The date of the next meeting is still to be decided.

John Mason MSP asked the group if there were any objections to Humanists joining future meetings, and there was no objections.

### **Action Points**

John Mason MSP drew participants attention to the note which had been circulated about the case of Asia Bibi who is a Christian woman currently on death row in Pakistan. The letter could be sent to the Chief Justice and the Pakistani Ambassador. John Mason MSP expressed enthusiasm about this kind of approach for the group in future.

There was also a suggestion to write a letter to those with influence on education on the topic of religious hatred or antisemitism. There followed a brief discussion about this idea, but as the meeting was already over time, it was drawn to a close by John Mason MSP.