

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

Scottish Parliament, Committee room 3

21st 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.