

Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on Building Bridges with Israel

1) Jackson Carlaw MSP (JC) opened the meeting, welcoming all attendees to the exploratory meeting for a potential Cross-Party Group (CPG) on Building Bridges with Israel. JC noted that the large attendance for such a meeting shows how much appetite there is for more objective, outward-looking and reasonable discussions of Israel in Scotland. JC emphasised that the group's business must be conducted in a respectful and productive tone.

2) Election of Office Bearers and Secretariat

- JC noted the requirements of a CPG. The first business is to elect a Convener. Adam Tomkins MSP (AT) nominated JC. This was seconded by Richard Lyle MSP (RL). JC is the chair of the CPG.
- JC nominated RL as vice-chair. John Lamont (JL) seconded. RL is the Vice-Covener of the group.
- JC advised that Peter Speirs of the Jewish Leadership Council had offered to provide secretariat services to the CPG.
- JC suggested that the group meet around 4 times a year.

3) The Aims and Objectives of the Group

- JC opened to the floor the question of what the aims and purpose of the group are.
- AT suggested that education be a focus of the group. AT has visited Israel on 6 occasions, including on one occasion to work with the Hebrew University. Upon returning to the UK, he discussed this collaboration with the Jewish Telegraph. He was attacked for this by some, but such criticism encouraged him to continue his work. AT noted that there are many such links and that the group could seek to highlight and expand them.
- Ruth Kennedy (RK) discussed the economic links between Scotland and Israel, including in the field of energy. She noted Israel's strong start up culture, and suggested that the group could seek to deepen and expand economic ties between Scotland and Israel.
- Edward Greene (EG) explained Israel's strong cultural scene, including its world class philharmonic orchestra. He reminded the group that a Jew started the Edinburgh Festival in order to use culture to build bridges with the world. Israel seeks to share its culture with the world and, much like Scotland, punches above its weight culturally. JC suggested that a cultural performance be incorporated into the group's meetings
- Micheline Brannan (MB) reflected on the Shalom Festival experience, where a group of unpleasant protesters chanted "anti-Semitism is a crime, anti-Zionism is a duty". MB noted that the widely accepted definition of anti-Semitism includes anti-Zionism. She discussed the case of the Israeli stallholder who has been subjected to repeated protests and acts which are currently being investigated by the police and Crown Office. More broadly, hate crime is underreported in Scotland. Even with that, Jewish people remain the religious group most likely to be victims of hate crime motivated by religion in Scotland today, per capita.

- John Mason MSP (JM) professed the connection between his strong Christian faith and his interest in the region. JM wants to build bridges between Scotland and Israel and influence thinking on the region within Scotland. He was struck by the unpleasant furor surrounding the Shalom Festival and believes that Israel is held to a different standard of conduct than other countries.
- RL represents a West of Scotland constituency, where he said there is an obvious religious and political divide. He wishes to build bridges of understanding between Scotland and Israel, and wants the group to represent the Jewish community's voice in the parliament.
- JC agreed that the Scotland's Jewish community feels under threat to some extent, and that the promotion of one side in the debate is too often unchallenged in the Scottish Parliament.

4) Any Other Competent Business

- EG believes that some cultural groups are cautious about working with Israeli groups. He wants to help change the perception of risk within the cultural community in Scotland.
- Sammy Stein relayed his experiences of taking a street stall on to the streets of Glasgow to discuss Israel. Most of his interactions with people are positive and he believes the group should focus on the positive aspects of its work.
- Itamar Nitzan, an Israeli national, highlighted the importance of tourism to building bridges. There are currently no direct flights between Scotland and Israel, but those who do go between the two countries greatly enjoy and value their experiences. JL noted that he hopes there will be progress on that topic.
- Rabbi Rose agreed with this, and hoped that the vocal anti-Israel minority in Scotland do not tarnish this country's reputation in Israel and across the world.
- AT explained his belief that the CPG should focus on the many positive aspects of the Scottish/Israeli relationship, and seek to publicize them in the media. JC agreed, and discussed the potential for expanding the Israeli market for Scottish goods and services. RK made clear her belief that building links between Scottish and Israeli young people would be very positive, and Sammy Stein suggested the use of exchange programmes between youth groups, as well as between the Scottish Parliament and Knesset. JM suggested that such exchanges be broader, and include business and community leaders.

5) JC thanked everyone for their attendance and brought the meeting to a close.

Apologies:

Gordon Matheson
Stanley Lovatt
Paul Morron

Attendees:

Jackson Carlaw MSP
Adam Tomkins MSP
Alison Harris MSP
Daniel Boyd – COFIS
Dorothy Kaufmann – Chair, Edinburgh Friends of Israel
Edward Greene
Evelyn Yedd – Co-President, Glasgow Jewish Representative Council
Guy Walker – COFIS
Hilary Rifkind – Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation/ScoJec
Itamar Nitzan
Jeremy Balfour MSP
John Lamont MSP
John Mason MSP
Mike Taylor
Michael Kusznir – Office of Jackson Carlaw MSP
Micheline Brannan – Chair, SCoJec
Nathan Wilson – Office of Jackson Carlaw MSP
Nigel Goodrich – COFIS
Peter Speirs – Scotland Director, Jewish Leadership Council
Rabbi David Rose – Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation
Rachel Oatley – Edinburgh Friends of Israel
Richard Lyle MSP
Ruth Kennedy – Centre for Scotland/Israel Relations
Sammy Stein – Glasgow Friends of Israel
Stanley Grossman – Scottish Friends of Israel
Vicci Stein – Glasgow Friends of Israel