LEARNING THE LESSONS OF BEST PRACTICE: AN INTERNATIONAL APPROACH TO COMBATTING ANTISEMITISM

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ABSTRACT

Whilst there has for a long time been an international effort to combat anti-Semitism, there is an increasing coherence of approach. As anti-racists, we must learn from the best practice of national governments, parliaments and NGO's in order to progress our cause. In the United Kingdom, key factors for success have included our ability to work across political party lines, to be independent from whilst communicating effectively with the Jewish community and to ensure that Government action against race hate has been joined-up in approach. In this essay, its is argued that such examples of best practice will be critical in addressing outstanding issues of global antisemitism namely; Baltic Holocaust denial, hate speech in higher education, internet hate and white-power football hooliganism.

THE UK APPROACH

In 2005, having assumed the chairmanship of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, I commissioned a Parliamentary Inquiry into the state of antisemitism in the UK. What followed was a rejuvenation if not revolution in the approach to combating race hate in the UK and beyond. There are a number of key factors which contributed to our success which I will try to expand on below.

In the UK Parliament, All-Party Inquiries and Groups are traditionally informal in nature. Critically, our approach bucked this trend. We took the decision to follow the format of a "Select Committee" which in our House of Commons holds the Government to account. We sought a former Minister, Rt Hon Denis MacShane MP, to chair the inquiry and then secured another 13 panellists amongst whom there were many senior Parliamentarians. A critical factor of our success was that none of these panel members were Jewish or represented significant Jewish constituencies – much like myself. Another important consideration was the all-party nature of our work. Taking the partisan politics out of our efforts ensured that we gained the necessary support from the leadership of all parties whilst shouldering the responsibility to tackle antisemitism emanating from

within our own backyard. Thus in both constitution and reputation we were independent and taken seriously from the outset.

Using this to our benefit, we were able to secure top-level witnesses. The Home Secretary and Attorney General were amongst those to give evidence to the committee and our hearings were conducted in much the same way a formal scrutiny hearing would take place. The 14 MPs involved found that there had been a rise in antisemitism in the UK over recent years and the panel was shocked by the details they learned during the process of the inquiry. As a result, they published a report with 35 recommendations for government, Parliament and civil society in September 2006. In another Parliamentary first and testament to the regard the panel was held in, we secured an official Government response to our report in April of 2007, which was followed by a one year progress report in 2008 and a third report is due in December 2010.

Perhaps the most important of all the Government actions in responding to our inquiry was the establishment of the UK Inter-Departmental Working Group on Antisemitism. This was a group made up of officials from all the relevant government departments together with key representatives of the Jewish community. The group was critically important for three reasons. First, it meant Government Departments were speaking to one another about antisemitism and race hate in a way that had not happened previously. Second, it ensured departments were bought into the follow-up process and third, it gave an excellent platform for engagement with the Jewish community so action could be monitored and processed with the key stakeholders. Needless to say, continued Parliamentary buy-in and scrutiny has been useful in ensuring commitment to our programme from a succession of Prime Ministers and Governments.

So to the results of this combined work. We had of course, a landmark inquiry and Government response. Then the establishment of a unique Inter-Departmental Taskforce on Antisemitism and later, sub-group on higher education. Perhaps the biggest success though, was the engagement of our Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) – usually known elsewhere as the Public Prosecution Service. The CPS had been criticised in the inquiry report for the disparity between numbers of incidents of antisemitism and numbers of prosecutions. They held a review into this and their subsequent report and work programme is an example par *excellence* of best practice. The "bench-book" training manual for judges has quite literally been re-written. In addition, from other organisations, we had good practice guides for the Higher Education (University) sector and subsequent reports into antisemitic discourse. In practical developments, the training for police around hate crime has developed and improved thanks in some part to our work.

Whilst some recommendations have been slower to implement they are soon to come to fruition. These include the detailed figures from the Police (the Jewish community's CST have been collecting data for many years) of anti-Semitic hate crime and funding for Jewish school security to name but two.

There were other proactive initiatives resulting from our work. The development of a joint Government-charitable sector interfaith school linking programme is key to ensuring future generations understand one another better. Another programme, BIRAX, brings together Israeli and British academics in a move to stifle support for boycotts of Israel, another subject of our inquiry.

Lastly, we have the international replication of the APPG Inquiry model (most recently in Canada) and the interventions of the UK Foreign Office in matters relating to antisemitism abroad – of which more to follow.

So, to reiterate, the cross-party, independent and formal nature of our work was the driver for much of our success. Alas, whilst the situation in the UK can certainly be said to have improved there are concerns which merit our continued attention both at home and abroad.

Thematically, it would be remiss of me not to mention the Middle East conflict – although I will not dwell on it. It is my view that whilst this conflict ensues and passions continue to run high, there is the risk of fall out onto the streets of London, Paris, Berlin or indeed New York. Efforts to bring peace are essential but in addition, Governments require well laid plans for engaging communities and appealing for calm at times of crisis. There are however three or four more tangible problems that require urgent attention.

Key to our future work is the need for a detailed look at what is happening with Antisemitism and in particular Holocaust revisionism in political parties in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. I outlined my concerns for the Latvian Jewish community in an Antisemitism debate in the UK Parliament. Latvia's bestselling book of Christmas 2007 was an overtly Antisemitic diatribe by Andris Grutups, the co-founder of, and lawyer for, the ruling party of Latvia. His book could be summarised as "the Jews had it coming because they were all Communists". Indeed, there has been a twenty year resurgence of ultra-nationalism in former Soviet States resulting in a new narrative of Stalinism as the greater evil of the World War Two period. As has been highlighted by Jonathan Freedland, a leading UK journalist, the Vilnius Museum of Genocide Victims commemorates 74,500 Lithuanians persecuted under Moscow rule whilst ignoring some 200,000 Jews murdered by Lithuanians. In Lithuania, three holocaust survivors are now part of a "pre-trial" investigation by state lawyers for alleged "war

crimes". Lithuania meanwhile has an appalling record for prosecuting Nazi war criminals. This concern about the attitudes of Latvia and other Baltic states towards the role of the Germans in World War Two was also noted in a report to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This revisionist angle, where Lithuanians, Latvians and Poles were victims rather than perpetrators, hinders collective efforts to move forward as a civilization.

The Prague Declaration, currently circulating through email accounts at the European Parliament, is perhaps the most sinister political embodiment of the argument. It uses the smokescreen of legitimate concerns about the evils of communist regimes to insist that Soviet Communism and Nazi Fascism be declared equal. Its recommendations include the re-writing of text books to "correct" this history. Its authors draw parallels between Nazi and Soviet crimes for Western European audiences-and as we become an ever more globalised society, this attempt to rewrite history is being both imported and exported. From the UK we will be working with the foreign office to ensure this matter is put on the agenda using the relevant European instruments. It should go without saying that any country assuming the chair of a European organization or group should be beyond reproach vis-à-vis action against antisemitism. Meanwhile, it is a testament to the seriousness with which our Government takes these issues that our first ever envoy for post-Holocaust issues, Sir Andrew Burns has been appointed.

Of course pan-European and global strategies will be key to addressing two outstanding and long-standing concerns namely; the Internet and Universities.

For students, our universities can be exciting places for broadening of both mind and experience. It is sad, therefore, that Jewish students feel uncomfortable on some campuses because of the prevalence of antisemitism and hostile feelings about being Jewish on campus. There is evidence to suggest that Jewish Students applying to university seem to be making decisions not on academic grounds but on their perception of antisemitism on different campuses. Of particular concern is the phenomenon of hate speech.

Whilst free speech is critical to academic thought and discovery, too often speakers are being brought onto campuses in the US, Canada, the UK and further afield whom if not breaking incitement laws are teetering over the edge of legal compliance. The ability of hate speakers to publicise themselves and communicate so easily is taking them across geographic boundaries. In the UK we are seeking urgent action including a guide for universities on how to deal with campus hate speech and the law, which sets clear boundaries to demarcate between legitimate debate and hate speech. Happily, universities in the UK and the National Union of Students UK are working towards this goal. They are lucky to have best practice examples to follow, such as Birmingham University – shortly to be joined by Manchester University – whom employ a speaker request processes whereby objections can be raised in advance of a speech being delivered. In the future, I hope we will see a sliding scale of compliance measures from general speaker guidelines to pre-signed contracts of behaviour.

Of course, in a sector which rightly guards its freedoms fiercely, movement to safeguard those freedoms can be difficult – so to the internet. Much work has been done and much is yet to do in respect of online hatred. There are countless examples of racist and anti-Semitic pages online. Some progress is being made at the OSCE though and it is now not unfeasible to consider a gold standard being established – in the same way secure payments are flagged at present – by internet service providers to award those taking action against online hate. In the UK, the Sheppard and Whittle case was a groundbreaking move forward. Two British men were sent to jail, having been refused asylum in the United States, for publishing and distributing racist material online. This was despite the host server for their material being based in the United States. I am hopeful that this will form the basis for many more cases against race hate websites in the UK and abroad. Indeed, we are currently preparing for a second UK Ministerial conference on the Internet to be hosted in late 2010 by our Department for Culture, Media and Sport on these and other matters.

Lastly, a short word on Football. In the summer of 2012, the European football championships will be held jointly between Poland and the Ukraine. The world's attention will be in part directed to sport with the 2012 Olympics to follow almost immediately. As has been noted in numerous television, magazine and web-based reports there is a solid and growing far-right "white power" movement tied to football hooliganism in many countries, notably Poland and the Ukraine. Despite this, much of the far-right activity goes under-reported and unchallenged. Unfortunately, the economic circumstances across the world make it increasingly unlikely that resources will be directed through police or football's regulatory bodies, to tackling this problem. Therefore it is up to Parliamentarians, Anti-racists and football lovers worldwide to ensure these games are held with both the necessary eye on white-power activism and in the case of the 2012 championships, effective education about the Holocaust for players and supporters alike.

In summary, there are key challenges ahead that require coherent thinking and action using the best practice examples that are available. I am aware of the UK's successes and what we need to learn from our failures. I hope that in this essay and beyond I can help share such information for the betterment of our fight against antisemitism, racism and move towards creating a better, more tolerant global society.