

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

Director's and Public Affairs Officer's Report **AGM 22 June 2008**

Scottish Parliament and Government

SCoJeC continues to monitor activity in the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government on a daily basis, forwarding relevant information to a wide range of organisations including Jewish Care, Cosgrove Care, Calderwood Lodge, Calderwood Jewish Education, the Board of Deputies, CST, the Israeli Embassy, students and other interested bodies, and briefing them on, for example, relevant parliamentary procedures. We also continue to brief MSPs on issues concerning the Jewish community, and, where appropriate, put them in touch with other organisations, such as the Israel Information Office, which have been able to provide information on specific issues.

Visit from the First Minister, Alex Salmond

At the request of the First Minister, Alex Salmond, SCoJeC arranged for him to visit the Community at the end of last year to meet a cross-section of communal leaders.

This included a visit to Calderwood Lodge, where the First Minister observed a Primary 7 Hebrew class, spoke to the school at the Chanukah assembly. That was followed by a brief tour of Giffnock Synagogue and John Clark's painted windows, after which he joined communal leaders for a business meeting in the Community Centre. This was attended by representatives of SCoJeC, Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, the Board of Deputies, the Orthodox and Reform religious communities, welfare and educational organisations, and the youth.

Mr Salmond responded to a wide range of questions on subjects that included multiculturalism, education, antisemitism, financial support for improving security at synagogues and other communal buildings, Holocaust education, and welfare services.

Community Security

During the meeting, Mr Salmond made a commitment to "give sympathetic consideration to a request for funding of physical security measures for communal buildings", and repeated this undertaking the following day in the Parliament in response to an oral question. In the light of this we commissioned a survey by the CST of all communal sites in Scotland, which estimated total costs for work recommended by the police at more than £380k. This was submitted to the now to the Scottish Government, which immediately made available £10,000 to East Renfrewshire Council for improved security at Calderwood Lodge. However, the Council decided that it did not want to implement the recommendations in full, and turned down all except £2,500.

The Scottish Government has still to reach a decision on other elements of the bid, and, to inform that process, has invited us to a meeting to discuss the security issues faced by the community.

Shechitah

Since the last AGM there have been two attacks on shechitah in the Scottish Parliament. The first, in January, took the form of a parliamentary question from the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Cathy Jamieson, "*whether [the Scottish Government] considers it acceptable for Scottish sheep to be exported for slaughter without prestunning.*" Following our briefing of the relevant Minister and the head of the relevant Government department, the response confirmed that: "*Although the slaughter of animals without pre-stunning does not take place in Scotland, it would be perfectly legal for this method to be used in Scottish slaughterhouses.*" We also briefed Cathy Jamieson about shechitah. She responded by saying that she had not realised the level of impact on the Jewish community a ban on slaughter without pre-stunning would have, and assured us that she would not campaign on this issue.

The second attack, which has not yet been resolved, came from a petition "*calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to bring forward legislation to ban the ritual slaughter of animals, through methods such as the shechita and the dhabiha, and require the stunning of all animals before slaughter.*" As a result of our intervention with the Public Petitions Committee clerks, the offensive term "ritual slaughter", and the wording was changed to refer to "animal slaughter without pre-stunning". Our evidence about shechitah was accepted, and there was no direct criticism of shechitah; on the contrary, reference was made to the Human Rights Act, and MSPs emphasised that the concerns of minority faith communities must be taken into account. The Committee appeared disposed to closing the petition at its first hearing, however, as a result of Bashir Ahmad's intervention, MSPs decided to defer a decision, and to ask animal welfare organisations for their views, and to investigate whether, and under what conditions, shechitah and dhabiha are permitted in other European countries. We have been invited to provide additional written evidence before the petition's next hearing in September.

Holocaust Education: Visits to Auschwitz

Ken Macintosh tabled an amendment to the debate on International Education, proposing that the relevant Barnett consequentials deriving from DCLG money to fund school visits to Auschwitz should be ring-fenced for that purpose by the Scottish Government.

Subsequently, Jackson Carlaw tabled a motion supporting Holocaust education, including visits to Auschwitz, that was the subject of a debate during members business.

We have been in touch with MSPs from all parties on the subject, and, whilst there is unanimity that such trips are very beneficial, the majority do not agree in principle with ring-fencing, and are of the opinion that all such decisions must be made at Local Authority and School level.

Regrettably, the issue appears to have become party-political, and has been widely reported as such in the Scottish and UK media.

We have liaised throughout with Karen Pollock of the Holocaust Educational Trust, who has requested SCoJeC to actively engage with MSPs and Ministers in the hope of

achieving a satisfactory outcome. With her agreement, we have written to the Schools Minister, Maureen Watt, welcoming her personal support for the visits, and asking that, irrespective of the funding mechanism, “you to take whatever steps are required to ensure that Scottish pupils and not disadvantaged relative to those in England and Wales, and that schools take the opportunity to send their senior pupils on what all agree to be a life-changing experience.”

Protection of Vulnerable Groups Act

SCoJeC is represented on one of the Scottish Government consultative groups advising on the secondary legislation for this Act, which will make wide-reaching changes to the “Disclosure” system for people working with children and vulnerable (or “protected”) adults, and is also a member of the Scottish Government working group advising on new guidance for the current Disclosure system.

Brit Milah

Following concerns about the resource implications of Muslim requirements, the NHS published guidance that presumes circumcisions should take place at approximately 6 months. We wrote to the Chief Medical Officer expressing concern that this may lead staff to put pressure on Jewish parents to postpone a brit. We also explained that Jewish circumcision is conducted under the auspices of the Jewish Initiation Society, which trains and supervises practitioners and audits their performance and requested that this information should be circulated to everyone to whom the leaflet had been sent. The CMO has replied that he is aware that the Jewish community makes its own arrangements, and that there are therefore no resource implications for the NHS, but he does not think it appropriate to circulate the information.

Faith Liaison Group

SCoJeC is represented on the Scottish Executive Faith Liaison Group (FLaG) which enables policy civil servants from all Executive departments to consult representatives of faith communities on proposed initiatives.

Consultation Responses

We have responded to consultations on a wide range of issues (full list attached), and would like to thank the many communal organisations and individuals whose expertise has contributed to these responses. All consultation responses are available online at <http://www.scojec.org/consultations/consultations.html>, and information about consultation responses in process of preparation is available at http://www.scojec.org/members/current_consultations/current_consultations.html

There is ample evidence that these consultations are not merely paper exercises but do affect the direction of policy. Examples of particular interest to synagogues and other communal organisations that own premises, are significant changes in Scottish Government policy concerning Fire Safety regulations, and the extension until 2014 of the water charge exemption which benefits small charities and faith community organisations. The first of these was due almost entirely to SCoJeC's intervention, and the latter due to the efforts of an informal coalition of voluntary sector organisations in which SCoJeC played a major role.

Other organisations

Disclosure Scotland

SCoJeC continues to act as a Registered Body with the CRBS (Central Registered Body in Scotland) to enable communal organisations to meet the requirements of the Protection of Children (Scotland) Act, and, at their request, to administer Disclosure applications for the Scottish Interfaith Council, BEMIS, and the Scottish-Iranian Association.

We attend regular meetings with the CRBS and the Scottish Churches Committee Child Protection Group to discuss issues around Disclosure and to share information and expertise.

Church of Scotland

SCoJeC continues to hold regular meetings with the Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland, and also had a formal meeting with the last Moderator and the Principal Clerk. The current Moderator, and the Principal Clerk (who is a former Moderator) are both participating in the multi-faith pilgrimage (*see below*).

STUC

SCoJeC has held a number of bilateral meetings with the STUC to discuss matters of mutual concern, and once again contributed a short essay to its annual anti-racism brochure. We have been invited to participate in a "faith panel" at the STUC Black Workers Conference this autumn.

BEMIS

SCoJeC's director, Ephraim Borowski, is also Vice-Convener of BEMIS (the Scottish ethnic minority umbrella organisation), and we welcome continued collaboration on projects such as the multi-faith pilgrimage, and MEMO and MEMO+. (*see below*)

SIFC

SCoJeC has participated in a number of SIFC initiatives, most recently a project entitled "Inspirational Harmony" to produce a resource that encapsulates the civic responsibilities recognised by each faith community, and their commitment to good community relations.

Externally Funded Projects

Outreach

SCoJeC is often contacted by people living outwith any of the large Jewish communities who would like information about the community, and contact with other Jewish people living nearby. Funding from the Scottish Government and the Clore Foundation has enabled us to employ an outreach worker, Sharon Mail. Flyers have been printed for distribution via local libraries, and stories, including SCoJeC's contact details, will be placed in local newspapers across Scotland.

"Scotland's Jews"

The booklet *Scotland's Jews* has been updated and expanded to include a survey of the contemporary community and its concerns, Jewish issues in employment, health, and other contexts, the demography of the community as revealed in the 2001 census, a basic introduction to Jewish beliefs and practices, and a guide to John Clark's spectacular stained glass windows, now in Giffnock Synagogue. We are grateful to the Scottish Government for funding this project. The booklet will be available after the AGM, and is also online at http://www.scojec.org/resources/files/scotlands_jews.pdf

Multi-faith pilgrimage

A multi-faith pilgrimage to Israel has been organised as part of an initiative to increase understanding and friendship between communities in Scotland. The idea grew out of a conversation between Ephraim Borowski, and Rami Ousta, CEO of BEMIS, who were concerned that tensions in the Middle East may sometimes be an obstacle to the development of good relations locally. The Very Reverend Dr Finlay Macdonald, principal clerk, and former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, and Na'eem Raza, Director of Meem, a diversity training organisation, were invited to join the steering group, and around thirty people from seven different faith communities have been invited to participate in the trip, which will take place at the beginning of July.

The pilgrimage has received funding from the Scottish Government, the Balcraig Foundation, the Church of Scotland, the RC Bishops' Conference, the Community Trust, UJIA, the Jewish Community Youth Fund, and is supported by both the Israeli Embassy in London and the British Ambassador to Israel. The programme is being arranged with the help of the Jerusalem Peacemakers, Eliyahu Maclean and Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari, and includes sites of importance to the different faiths. Amongst the highlights will be the holy sites of the Old City of Jerusalem, the Baha'i shrine in Haifa, Yad Vashem, the Knesset, prayers at the Al Aqsa mosque, Seudah Shlishit with Chief Rabbi David Rosen, and meetings with prominent clergy and politicians.

"MEMO" and "MEMO+" (Minority Ethnic Matters Overview)

We continue to receive very positive feedback about MEMO, the weekly bulletin of information relevant to minority ethnic communities in Scotland which is compiled in response to a request from BEMIS. MEMO includes information about relevant activity in the Scottish and Westminster Parliaments, the Scottish Government and Whitehall, organisations such as the NHS, Equalities and Human Rights Coalition, as well as details of relevant consultations and new publications.

MEMO+ is an occasional publication which provides more in-depth information about particular issues, such as the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions process (see <http://www.scojec.org/memo+/memo+.html>).

"Four Corners"

"Four Corners" continues to be very well-received, and was runner-up in the "small communities" category of the Board of Deputies Media Awards. The majority of paper copies are sent to people living in the smaller Jewish communities or outwith any Jewish community, but it also has a large online readership at http://www.scojec.org/four_corners/four_corners.html

Other Activities

Complaint to Press Complaints Commission

We have been horrified by the significant increase in antisemitic contributions to the online discussion forums on the Scotsman and Herald websites, and have complained to both the Press Complaints Commission and the police, and wrote to MSPs inviting them to condemn this trend and use their influence to reverse it. Comments include:

jews are not fit to breathe our air. They must be attacked wherever you see them; throw rocks at their ugly, hooked-nosed women and mentally ill children, and light up the REAL ovens. ("Binny" in Scotsman, 1 Mar)

People around the world will one day unite to declare that Hitler may have been right all along... Mark my words. ("Binny" in Scotsman, 29 Feb)

It is absolutely clear that these comments bear no relation to the reports about Gaza which they purport to discuss, and can have no purpose other than to foment hatred of Jewish people in general. The hosting of such unacceptable views by respectable newspapers gives them legitimacy, undermines efforts to make the rhetoric of hatred unacceptable in the public forum.

We are certain that none of these comments would have been allowed to reach the letters page of the print editions, but they seem to be routinely accepted on what is, in effect, the letters page of the online editions. While it is true that they can be removed from the website, this normally only happens if the newspaper receives a complaint from a reader – i.e. after someone has already taken offence.

Responses to our letters have been mixed.

The editors of both newspapers have simply ignored them, and, several months later, we are still waiting for a reply – though some of the offensive comments have been removed from their websites.

The response from the Press Complaints Commission quotes their Code which states "*the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to [amongst other things] an individual's religion*". In other words, provided they make prejudicial or pejorative reference to the religion of a large enough number of individuals, newspapers are in the clear! And "*material only comes under the jurisdiction of the PCC if an editor has exercised control*", so the way to avoid being criticised for not exercising proper control is not to exercise any control at all!

However, the PCC did confirm that this is a matter for the police. We had already made a formal complaint, and they are currently investigating the possibility of prosecuting both the newspapers and the authors of the offensive comments.

Most encouragingly, the response from MSPs expressing outrage that reputable newspapers did not prevent the publication of blatantly antisemitic comments has been overwhelming. Many have written to the editors to express their abhorrence at the comments, and several have written to the Justice Minister to enquire whether there may be a legislative solution.

In addition, Bill Kidd MSP tabled a motion in the Scottish Parliament:

That the Parliament abhors the publication in both The Scotsman and The Herald newspapers' online blogs of blatantly anti-Semitic rhetoric by individuals who hide their identities behind screen names; believes that any such racist statements have no place in national newspapers, in print or online, and calls on the editors of these two major newspapers to ensure that such foul-mouthed attacks on any section of society are removed from their blogs before publication.

It is very reassuring that the police are taking the matter seriously, and that the Minister for Communities, the Justice Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Community Safety, and the Convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee of the Parliament, amongst others, are keen to pursue the matter.

Chanukah and Purim events

SCoJeC organised a Chanukah party in Dundee, and a Purim Megillah reading and shabbaton in Aberdeen, both of which proved very popular.

Public Resource

Website (www.scojec.org)

In March the website moved to www.scojec.org, and the e-mail address changed to scojec@scojec.org. For the next year anyone entering the url of a page on the old site will be forwarded to the same page on the new site, but that will end in June 2009, and we urge everyone to update bookmarks and address books now.

The website continues to be extremely well-used, with around 1500 unique visitors each month, viewing a total of around 12,000 pages. The "Guide to Jewish Facilities in Scotland" is particularly popular, as is "Four Corners", and MEMO.

New Year Honours List

Ephraim Borowski will receive the MBE, awarded to him in the Queen's New Year Honours List for "services on behalf of the Jewish Community in Scotland", at Holyrood Palace on 1 July. He insists on sharing the honour, and says that he regards it as public recognition of the success of SCoJeC.

Ephraim and Leah would like to thank the Council, especially the Management Team, for their ongoing support throughout the past year.

Ephraim Borowski
Leah Granat

June 2008

Consultation Responses submitted since the last AGM

Please note that copies of all of these responses, and of responses submitted in previous years, are available on SCoJeC's website at <http://www.scojec.org/consultations/consultations.html>

Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003 (Amendment of Definition of Child Care Position) Order 2008 (Scottish Government)

Draft Diversity Booklet (ACPOS)

Community Policing Inquiry (Scottish Parliament)

Proposal for a new regulation on the provision of food information to consumers (Food Standards Agency)

Meeting the Charity Test (OSCR)

Modernising the Planning System: Development Management (Scottish Government)

Diversity Delivers: Consultation on the proposed strategy for enhancing equal opportunities in Scotland's ministerial public appointments process (OCPAS)

"Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side": A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action (DCLG)

Secondary Legislation to the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act (Scottish Government)

Civil Courts Review (Court of Session)

The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations (Scottish Government)

Paying for Water Services 2010-2014 (Scottish Government)

Public Health Bill (Scottish Parliament)

Draft regulations for museums on the publication of information about cultural objects on loan under Part 6 of the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007 (DCMS)

Equality and Diversity Strategy (Strathclyde Police)

Equality Review (Scottish Government)

Fundamental Rights Agency consultation with Civil Society (European Union)

Public Events Held by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities since the last AGM

December 2007

Visit by the First Minister, Alex Salmond.

December 2007

Chanukah Party (Dundee)

March 2008

Purim and Shabbaton (Aberdeen)

Meetings, Briefings, Conferences etc attended since the last AGM

Regular meetings

Scottish Executive Faith Liaison Group
Scottish Government Voluntary Sector Advisory Group on the Protection of
Vulnerable Groups Act
Cross Party Group on Human Rights
Cross Party Group on Race Equality
NHS Lanarkshire Spiritual Care Steering Group
NES Spiritual Care Co-ordinating Committee
Church of Scotland
STUC
BEMIS
Scottish Inter-Faith Council
Ethnic Minority Civic Congress
Churches Parliamentary Officer meetings
Policy Officers Network
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office briefings
Scottish Churches Committee Child Protection Group
Central Registered Body in Scotland Faith Liaison Group
Lanarkshire Ethnic Minority Action Group
Faith in Communities Scotland
Board of Deputies
Antisemitism Co-ordinating Committee

Occasional and one-off meetings, seminars and conferences

* attended as presenter

Scottish Government Anti-Sectarianism event
Scottish Government launch of phase 2 of the National Conversation
Meeting with Adam Ingram re the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Act
Scottish Government re the Water Charges Exemption
General Register Office in Scotland
Moderator, Church of Scotland
Church of Scotland General Assembly
* Meem multi-faith training days
Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator consultation events
* Broughton Kirk Session
* NES new chaplains' training days
National Resource Centre for Ethnic Minority Health Conference
* Black Community Development Project census seminar
STUC Equalities Conference
STUC Women's Conference
Internet Watch Conference
Roshni
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office Anti-Sectarianism Conference
Baillie Lecture
* GCVS Equalities Conference
Association for Scottish Public Affairs
Equalities and Human Rights Commission Funding Forum
Scottish Government Protection of Vulnerable Groups consultation
Lanarkshire Multi Agency Racial Incident Monitoring Group
Strathclyde Police Equality Strategy consultation
Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland Diversity consultation
Meeting with Lord Carlile
Bashir Maan book launch
Catholic Parliamentary Office annual lecture
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office annual lecture
* "Wrecking Gd's Creation" (Faith communities and the environment)
Transformation Team Annual Meeting
* Transformation Team Judaism briefing
SCVO National Conversation conference
Scottish Broadcasting Commission consultation
Third Sector Parliamentary Reception
SEMPERscotland conference