

BOARD OF DEPUTIES CHIEF EXECUTIVE VISITS EDINBURGH

Report of SCoJeC Council meeting on 5 October 2014 in the Marian Oppenheim Hall, 4 Salisbury Road

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The Edinburgh Jewish Community made an effort the day after Yom Kippur to attend the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) Council meeting on Sunday 5 October. The guest speakers were Supt Ross Aitken, who is responsible for community safety within Police Scotland and Gillian Merron, the recently appointed Chief Executive of the Board of Deputies of British Jews.



L to R: Philip Rosenberg, Public Affairs Director, BoD, Gillian Merron, CEO, BoD, Ephraim Borowski, Director, SCoJeC, Hilary Rifkind, Chair, SCoJeC

Supt Aitken gave a message of reassurance to the meeting that Police Scotland will take firm action where there is evidence of any criminal behaviour associated with antisemitism. He recognised that sometimes antisemitism is masked as anti-Zionism. He stressed that the police want to be educated about how it feels to a Jewish person living in Scotland when Israel is attacked as there is a fine line between political protest and hate crime. There are avenues for the public to report offensive behaviour and literature and this can be done anonymously. SCoJeC works in full co-operation with Police Scotland so that anyone affected can

report such episodes safely, whether or not they are the victim. There was then a lively discussion in which participants raised their concerns, particularly about the difficulties that had affected Israeli performers at the Edinburgh Festival, as well as the siege being laid to stalls selling Israeli products in local shopping centres such as Ocean Terminal. Supt Aitken commented on the issues involved in policing such demonstrations, that can feel very threatening to the Jewish community wanting to attend artistic performances or patronise Israeli businesses, and stressed again that, given evidence of hate crime motivation, the police will take action.



L to R: Ephraim Borowski, Supt Ross Aitken, Police Scotland, Hilary Rifkind

Ms Merron was the Labour Party MP for Lincoln from 1997 to 2010 and could be considered one of 'Blair's Babes', but she was by no means a token appointment, having had a solid Ministerial career, serving in the Whip's Office, the Department of Transport, the Cabinet Office, the Department for International Development, the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office and lastly as Minister for Public Health.

A strikingly tall, straight figure, with frothy black hair and ageless good looks, Ms Merron breaks the mould of Jewish leadership. Not only by gender, but also by being of Liberal Jewish background and coming from a small provincial community, she is different. That makes her passion for her new role all the more arresting. The mission of the Board is 'Standing up for British Jewry', and the challenges of that role were all too evident in Ms Merron's first few weeks which coincided with the reigniting of the Gaza conflict.



Gillian Merron talks to Norman Crane, Chair of EJLS (L), and Rabbi Mark Solomon (R)

The Israeli campaign against the Gaza rockets of summer 2014 was the longest ever running military conflict in which Israel has been involved. The fall-out affected the UK Jewish community in various ways, including intensification of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, attacks on the legitimacy of the State of Israel, flying of PLO flags above public buildings and an insidious upsurge in antisemitism. Throughout the conflict, the UK Government had been steadfast in its support for the Jewish community. This was the result of vigorous and persistent lobbying by the Board.



L to R: Gillian Merron, Hilary Rifkind, Ephraim Borowski, Supt Ross Aitken

The message of that experience is that we should always contact our elected representatives about issues that affect the Jewish community. Our problems are no different from those that exist at UK level and Ms Merron was keen to stress that the Board and SCoJeC are 'better together'.

The Board has published 'A Jewish Manifesto for the 2015 General Election' that builds on the Manifesto the Board published for the European Parliament elections last May. The document makes 10 Jewish policy demands following Board consultation with 360 communal organisations and individuals. It covers Middle East policies, and calls on MPs and parliamentary candidates to defend religious slaughter, circumcision and Jewish faith schools while working to oppose antisemitism and Islamophobia, poverty and climate change. Copies of the 40 page document were handed out at the meeting. The Board has undertaken to work with SCoJeC on producing a Scottish Manifesto covering devolved issues before the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections.

The meeting was chaired by Hilary Rifkind, chair of SCoJeC who thanked Supt Ross Aitken and Gillian Merron for their contributions.