

Board of Deputies of British Jews:

Speech

It's a pleasure to be invited here this morning to speak with you, and in these eventful times – shifting coalitions, short-lived governments... British politics is in danger of making Israeli politics look stable.

It's an honour to stand before you as Communities Secretary. An important part of my role is representing communities of different faiths. Celebrating our rich diversity. Helping to build a country which is respectful of faith and of individual liberty, but integrated and united.

As the UK's longest-established religious minority, our Jewish community has led the way with its incredible contribution to our national life.

And the Board of Deputies of British Jews has been at the heart of this for more than 250 years. Led today by you Marie and Gillian, my former parliamentary neighbour. I look forward to working with you all to ensure members of our Jewish community can observe their faith and traditions, achieve your aspirations and continue to prosper in the years ahead.

As our Prime Minister has said: our nation would be less without our Jewish citizens. Married to a Jew and with three Jewish daughters, I cannot imagine a Britain without our Jewish friends, neighbours and loved ones.

But I am all too aware of the challenges you face. The scourge of antisemitism is a stain on our society.

Whether on our streets or in the comfort of our own homes using social media, there is no place for antisemitic abuse, and this Government will do everything possible to ensure Jewish people feel safe wherever they are.

This Government led the way by adopting the IHRA definition of antisemitism – the first Government to do so. But I regret that this lead has not always been followed.

Sitting on the front line of our democracy, our local councils have a duty to act and stamp out antisemitism wherever they find it. So it's troubling that, in some cases, we're seeing the reverse. As Secretary of State for Local Government, I will be writing to all councils insisting that they adopt the IHRA definition at the earliest opportunity and use it on all appropriate occasions, including in disciplinary proceedings.

Boycotts, divestment and sanctions against the State of Israel are also damaging and divisive – I will not tolerate them on my watch.

Councils should not be wasting time and taxpayer's money pursuing their own foreign policies – often seemingly obsessed with Zionism – to the detriment of delivering high quality services for residents.

My British wife was born in Israel and I've visited many times, so I am well placed to say that Israelis are often the fiercest critics of their government's policies.

Israel's vibrant democracy allows for lively debate and the country is about to head to the polls for the second time in a year!

We are in dangerous times when some, including those in prominent positions in public life, cannot distinguish between legitimate criticism of the policies of a democratically elected government and blatant antisemitism.

Replacing the word "Jew" for "Zionist" when pedalling vile and offensive views can never sanitise them. Rejecting Israel's right to exist is antisemitic and suggestions that the IHRA definition of antisemitism curtails legitimate criticism of the Israeli government must be countered.

I am also concerned by the evidence coming out of our universities – the disgraceful experiences that Jewish students have lived through at certain universities.

From the case of 200 students voting against the establishment of a new Jewish society at one university, "Hitler was right" stickers appearing around the campuses of three universities, to academics indulging in ludicrous and deeply prejudiced conspiracy theories.

Attending university for me was a life enriching experience. Tragically that's not always the case. We wrote to many universities urging them to adopt the IHRA definition. Yet some didn't even reply.

These organisations are recipients of public money – failure to act is unacceptable.

As Secretary of State, I will be writing to universities asking them to adopt the IHRA definition. And as with council leaders, I will be calling Vice Chancellors personally to press for action if none is forthcoming.

The figures compiled by the Community Security Trust not only showed antisemitic incidents in 2018 at an all-time high for the third year running, but a very significant increase in online hate.

Today I'm pleased to announce on behalf of the Government that we are going to be providing £100,000 funding to tackle the spread of antisemitic material on social media.

This funding will support the Antisemitism Policy Trust's ongoing work to tackle the spread of antisemitic tropes online and challenge harmful narratives about the Jewish community.

During the latest Spending Round, the Chancellor doubled the funding for the Places of Worship Fund to £3.2 million. We continue to fund education courses to tackle racism; the outstanding work of the Holocaust Education Trust through their lessons from Auschwitz programme; and further work to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, for

which I helped to secure £1.7 million in my former role at the Treasury.

We continue to do all we can to protect Jewish schools and institutions. I'm grateful to the CST for their work and to all those who volunteer at synagogues and Jewish centres to help keep people safe.

The Government also proscribed the antisemitic Hezbollah terror group in full earlier this year. The untenable distinction between a military and a political wing was dropped after years of campaigning by activists inside and outside Parliament, myself included.

It gives me great comfort that the Hezbollah flag, emblazoned with an automatic rifle, will no longer be flown with impunity on the streets of London or the UK.

People need to see leadership on this issue from all sides of the political divide.

In addition to the appointment of Rehman Chishti MP to succeed Lord Ahmad as Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief, I'm delighted that we now have two independent figures dedicated to tackling antisemitism.

Lord Pickles and John Mann come from very different political traditions, but both are strong campaigners and individuals of great integrity, committed to rooting out discrimination and will bring their considerable experience and energy to doing so.

I am pleased that Eric is continuing in his current role as Special Envoy for Post-Holocaust Issues ensuring that the UK continues to play a central role in all international discussions on Holocaust-related matters and continuing his brilliant partnership with Ed Balls as co-chairs of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation Advisory Board.

A partnership that has been considerably more graceful than anything Ed attempted on Strictly Come Dancing.

Eric will also continue to focus on the vital restitution of art and immovable property and promoting the implementation of the 2009 Terezin Declaration and Holocaust Era Assets programme.

John will be providing me as Secretary of State with independent advice on the most effective methods to tackle antisemitism within Britain.

As he has said, he will continue to call out those throwing stones of hatred at Jewish people and his role will be to advise me on combatting antisemitism wherever it is found in the United Kingdom – particularly where we have seen it take hold in and corrupt our institutions. We must ensure that the UK Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre is built in Westminster. The centre has the complete and unshakeable support of the Prime Minister and myself.

And I politely say to those who raise concerns about the park and the setting that is in today – concerns we have engaged with and sought to answer, and will continue to do.

I too walk there on a weekend when I am in Westminster and appreciate it. I too take my children there to play in the playground.

But my children are the great-grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and I do not want them or their children to live through those horrors ever again.

It is hard to think of a stronger public interest than that. Help us to build this fitting memorial in the shadow of the mother of parliaments and educate ourselves and generations to come of the ultimate consequences of hate, prejudice and discrimination. In my constituency, I have the Beth Shalom holocaust centre. The founders of that unlikely museum, Stephen and James Smith were, two non-Jews with no prior connection to Israel or the Holocaust, who were so moved by the experience of visiting the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, and surprised to learn that our country had so little to remember and learn about it, that they returned home to Nottinghamshire and persuaded their parents to convert their own home into a Holocaust museum.

I never cease to be amazed and uplifted by their altruism and sacrifice and it makes me even more determined that we should and will see the national centre built in Westminster.

As long as I am Secretary of State, you, the Jewish community will have my unflinching support.

On behalf of the Prime Minister and I, Toda raba. Anachnu itchem tamid