



January 2024

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for contacting me about boycotts by public institutions.

The Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill will stop public bodies pursuing their own foreign policy agenda, including with public money, through divisive boycotts, divestment and sanctions campaigns.

I believe that the United Kingdom must speak with one voice internationally, and public bodies running their own foreign policies risks undermining our foreign diplomacy. I am concerned that local level boycotts can pit communities against one another and damage community cohesion. In particular, in the case of boycotts against businesses and organisations affiliated with Israel, there has been a horrific rise in antisemitic rhetoric and abuse which I believe must be stamped out. It is also not right for local authorities and public bodies to waste time and resources when they have key responsibilities to prioritise.

I want to be clear that the proposed legislation would not restrict individuals' right to freedom of speech. Nor will it apply to private organisations, except if they are exercising public functions. The Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill will extend to public institutions (as defined in the Human Rights Act 1998) only.

The UK has a well-established sanctions policy which remains in place. Ministers have been clear that organisations with links to Russia and Belarus will still be prevented from benefitting from taxpayers' money with councils able to terminate existing contracts with those linked to Putin's war machine.

Ministers have provided assurance that Clause 4 only prevents public authorities from making statements of intent to boycott or divest. It does not prevent public bodies from disagreeing with this legislation.

The Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill includes powers to exclude a particular country or territory from the ban on boycotts. This would be enacted through secondary legislation. I understand that the Government intends to use these powers to exempt Russia and Belarus from the ban. Ministers have clarified that the purpose of Clause 3(7) of the Bill is simply to ensure that, given that the BDS



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campaign has focused on Israel specifically, primary legislation would be required in order for Israel to be exempted from the Economic Activity of Public Bodies Bill. The Bill is not intended to legislate for the UK's foreign policy on Israel or on any other country. Indeed, the Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Felicity Buchan, has stated that the Bill "will not prevent the UK Government from imposing sanctions, or otherwise changing our foreign policy on any country in future."

I join the UK Government in utterly condemning the appalling terrorist attacks against Israel by Hamas on the 7th October, and welcome that the UK has been in close contact with the Israeli Government since the attacks were launched. The UK is resolute in supporting Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas. However, the UK has been consistently clear that Israel must abide by international humanitarian law; Israel will not win this war if its operations destroy the prospect of peaceful coexistence with Palestinians. Too many civilians have been killed, and the Israeli Government should do more to discriminate sufficiently between terrorists and civilians, ensuring its campaign targets Hamas leaders and operatives. The UK is supporting a sustainable ceasefire, meaning that Hamas must stop launching rockets into Israel, and must release all the hostages.

I am assured that the UK Government maintains its absolute commitment to a two-state solution. To echo the words of the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies Bill enables the UK Government to speak with one voice on behalf of the entire United Kingdom in our determination to secure a two-state solution, however distant that prospect may seem at the moment.

Foreign policy is rightly the reserve of national government. I believe it cannot be right for public institutions to have the power to make divisive decisions which set different parts of the community against each other.

Thank you for taking the time to contact me.

Yours faithfully,



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