

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Antisemitism](#), HC 136

Tuesday 11 October 2016

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Members present: Tim Loughton (Chair); James Berry; Mr David Burrowes; Nusrat Ghani; Mr Ranil Jayawardena; Mr Chuka Umunna; Mr David Winnick.

Questions 510-567

Witnesses

I: Tim Farron, Leader of the Liberal Democrats.

II: Right hon. Sir Eric Pickles MP, UK Special Envoy for post-Holocaust issues and former Conservative Party Chairman.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Conservative Party](#)



Examination of witness

Witness: Tim Farron.

Q510 Chair: Welcome, Mr Farron. This is probably the final session of the antisemitism inquiry that we have been holding, on and off, for some time. We are keen to get on with it, so we are very grateful that you were able to come along today. We have also, after some effort, got Sir Eric Pickles as well, representing the Conservative party, so we will have had all the main party leaders—and the Conservative party represented by Eric Pickles.

This is a study of antisemitism; obviously its topicality is related to events within the Labour party, but we are keen to look at it in the general political context. We are grateful that you are here on behalf of your party today.

I will kick off by saying that you are as aware as anybody of the recent controversy within the Labour party. There are, obviously, incidents in your party's past, with former colleagues such as David Ward from Bradford and some comments made by Jenny, now Baroness Tonge in the House of Lords, that could be construed as antisemitic. You yourself have said that the Liberal Democrat party can offer a warm home for British Jewish people who feel alienated by the Labour party. Do you think you have an antisemitism problem within your party?

Tim Farron: First, thanks for having me. My sense is that antisemitism is a problem throughout society and throughout history. The evidence is that within this country over the last 12 months there has been an 11% rise in antisemitic attacks. I think that demonstrates a broader problem, and I think this will raise its head within every institution. I consider it to be my job not to be in any denial about any problems we have had in my party, either in the past or currently. Do I think we have a systemic problem throughout the party? I don't think the evidence shows that. But have individuals, in the past, behaved in a way or said things that are not acceptable? I would surely say that is the case.

Q511 Chair: In the case of David Ward, he was never expelled from the party, was he? He presumably remains a member of the party, although not an elected Member now.

Tim Farron: David Ward was suspended. In our history of being a Liberal party that tends to think very hard about these things, David Ward is the first Liberal or Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament since the second world war to have had the Whip removed from him, albeit temporarily. Looking back at that incident, in 2013, there are certainly plenty of lessons that could be learned from that process. To be blunt with you, we took far too long to deal with that particular issue. Although he was suspended—as I say, he was the first member of our parliamentary party since the second world war, or possibly ever, but that is as far back as I have been able to do my research, to have the Whip removed from him—it took too



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long. What we have done since is to change our standing orders to permit an individual who commits a similar act to have the Whip removed instantaneously.

Q512 **Chair:** Is that a reflection of the lack of rigour within the Liberal and Liberal Democratic party since the war, in clamping down on people who have extremist views, or a reflection of the extremity of the views he then espoused?

Tim Farron: You tend to find out that your procedures fall short of what is needed when they are tested, and they were tested and found somewhat falling short. Yes, he was suspended, but it took far too long. We are not a party that—

Q513 **Chair:** He was in receipt of the Whip before the election, was he not?

Tim Farron: At the time of the general election, yes, he was—

Q514 **Chair:** And he stood again as the candidate for the Liberal Democrats.

Tim Farron: Yes, he did.

Q515 **Chair:** He was a repeat offender, effectively, wasn't he? It wasn't a one-off incident.

Tim Farron: No, it wasn't. We could probably both exchange incidents. The incident in particular that led to his having the Whip withdrawn from him in 2013 over a period of, I think, about three months, was, as I say, the first time something like that had happened. He made apologies. He has also said other things since, which many people, me included, would consider to be offensive and provocative. The question always, when we are looking at matters of discipline, is to allow a disciplinary process to take place. Then a judgment is made as to whether someone has gone from a provocative and offensive remark into something racist and antisemitic and therefore utterly unacceptable.

Q516 **Chair:** My point is that he had form, and he repeated it, so how many strikes and they're out is the policy of the Liberal Democrat party? Do you think you were not tough enough on him subsequently, or were his subsequent misdemeanours of a much more diluted form in your view?

Tim Farron: There are two disciplinary processes that we can be talking about here. The first, as I have mentioned, is the one within the parliamentary party, which has been changed and tightened up. Yes, he was suspended, but I observe that that took far too long because of the absence of rules to enable it to happen immediately, back in 2013. But that has since been changed; it has been changed for 18 months now. But alongside that is the wider party's disciplinary process, about how one deals with claims of racism, antisemitism or, indeed, other unacceptable behaviour within the party. Whether a person has made one, two or three too many offensive remarks is not something for a leader to judge; it is up to the disciplinary processes to take that forward—

Q517 **Chair:** I understand that, but you are the leader of the party, who decides how the disciplinary processes are applied. You have explained that he



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had the Whip suspended, which is a perfectly reasonable course of action, and that it was restored three months later. The following year, he made a suggestion that he would fire rockets at Israel if he lived in Gaza, for which he was not suspended and he remained a fully paid-up Whip-receiving member of the Liberal Democrat party. After losing his seat at the election he became a councillor in Bradford. This year, in reference to something that another member of the Committee, Naz Shah, had said, he referred to the "rogue state of Israel" and he remains in receipt of the Lib-Dem Whip and a member, presumably, of your party. So do you agree, if you were him, that it is acceptable that you would fire rockets at Israel if you lived in Gaza? Do you think that Israel is a rogue state?

Tim Farron: I think they are utterly provocative and offensive remarks

Q518 **Chair:** Yet no action has been taken against him.

Tim Farron: You asked me about what I think, and then I will talk about the action. I do not believe that Israel is a rogue state. I think that we are now at the heart of the problem, which is the danger that when people are talking about Israel/Palestine they move from a potentially legitimate criticism of the Israeli Government and the actions of the Administration and morph into criticism or delegitimation of the existence of the state of Israel and, still worse, attributing collective responsibility or denigrating, bringing into suspicion and using hate language towards Jewish people and communities everywhere. That, I think, is the source of this problem. You asked me about those individual comments, and I totally disassociate myself from them.

In terms of how you deal with an individual who makes those comments, a judgment has to be made about whether they are antisemitic or racist comments, or just provocative and offensive. That is a very tricky one, which is why it is not right for party leaders to knee-jerk decide whether somebody is guilty or innocent. That is why you need to have proper disciplinary procedures. Our procedures allow for an individual to be suspended pretty much overnight if a complaint is made, but I am not content to just sit as we are. At our party conference three weeks ago, I formally launched a new inquiry into our disciplinary procedures, which will be headed up by Lord Ken Macdonald, former Director of Public Prosecutions. You invite me to call out those phrases by David Ward, and I do so without hesitation.

Q519 **Chair:** Do you think the vast majority of members of your party would also condemn them?

Tim Farron: You would have to ask them, but I would imagine certainly so. There will be a whole range of views—

Q520 **Chair:** We need a bit more than that. You are the leader of this party. Surely you would not want to lead a party of which a large proportion, or possibly the majority, hold the same views as David Ward. It is not just a question of, "I would imagine"; it is a question of, "Absolutely not", or, "I would not want to be the leader of such a party."



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Tim Farron: That is a very fair point. My point is that I would not want to wish to speak for every single one of them, but I am absolutely confident that my party is a place that does not tolerate antisemitism. I won't say we have dealt perfectly with the relatively small but still unacceptable number of incidents that have taken place, but we have dealt with them. I have been leader of the party since July 2015, and I have made it my business to reach out to the Jewish community, particularly in the light of the remarks that you have perfectly fairly concentrated on in the last few minutes, to demonstrate my very strong belief in the legitimacy of the state of Israel and my support of the Jewish community in this country and further afield. I want to make sure that the debate about Israel/Palestine in particular does not become poisonous, and that we do not tolerate people morphing criticism of the Government of Israel into criticism of Israel itself and questioning its right to exist.

Q521 **Chair:** Thank you for that. I think there will be more on that in a minute. This is my last point before I come to Nusrat Ghani. Putting antisemitism aside for a minute, you have not got rid of or taken disciplinary procedures against a member of the party who said that he would fire rockets at Israel. Whatever one might think about antisemitism, that is promoting violence, is it not? Are you happy to tolerate somebody who advocates violence against a legitimate state and innocent civilians within it? Are you happy that he is an elected councillor representing your party having made those comments and not withdrawing them?

Tim Farron: If you are asking me whether I think those comments are in any way acceptable—

Chair: I am.

Tim Farron: No, they are not, but it is right to deal with those sorts of issues through proper disciplinary procedures. That is among the reasons why I think it was right for me, just last month, to launch the review of our disciplinary procedures to make sure we can deal with issues like that.

Q522 **Nusrat Ghani:** Mr Farron, you said that Mr David Ward was tested on whether he breached any issues around—

Tim Farron: Sorry, forgive me, I said that our procedures were tested.

Q523 **Nusrat Ghani:** Your procedures were tested. So you have been through a process and your procedures have been tested. Would you agree with the definition of antisemitism: holding Jews collectively responsible for the actions of the state of Israel?

Tim Farron: Yes, I would consider that to be antisemitic.

Q524 **Nusrat Ghani:** May I take you back to Baroness Tonge, who recently called on British Jewish people to stop the Israeli Government destroying the Middle East? The Campaign Against Antisemitism reported that individuals who complained about her speech were told by your party that her words were offensive but fell short of racism. Does that test your party at all, or were you fairly sure on what you felt about what she said being right or wrong?



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Tim Farron: Jenny Tonge has not carried the party's Whip for many years. You are right to say that she is a member of the party, but she does not speak for the party and she holds no office within the party. As I say, she does not carry the Whip.

Q525 **Nusrat Ghani:** How many Members of Parliament do you have?

Tim Farron: We have eight in the House of Commons and over 100 in the House of Lords.

Q526 **Nusrat Ghani:** You have eight MPs. Baroness Tonge does not carry the Whip and she does not represent the Liberal Democrat party. You felt that her words were offensive but fell short of racism. Why would you not then be more robust in dealing with her?

Tim Farron: Again, I go by the definition of antisemitism used by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, which talks about not attributing collective responsibility to Jewish people for the actions of the Government of Israel, but it also talks more widely about hatred directed towards Jewish people, individually or collectively. Sir William Macpherson's report, more recently, talked about how racism is essentially any incident or comment that is considered to be racist by a person at the receiving end, or indeed by anyone else, and should be considered as such for the purpose of any investigation. You are asking me what I think, and in one sense that is not as relevant as what is felt by the people who felt that such comments could have been racist.

Q527 **Nusrat Ghani:** How many of those people do you have in your party? Out of your eight MPs, how many of them might have found it offensive or might be from a Jewish background?

Tim Farron: We have several Jewish Members of the House of Lords but no Jewish Members among our eight in the House of Commons. I have made it clear what I consider those remarks to mean—they offend me—but it is right that those issues are dealt with through a full disciplinary process. As I have said, Jenny Tonge does not carry the Whip in the House of Lords for the Liberal Democrats and does not speak for us.

Q528 **Nusrat Ghani:** One of the issues that was raised frequently when Mr Corbyn gave evidence was the difference between someone being the leader of a party and taking responsibility and other people being dealt with through a process within an organisation. Do you not feel that, as leader of your party, you could lead on these issues a bit more and not rely on an organisation to see if they are offensive or not?

Tim Farron: I would say a number of things. First of all, most recently, at our conference just a few weeks ago I launched a review of our disciplinary procedures in order to take such issues into account, among other things. Since I became leader we have formally and informally reached out to the Jewish community in, I would say, an unprecedented way for our party. I met the Jewish Leadership Council earlier this year, and I am in regular contact with them. My official Middle East adviser is Lord Monroe Palmer, who is the vice-president of the Jewish Leadership Council, and I am meeting senior people on the Board of Deputies in just a



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couple of weeks' time. It is important for me not just in terms of reaching out to the community but in terms of making it very clear what I think. Through interviews and public statements within and outside the party, I make it very clear that discussion of the Israel/Palestine issue must never be allowed to move into territory where criticism of the actions of the Israeli Government becomes criticism of the state of Israel or a challenge to its legitimacy.

Q529 Nusrat Ghani: But the privilege of leadership is surely that you can do more than just say and reach out. Actions mean more than words. You have a gentleman who is now a councillor and Baroness Tonge, who is in the House of Lords. Surely your actions could do so much more for this community than just reaching out and holding an inquiry.

Tim Farron: My job is not to be an apologist for what has happened in the past, and I have no desire to come here and be defensive about the remarks of either of those two individuals—I accept them as being unacceptable, so to speak—but I am setting out how we have dealt with these things in the past. David Ward had the Whip removed from him, unlike any other Liberal or Liberal Democrat MP since the war. Jenny Tonge does not have the Whip. That is not sufficient to say we have the problem under control—of course we don't—but this is about setting the tone of debate, making it clear what matters to me and also making sure that our disciplinary procedures are properly fit for purpose so that should there be any such matters in the future, they will be dealt with swiftly and properly.

Q530 Mr Jayawardena: Mr Farron, I do not doubt the sincerity of what you have said and your remarks that these comments made by others are wholly wrong, but Jenny Tonge, who served as a Liberal Democrat MP and was then elevated to the House of Lords by your party, said, "Israel will lose support" and continued to say that "they will reap what they have sown." In that context, is it not wholly ironic that you are the Liberal Democrat party but you unequivocally fail to support the only liberal democracy in the Middle East?

Tim Farron: Not only is my view that Israel is a legitimate state, but I consider myself to be a friend of Israel. A good friend is honest to its friend when it acts in a way that is wrong and contrary to its self-interest, so I will often say that. Where I always differ is if individuals who criticise the Government of Israel for its actions, which it is utterly legitimate to do, start criticising or questioning the existence of the state of Israel. You point out that Israel is a country that is in many ways a liberal democracy and has much to commend it, and the future for Israel is surely to continue as a liberal democracy in a two-state solution, co-existing with an equally liberal democratic Palestinian state.

Q531 Mr Jayawardena: What do you say to your party members who hold a different view—who perhaps hold the view that Baroness Tonge holds? What do you say to them?

Tim Farron: I am someone who believes that the Palestinian people are often treated very unfairly, and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza



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is not an action that I can support. The idea that there is a great divide between people who are pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian is not so. We believe passionately in a peaceful two-state solution. The issue of antisemitism, where it comes up, particularly around this very issue, is one where people—for whatever reasons—cross a line from holding the Government of Israel to account for its actions, which may be very wrong on occasions, and allow themselves, by design or by accident, to use language and adopt positions that are antisemitic by questioning the legitimacy of the state of Israel and its very existence or attributing blame to Jewish people everywhere and Jewish communities in this country in particular.

Q532 Mr Jayawardena: You would not say today, here at this Committee, that any party member of the Liberal Democrats who holds views similar to or exactly the same as Baroness Tonge's should leave your party.

Tim Farron: In the debate over the future of Israel-Palestine, it is important that all sides' views are heard, and—

Q533 Mr Jayawardena: But those who are antisemitic, you would not suggest—

Tim Farron: Antisemitism should absolutely be stamped out.

Q534 Mr Jayawardena: So those who believe the people of Israel are the problem should leave your party.

Tim Farron: People who attribute blame for the actions of the Israeli Government to the whole of the people of Israel and in particular, more generally, to the Jewish people across the world—I think those views are unacceptable. How you deal with a person who expresses those views, which I would consider to be antisemitic but it is not for me arbitrarily to go and deal with individuals one by one—I would expect there to be proper disciplinary procedures in any party to ensure those people were formally dealt with. To go back to what I said earlier on, that is why we have instigated a review under Lord Ken Macdonald to make sure our procedures are proper and adequate.

Q535 Mr Jayawardena: I will come back to disciplinary procedures in a second, but I am afraid this chimes with the remarks of Charlotte Henry, who was a member of the Liberal Democrats and stood for council. She said: "The leadership fears a backlash from activists." You have said today that you would not urge those people to leave your party and that you do not believe your party is a home for people who hold these unacceptable views. I accept that you hold them to be unacceptable, but I challenge you: why doesn't your party do something more about this? The fact is that you are now not broadly trusted by the Jewish community. You are getting doors slammed in your activists' faces, with people saying, "I won't vote for you. You're an antisemitic party." This is doing you damage.

Tim Farron: Where are those quotes from?

Mr Jayawardena: This is from Charlotte Henry.



Tim Farron: I know Charlotte Henry very well. She interviewed me for the *Jewish Chronicle* a few months ago. I certainly spoke to her at the time that she chose to leave the party. Among the reasons why I have taken the approach I have specifically towards the Jewish community—I ought to point out, and you can check the timeline very easily, that these hugely predate the instance that led to this inquiry being set up. Although it happened before I was leader, the issues around David Ward happened, and I was aware of them. I feel deeply concerned about it. As someone who believes we should live in a society where Jewish people are warmly embraced, it worries me deeply that Jewish people should feel anything other than welcome within our party.

Without the pressure of the scrutiny of an inquiry like this, I chose straight away to make sure I appointed someone who is now the vice-president of the Jewish Leadership Council to be my Middle East adviser and to do things like, for example, recently meet with the Israeli ambassador and, indeed, to reach out to the Jewish community in other ways. I am meeting with the Board of Deputies in a fortnight. If anyone feels that my party is not a place to be if you are Jewish, that would appal me, and it is why I have gone out of my way—as I say, without the immediate pressure of the things that have happened in recent weeks and months—to do those things.

Q536 **Mr Jayawardena:** I very much hope that that is the case. Turning to the disciplinary process and the review you have now sanctioned, how can you assure us and the public that this will not be a whitewashing of antisemitism in exactly the same way that I would suggest the Chakrabarti report was for the Labour party? In what manner do the Liberal Democrats' own disciplinary procedures to tackle these important issues today differ from those of the Labour party?

Tim Farron: I am tempted to say that Ken Macdonald has already got a peerage, so I have nothing to offer him, but that would be facetious. First, on the Chakrabarti report, I have enormous respect for her and for her time at Liberty. I hope I will continue to have respect for her as she carries the position she currently has. I would say that her appointment was about a response—you might pejoratively refer to it as a knee-jerk response—to an immediate issue. My decision to go ahead with our disciplinary review was done not under immediate pressure. It was done because I believe it to be the right thing to do—and not, by the way, specifically because of concerns about antisemitism, but of course, those sorts of complaint are of great importance. It is about making sure we learn lessons from other issues that have happened in the past and that they are robust.

Our disciplinary procedures are, at the moment, essentially as follows. Where a complaint is made against a party member by either another party member or an external person, a disciplinary committee is convened pretty much immediately, and a meeting takes place. It can take place over the phone, so that an individual can be suspended pretty much overnight. That has happened in the relatively recent past. Then a formal committee is selected, and over a four-week period there is an



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investigation as to whether it is actionable. If it is, the person is deemed guilty or otherwise and there is a sanction at the end of it. If people are expelled, it is normally expected to be for life, but there is permission to appeal. I don't know the Labour party's procedures intimately enough to be able to compare them, I'm afraid.

Q537 Mr Jayawardena: Was it right or wrong—and right or wrong is absolutely fine as an answer—that the Liberal Democrats Regional Parties Committee, which is a sub-committee chaired by a vice-chairman of your party, ruled that Baroness Tonge was not being racist?

Tim Farron: When was that and what incident?

Mr Jayawardena: I don't know the exact date. This is obviously when she was a Liberal Democrat peer, but this is about the judgment that the party structures hold.

Tim Farron: I'm pretty certain there was an incident of that nature in the relatively recent past and it was post her time as a Liberal Democrat peer. Obviously, I don't know all the details of that particular case. I am happy to write to you and tell you what I understand to be the case. In the end, though, learning from those sorts of incidents and the testings of our current procedures will be part of our review going forward under Ken Macdonald.

Q538 Mr Burrowes: You may well be aware of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism. I would just check whether you and the party would join in adopting it. It has obviously been adopted by 31 member countries, including the UK, in 2016. It is, "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

Tim Farron: Yes, I acknowledge that, I am aware of it and I would subscribe to that. It is not for me to define what is and isn't antisemitism, but I consider that to be a more than adequate definition.

Q539 Mr Burrowes: In terms of the review that you have initiated—in your comments relating to Mr Ward and his Whip being removed, you said that it was the right thing to do, but you said that it was "pretty harsh". You have mentioned a few times that it was the first time since the second world war that that had happened, but you said it was pretty harsh. What did you mean by that?

Tim Farron: No, I recall that. I am not sure whether that was from the Charlotte Henry interview with *The Jewish Chronicle*, but it was certainly a *Jewish Chronicle* piece. I am sure I said that it was harsh, but harsh implies that I thought it was too harsh. The point I was making was that it was fairly strong action. I was saying that, for all I thought that it was too lengthy a process, as I said earlier to the Chair, nevertheless I thought that the suspension of the Whip was strong action. I can see how reading



that would make you think that I meant it was too harsh, and that was not what I meant.

Q540 Mr Burrowes: You make the point that generalised smears against all Jewish people and Israeli-Jewish people is offensive and antisemitic. So how does that then square with the Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine's postings on Facebook during conference? No doubt the Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine are affiliated with your party. They posted a couple of posts. They said that, "After all, they"—meaning Palestinian children—"rarely, if ever, meet" a Jew "who is kind to them." Then it also went on in another post that, "The Jews as victim. Always the Jews, only the Jews." This playing on Jewish victimhood and this generalisation against Jewish people plainly comes within your understanding of being antisemitic. Would you agree that those posts, during your conference, by Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine were antisemitic?

Tim Farron: Again, it is what Jewish people would consider those comments to be, but my view is that clearly yes they were. When they were brought to the attention of party officials during conference, there was immediately a challenge to the Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine Facebook page moderator. Those comments were taken down immediately, but they are utterly unacceptable. As you say, the use of language that extends actions committed by the Government of Israel and extends responsibility not just to all the people of Israel, but to the Jewish people across the world—especially those in Israel, but across the world—is utterly unacceptable and is in line with our shared understanding of what counts as antisemitism.

Q541 Mr Burrowes: The problem is, although I recognise the sincerity of your concern to reach out and to be that warm home for Jewish people—you talk about reaching out and to be against the poisonous words, not least those postings—you have this happening. But there is this repetitive offending, which has been mentioned, with David Ward on the stand at Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine. It just continues. What action can you take to give reassurance?

Tim Farron: I think that a lot of it is about setting the correct tone. When those posts became known about during our conference, they were taken down at the challenge of party officials. But I think it says more about the general tone of debate when it comes to the issue of Israel and Palestine. It is something that—if you will forgive me—progressive parties find a challenge more than others because of an innate desire to support those at the receiving end of actions of the Jewish Government that I would not agree with.

It is easy for some people to allow the debate to move into utterly unacceptable territory. They start saying—as some have—that Israel as a state is not legitimate, should not exist and that its time may be limited, or that Jewish people everywhere are collectively responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government. Those comments, I am afraid, certainly fit that stereotype. That is why it is really important that there is no mealy-mouthedness from people like me.



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Yes, we can set disciplinary procedures that are better—we do and we have—but it is also about the leadership you show from the top. Who do you appoint as your Middle East adviser? Who do you spend time on? Do you reach out to the Jewish community? Do you ensure that you spend time in your statement on the matter being immensely careful and reaching out to Israel as a state and the Jewish people across the world, particularly those in our country, to ensure that the comments that you highlighted are deemed unacceptable and are not part of the mainstream discussion?

Chair: You have provoked questions from the rest of the Committee, so we are going to have quick questions and short answers. Mr Winnick?

Q542 **Mr Winnick:** Someone who defected from the Tories to your party was suspended on the basis that he said that your campaign as the leader was funded by London Jews, which must have come as a surprise to you to say the least. Has that particular person been expelled now?

Chair: I think you are referring to Matthew Banks.

Tim Farron: He was suspended pretty much overnight.

Q543 **Mr Winnick:** I said he was suspended. Is that leading to expulsion?

Tim Farron: My understanding is that those remarks were made about a fortnight ago. Pretty much overnight—certainly within 24 or 36 hours—the disciplinary process kicked in. He was suspended within those 36 hours and that disciplinary process has now begun. I could not comment on what the outcome might be.

Q544 **Mr Winnick:** There have been questions—there are bound to be—about the Israeli and Palestinian dispute. One takes the position, no doubt, of many other hon. Members, which is that criticism of Israel and its actions is not in itself antisemitic. However, bear in mind some of the views that have been expressed and that have been the subject of questions to you. Would it be useful if your party gave some sort of guidance on the difference between criticism of Israel, which should be the subject of criticism if necessary, like any other country—it would be odd if it was otherwise, particularly given some Israelis' actions—and antisemitism? There seems to be a lack of understanding between the two, at least among some of those who have spoken on the issue. Do you agree?

Tim Farron: Yes, I would say within many parties there are those—we have talked about individuals in my party—who would fit into the category of people who seem to have a difficulty understanding that there is a difference between legitimate criticisms of the actions of a Government and the legitimacy of a state, and, more broadly, the Jewish people across the globe. I make it very clear—I have done not just in interviews with *The Jewish Chronicle* but to, shall we say, more critical audiences who would perhaps take a different view—that I think that is a very dangerous confusion. It is where progressives are most likely to fall foul.

Q545 **Mr Winnick:** Mr Farron, I mention this because it has been in the media; otherwise, I wouldn't have mentioned it. You smile, but you will be



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pleased to know that it is nothing derogatory whatever. Mention has been made of your Christian faith. Antisemitism has been around for centuries. As it has not come out of thin air, it could be argued that there was a direct line from the beginning to the Holocaust—the extermination, the killings and the other ways—of millions of people simply because of their racial origin. It was nothing to do with religion, not that it would have made any difference if it was. Do you particularly welcome the remarks made by the Archbishop of Canterbury to this Committee in answer to my question about antisemitism and Christianity? He said that the record has been very shameful and that he was ashamed of it himself. Do you think that the lessening of antisemitism within Christianity, particularly since 1945, should lead to a better understanding among many people about anti-Jewish hatred?

Chair: We don't expect you to be an apologist for 2,000 years of history, but perhaps you can address that in the context of the Liberal Democrats party.

Tim Farron: That's very kind of you. Thank you for the question. It is a fair one. I think that, over 2,000 years, many people who would have referred to themselves as or been deemed to be Christians have behaved in unspeakable ways towards the Jewish community. That is utterly contrary to Christian teaching. I always refer to the fact that there are only two books in the entire Bible that were not written by Jewish people—Luke and Acts, in case you wondered.

Q546 **James Berry:** Sorry that we are going over this in some detail, but to return to Mr Ward, I think we agree that his comments incited violence and were deplorable for anyone to make, but especially an elected politician. You said that the procedures that led to the Whip not being removed were perhaps not what they could be and you ordered a review. Can I ask about some other procedures? This is a man who was reselected as a Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate, who was selected as a Liberal Democrat council candidate, who remains a member of the party and, indeed, who was just a few weeks ago at your conference manning the stand of the organisation that sent out the Facebook post. How did Mr Ward manage to get through those reselection and selection procedures? Might you also want to look at those procedures?

Tim Farron: A suspension from the parliamentary party, which was always time-limited, took place, and I think that that is strong action. But obviously it was time-limited. He was not removed from the membership of the party. His discipline was, if you like, done in his role as a Member of Parliament and not as an ordinary member, so once his time of suspension was complete, he retained all rights as a party member, including being able to put himself forward for reselection approval and so on. Likewise, in the time since he has ceased to be a Member of Parliament, he has been able to have involvement at a local government level. If you are asking whether we should look at processes to ensure that our selection is done appropriately and that disciplinary processes inform that, that would be something that would come under Ken Macdonald's review.



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Q547 **James Berry:** It must concern you that someone is able to get through one of your party's selection processes and to stand under your party's banner who, just months previously, sent out a tweet saying that they would fire a rocket into Israel. Isn't that pretty worrying?

Tim Farron: When you look at an individual's actions, you have to make sure that justice is done. If a disciplinary process has been gone through and either a person has not been convicted of an offence—for want of a better phrase—or they have but have served their time, it is appropriate that that person would continue in any other free organisation, as they would do otherwise. That doesn't mean I associate myself in any way with some of the comments he's made, some of which I would deem to be antisemitic.

Q548 **James Berry:** You have made very balanced comments about the Middle East today and, indeed, recently in the press, but do you accept that unless you, as party leader, and your party take action and say, "No. People who make comments like David Ward did are not fit to be members of the Liberal Democrats. People who make Facebook posts like those of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine are not fit to be Liberal Democrats", voters and members of the Jewish community here in England are just not going to feel that the Liberal Democrats are a friendly party to Israel and to Jewish people.

Tim Farron: You certainly would not be a friendly party towards Israel or Jewish people if you were in any denial that these are challenges that any party faces. My job is not to point the finger anywhere else, or even to be an apologist for what has happened in the past within the party. It is my job to make sure that we have the right procedures to deal with offences in the future and, just as importantly, to set the tone and be very clear about what is and isn't acceptable but then to reach out and engage in that debate as somebody who believes that the Israeli Government do treat the Palestinian people in a way that is unfair and, as a friend of Israel, challenge their actions. That is acceptable, but what is not acceptable is to challenge and undermine or seek to delegitimise the existence of the state of Israel or to seek to blame Jewish people everywhere. You will find no mealy-mouthed, weasel words from me when it comes to making sure that we call out antisemitism and approach the issue of Israel-Palestine in a way that is respectful and liberal.

Chair: Last, but not least, Chuka Umunna.

Q549 **Mr Umunna:** First, thank you very much for appearing in front of us. I recall your describing this Committee as a sideshow I think during the recess, so we are grateful that you have come to the sideshow. I couldn't resist that one. Going back to the serious issues that we are talking about today, which illustrate precisely why this Committee is clearly not a sideshow, you made an interesting comment in respect of the boundary between people passing comment on the actions of the Israeli Government and then crossing the line to attribute responsibility for the actions of that Government to all Jewish people. In that sense, I just wanted to go back and ask a question in respect of the point you made



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about systemic or institutional issues. Would you not agree that to some extent, certainly probably on the progressive side of political spectrum, there is a systemic issue in the sense of that crossing of the line from criticism of the Government to extending responsibility for their actions to all Jewish people is not an unusual thing in any, certainly progressive, party, if we are honest about it?

Tim Farron: I think that is right, and it is my job to make sure that I ensure that a culture is built and nurtured and fostered within the Liberal Democrats that makes discussion of Israel-Palestine a safe discussion to be on either or any side of. What I have not seen any evidence of, and I consider myself somebody who has held pretty much every office from leaflet distributor and co-ordinator to party leader and pretty much all points in between, as a person of the grassroots, are instances of personal abuse and threatening behaviour within a local party. That is not to say that it has not existed, but in my wide and deep experience I have not seen it. What I have seen and heard, however, are the things that we have discussed this afternoon.

Q550 **Mr Umunna:** But, in a way, I suppose the simple point I am making is that you have institutional issues in the sense that I am referring to, as well.

Tim Farron: Their manifestation is in the use of language in the public sphere. I have not seen them manifested on a personal level, but I would want to make sure that that never happened.

Chair: Mr Farron, thank you very much for your evidence. We will not hold you responsible for everything in Christian history.

Tim Farron: That is very kind of you. I apologise for whatever I may have said which was intended as a compliment to Chuka.

Chair: It was picked up and tweeted. Thank you very much.

Examination of witness

Witness: The right hon. Sir Eric Pickles MP.

Chair: Sir Eric, welcome.

Sir Eric Pickles: I aspire to go to sideshows.

Q551 **Chair:** Well, there are no coconuts available at this one. I am afraid we have very limited time because we have a private session after this and that last session went on for rather longer than anticipated, so I apologise.

I will kick off by saying we are very grateful that you are here today. I know it is not your fault, but the Committee has been trying to get a representative of the Conservative party since July. David Cameron originally agreed to come in front of the Committee. Subsequently the leadership contest obviously overtook that. Sir Patrick McLoughlin, the new chairman of the Conservative party, gave us a written submission at



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the beginning of August, which was helpful. We then asked the new Prime Minister on several occasions whether she would appear or nominate somebody. No response was received from No. 10 right up until last week, despite my going through her Parliamentary Private Secretary.

We were then told that the Home Secretary would be nominated to appear but then the Home Secretary couldn't do it. As it stood last night we had nobody representing the Conservative party, and then this morning we heard that you were able to do it. We are grateful to you, but it has obviously been something of an endeavour to get the Conservative party represented, given that we have now had the leaders of every other major political party in front of us. I just want to put that on record and in context. We are grateful to you.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin's evidence was helpful, but this is evidence about the parties rather than the Government, as you have seen from the questioning of Tim Farron. I have to say that, from the five pages or so from Sir Patrick McLoughlin, it mostly refers to a creditable record of action that the Government have taken—the Home Secretary, the Department for Education and so on—that I think most parties would agree has been a commendable record of clamping down on antisemitism throughout this Government and the previous Government. The section on the actions of the Conservative party is rather shorter than the section criticising Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour party. On that basis, do you think the Conservative party has no problems with antisemitism within its ranks?

Sir Eric Pickles: First of all, I recognise that I am but a third substitute for who should be here. I apologise for that.

Chair: That was never the implication.

Sir Eric Pickles: I was a member of the Conservative party's national executive from 1972 to 1991. I have held senior positions in the voluntary party, I was vice-chairman, deputy chairman and chairman of the Conservative party and I was actively engaged in these issues. As you perhaps personally know, I was actively engaged in these issues when there were problems in the past.

I am a former national chairman of the joint committee against racism, so it is a subject I care passionately about. We have had two incidents of allegations of antisemitism: one from a councillor in, I think, St Albans, who was eventually expelled; and one against a councillor in Bradford that, according to the information I have, came down to a problem of a very dodgy translation, because the original allegation was in a mother tongue language. People who I know and trust, because it was from Bradford, were at the meeting and told me that he said exactly the opposite of what it was claimed had been said.

When I was in a position to affect these things, and that was for a number of years, I always had zero tolerance with regard to anti-racism and antisemitism. I listened to Mr Farron and we had the same problems that the Labour party has and the Liberal Democrats have—you have to follow



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due process and due diligence and it is necessary to get the number of people together in order to suspend somebody. I hold the record: I managed to suspend someone in 18 minutes and 27 seconds for racist activities. It was not antisemitic; someone had been extremely derogatory about someone with Pakistani origins.

Q552 Chair: I am grateful. I first put on the record that the calibre of you as a witness is not under question; it was purely the timing and the effort to get you here as the representative.

I hear what you say. Is that an indication that antisemitism in the Conservative party is not taken as seriously as it might be and is in some way disregarded or swept under the carpet? Or do you think that the incidences of people within the Conservative party, certainly at elected level, being outspoken in an antisemitic way are genuinely limited?

The Conservative party is a broad church, as with other parties, and there will be some bad apples—or however you want to refer to them—within it, yet in the report we have struggled to find as high-profile examples of antisemitism as those quoted for Mr Farron. That is not to say it is quantity, but certainly the profile of them has not been as high in the Conservative party. Why is that?

Sir Eric Pickles: I think that is because we learnt hard lessons perhaps a little earlier. Coming from Bradford, I understand the David Ward problems and I do realise why sometimes it is difficult, but I think we learnt through past mistakes that you need to be pretty decisive on things like this.

I am coming up to my 50th anniversary as a member of the Conservative party and it was not like this in the late 1960s. There were problems and I think we learnt our lessons and recognised that you have to deal with this very quickly. You must have a no tolerance policy with regard to any form of racism.

Q553 Chair: Specifically on the question of Bradford, on which you are eminently equipped to speak, you have just given an example that may or may not have been as serious as it could have been and we have examples we have just heard from a former Lib Dem Bradford MP, and we have obvious examples from the Labour side to do with Bradford. I am not saying that it is uniquely Bradford, but obviously there is a place with a very large Muslim community for whom the Middle East Muslim-Jewish issues have a higher resonance—they are higher on the radar. What is it about a place like that that produces these instances of antisemitism? What could we do about it that the Tory party is or is not doing about it?

Sir Eric Pickles: And yet there is the other side of Bradford: there is not a large Jewish community in Bradford, but when the local synagogue was under threat it was exclusively Muslim community leaders who came together to raise the money to repair the roof. I think sometimes we should not see the street through the telescope or binoculars of extremists. Most people are able to get on together. But of course there



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are times—you only need to look at the number of incidents of antisemitism, and they generally coincide with problems that occur in the Middle East, notably a couple of years ago.

Why is it that the level of antisemitic activity increased in London and yet in Manchester we have seen it plunge? In a way, it is about good leadership and engagement. I think there are a number of people in Manchester, particularly in the churches, mosques and synagogues, who have gone out of their way over a number of years to engage and see people not through the spectrum of their religion.

Q554 Mr Umunna: May I start off by going back to the comments the Chair made about the absence of the present leader of your party? If antisemitism is a thing on which you as a party have a zero tolerance policy and you take it so seriously, why is the leader of your party the one leader of the main parties who has not appeared in front of the Committee for this inquiry?

Sir Eric Pickles: The party put up a spokesman with a fair degree of knowledge about it. I am sure the Prime Minister would be delighted to be here, but, as you can readily understand, new into office with Brexit and engagements, perhaps it did not fit her calendar. But I cannot give you any particular insight as to why she is not here.

Q555 Mr Umunna: The former Prime Minister agreed after the vote to leave the European Union to appear in front of this Committee to face the same issues. He agreed to come and yet she hasn't.

Sir Eric Pickles: I have nothing to add to my other answer.

Q556 Mr Umunna: Your argument is that going back to the '60s or '70s, historically there have been issues in the Conservative party around antisemitism, but now things are different. You mentioned the incidents in St Albans and you also mentioned the incident in Bradford. Can I ask you about two other incidents?

In August 2014, a University College London Conservative Society member was censured for saying, "Jews own everything. We all know it is true. I wish I was a Jew but," and I am not going to say the rest because it is frankly too offensive. The UCL Union ordered that the society apologise for this. It was quite widely reported—you can just google it. Was that incident investigated by the Conservative party?

Sir Eric Pickles: I don't know. Maybe. It is entirely my fault. In coming before the Committee, I just asked about the number of incidents that have occurred over the last year.

Mr Umunna: Because the understanding is—

Sir Eric Pickles: If I was chairman, he would have been out on his ear.

Q557 Mr Umunna: Right. But from what I have seen and understand, UCL obviously censured the society for this, but there was no investigation or follow-up by the Conservative party itself.



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Sir Eric Pickles: Well, I apologise for that. We should have done that.

Q558 **Mr Umunna:** Right. Okay. What about in April 2015—last year—when you had a Conservative candidate for the Derby council election who said she would never support “the Jew”, Ed Miliband?

Sir Eric Pickles: I don’t recall it, but I hope she isn’t a member now.

Q559 **Mr Umunna:** I am simply asking the question to illustrate and to ask you my final question that in fact every political party continues to have problems, as we have just heard from Mr Farron, in respect of antisemitism. Admittedly, there are degrees of that, as I see in my own party, and I am not going to be disingenuous about it. But to suggest that your party is alone amongst the main parties in not continuing to have these types of issues pop up wouldn’t really be correct. Maybe I have misinterpreted what you said.

Sir Eric Pickles: Mr Umunna, that would be to put words into my mouth. I wouldn’t even dream of suggesting that. Antisemitism is one of the oldest, most nasty, most evil of all the sins. It comes back. What I am suggesting is that the way to deal with it is zero tolerance. I do understand the problems and I am not unsympathetic in terms of people fighting to deal with antisemitism inside the Labour party. I can think of many friends who operate there who I am proud to stand beside on this. But to suggest for a millisecond that I believe that the Conservative party is free of antisemitism would be a complete bastardisation of what I have just said.

Q560 **James Berry:** Yes, I think you will find when you check the record that the Derby Council candidate for our party was expelled from the party for making the comments that Mr Umunna referred to, which is exactly what you would expect.

Sir Eric Pickles: I rejoice at that news.

Q561 **James Berry:** I want to move on from talking about procedures, which I think Mr Farron got himself a little wrapped up in, to talk about leadership. On Israel, there is no question that David Cameron showed very strong leadership and that Theresa May shows very strong leadership and, for balance, that Tony Blair showed very strong leadership. Do you agree that setting the tone on middle eastern issues is vitally important for a party leader?

Sir Eric Pickles: Yes, I do, of course, but if the leader is not reflective of what the wider party says—I think there is a duty to show that. I think it is a conflating between Israel and Jewish people that is a problem, because of the Holocaust. The old stereotype of Jews owning everything, how they look and how they dress, that is completely unacceptable, but a kind of new antisemitism has crept in through this back-door, through anti-Zionism. Things that people say about Israelis or Zionists if they said about Jews would be clearly seen as being antisemitic.

Q562 **James Berry:** So I think the criticism of Jeremy Corbyn has been that not showing sufficient and strong leadership on this issue from the very



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beginning allowed space—allowed oxygen—for old antisemitic views to be aired and to have some kind of currency, and that shows the importance of showing early and vocal leadership on the issue.

Sir Eric Pickles: I certainly think that there may well be something in that; I think that is a view that might well be shared by many people within the Labour party.

Q563 **Mr Winnick:** You said in answer to our question, Sir Eric, that antisemitism goes back a long time, and we all recognise that. Therefore, would it not be reasonable to assume that the main parties, let alone some of the minor parties—all the main parties represented in the House of Commons—would have their number of antisemites or those who are pretty close to antisemitism?

Sir Eric Pickles: An unqualified yes.

Q564 **Mr Winnick:** You agree on that. Do you think there is any particular reason why the Conservative party seem to have had what appeared to be more difficulties in having Jewish MPs in the first half of the last century?

Sir Eric Pickles: I know I am very old, but it was before I became a member of the national executive. I have been reading your deliberations, which I think have been pretty good, and I think somebody said in evidence that the civil service of the Foreign Office were asked to define what an antisemite was, and they said, "That was someone who hated Jews more than was reasonable." It is a reflection of what society was like.

I can remember when it was difficult to get people from different ethnic minorities to be members of the Conservative party, to become councillors, to become MPs—people whose sexual orientation was different. I can remember that; I am old enough to remember that. And I am much happier living in a world now where we have Jewish Members of Parliament, Muslim Members of Parliament, people who are straight, people who are gay. It is a better world.

Q565 **Mr Winnick:** Yes, but I am just wondering if you are familiar with the figures that in 1945—it was the end of the second world war and a general election then took place—there were no Jewish Members of Parliament at all, compared to my party. And even 21 years later, in 1966, the total number of Jewish MPs amounted to two. It seemed to be somewhat of an obstacle—Jews.

Sir Eric Pickles: One of the great delights of my life was to have had a number of conversations with the late Manny Shinwell, who I regarded as a truly great man, and I am delighted and pleased that we've learned the lesson. And I think it is massively important that Members of Parliament reflect the wider community. It is certainly my view that what makes up the British identity is a strong Jewish presence, a strong Muslim presence, a strong Hindu presence, a strong Christian presence. If any of those were to feel uncomfortable or were not to be represented, I think we would all be the lesser.



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Q566 Mr Winnick: A last question, bringing us—in some respects—up to date. On Sunday 4 October 1936, there was a tremendous demonstration that stopped Mosleyites marching through Jewish districts in the east end of London—working-class districts—and as a result, as you no doubt know, Mosley was unable to continue his procession; the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police said, “No”.

I ask you this because, as I understand it, and you can correct me, there was no representative at the event of the 80th anniversary. I was just wondering—I understand that you are not the chairman of the Conservative party—why someone didn’t go along.

Sir Eric Pickles: Well, I’m not sure that that is correct. I think it’s an important anniversary to be there.

Q567 Mr Winnick: The Conservative party was not represented.

Sir Eric Pickles: I have spoken to many of the people who were involved in part of that struggle and I kind of wish I’d been there myself. I’m not that old, but I would very much like to have been there on Sunday. I would have been there if it had been possible, because I think it is an immensely important part of our history that we should celebrate. It is an important statement that we were not going to follow Spain, Italy or Germany. It was a great pleasure to read about it, see it and talk about it.

Chair: Sir Eric, I am afraid we have to finish it there because we have to go into private session. Once again, we are very grateful that you have come. Your calibre as a witness has never been in question, and we are very grateful for your evidence.

Sir Eric Pickles: It has been terrific. I shall read your deliberations with enormous interest, because I think it is an immensely important report.