



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

7th February 2024

Dear Constance,

RE: ECONOMIC ACTIVITY OF PUBLIC BODIES (OVERSEAS MATTERS) BILL

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of your concerns about boycotts by public institutions. I have read your comments with interest.

First, thank you for your kind invitation to attend the briefing event held on the 10th January 2024. Unfortunately, owing to prior, longstanding diary commitments, I was unable to attend, although please rest assured that I will continue to follow this issue closely.

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 the Government believes 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 *Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill* will not restrict individuals' rights to freedom of speech. Nor will it apply to private organisations, except if they are exercising public functions. The Bill will extend to public institutions (as defined in the *Human Rights Act 1998*) only. To quote the Secretary of State, the Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP, the Bill does not prevent any individual from articulating their support for the boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign, or indeed any particular policy that the BDS campaign puts forward. It simply prevents public bodies and public money being used to advance that case. Ministers believe this is only right given that the BDS campaign is explicitly and regrettably antisemitic.

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 President Putin's evil war machine.




Turning specifically to the Israel-Hamas conflict, 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 would also add that 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 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 (Overseas Matters) 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 MP, 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 hope this provides you with some assurance.

Ultimately, 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.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

With best wishes,


**TOM PURSGLOVE MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**