

A Community of Communities

Report of the Commission on Representation
of the Interests
of the British Jewish Community

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The **Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)** is an independent think-tank which informs and influences opinion and decision-making on social, political and cultural issues affecting Jewish life.

The **Commission on Representation of the Interests of the British Jewish Community** was established as an independent working party in 1998 by JPR, which provided the secretariat and a home for the Commission. Members were drawn on an *ad personam* basis from a cross-section of British Jewry in terms of gender, region and religious outlook. The Commission's task was to examine how the interests of the British Jewish community are represented at various levels—within the community, to Jewish communities abroad and in the wider UK society. The Commission was also asked to make recommendations on how the representation of these interests can best be organized for the twenty-first century. JPR pledged to publish the report of the Commission.

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Summary

Setting the stage: reasons for the Commission's establishment

Over the past 300 years British Jews have established well-developed representative structures. However, there is an increasing recognition that we are in a period of rapid change. The pace of this change has placed considerable strain on the historic central representative structures: the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Chief Rabbinate. Vocal and variegated interest groups, ranging from the strictly Orthodox to the progressive, claim that the current modes of representation fail to include them or speak for their interests.

Questions have been raised as to why Jewish representative institutions have been unable to defuse tensions and resolve disputes that frequently surface in the public sphere. In addition, new organizations are continually emerging to address the wider society on matters of Jewish interest.

Finally, many individuals—particularly women, the younger generation and the unaffiliated—feel disenfranchised. Aware that decisions taken by others affect them, they do not believe that they have the means of influencing those decisions. They also do not feel the present representational structures meet their needs.

Changing British Jewry

The Commission asked: 'For what sort of British Jewry is representation being undertaken?' The answer was: a community in transition.

In terms of demography, there has been a significant decline in the estimated Jewish population, which now numbers under 300,000 people. Despite the fact that today approximately 70 per cent of the population of UK Jews are formally linked to a synagogue, approximately one third of the population is religiously unaffiliated.

Moreover, those British Jews who are affiliated to a synagogue are increasingly diverse and are segmented across the following groupings:

- 60.7 per cent belong to central Orthodox synagogues (Ashkenazi and Sephardi);
- 28.8 per cent belong to progressive synagogues (Reform, Liberal and Masorti);
- 10.5 per cent belong to strictly Orthodox (Haredi) synagogues, which have shown the greatest

degree of growth in the last decade.

Recent studies on issues of Jewish identity have shown a trend towards non-synagogal modes of affiliation and a rising number of marriages with non-Jews. Yet, paradoxically, at the same time there is greater confidence among the strictly Orthodox, a huge investment and expansion in Jewish education and a stronger sense of British Jewish identity.

Finally, British Jews increasingly regard themselves in ethnic terms. Alongside religion, culture and language, their ethnicity includes feelings of kinship and belonging, and a desire for group continuity. In practice, however, most British Jews presently regard the synagogue as the only practicable way open to them to identify with and belong to something Jewish.

Changing Britain

In what kind of Britain, then, is representation taking place?

Britain has become more diverse in terms of religion, ethnic origin, culture and lifestyle. It is now often referred to as a multicultural society. Ethnic, regional and other differences are increasingly portrayed as requiring not merely toleration, but also acknowledgement, respect, resources and representation.

The most significant changes are structural, affecting the various tiers of government to which Jews have traditionally made representations. The changes under way that are already affecting Britain's central political institutions promise to alter significantly the pattern of power, leading to new challenges and opportunities for representational activity. They include reform of the House of Lords, devolution and regionalization, changes in local government, including a London mayor and Greater London Authority, and closer integration into the European Union.

Mapping current representation

The Commission identified those Jewish communal organizations that carry out representation, together with their main target audiences: government and Parliament, local authorities, international and European organizations, foreign governments, international Jewish organizations, Israel, Diaspora communities, European Jewish organizations, other-faith minority groups, the voluntary sector, the media and other opinion formers.

This information is discussed in Section 4 and has been produced in diagrammatic form. The organizational map served as the starting point for analysing Jewish representation, revealing in stark relief its multi-faceted, diverse and complex nature.

Gathering ideas: the consultation exercise

For more than eighteen months the Commission carried out its research and deliberations on a variety of levels. It canvassed as many people as possible within the Jewish community, together with those in the wider society who are the main target audiences of Jewish representation.

A detailed questionnaire on the scope, subject matter and comprehensiveness of Jewish representation was compiled, and copies were sent to more than 2,000 Jewish organizations and individuals. Advertisements were placed in the national and Jewish press inviting people to request a questionnaire, and a special web site was established to allow respondents to submit their answers on-line.

Seven 'town meetings' were held in Central London, Redbridge, Golders Green, Brighton, Manchester, Glasgow and Leeds. Smaller focus groups and discussions were also held. Finally, the Commission conducted in-depth interviews with more than seventy key informants, both inside and outside the British Jewish community.

During the Commission's evidence-gathering, certain recurring themes emerged: questions of leadership, consultation, professionalism, networking and coordination, reaching the unaffiliated, internal, informal and religious

representation, representation abroad and internal Jewish divisions.

Among the key questions surrounding the current state of representational activity, the following emerged:

- Do the multiple layers of special interest and representation constitute needless duplication or strength through diversity?
- Should there be one or many voices?
- What is the role of religious representation?
- Do the Jewish media have a role in representation?
- What is the place of informal representation?
- How is the Jewish community regarded by the targets of representation—as a religious or an ethnic group?
- When is collective representation necessary?

Through the Commission's wide-ranging consultations with every sector of the Jewish community an overriding leitmotif began to emerge: a growing realization that a means of representation regarded as effective in the past or even today may not be adequate in the future.

The Commission observed that, while people were quick to express their concerns and extensive criticisms of existing representative structures, they were less willing, initially, to posit solutions. Nevertheless, a number of solutions were put forward and subsequently served as a basis for the Commission's recommendations, which follow.

Recommendations

The following section is in two parts: 'Principles for action' and 'Implementation of principles'. Both grew out of a consideration of the evidence, ideas and suggestions expressed during the consultative process. Together they constitute a strategic direction that we believe will meet the current and emerging representational needs of the British Jewish community.

Principles for action

1 For the purposes of representation we should adopt an *inclusive definition of the Jewish people and present ourselves as an ethnic minority.*

Jews believe in, or are conscious of having, a common origin and destiny. Historically, for more than three centuries Jews in Britain were regarded as a religious minority. However, in recent decades, Jewish ethnicity has been officially recognized under the Race Relations Act of 1976. A government report stated in 1995:

It is a fundamental objective of the UK government to enable members of ethnic minorities to participate freely and fully in the economic, social and public life of the nation, with all the benefits and responsibilities which that entails, while still being able to maintain their own culture, traditions, language and values.¹

We believe that for the purposes and benefits of representation the Jewish community needs to see itself in these terms: namely, as an ethnic group. It is this policy which offers the community the public space and the social and political climate in which it can pursue its efforts at representing itself.

2 We affirm the continuing relevance of the 'emancipation contract'.

The British Jewish community today still operates and exists on the basis of the emancipation contract: Jews have full legal and political equality with all other citizens before the law; they are free to form their own associations or to choose not to single themselves out as Jews in any way at all.

3 We are a community of communities.

We accept the analysis of a former president of the Board of Deputies, Israel Finestein, that to speak of one community is misleading. British Jewry has always consisted of "communities"—distinguished geographically, religiously, socio-economically, ideologically, historically and by personality.

In adopting the principle of 'a community of communities',² we also accept the principle of subsidiarity in representational activities. That is, we believe that groupings within the Jewish community should take and retain responsibility for representational activities that can be dealt with effectively at their own level.

4 Representation of the community must be seen as multi-faceted. There is no one best way, nor is one overarching organization or leader able, to speak on behalf of the entire community.

It follows from our understanding of contemporary Jewry in Britain that different sections of the community will make different demands on the government or express their interests in a different manner to various third parties.

We noted the growth of a 'free market' in representation, with a corresponding increase in the number of specialist and single-interest bodies. Like similar organizations in the wider society, they are generally a flexible, responsive and effective means of representing interests.

In view of the variety of issues to be represented, the range of effective voices available and our understanding of ourselves as a community of communities, we believe it is not possible, nor has it been possible of late, for any single organization or leader—religious or secular—to attempt to provide all British Jewry's representational activities or speak on behalf of the entire community.

We believe that this principle of multiple representation also lends itself to cooperation, coordination and even agreement to speak with one voice on certain issues when the need arises. In these circumstances it seems that collective representation can currently be carried out only on a non-ecclesiastical, non-rabbinical basis.

What should drive this process is (a) the nature of the representation that needs to be undertaken, (b) the ability to be proactive and make effective representation and (c) accountability, with the last constituting an essential component of credibility within the Jewish community. Such representation may involve, but is not necessarily associated with, democratic organizational structures. In the words of one of our interviewees: 'The extent to which you are considered representative is the extent to which you have consulted well.'

5 Effective representation needs to take into account the structural changes and changing tiers of government at local, regional, national and European levels.

As the internal and external structure of the UK is in the process of transition we need to realign our representational activities to address:

- constitutional change, including the reform of the House of Lords, proportional representation, and devolution and regionalization;
- changes in local government, including the emergence of the Greater London Authority and proposed changes in other metropolitan authorities, changes in local authority boundaries, changing roles of local government and the 'modernization' agenda;
- closer integration into the European Union, including the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law.

6 In order to carry out representation we need to take into account current and future trends and developments in the political, social and economic environment of the UK.

The withdrawal of the state from many areas of social and economic activity has put increased pressure on communities to provide for themselves. In particular, the retreat of the state from welfare provision puts pressure on voluntary organizations to provide more social, educational and housing services.

Because British Jewish communities are essentially clusters of voluntary organizations, the above trends offer new opportunities for forging creative partnerships with the broader voluntary sector in general and with governmental agencies, including the newly devolved regional and European institutions.

The dramatic expansion of information/communication technology (ICT), including the Internet, creates still more opportunities for various sectors of British Jewry to share knowledge and interact, both with each other and with Jewish communities in other countries.

7 British Jews are members of a global Jewish people and have responsibilities to represent Jewish interests wherever the need arises.

We affirm this principle particularly now, when our links with Israel and other Diaspora communities are subject to ongoing and rapid change due to social, political and economic developments world-wide.

It follows from this principle that effective representation of Jewish interests beyond Europe needs to take into account the changing dynamic of the relationships between Israel and the Diaspora, as well as among Diaspora communities themselves.

8 There is a clear need for reform in representation.

The accelerating rate of change in multiple sectors of British government and society precludes a piecemeal approach to reforming the method and means by which we carry out our representational interests. If our own response to that change is not implemented in a deliberate and strategic manner, we will be put at a disadvantage precisely at a time when our community's future is so closely linked with developments in the wider society. Jews in the UK therefore need to devise a systematic and proactive response in order to ensure that both the *multiple voices of our community and the voice of our multiple communities* are effectively heard.

9 There are viable models for community-wide cooperation on representational matters.

In contrast to the internal issues which can serve as a bar to dialogue and cooperation, we believe that a range of external concerns exists which relate to and affect British Jews as a whole. It is external issues such as these—the prime subject matter of representation—which provide us with an opportunity to respond in a coherent and focused way. Such concerns may range from the civic/secular, such as antisemitism and security, to the religious, such as circumcision and *shechita* (kosher slaughter of animals).

On specific religious matters, each grouping tends to organize its own representation. We have found that, depending on the need, religious

groupings within the community will accept people beyond their communities to represent their interests; what is important for them is the manner in which representatives speak for them and the sensitivity shown to their beliefs and needs. It is therefore feasible to envisage a situation in which, without any religious group abandoning or compromising any of its principles, alliances can be formed on a pragmatic basis, in order to pursue certain issues.

10 The development of our human resources is a prerequisite for effective communal representation.

Effective representation requires informed leaders of high calibre. Given the diversity that prevails, quality leadership is needed in both governance and staffing. Talented individuals, irrespective of age and gender, must be able and encouraged to move through the system to the top. It is imperative that those who seek to represent the community be appropriately trained and informed.

Implementation of principles

1 A coordinating structure

The range of issues which organizations and individuals pursue in the wider society is considerable. Because they operate in what amounts to a free-market system, we do not propose to prescribe or proscribe issues that require representation. We are also keenly aware of the difficulty of direct communication and public consultation between some religious groups.

We therefore recommend the creation of an independent, cross-communal coordinating structure. This structure will serve as a network of organizations and will involve the senior lay and professional leaders concerned with representation.

The structure will require a small but highly professional and well-qualified staff. It will have no independent, executive function and no ecclesiastical or rabbinic authority. Rather than being empowered to speak on anyone's behalf, its primary role will be as a facilitator and catalyst. Working groups or committees could be established on an ad hoc or ongoing basis. Its aim will be to be flexible and outcome-oriented.

In the event that a unified communal response is required to any issue that arises, the structure will operate on a networking basis, assembling a group of appropriate voices, groups and interests within the community in order to discuss a collective response in an appropriate timescale. This response will then be disseminated by the network as a representative communal position.

The structure's remit will be to:

- *operate according to the above principles;*
- *monitor and disseminate information* on issues involving representation of the interests of the British Jewish communities;
- *identify emerging issues* by virtue of the network's knowledge base and stemming from its interaction with all the elements of the community;

- *react to external issues* when they emerge, if necessary facilitating targeted coalitions of Jewish organizations and agencies in order to formulate a strategic response;
- *respond to requests* from Jewish agencies and communal organizations throughout the UK for representation and for advice and consultation on how to carry out representation as the need arises;
- *create and facilitate a forum for communal organizations* to discuss and develop strategies on how to advance the representative agenda. Such a forum could range in format and include group meetings, formal assembly, mediated sessions and an electronic bulletin board in 'real time'. This could be launched via an annual agenda-setting conference for the purpose of establishing priorities and creating long- and short-term strategies.

2 A development programme for future leaders

A change in the culture of communal organizations is necessary before new leaders will come forward. We believe this can happen through discussion and implementation of the recommended reforms and a systematic adoption of the principles we have set out. If the result is seen to be effective and efficient, and the key issues which are raised for discussion and action are recognized as directly affecting the future of the community, we believe that high-calibre leaders will come forward to fill formal leadership positions. Despite much lip service to similar recommendations in the past, the above aspiration has not been put into practice. This, too, must change.

To ensure a desirable level of knowledge and competence in the field of representation, we recommend the introduction of a high-quality training and development programme for professional and lay leaders. This programme should be designed to build a systematic body of knowledge about the effective conduct of representation that can be transmitted to potential leaders throughout their communal careers.

Part of this training should involve the creation of a syllabus which will help ensure that those involved in representation are well informed about the processes and methodology of representation. In general, based on our research, such a syllabus would include a knowledge of:

- *the changing landscape of communal and governmental bodies* on the local, regional, national and European levels as they relate to targets of representation;
- *a working familiarity with the religious and ethnic composition, social structure and demography* of the Jewish population in the UK and the corresponding range of views that exists in our community of communities;
- *an awareness of the history of British Jewry* as it relates to its governance and formal status as a 'dissenting religious minority' in the UK and in its relationship to the European and international community;
- *Jewish thought and practice* relevant to issues of representation.

3 An independent mass media and resource office

We are keenly aware of the role which the mass media play in acting as a window on the Jewish community, through both their coverage of formal



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