



United Kingdom Delegation to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
(OSCE)

**OSCE CORDOBA CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SEMITISM AND ON OTHER  
FORMS OF INTOLERANCE, 8-9 JUNE 2005**

**Statement by the Solicitor General, Mr Mike O'Brien, QC**

The United Kingdom supports the statement by M. Jean Asselborn, Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, on behalf of the European Union.

Cordoba was the historic meeting place of three great cultures, and so it is right that the OSCE should gather here to discuss how we tackle anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance.

Anyone who has visited the site of the death camp at Auschwitz, as I have, knows where hatred of others because of their race or religion can lead.

What struck me when I saw the piles of spectacles, children's clothes and shoes was that each was a little different, and had been chosen by an individual who was a victim of hate.

No nation has a natural immunity from hatred and intolerance. There will always be those among us who, because of their feelings of personal insecurity or fanaticism in pursuit of some nostrum, seek to set one community against another.

Sometimes the scapegoats are Jews, sometimes Muslims, the Roma, a national minority or those of a different religion.

Today we all live in countries which are more multicultural than in the 1930s, so our vulnerability to the politics of hate is as great as ever.

That is why it is so important to strengthen our laws and democratic institutions against hatred.

And that is what this Conference is about.

How do we build on the fine words which came out of the OSCE Conferences at Berlin, Paris and Brussels to identify practical steps each country can take to make our commitments a reality?

The first thing is to admit the problem, then to take action to deal with it. That is what we have done in Britain.

Last year, there was a rise in anti-Semitic incidents. There were 532 incidents, a rise of 42%. Seventeen synagogues and 5 cemeteries were desecrated.

Historically anti-Semitism has been associated with fascists, but worryingly, in recent years, we have seen some of the tensions in the Middle East spill over into acts against British Jews.

This is unacceptable.

But other British Communities have been victims of right wing extremism too.

Since 9/11 Muslims have sometimes been victims of criminal thuggery and harassment by extremists.

Those hate groups who target minorities present serious questions for democracies. How far should we restrict their freedom of speech or their political activities?

Groups who preach the politics of hate are different to other political parties and we must respond to them in a different way.

Most political parties seek to convince others to agree with their policies – to join them.

The advocates of hatred seek to exclude a minority from having an equal say in the future; they seek to divide our society.

We may not need to ban them, but we do need strong laws to restrict their behaviour and to protect the rights of minorities.

In the 1970s, Britain's Race Relations' laws restricted racist language and racist acts.

Perhaps we cannot legislate for what people think but we can make laws to restrict what they do and say.

In 1998, as a Minister I helped draft specific laws on racial and religious violence and harassment.

Those convicted of these hate crimes face higher penalties – to show that the attacks are not just attacks on individuals but on all in our society.

We also carefully monitor the statistics on these offences to create a better understanding of the problems.

In 2000, I helped pass new Race Relations laws which placed a duty on all public authorities to promote race equality rather than react to discrimination once it happens. It marked an important strengthening of our laws.

We now intend to legislate to hatred of people because of their religion.

Some extremists have frustrated our race laws by attacking Muslims as a faith group. Our new law will restrict that.

Laws are important, but we must do more.

As Race Equality Minister I helped introduce national Holocaust Memorial Day each year which demonstrates our commitment to eternal vigilance against the rise of intolerance.

Our school curriculum ensures the message is learnt by the young.

The British Government has also promoted an inclusive concept of citizenship. It allows people to be British but to be individuals and express their cultural identity.

Our aim is integration, not assimilation.

We welcome migrants and expect them to integrate, but on the basis of respect for their own identity.

Our people have nothing to fear from that.

In the UK we have a long tradition of having more than one identity; indeed our flag reflects the four nationalities of the UK.

Suppressing reasonable expressions of cultural or faith identity can undermine integration by contributing to alienation and exclusion of individuals.

So, for example, our police uniform has been adapted to allow people to wear Sikh turbans, Jewish kippahs or the Muslim hijab.

Expressing culture or faith in this way does not make a person less British or less of a police officer. Nor does it detract from the duty of the police to protect the public. In fact, as my Home Office colleague Fiona Mactaggart has argued, it strengthens it.

A police force which reflects the community around it is better able to serve it.

We have been able in a range of ways to take practical steps to make the ideals of the Brussels and Berlin Declarations a reality. This we will take forward – during our EU Presidency and working with the OSCE's three Personal Representatives.

The important thing is to recognize there is a problem, and then we can take steps to deal with it.

Finally, let me add that it is a pleasure to be in this beautiful city, the birthplace of Maimonides (Ibu Ma'mum) who wrote, "The Guide to the Perplexed."

Let us hope that our work will enable us to leave here slightly less perplexed and less in need of Maimonides' words of guidance than when we arrived.