

Speaking notes and key arguments

This is a guide to help you structure the meeting with your MP. Each meeting will be unique, and will require some flexibility, but try to steer the discussion to raise as many of the key points below as possible.

At the start of the meeting briefly introduce yourself, explain that you are taking part in the Right to Boycott National Lobby Day organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and thank your MP for taking the time to meet with you. It is also useful to ask your MP to confirm how much time you have at this stage. Please ensure someone in the group is designated with taking notes during the meeting and filling in the online feedback form at the end.

The main purpose of meeting with your MP today is to try to get them to vote against the anti-boycott bill. It is not our priority on this occasion to convince MPs of the justness of the Palestinian cause or the wisdom of boycotts and divestment as a tactic. We definitely encourage you to engage in an ongoing dialogue with your MP about Palestinian rights more broadly (and we are happy to support you in doing so!), but for today, we want to keep the focus very targeted. Even if your MP opposes BDS, if they support democratic principles then we want them on our side. The best way to do this is through polite engagement.

The notes below cover some key points that we want to emphasise and several arguments that we expect you to come across. They are divided into three sections:

- 1) Key arguments that we want to push in the meetings. Many of these points are also covered in the MPs briefing document so please leave a copy with them.
- 2) Possible responses to likely government lines. This is particularly relevant **if you will be meeting with a Conservative MP**. These arguments have been developed based on previous public statements including the Queen's speech 2022, information received about the likely contents of the bill, and the written responses already received from some MPs.
- 3) Tips on how to respond if your MP raises other issues, including misinformation sent to them by the campaign group 'We Believe in Israel'. We think it is **unlikely that they will put these questions** to you but have suggested some responses should they choose to do so.

An example response from a Conservative MP to a request to meet to discuss the anti-boycott bill and a copy of the email sent to MPs by 'We Believe in Israel' have been included at the end of this document for your information.

After your meeting, please come and tell us how you got on and what your MP said so we can pass that advice on to others. Make sure to also complete the online feedback form.

Summary

The government's planned anti-boycott bill threatens to erode local democracy, restrict freedom of expression, and undermine campaigns for social and climate justice. A broad coalition of over 60 civil society organisations made up of trade unions, charities, NGOs, faith, climate justice, human rights, and solidarity organisations are calling on MPs to reject this dangerous bill in parliament. Boycott and divestment have long been used to campaign peacefully for progressive change in this country and around the world. They are important tools for accountability and core elements of freedom of expression, which should be protected in a democratic society.

1) Key points to emphasise:

- **Boycotts and divestment are longstanding campaigning tactics and a normal feature of democratic societies**

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns are part of the **fabric of democracy**.

As a set of tactics, they provide a **peaceful way for people to push for justice**.

BDS campaigns have been **used by social movements throughout history** and across the world to pressure regimes, institutions, or companies to change abusive, discriminatory, or illegal practices. In this way, members of the public have helped to **end the trans-Atlantic slave trade**, obtain **civil rights**, and champion freedom and equality. The anti-boycott bill now threatens to erode that **centuries-long tradition of democratic participation**.

Prominent BDS campaigns have included the Bristol bus boycott in 1963, to protest against a company's refusal to employ Black or Asian bus crews, the campaign by women in Britain to reject sugar produced on slave plantations during the nineteenth century, and divestment from fossil fuel companies.

The best-known boycott was the **campaign to end apartheid in South Africa**.

Similar restrictions were introduced in an unsuccessful attempt to force public bodies and British universities to do business with South African apartheid as well as other brutal and criminal regimes. Despite that, **millions of people in this country, including many local authorities, took part in that movement** and their contribution to the creation of a democratic South Africa was subsequently recognised by anti-apartheid leaders including **Nelson Mandela**.

- **Civil society opposes plans for an anti-boycott bill**

In response to the government's threats to impose an anti-boycott bill, **over 60 civil society organisations** have signed a statement calling on the government to immediately halt this bill, on opposition parties to oppose it and on civil society to mobilise in support of the right to boycott.

Their statement reads: "As a group of civil society organisations made up of **trade unions, charities, NGOs, faith, climate justice, human rights, cultural, campaigning, and solidarity organisations**, we advocate for the right of public bodies to decide not to purchase or procure from, or invest in **companies involved in human rights abuse, abuse of workers' rights, destruction of our planet, or any other harmful or illegal acts**. We therefore oppose the government's proposed law to stop public bodies from taking such actions."

This diverse group of organisations signing the statement, along with a range of others, are motivated to publicly oppose the plans for a variety of reasons. **Many of the organisations opposing the bill do not use boycott and divestment tactics themselves** but agree that plans for an anti-boycott bill will **stifle a wide range of campaigns and present a threat to freedom of expression**, and the ability of public bodies and democratic institutions to spend, invest and trade ethically in line with international law and human rights.

Especially if you are speaking to a **Labour MP**, it is important to stress that this bill could stifle a wide of campaigns. Official statements on the bill imply that it is primarily aimed at campaigns against Israel's violations of Palestinian rights, but **other movements who use boycott or divestment tactics will also be impacted**. Such legislation could curtail **campaigns against deforestation, environmental pollution, and the exploitation of children and workers**, in countries where these practices are tolerated or endorsed by authorities.

- **The anti-boycott bill with threaten freedom of expression and erode local democracy**

BDS tactics are a part of citizens' rights to protest and take **peaceful action** for a cause, hallmarks of freedom of expression. Even those who do not participate in such campaigns, including many signatories of the civil society statement, affirm the right of others to make that choice.

The anti-boycott bill will **take power away from local representatives and prevent them from responding to the wishes of their electorate**. Its application to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the concentration of substantial powers in Westminster, could undermine devolution and disempower elected mayors. **Previous attempts to silence local authorities** – including the notorious '**Section 28**' which banned the 'promotion of homosexuality' – prove that **central government does not always know better** than communities and their elected representatives.

Contrary to the **government's own stated commitment to free speech on campus**, preventing universities from making ethical investments, or just openly discussing their potential merits, will seriously curtail academic debate.

Watching how **similar bills** have rolled out **in the USA** has given campaigners for justice a clear sense of alarm around how legislative wording can be stretched to create restrictions on a broad range of campaigns. Civil liberties' groups in the USA have noted that the **anti-boycott laws are now being replicated to restrict those campaigning for environmental protection, gun control, and access to abortion**. The anti-boycott bill **could be the thin end of the wedge** and open the way to further erosion of democratic rights.

2) Likely government lines:

- **Boycotts are racist/antisemitic//Boycotts are divisive/damage community cohesion and integration/set different parts of the community against each other**

These **statements are false** and intended to create fear and division. Misrepresenting the movement for Palestinian rights **contributes nothing to the goal of fighting antisemitism**.

It is ludicrous to suggest that antisemitism is driven by divestment from companies involved in Israel's breaches of international law. **Such rhetoric creates a false equivalence between Jewish people and the policies of the state of Israel**, and silences advocates for human rights and justice.

In fact, **many Jewish groups and individuals oppose the anti-boycott bill**. This opposition transcends the diverse attitudes to Israel and Palestinian rights that exist within the Jewish community in Britain. Some, including Jews for Justice for Palestinians, *Na'ama*: UK Jews Against the Occupation, and Jewish Solidarity Action, are actively committed to campaigning for Palestinian rights.

Others are implacably against BDS but believe that this law would stifle democracy and undermine debate. At its recent conference, **the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) voted overwhelmingly to oppose the government's plans** describing them as a 'curtailment' of 'the democratic right to non-violently protest' and 'a setback to Israeli-Palestinian peace.'

It is normal in a democratic society that issues at every level generate strong views and decisions will not always please everyone. The appropriate way to deal with this is through dialogue and debate not through bans and proscriptions. Denying members of the public their right to be heard, and the right to make their case for policies that they wish to see, undermines democracy and is a greater threat to community cohesion.

- **This bill won't ban boycotts it only prevents campaigns that single out Israel//It will still be possible to divest from fossil fuels/the arms trade if it is applied consistently**

Government messaging around the bill suggests the government will argue that, in principle, the right to engage in boycott is protected, while only attempts to 'single out' particular states are prevented.

In practice, it could make it **difficult, if not impossible, to exercise that right in many real-world situations** or to effect real change.

Boycotts work when they are targeted and specific. An equivalent might be to claim that workers still had the right to strike while introducing a law prohibiting any strikes that target individual workplaces or employers.

The Bristol bus boycott did not seek to end racism or racial discrimination in some general or abstract sense, even though both were widespread. It worked because it focused on, or 'singled out', the specific racist policies of a particular bus company.

- **These types of campaigns overwhelmingly target Israel**

This is simply **not the case**.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns have long been part of the fabric of democracy.

Repeat arguments from **point 1) above**.

- **Foreign policy is rightly the reserve of national government**

This sets a very low bar for those committed to human rights.

In 2021, for example, **the government voted down an amendment to the Trade Bill that would have restricted business dealings with countries where genocide is taking place.**

There are good reasons why some local communities might be particularly concerned about certain international issues owing to their history or economy. Coastal communities might be especially concerned by climate change and its effects on sea levels.

The experiences of Section 28 and the boycott of Apartheid South Africa show that central government does not always get it right.

The public are right not to rely on ministers to uphold ethical standards.

- **Councils should prioritise securing long-term returns from their investment rather than dividing communities and making political statements**

The public in Britain cares deeply about human rights and the environment.

This bill threatens **the rights of voters, council tax-payers, and members of public sector pension schemes to have a say** in how **their money** is spent or invested on their behalf and to hold those responsible accountable for their decisions.

Similarly, local authorities have a responsibility to take account of voters' views when making decisions, to do so openly and transparently, and to make themselves accountable for those choices. This bill will undermine their ability to do so.

This is especially true of public sector pension fund managers. The **deferred wages** of pension scheme holders are **not 'public money'**, it is money paid to individual workers who have served the public sector, often over the course of decades. It cannot be right that the government can force pension scheme members to invest in companies whose behaviour they know is illegal or immoral.

The bill would likely place the onus on public bodies to prove that they had not taken decisions based on moral or political considerations. This cumbersome responsibility could leave them hesitant to make choices that would protect long-term returns in some circumstances – for example, if investment in a country was deemed to be at risk due to political instability – and eat into staff time and publicly funded resources.

3) Hostile questions for PSC sent to MPs by 'We believe in Israel' group

We don't expect MPs to raise these issues with you, but it is not impossible. The purpose of these questions is to distract from our focus. PSC has sent an email to MPs which addresses the points We Believe in Israel has made. If your MP raises the We Believe in Israel email you should direct them to the PSC response, and steer the conversation back to the anti-boycott bill.

- **Why doesn't [PSC] support a two state solution to the Middle East conflict, when for decades it has been recognised that two states for two peoples, Israel and Palestine, is the just solution to the conflict?**

PSC does not take a position either in support or against a one state or two state solution, but insists that any solution must be based on the protection of human rights and upholding international law. It is important to note that Israel's ongoing settlement expansion and annexation of Palestinian land has eroded any possibility of a 'two-state solution' making it unviable anyway.

- **Why won't [PSC] adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism? How does it recognise and tackle antisemitism in its ranks without accepting the definition adopted by a host of governments and the major UK political parties?**

The IHRA definition is deeply controversial due to its conflation of antisemitism with legitimate advocacy for Palestinian rights and critique of violation of those rights by successive Israeli governments. The definition has been criticised on that basis, and the threat it poses to freedom of expression, by eminent lawyers including Geoffrey Robertson KC, Hugh Tomlinson KC and Sir Stephen Sedley, by over 300 scholars of antisemitism and the Holocaust, and even by its own author, Kenneth Stern.

- **What is [PSC] doing to tackle incidents such as the recent one when Brixton PSC called on its supporters to root out "Zionist" work colleagues and have them fired?**

Brixton PSC shared a post on its Instagram page from another organisation about how to address Zionism. The post did not reflect the values of PSC; the branch was contacted and immediately removed the post.

Appendix 1: an example response from a Conservative MP to a request to meet to discuss the anti-boycott bill

Dear xxxyyy,

Thank you for contacting me about boycotts by public institutions.

There are strong views on this issue, and I appreciate that my position will not please everyone. The UK is a close friend of Israel and we enjoy an excellent bilateral relationship, built on decades of cooperation between our two countries across a range of fields.

The UK's position on settlements is clear. They are illegal under international law, present an obstacle to peace, and threaten the physical viability of a two-state solution. The UK regularly raises its concerns on this issue with the Israeli authorities and urges them to reverse their policy of settlement expansion. However, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is deeply complex: settlements are not the only obstacle to peace. The people of Israel deserve to live free from the scourge of terrorism and antisemitic incitement, which gravely undermine the prospects for a two-state solution.

While the UK should not hesitate to express disagreement with Israel wherever necessary, I know Ministers believe that imposing sanctions on Israel or supporting anti-Israeli boycotts would not support efforts to progress the peace process and achieve a negotiated solution. I agree. Imposing local level boycotts can damage integration and community cohesion within the United Kingdom, hinder Britain's export trade, and harm foreign relations to the detriment of Britain's economic and international security.

I understand that the Government intends to bring forward a Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions Bill which would ban universities and local councils from organising boycotts, sanctions and

disinvestment against other countries. [Optional: While I do appreciate your concerns, I should stress that] This would stop public bodies pursuing their own foreign policy agenda with public money. I understand that the proposed legislation would ban public bodies that are already subject to public procurement rules from conducting their own boycott campaigns against foreign countries or territories.

Foreign policy is rightly the reserve of national government. I believe that public institutions should prioritise securing long-term returns from their investment rather than dividing communities and making political statements. 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.

Unfortunately, due to a prior commitment, I am unable to attend the briefing event on 22 March. However, I would like to assure you that I will follow any developments surrounding the proposed Bill closely. I look forward to scrutinising the legislation as it progresses through Parliament.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 2: email to MPs from the 'We believe in Israel' group

I am writing as Director of We Believe in Israel to all Members of Parliament because the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) is holding a "Lobby Day" in Parliament, this Wednesday, 22nd March 2022.

PSC activists will be asking to meet their MPs to ask you to oppose the Government's proposed legislation to ban councils and other public bodies from engaging in boycotts and divestment that contradict UK national foreign policy.

Having campaigned for this legislation for many years, with thousands of our supporters having previously written to their MPs to call for it, we wanted to remind you of the main arguments for the new law:

- The new law is backed by the major UK Jewish community organisations, the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council.
- We oppose anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) more widely, because it deepens the divisions in the Middle East conflict rather than encouraging dialogue and coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians. BDS demonises and delegitimises Israel by reusing a tactic made famous in the superb global campaign to rid South Africa of its racist apartheid regime to imply, completely falsely, that Israel is morally comparable to apartheid.
- We are specifically concerned about councils engaging in BDS because it cuts straight across their duty to promote community cohesion. Taking sides in a divisive foreign policy issue risks importing that conflict into our town halls and potentially onto our streets, to the detriment of good relationships between communities in the UK.
- Local Jewish communities, most of the members of which will feel deep connections to Israel, will view their council boycotting or divesting from companies associated with Israel as an attack on their values as a community. It puts people who care about Israel in an invidious position if the council they rely on for education, social services, parks and waste management is taking a very public stance against a country they love.

- We shouldn't forget how ugly and irrational local government BDS has looked in the recent past. Protesters have stood on town hall steps accusing the contractor Veolia of being "complicit in war crimes" and tried to block it from winning contracts to collect bins, simply because it used to be a minority partner in building the tram network in Jerusalem. West Dunbartonshire Council interpreted its BDS policy as meaning it had to remove books by Israeli authors from its libraries, and a Clackmannanshire councillor refused to meet a constituent at his advice surgery who was a dual British and Israeli national because she was a "citizen of a settler colonialist state" and so had to be boycotted.
- It does not prevent individuals from engaging in whatever form of personal boycott of goods from particular countries they want to.

I would also encourage you to ask some questions about the PSC to any of its activists who contact you:

- Why doesn't it support a two state solution to the Middle East conflict, when for decades it has been recognised that two states for two peoples, Israel and Palestine, is the just solution to the conflict?
- Why won't it adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism? How does it recognise and tackle antisemitism in its ranks without accepting the definition adopted by a host of governments and the major UK political parties?
- What is it doing to tackle incidents such as the recent one when Brixton PSC called on its supporters to root out "Zionist" work colleagues and have them fired?
(<https://www.thejc.com/news/news/group-calls-on-britons-to-root-out-'zionists'-and-have-them-sacked-4WAm4ueggktNXMjiAKglo7>)

Please do contact me if you have any questions.

If you or your staff would like to join We Believe in Israel's network and receive our updates, please sign up here: https://www.webelieveinIsrael.org.uk/join_the_movement

Yours faithfully,

Luke Akehurst

Director, We Believe in Israel