



Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill

Quaker briefing for Peers at Committee Stage, April 2024

Contents

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill	1
Introduction	1
Amendments	1
49A – Review of effect on interfaith relations	1
Removal of Clause 4 – Prohibition on Statements	2
Amendment 20 – Removal of exception for Israel and Occupied Territories	2
Amendments 32A and 32B – Environmental Exceptions	3
Conclusion	3

Introduction

[Quakers in Britain](#) are a faith community committed to peace, equality, truth, and sustainability. We work to tackle the root causes of violence and injustice in the world. We believe this bill will undermine our ability to put our faith into action and bring about positive change.

This briefing sets out our position on [some amendments](#) that have been tabled for the Bill. As stated in briefings at earlier stages, it is still our position that this Bill should be dropped in its entirety. Our views on individual amendments do not in any way imply an endorsement of the Bill itself.

We ask that you raise our concerns during debates and in conversations with ministers and other parliamentarians. If you have any questions about this briefing, please email the Quakers in Britain public affairs team on graced@quaker.org.uk and billyv@quaker.org.uk.

Amendments

Amendment 49A – Review of effect on interfaith relations

Lord Wallace of Saltaire has tabled this amendment on our behalf. It will require the government to undertake a review of the Act's effect on community cohesion within 6 months of the Bill passing, with a particular focus on interfaith relations.

It is deeply troubling that the government's own impact assessment has found no evidence to suggest that boycott campaigns have any significant effect on inter-community tensions. This is despite the government using community cohesion as its

main justification for the legislation. We are concerned that this Bill will exacerbate rather than ease interfaith tensions.

Much of our work at Quakers in Britain involves reaching out to other faith groups in order to find common ground and work together. Recently, we have noticed a distinct “chilling effect” on interfaith relations because of government actions, such as the defunding of the Inter Faith Network, and the new definition of extremism.

We believe that this Bill could add to this chilling effect. A full picture of the effects of this legislation are needed, in the absence of proper consultation with faith groups on the part of government. Therefore, it is imperative that we scrutinise the potential adverse impacts of this legislation on faith communities and take decisive action to mitigate any harm caused.

Removal of Clause 4 – Prohibition on Statements

We support the removal of Clause 4, tabled in the names of Lord Collins of Highbury, Lord Hain, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, and the Lord Bishop of Manchester. Clause 4 of the Bill forbids public authorities from saying whether they would make certain investment and procurement decisions if the legislation did not prohibit them from doing so.

Quakers believe in living authentic and honest lives, which includes being truthful in both words and actions. We are concerned that Quakers who work in, or are elected to, these organisations will be forced to refrain from open and honest communication, including about matters of conscience, which is a vital part of the Quaker faith. This would infringe on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as the right to freedom of expression.

Amendment 20 – Removal of exception for Israel and Occupied Territories

We support Amendment 20, tabled in the names of Lord Warner, Lord Collins of Highbury, Baroness Blower, and Lord Oates.

We believe that no country should be given a special exemption from the provisions of this Bill if it is enacted.

This legislation, by specifically granting permanent immunity to Israel and its occupation of Palestinian territories, serves to legitimise widely documented human rights abuses. Quakers in Britain are the UK and Ireland coordinators for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), which is an international programme bringing people from around the world to serve as human rights monitors in occupied Palestine. Our monitors witness these abuses on a daily basis. You can read their eyewitness accounts at www.eyewitnessblogs.com

It would also be the first time a piece of British law requires the state of Israel and the territories it occupies to be treated as one unit. This is completely at odds with the UK's own foreign policy of working for a "just peace between a stable, democratic Palestinian State and Israel, *based on 1967 borders*" (our italics for clarity).

Amendments 32A and 32B – Environmental Exceptions

These amendments have been tabled by Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb. They would expand the environmental grounds on which a public body is allowed to make certain economic decisions, and extend the definition of environmental misconduct to include damage regardless of whether it is legal or illegal, and to include species, habitats and the natural world.

Many Quakers work to make their lives low-carbon and sustainable, and support their local communities to do the same. In 2013, as a national church we agreed to divest from fossil fuel extraction companies, and later produced a guide for Quaker meetings around the country who want to divest from fossil fuels.

The proposed legislation could hinder our collective efforts to combat climate change and transition to a sustainable future. Overall, the environmental sections of the Bill are poorly worded, and could potentially [permit](#) a wide range of environmentally destructive practices. While the Bill makes an exception for decisions relating to 'environmental misconduct', this is limited to conduct that is illegal in the UK or another country, when much environmental damage takes place legally.

Conclusion

Quakers work for a more peaceful and just world, and we also believe in having the freedom to speak the truth, and freedom of conscience. This Bill will interfere in Quakers' ability to put their faith into action, and act with integrity and honesty. We ask that you support the amendments listed above so that if this Bill is passed, we can at least mitigate some of the damage it would cause.