

Can The Board Remain Relevant? No

Brian Gordon - Thursday 28th 2010f January 2010

When I joined the Board of Deputies in the early 1980s it possessed a captivating buzz, a sense of excitement. Its crowded plenary meetings in Woburn House resembled a Parliament. Greville Janner, then an MP, was a highly charismatic president and issues of the day were hotly debated through a diversity of view points, from left to right. You felt you were making decisions.

When I stood down from the Board last year, 25 years and one hundred or so personal speeches later, certain features had changed considerably since I first stood up to make my maiden speech. One was the average age of deputies, illustrated by the fact that I still seemed to be within the Board's younger age bracket. Secondly, the style of plenary debate had transformed from the old "cut-and-thrust" towards a sleepy consensus approach - mostly rubber-stamping executive decisions. Thirdly, Anglo-Jewry itself looked quite different.

The Board has its uses, let us not deny. Every Jewish community needs activists to engage on its behalf with government and the Board has always performed this role fairly effectively. It is certainly democratic since all deputies are formally elected by the synagogues or organisations they represent. However, it is becoming increasingly unrepresentative of the community as a whole.

A major reason for the Board's declining representative nature is the erosion of central orthodoxy, which is its largest constituency. Although there are still some very vibrant United Synagogue, Federation and provincial congregations, most middle-of-the-road communities are diminishing. People dying are not being replaced by the next generation. People moving away from outlying areas are not being replaced. There is a trend towards assimilation, with many Jews not identifying with their culture at all. Most significant of all, the Charedi (strictly Orthodox) community is not represented on the Board.

The Charedi community is the only expanding section of Anglo-Jewry. Strictly Orthodox synagogues throughout Stamford Hill, Golders Green, and Edgware (not to mention Manchester and Gateshead) are filled to capacity. With Charedim, marriage at a young age is the norm, intermarriage rare, religious observance automatic and families are very large. There is consequently substantial natural increase. If this continues, in a few decades Charedim could constitute the majority of Anglo-Jewry. Any umbrella organisation not representing them is therefore severely deficient.

Charedim, principally under the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations (UOHC), disaffiliated from the Board in 1966. This followed the decision to expand the Board's "ecclesiastical authorities" to include non-Orthodox clergy. It was a foolish decision, since it was obvious the Charedim would reject it out of hand. It was also completely unnecessary since the Board rarely consults with its ecclesiastical authorities anyway.

Even on matters that are essentially of a religious nature such as faith schools, organ donation and double summer time, I cannot recall any formal ecclesiastical consultation. But the technical existence of those authorities in their current form perpetuates a halachic state of affairs which, for the strictly Orthodox, is completely untenable.

Although I represented a United Synagogue, I was often asked by the Board whether I could assist in efforts to restore Charedi representation. I would respond that an absolute pre-requisite would be the re-introduction of the pre-1966 definition of ecclesiastical authorities - namely the Chief Rabbi and the Sephardi Rav - or perhaps the abolition of those authorities altogether. Alas, no Board leader had the courage to tackle this issue head-on, not least because it would have met with fierce resistance from Reformist deputies who are desperate for theological recognition and would be marginalised by a new Charedi influx. So it's not going to happen.

The Board will continue its work for years to come, although its influence will wane as time passes. Its leaders must be realistic in their public

relations. They should avoid referring to the Board as the sole representative body of Anglo-Jewry since this is simply not the case. They should refrain from pronouncing on sensitive religious issues such as conversion and agunos, upon which they are not only unqualified but have absolutely no authority to influence change. They should recognise that bodies such as the UOHC and Agudas Israel have developed their own channels of communication with government which have proven to be as effective as the Board.

With all these key conditions, there is no reason why unofficial links between Charedim and the Board should not continue to operate on key issues where there are threats that are common to us all. The community as a whole will have to get used to the idea there is no longer one individual organisation that can realistically claim to speak for us all.

-Brian Gordon is a former deputy and a Barnet councillor