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Vote to proscribe Palestine Action was not a straightforward decision

THERE have been a few political shenanigans going on in Parliament recently and I want to take some time this week to explain what's been happening.

I've written previously about cynical amendments to bills (draft laws) or motions that have been proposed in Parliament.

I wrote before about the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill where the Conservatives put forward something called a Reasoned Amendment, which would have stopped this important Bill in its tracks, while trying to claim that they were protecting children.

Utter nonsense – their Reasoned Amendment was nothing more than a political trap attempting to create a sort of Hobson's choice where you are damned if you vote for it, and damned if you vote against it.

It was purely political cynicism. I think the country deserves better and so does my party, which is why we refused to take part.

I'm sorry to observe that it isn't just the Conservatives who will stoop to these levels even when it comes to really important issues – Labour have been at it too.

Recently, a motion was put to the House of Commons about proscribing (banning) a protest group called Palestine Action.

In order to proscribe an organisation, there are various legal tests that must be met.

The legal tests for proscription in the UK are outlined in the Terrorism Act 2000. According to this act, the Home Secretary may proscribe an organisation if they believe it is involved in terrorism and it is proportionate to do so. For the purposes of the act, this means that the organisation:

- Commits or participates in acts of terrorism;
- Prepares for terrorism;
- Promotes or encourages terrorism (including the unlawful glorification of terrorism);
- Is otherwise concerned in terrorism;

"Terrorism" in this context is defined as the use or threat of action which:

- Involves serious violence against a person;
- Involves serious damage to prop-



The Lib Dems were not convinced of the decision to proscribe the Palestine Action group
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erty;

■ Endangers a person's life (other than that of the person committing the act);

■ Creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public;

■ Is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system.

Palestine Action has been involved in various protest activities recently, including breaking into RAF Brize Norton and spraying paint onto two military planes.

Subsequently, the Government decided it wanted to proscribe Palestine Action.

I absolutely do not condone these actions, and neither does my party.

However, proscription has very serious consequences, and used improperly, it has profound and worrying negative implications for democracy.

For example, anyone found even just associating themselves with a

proscribed organisation can be imprisoned for up to 14 years.

That's why it's so important that we must all be very sure that the legal tests outlined above are met before we proscribe.

My party and I were not convinced that those tests were met in this case. So, when the Government brought forward an Order to proscribe Palestine Action we would have voted against it.

However, that is not what the Government did. Instead they brought forward a draft Proscription Order which sought to proscribe not just Palestine Action, but also two other terrible groups (with very strange names): Maniacs Murder Cult (MMC) and the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM).

The important thing to note is that this draft Order was unamendable, meaning MPs could only vote for or against it.

If MPs voted for the Order, they would be choosing to proscribe all three groups, and if they voted against it, they would be choosing not to proscribe all three groups, even if they thought some should be proscribed and others not.

The sad truth is, the Labour Government knew that there was resist-

ance to proscribing Palestine Action. They knew that many MPs did not think the legal tests had been met, but they wanted to make it very uncomfortable for MPs to vote against the Order as that would also mean voting not to proscribe MMC and RIM.

That's why they included these latter two groups in the Order, again presenting a Hobson's choice.

The Liberal Democrats did not want to proscribe Palestine Action, but nor did we want to vote against proscription of MMC and RIM, so we abstained on the vote.

It's disappointing that Labour chose to act this way. They didn't have to. It certainly wasn't about grown-up, sensible democracy where proper debate and open-mindedness leads to good decisions.

No, this was about forcing through what they wanted in the face of opposition. I think our country deserves better than this.

So, if you look at the votes that day, you will see that I am not recorded as voting. That isn't because I wasn't there – it's because you can only vote yes or no.

We chose not to vote at all and not to play this disappointing, cynical political game. Please do watch out

for this kind of stuff in the future. I fear it won't be the last we see of this unifying, anti-democratic tactic.

In much more positive news, I was delighted, last Friday morning, to attend the official opening of the new Bow Bridge that connects Bad-dow Road to Wharf Road.

I think the bridge's majestic twin arches are a great addition to Chelmsford.

They provide a brand new landmark in the heart of our city, with the steel design reflecting our proud industrial heritage.

Each arch weighs 110 tons. It took 35 contractors, 171,000 hours of work, and 1,990 cubic metres of concrete (an Olympic-sized swimming pool is about 2,500 cubic metres) to build the bridge, which is part of the infrastructure needed to unlock the old gasworks site for the development of about 1,000 homes.

I know it's been a long time coming and a lot of people worked very hard to make this happen over many years.

Well done to all those involved, but especially to Chelmsford City Council who invested, alongside Homes England, in infrastructure first – something I'd like to see far more of in the future.

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