

Tense end to war of words

THE debate over the potential divisiveness of the proposed eruv continued to dominate the public inquiry as it wound its way to a conclusion on Monday.

In an occasionally tense final session, the spectre of possible breaches of the Race Relations Act was raised by the Barnet Eruv Objectors group, whose witnesses have included Garden Suburb residents Lord Soper and Lord McGregor.

Alistair McGregor, counsel for the objectors' group, warned the inspector that granting approval for the eruv could lead other local councils into breaches of the Race Relations Act.

"Once you grant an accommodation for an ethnic or religious group, you then

by PAUL FRANCIS

create a very real danger that if planning authorities reject similar applications from other ethnic groups, they will breach the Race Relations Act," he said.

The impact the eruv might have on social harmony was a material factor, given that Barnet's planning guidelines stress such harmony should be considered in determining any application.

"There is unquestioned outrage that the interests of one comparatively small interest group should be advanced against the interests of the whole community and the inevitable destruction of social harmony," said Mr McGregor.

But the claim was countered by John Steel, QC for the United Synagogue's eruv committee. He suggested that it was, in fact, objections based on fears the eruv

might attract more Orthodox Jews to the area which were unlawful and amounted to an attempt at "social control".

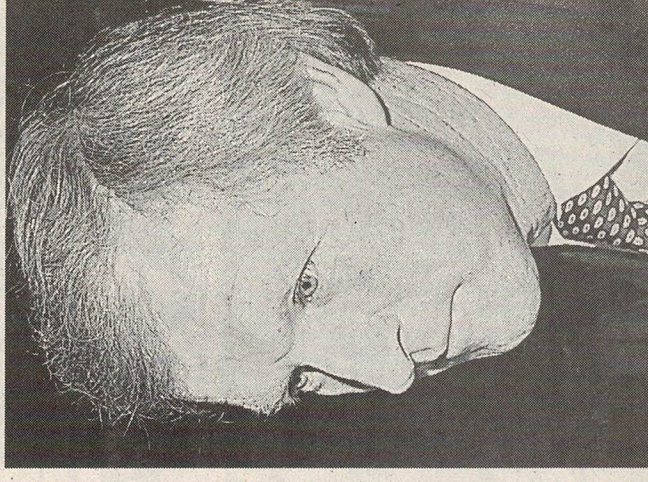
"Objections based on attitudes which discourage social harmony and personal well-being are unlawful, either because they breach the Race Relations Act or because they are contrary to policies aimed at breaking down such barriers," he said during his final submission.

Those who tried to put such a "sinister effect" on the proposal were trying to prejudice the effects of the eruv, contrary to "common decency", he told the inspector.

And in a surprising admission which appeared to endorse that view, Barnet's own counsel described arguments over social divisiveness as "wholly irrelevant". Any decision which took account of such arguments might "fall foul" of the Race Relations Act, said John Taylor.

"The planning system is quite blind. It does not distinguish between the Church of England, Hindus, Muslims or Jews. It would be quite wrong for any decision to be based on such considerations," said John Taylor.

Planning inspector David Bushby is expected to give his verdict in about two months after considering evidence heard during the two-week inquiry.



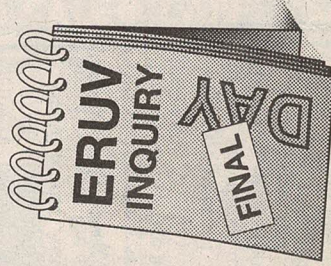
Planning inspector David Bushby, who will give his verdict in about two months

MP lends support

HENDON South MP John Marshall has lent his formal support to the eruv plan.

Mr Marshall, who endorsed the proposal when it was first announced, says in a letter it would have been easy for him to "sit on the fence" but he has been persuaded it would benefit many constituents.

He says fears the eruv would isolate the Orthodox Jewish community are groundless. His letter says while working as a Euro MP in Strasbourg — where there has been an eruv for many years — he was impressed with the way the Jewish community were "fully integrated into the community."



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