

UK Independence Party Hit by New Row Over Holocaust Denial

David Hencke, Westminster correspondent

A further split has occurred in the United Kingdom Independence party after an executive member and five-time candidate endorsed the rightwing historian David Irving's denial of the Holocaust. Alistair McConnachie caused resignations from the party when he wrote to the Scottish press saying the Pope had been duped over the Holocaust and attacked the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

Mark Lester, the party's London candidate for the Euro elections, has resigned after the executive (which includes two MEPs) rescinded a decision to expel Mr McConnachie for five years, saying he had a private right to "freedom of speech".

Documents passed to the Guardian show Mr. McConnachie took a far stronger line in emails to party members. He wrote to one critic, executive member Christopher Skeate, saying: "I don't accept that gas chambers were used to execute Jews for the simple fact there is no direct physical evidence to show that such gas chambers ever existed... there are no photographs or film of execution gas chambers... Alleged eyewitness accounts are revealed as false or highly exaggerated."

Mr McConnachie has publicly said the Pope had been misled about numbers of Jews killed at Auschwitz, and has accused the board of deputies of "seeking to establish a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas" because it complained to the BBC about the handling of Mr Irving's views.

Mr Lester initially complained about the letters. Minutes of a party disciplinary hearing show it expelled Mr McConnachie for five years for bringing the party into disrepute, though it defended his right to free speech.

This month the executive commuted the penalty to a year's suspension from the executive. Mr McConnachie remains listed as Scottish organiser on UKIP's website, and no publicity has been given to the action taken.

Yesterday he defended his "private right to free speech within the law" and stood by every word in his emails. "The executive did rule I had the right to free speech about an historical situation," he said.

Mr Lester yesterday expressed his "anger and disgust". He wrote to the party secretary, Michael Harvey, saying: "I wish I could say I wish you and the party success in the future – I don't."

He had been put in a totally unacceptable position "as the guarantor to the Jewish community and the media that [the party's] leadership would not countenance individuals with anti-semitic or similarly disturbing viewpoints – the executive is happy to have a supporter of David Irving as a member and activist, so long as he is not on the executive for one year."

Mr Harvey said yesterday Mr McConnachie had brought the party into disrepute, and he had yet to apply to be a candidate at the general election.