

Anti-Semitism in the Labour Party

Colin Challen

I feel compelled to respond to John Booth's excellent article on 'anti-Semitism' in the Labour Party. I write as one who has 35 years membership of the party, most of which years were spent as a Labour Councillor, an employed organiser of the party and latterly an MP. In all of this time I encountered not a single instance of anti-Semitism; and given my experience perhaps I should have.

As the Labour Party organiser in Leeds in the 1990s, and the full time agent for the Jewish Prospective Parliamentary Candidate (PPC) for Leeds North East, Fabian Hamilton, I might reasonably have expected to hear something unpleasant. Following the Blairite ascendancy, the selection contest for the parliamentary candidate for Leeds North East in the 1997 general election was bitterly fought. Liz Davies was originally chosen when an all-women shortlist had been used, but this news was greeted with utter dismay by the new elite running the party – an elite from that part of Islington which didn't correspond to Jeremy Corbyn's. (I surmise at this point that Jeremy and Liz at that time were at least fellow travellers if not friends – I'm willing to be corrected on that point.)

After her selection, I got the message that it had to be undone. My job was to undo the selection. (Coincidentally, at this time a court case established that all women shortlists were illegal.) Fabian Hamilton, who had been the candidate in 1992, was back in the frame and was for various reasons the favoured party candidate to win the new selection process. Liz Davies was ruled out of standing again because she failed to declare at her original selection meeting that she had appeared in court on the grounds of non-payment of the poll tax. As the presiding party officer at the selection meeting this was ironic: I'd been in court for the same reason.

So, on a flimsy pretext Liz Davies was defenestrated and in the subsequent period the constituency, one of the most ethnically diverse in the UK and a key seat for Labour's success, struggled in deep factionalism to select a new PPC. With the benefit of 2017 hindsight this would have been a perfect time for proto-Corbynistas to spread some anti-semitic muck about. This was when there was little media attention given to the oddball backbencher from Islington or his acolytes. If his camp was motivated by such instincts it could have passed under the radar. But nothing emerged, despite the anger that the deselection of Davies aroused, and the bitter conflict that followed.

If anti-semitism is not found in tests of this sort – tests of utter bitterness – then where is it to be found?

Labour Friends of Israel

I turn to the issue of the influence of the Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) in the Labour Party. I went as an MP on an LFI-funded, week-long trip to Israel in 2009. If the ambition of LFI was to turn me into a craven fan of the Israeli state, it failed, but not miserably. What I found was the rapidly receding liberalism of what might be described as a democratic dream, foundering on fundamentalist values – values which are justified in their keepers' eyes on the grounds of self-defence and history.

Israel, I believe, likes to think of itself as an outpost of western democracy – no, civilisation – in an as yet untamed tribal, primitive world. (The sort of world which the historian David Starkey is apt to describe as being stuck in the middle ages.) But ever since 2009 the Israeli coalition government has relied on religious fundamentalists to stay in power. Zealots have, I suppose, been a part of the street scene in Jerusalem since biblical times, but to see them strutting around in the 21st century was certainly an eye-opener for me. And they hold a privileged position in Israeli society. Thanks to LFI, I also witnessed (from a distance) the imprisonment of the Gaza people, the 'apartheid wall' and the illegal settlements. We were there when an election campaign was going on. It was surprising to see how many campaigns were being fought in Russian rather than Hebrew, a point I'm sure that was not lost on the remaining Arabs in Israel, who could with justification see the influx of Russians (the main source of recent Jewish immigration) as a particular form of Jewish colonialism.

And then there is the issue of Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial and museum outside Jerusalem. I found this a very moving place. It seemed a shrine. Inside, a circular hall of filing cabinets two or three stories high, containing the names of all the known victims of the holocaust bore testament to the suffering of a people, arranged almost as a mirror image of the efficiency of the Nazi extermination system. That's surely what LFI would want me to see, to understand that the Jewish state could not tolerate the oppression of the Jews and that it alone, at all costs, would be there to defend them, nuclear weapons, wall, illegal settlements, diplomatic belligerence and all.

I had time to pause and reflect on what surrounds Israel. Our friends the Wahhabi? Or perhaps that old friend of the west, Egypt, with its lately installed dictator? Or the crumbling waywardness of countries previously treated as vassal oil reservoirs with little or no legitimate government – and, more importantly, with no evident desire to progress? Compared to them, where stands Israel?

So, I hope for any thinking Labour MP, an LFI trip could be a rare opportunity to question where Israel stands, what threats it faces and what threats it poses. I have to say that on the basis of my visit, Israel did itself no favours. That's probably not the result LFI's financial backers would have desired. But I have no regrets seeing things with my own eyes that many only see through the eyes of others.

It should be clear that that I have sought to understand what's going on in Israel. I have taken an interest and formed the view that Israel fails to live up to its ideal of a

western-style democracy (putting it mildly) and to criticise that country is justifiable. Sadly that can no longer be discussed without the inevitable and specious accusations of anti-semitism, not least from those in Parliamentary Labour Party whose cloth ears shroud debate but still have a nose for a good old fashioned lunge at their hated new leader.

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