

Labour, Corbyn and anti-semitism

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Anyone reading and hearing about Labour's annual conference in Brighton might have thought it riven by yet more acrimonious controversy over anti-semitism. From *The Guardian* to the *Daily Express* and the broadcast journalists in between that was the big story for those critical of the party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.¹

But for those who were there or learned of it through the burgeoning alternative media, there were other impressions to be gained. The Jewish former party leader Ed Miliband appeared in relaxed mode at fringe events.² The keynote conference speaker was Naomi Klein, the Canadian author of Jewish descent who has done much to challenge the orthodoxies of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism.³ On the conference floor Jewish party activist Naomi Wimbourne-Idrissi wowed delegates by her denunciation of Israeli policy on settlements and Gaza. She concluded: 'This party does not have a problem with Jews.'⁴

Away from the formal party conference fringe, the events of the Momentum-led festival The World Transformed were routinely oversubscribed. Momentum is chaired by Jon Lansman, a former kibbutznik brought up in an Orthodox Jewish family.

Later that day Wimbourne-Idrissi helped launch Jewish Voice for Labour

¹ <<http://tinyurl.com/ybe3y666>> or
<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/27/labour-denial-antisemitism-party-dark-place>>
<<http://tinyurl.com/yate85kp>> or
<<http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/858647/labour-party-conference-2017-anti-semitism-jew-brighton>>

² <<http://tinyurl.com/y93cgfow>> or
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-41429049/labour-conference-ed-miliband-on-cost-of-sausage-roll>>
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b098jfrq>>

³ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj1nuw38DqY>>

⁴ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4zpURgqhJw>>

(JVL)⁵ alongside international jurist Sir Stephen Sedley, Oxford emeritus professor Avi Shlaim (a member of the Israel Defence Forces in 1967) and David Rosenberg of the Jewish Socialists' Group.⁶

A clue as to why the Corbyn-led Labour party has been dogged by anti-semitism allegations can be found in comparing the words with which Rosenberg concluded his 2017 JVL address to a packed audience and one from a fundraiser for New Labour 15 years earlier. Here's Rosenberg on Marek Edelman, the longest surviving member of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, who died in 2009:

'This hero was *persona non grata* in Israel for remaining an anti-Zionist, and for saying about that incredible Uprising: "We fought for dignity and freedom. Not for a territory, nor for a national identity". But the very most important thing he said was: "To be a Jew means always being with the oppressed, never with the oppressors."'

In contrast, this is Jon (now Lord) Mendelsohn speaking to Jewsweek.com on 8 September 2002:

'[Tony] Blair has attacked the anti-Israelism that had existed in the Labour Party . . . Labour was cowboys-and-Indians politics, picking underdogs. The milieu has changed. Zionism is pervasive in New Labour. It is automatic that Blair will come to Friends of Israel meetings.'

Mendelsohn was speaking during the build-up to the Iraq war. At the time Corbyn was indulging in what the New Labour fundraiser would probably style 'cowboy-and Indian politics' by helping create the Stop the War Coalition.⁷ Mendelsohn was a close associate of Michael (now Lord) Levy in drawing down funds from Israel supporters, a programme also well described in Robert Peston's *Who Runs Britain?*.⁸ The ITN political editor in his informative chapter 'Democracy for Sale' makes clear that a good deal of that funding was not from Labour supporters, but from those, including previous Conservative backers, who identified with Blair and his support for Israel and the Iraq war.

⁵ <<http://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/>>

⁶ <<http://tinyurl.com/y9dhkx5f>> or <<http://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/jvl/jew-means-always-oppressed-never-oppressors/>>

⁷ On the identification of New Labour with the interests of Israel see, for example, 'Blair and Israel'. Originally in *Lobster* 43, this was reproduced in *Lobster* 73 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster73/blair-israel.pdf>>.

⁸ Robert Peston, *Who Runs Britain? . . . and who's to blame for the economic mess we're in* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008) Chapter 8: Democracy for Sale

LFI

Mendelsohn is a former chairman of Labour Friends of Israel (LFI), membership of which, as he says, attracted many of the New Labour intake in 1997 and which resembled a passport to promotion for many of them. Not all have stayed in party politics since Labour's 2010 defeat. Former Cabinet minister and chairman of LFI James Purnell is now a senior BBC executive and is talked of as a possible future director-general.⁹ LFI supporter Lorna Fitzsimons, formerly Parliamentary Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, became chief executive of the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM) after losing her parliamentary seat in 2005. Most of the LFI supporters still in Parliament or subsequently elected to it were opposed to Corbyn's 2015 election as leader and tried to unseat him the following year. From their ranks – some of them here supporting LFI chair Joan Ryan¹⁰ – have come many of the well-publicised claims of anti-semitic abuse that has attended Corbyn's rise.¹¹

As the Al Jazeera documentary series, *The Lobby*, exposed earlier this year, there is a very close working relationship between the Israel embassy in London and the Friends of Israel groups in Parliament, including the one chaired by Enfield North MP Ryan.¹²

There is also a strong link between the embassy and the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) that has led criticism of Corbyn and was very active on the 'anti-semitism' issue at the Brighton conference.¹³ Two JLM officials, Jeremy Newmark and Mike Katz, were backed by Yvette Cooper, a Corbyn rival for the leadership in 2015, when they unsuccessfully stood as Labour candidates in the general election.¹⁴

But it would be wrong to assume that the issue of Palestine – a career-long campaigning issue for Corbyn – is the only reason why the LFI members and their media supporters have so fiercely opposed the Labour leader and

⁹ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-37517074>>

¹⁰ <<http://www.lfi.org.uk/campaigns/>>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4Iwst_gEdE>
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2utItjFiokU>>

¹¹ <<http://www.lfi.org.uk/in-parliament/>>

¹² <<http://www.aljazeera.com/investigations/thelobby/>>

¹³ <<http://tinyurl.com/yb2v3fd4>> or
<<http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/top-labour-mps-to-address-inaugural-jlm-one-day-conference/>>

¹⁴ <<http://tinyurl.com/yb9omnrr>> or <<http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/yvette-cooper-anti-semitism-fight-would-be-boosted-by-election-of-jlm-leaders/>>

why 'anti-semitism' has been used against him. The LFI as described by Mendelsohn in 2002 was one that enjoyed not only the active support and promotion possibilities of Blair's No 10, but one whose supporters received the largely uncritical support of the mainstream media. (Cooper, *The Guardian's* preferred Labour leader in 2015, had a regular column in the supportive *The Daily Mirror* during the 2017 general election.)

For those MPs and peers in the Blair-led New Labour initiative backed by Rupert Murdoch and many of the political reporters and columnists on *The Daily Mirror*, *The Independent*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian*, the arrival of Corbyn as a leadership contender was distinctively uncomfortable – a forced ejection from what had become quite a cozy comfort zone. Not only was Corbyn challenging their New Labour assumptions about neoliberalism, neo-conservatism, the 'war on terror', triangulation, the Third Way of Anthony Giddens and the communitarianism of Amitai Etzioni, he was developing a grass-roots movement that potentially threatened their parliamentary careers. (There are some parallels here with the formation of the Social Democratic Party in 1981.¹⁵)

In addition, the energy and fund-raising capacity of the 600,000-plus members meant Labour was no longer dependent on the deep pockets of the friends and associates of Lords Levy and Mendelsohn. And just as the trade unions with their resources warmed to the new direction of the party, so the clever and relatively inexpensive use of social media by younger Corbyn-supporting activists largely obviated the need for Labour to curry favour with mainstream newspaper owners Rupert Murdoch, Viscount Rothermere, Richard Desmond and the Barclay Brothers – all supporters of the policies and priorities Labour was now clearly rejecting.

Coinciding with the progress of Corbyn was the public's opportunity to challenge membership of the European Union offered by the Conservative Party at the 2015 election. The referendum the following year – Labour in 2015 had ruled out an EU referendum – offered electors in many of the safe seats into which the New Labour machine had parachuted its favoured neophytes the chance to express their views. In many parts of these so-called Labour heartlands, they voted to quit the EU.

While a few Labour critics of Corbyn using the anti-semitism meme agreed with his Brexit-voting constituents – John Mann was one¹⁶ – most were committed Remainers.¹⁷ And while some mainstream media outlets

¹⁵ See Tom Easton, 'Who were they travelling with?' In *Lobster* 31.

¹⁶ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRUTpypkVOI>>

¹⁷ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36496203>>

wanted out of the EU, the ones that didn't – *The Daily Mirror*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* – then publicised the Labour Remainers' claim that Corbyn failed to campaign effectively for a Yes vote.

That charge and the anti-semitism allegations formed the core of the effort to unseat him in 2016. These continued after Theresa May's decision to call the 2017 general election though many of them, including LFI chair Ryan, subsequently increased their majorities on the back of Corbyn's popularity.¹⁸

Israel and the EU

David Cronin details how support for Israel and EU membership often coincide: Israel is so closely linked to the Brussels institution on trade and other matters it is virtually a member.¹⁹ He shows how Israel organises support across the countries of the EU with the help of its powerful US backer, AIPAC, the America Israel Public Affairs Committee.²⁰

A personification of this Israel/EU link is Chuka Umunna whose 2015 resignation from the Shadow Cabinet team²¹ over the EU was followed by his fierce denunciation of Corbyn for allegedly failing to act over the rise of anti-semitism in the Labour party.²² A pattern of similar front-bench resignations dogged Corbyn's leadership as did critical Labour MPs such as Tristram Hunt quitting Parliament and causing difficult by-elections.²³

Another thread linking Corbyn's critics inside Labour and their supportive media arises from his criticism of US foreign policy. That is personal as well as political: his second wife and the mother of his children was a Chilean refugee from the 1973 Pinochet coup. Corbyn's campaigning against the Iraq war, the infringement on personal liberties that followed 9/11, the demonization of Muslims and support for the Palestinians is all of a piece. This places him poles apart from the position of many in the Parliamentary Labour Party who identified with New Labour and its role in Iraq, extraordinary rendition, detention without trial and much else in pursuit

¹⁸ <<http://tinyurl.com/yaydjpedor>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/02/back-me-despite-corbyn-as-may-will-win-labour-mp-urges-voters>>

¹⁹ David Cronin, *Europe's alliance with Israel: Aiding the occupation* (London: Pluto, 2010) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zu-soP7L-6M>>

²⁰ <<http://tinyurl.com/y9scg2ln>> or <<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/david-cronin/fired-aipac-hawk-steven-rosen-expands-israel-lobbys-reach-europe>>

²¹ <<http://tinyurl.com/y9xf5ex4>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/13/chuka-umunna-quits-over-jeremy-corbyns-eu-stance>>

²² <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgnANRWjhx4>>

²³ <<http://tinyurl.com/jp7cpql>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/13/tristram-hunt-to-quit-as-mp-to-become-va-director>>

of the US-led and Israel-supporting ‘war on terror’.

Corbyn’s 2017 conference speech challenging much of the basis of New Labour’s economic, political and international strategy,²⁴ while popular with most of the party’s expanding membership, was less well received by those in Parliament, the studios and the newspaper columns still wedded to the priorities and party practices of Blair and Gordon Brown. While it’s true that Corbyn’s position was not strengthened on the anti-semitism issue by some of his supporters, including Ken Livingstone, it’s also important to see this attack on him in a wider context.

He is the first Labour leader to challenge Labour Party orthodoxies for several decades. He is doing so when the neoliberal belief in markets and light-touch regulation and the neoconservative drive to a 21st century marked by ‘wars on terror’ are both running out of steam. The 2007/8 crash has exacted a heavy price on the lives of the majority not only in this country but many others, including the US. The apparently permanent state of conflict at home and abroad is costly in other ways.

From the viewpoint of Israel, reliant as it is on assured Western financial, economic, trade, political and strategic support, the election of Corbyn to party leadership is one more piece of bad news. Surveys in Europe and the US have shown the growing opposition to the policies of Israel. One expression of this is the mounting influence of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.²⁵

Redefining anti-semitism

The response by Israel’s supporters around the world has been to seek to define anti-semitism – for which there is almost universal abhorrence – to include criticism of Israel. This worldwide effort to conflate criticism of Israel with anti-semitism is well described by writer Alison Weir.²⁶ She shows that the originator was Israel’s former Minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs Natan Sharansky. (Older readers or students of Russian history may remember Sharansky and his wife as important figures in the Cold War Russian Jewry movement.²⁷ Weir quotes Sharansky as saying in 2002: ‘The State of Israel has decided to take the gloves off and implement a

²⁴ <<http://tinyurl.com/yar5xzd6>> or <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-41415568/labour-conference-jeremy-corbyn-s-2017-speech-in-full>>

²⁵ <<https://bdsmovement.net/>>

²⁶ <<http://ifamericanaknew.org/history/antisemitism.html>>

²⁷ <<http://tinyurl.com/yd2d73lk>> or <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1978/07/20/avital-scharansky-and-the-politics-of-sorrow/24c7541f-60c2-42ef-bc0c-00c6078358ef/?utm_term=.10d77be93a07>

coordinated counter-offensive against anti-semitism.'

Sir Stephen Sedley, the jurist who spoke in Brighton, wrote in May 2017:

'Endeavours to conflate the two by characterising everything other than anodyne criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic are not new. What is new is the adoption by the UK government (and the Labour Party) of a definition of anti-semitism which endorses the conflation.'

After reviewing the implications of such action, he concluded:

'In recent times a number of institutions, academic, religious and social, have stood up to pressure to abandon events critical of Israel. What are less easy to track are events which failed to take place because of such pressure, or for fear of it; but the IHRA [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance] definition offers encouragement to pro-Israel militants whose targets for abuse and disruption in London have recently included the leading American scholar and critic of Israel Richard Falk, and discouragement to university authorities which do not want to act as censors but worry that the IHRA definition requires them to do so.

'When a replica of Israel's separation wall was erected in the churchyard of St James, Piccadilly in 2013, the *Spectator* denounced it as an "anti-Israeli hate-festival" – a description now capable of coming within the IHRA's "working definition" of anti-semitism. In such ways the official adoption of the definition, while not a source of law, gives respectability and encouragement to forms of intolerance which are themselves contrary to law, and higher education institutions in particular need to be aware of this.'²⁸

In the fevered atmosphere that followed the candidature and election of Corbyn as Labour leader, Sedley's careful dissection and evaluation counted for little: perceived slights and remarks shorn of context became the basis for the media assault, including demands for the suspension and expulsion of party members.²⁹

Significantly for active Labour supporters, *The Observer* and its sister paper, *The Guardian*, was home to many of these attacks. The former had supported the 2003 Iraq invasion and offered a platform to the

²⁸ <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n09/stephen-sedley/defining-anti-semitism>>

²⁹ <<http://tinyurl.com/h67th8v>> or <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-antisemitism-jeremy-corbyn-ruth-smeeth-jewish-mp-accused-of-colluding-with-media-a7111061.html>>

<<http://tinyurl.com/ycvjlqoa>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/03/momentums-vice-chair-removed-antisemitism-row-jackie-walker>>

neoconservatives who promoted it.³⁰ So continuing with the ‘anti-semitism’ theme was no surprise, though a disappointment to those who had applauded *The Observer’s* principled opposition to the Suez invasion in 1956.

The Guardian, while maintaining its support for Blair and Brown, was more critical over Iraq. But it came out strongly against Corbyn when he was nominated for the party leadership and during the 2016 attempt to unseat him. Often its reporters and columnists used ‘anti-semitism’ as the basis of its criticism of the Corbyn-led Labour party.³¹

Quite why two publications long favoured by Labour activists should have taken this line is not clear. It would appear commercially unsound for these papers whose combined paid-for circulation totals little more than half that of Labour’s membership³² to risk alienating a hitherto loyal readership. If the view of Labour under Corbyn and ‘anti-semitism’ taken by their respective managements is not led by financial considerations, what is driving them along this road?

In the two years since Corbyn was elected leader, Labour’s support has grown in terms of members, supporters and voters. The claims of party anti-semitism in that time have been strident, but often serving as little more than proxy attacks upon Corbyn and the direction of Labour under his leadership. Corbyn can be criticised for many things but this is best done directly and with precision. In these brittle political times to employ the devious and crude instrument of ‘anti-semitism’ is a dishonest and dangerous strategy.

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³⁰ <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/11/terrorism.afghanistan>>
<<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/mar/21/foreignpolicy.iraq1>>

³¹ <<http://theguardian.fivefilters.org/?v1>>

³² <<http://tinyurl.com/y8nv95nc>> or <<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/abc-national-press-circulation-figures-mirror-titles-were-the-biggest-fallers-in-august/>>