

Labour, the anti-semitism crisis & the destroying of an MP

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Perhaps this important book may one day be read by those alerted to it by seeing reviews in the mainstream press. But given its subject matter – former Derby North Labour MP Chris Williamson and ‘Labour anti-semitism’ – I’m not holding my breath that many will appear. Both man and subject are now dismissed as old hat by many inside and outside the party to which he devoted his political life. But that doesn’t mean that the events taking place in the years of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership – well described by Lee Garratt – aren’t worth our scrutiny: where the mainstream is silent is where our attention is often most needed.

In the interests of transparency let me make it clear that I know Chris Williamson. That came about as a result of seeking to work voluntarily in a Tory marginal constituency in the 2017 general election. I left messages with Labour organisers in the nearest North London one to my safe Labour one, but it was several days before I received a reply.

When it came it was a surprising one as I was told that I should travel to join members of his constituency party who were not working there but instead in the Enfield North one of sitting Labour MP Joan Ryan. As opinion polls suggested that Ryan would comfortably hold her seat with an increased majority, this seemed to be a strange strategy for general election success. Only later did I learn that Ryan’s maintenance of her role as chair of the Labour Friends of Israel was seen by her supporters as a higher priority than a Labour majority, one reportedly supported by party HQ staff machinations.¹

So I looked for a Tory marginal where Labour seemed more focussed on winning. That took me to Derby North and its candidate, Chris Williamson. We were part of a popular and enthusiastic campaign that recaptured the seat for Labour with a majority of 2,015.

Garratt introduces his short but well-sourced book with events two years later which led to the Conservative party regaining Derby North in 2019 with 4.8 per cent swing and with Williamson coming bottom of the poll as an

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/xt2bxbh6>> or <<https://off-guardian.org/wp-content/medialibrary/200329-Labour-Report-Final.pdf?x29353>>

Independent with 635 votes. The author details the ugly means by which one of Jeremy Corbyn's most ardent supporters was repeatedly smeared in the media, endlessly attacked by his Labour colleagues in Parliament and finally abandoned by the party leadership in their panicked response to the sustained 'Labour anti-semitism' campaign which then brought them down too.

The author outlines the career of the former bricklayer, trade unionist and animal rights activist who became a councillor in the Derby city ward where he was born, rising to become council leader before being elected to Parliament in 2010. Williamson lost it by 41 votes in 2015 when Labour was led by Ed Miliband, but continued to work on behalf of Derby North residents until recapturing it under Corbyn four years later.

By then what Garratt calls 'the manufactured anti-semitism "crisis"' was in full swing with Williamson following Ken Livingstone, Marc Wadsworth and leading Jewish figures, including Moshé Machover and Jackie Walker, as targets. The adoption of the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism and its tendentious examples was energetically promoted by Corbyn's internal and external critics as the acid test of Labour's decency and electability. Those, like Williamson, who did not immediately fall in line behind it became targets of the Israel lobby inside and outside Parliament, with the mainstream media piling on the pressure.

Garratt well describes the failure of the Labour leadership to fight back and the Kafkaesque procedures by which unsubstantiated allegations became 'patterns of behaviour' deserving of party censure. His appendices reproduce Williamson's responses to the tactics of the party bureaucracy and the text illustrates the way the mainstream media misreported his legal battles.

Williamson found few allies in the Parliamentary Labour Party, two being Fabian Hamilton, the Jewish MP for Leeds North-East, and Laura Smith, at that time the MP for Crewe and Nantwich. Others proved to be the summer soldiers and sunshine patriots Tom Paine would have recognised. When the city's long-serving Labour councillor and MP was prevented from standing by Labour in 2019, much of his Derby party support fell away too, supporting his losing party replacement instead.

Garratt offers his readers material on Williamson's critics. These include Labour figures like Dame Margaret Hodge and Ruth Smeeth, much favoured by Sir Keir Starmer, and Luciana Berger who in 2019 stood as a LibDem against Labour in the North London constituency where my voluntary election campaign services had been turned down in 2017.

He concludes with reflections on the sickening spectacle that was the

'Labour anti-semitism crisis' that are well worth our serious consideration.

'It should be acknowledged that, in modern Britain, anti-semitism is a criminal offence. One can, and should, report it to the police. Consequently, one would expect that any "anti-semitic crisis" in the Labour Party – at the level and over the timescale that has been alleged – would have resulted in a significant number of criminal convictions.

At this point in time then, one may ask, how many Labour MPs have been found guilty of committing an anti-semitic crime? The answer is zero. For those frothing at the mouth regarding Ken Livingstone, Chris Williamson or Jeremy Corbyn, this must come as a surprise.

What about at the CLP [Constituency Labour Party] level? Surely constituencies such as Berger's Liverpool Wavertree, seen by *The Guardian* and Berger as festering hotbeds of "anger, denial and prejudice", would have harboured CLP individuals ripe for committing such crimes? The answer is, up to this point, not one Labour constituency member has been found guilty of committing an antisemitic crime.

Indeed, to find evidence of any anti-semitic acts that have resulted in police action, anywhere in the country amongst Labour's half a million members, is difficult. There seems to have been only a handful of members scattered around who have faced criminal charges. And to my knowledge, at this moment in time, not one of them has been found guilty.

This surely is an improbable state of affairs, particularly for an issue that can easily be dealt with in court. Moreover, for such a "crisis" to lack any evidence in relation to its existence, is quite an embarrassment. One looks in vain for the simple acknowledgement of this reality in either party or the media.'

Garratt concludes: 'This has been the biggest non-story in British political history. A fabricated smear campaign comparable to the US McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s.'

There is a wider and deeper context to this "non-story" which I² and others, as well as targeted Jewish members of the Labour party,³ have tried to describe. But by narrowing the focus upon the abusive treatment of Chris Williamson and by adhering to standards higher than those of his dishonest opponents and their mainstream media allies, Garratt has performed a very

² <<https://tinyurl.com/4hyd3zz5>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster74/lob74-labour-corbyn-anti-semitism.pdf>>

³ <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/>>

valuable democratic service. Are there many people left in the Labour party to act on his warning?

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