

The Corbyn years

John Booth

Left Out: The Inside Story of Labour Under Corbyn

Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire

London: The Bodley Head, 2020, £18.99

This Land: The Story of a Movement

Owen Jones

London: Allen Lane, 2020, £20.00

When back in 2015 newly elected Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was first hit by critical abuse, Benjamin Netanyahu had just warned President Barack Obama of the power of the friends of Israel in Washington DC.¹ Hundreds of members of the US Congress afforded Israel's prime minister repeated standing ovations for assertively undermining their president's Iran nuclear deal.²

Anyone with a weather eye to the West could forecast what was to descend on the peace-campaigning MP for Islington North. If the US President could be so vilified a mile from the White House, what chance had a life-long critic of US foreign policy – his children's Chilean-born mother was a refugee from the Kissinger-backed Pinochet coup – who had landed the task of leading a party of diminished and largely demoralised members after two general election defeats?³

This perspective is not one embraced by the authors of these two books on Corbyn's travails. It's disappointing as *Left Out* joint author Gabriel Pogrund enjoyed a Laurence Stern journalism fellowship (now the Stern-

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/nsvwssf>> or <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/full-text-netanyahus-address-to-congress/>>

² <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KMHb57RqI&>>

³ <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/>>
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results>>
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results>>

Bryan fellowship) at *The Washington Post*.⁴ In my experience of working at the *Post* in DC it's hard not to be aware of the powerful influence of Israel's supporters in US politics and journalism.

Owen Jones, the *Guardian* columnist, broadcaster and Labour activist, is not quite so narrowly focused on Westminster as Pogrodin and his fellow Rupert Murdoch journalist Patrick Maguire. Jones had worked in Parliament for John McDonnell, the long-time Corbyn ally who became his Shadow Chancellor in 2015, and he has a better grasp of Labour history. He had grown up during the premierships of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and identified with their critics who had seen the party's loss of members, confidence and popular support from the New Labour high point of 1997.

Jones writes: 'From 2015 to 2017, Corbyn tapped into a huge well of political disappointment in Britain, because no other credible mainstream politician was willing or able to do so.' He maps the virtual tripling in party membership that liberated its finances from years of indebtedness and assorted financial embarrassments⁵ that saw Labour take a 40 per cent vote share in the 2017 general election.⁶ Two years earlier under Ed Miliband's leadership Labour had barely topped 30 per cent and Corbyn's many party foes in Parliament, fearing an even worse outcome, wanted his leadership ended almost before it started.⁷

Both books record Labour's subsequent failure to consolidate the 2017

⁴ The first Stern beneficiary was former *Guardian/Observer* journalist David Leigh, much referred to in the recent Old Bailey extradition case for his Julian Assange role. Subsequent recipients include James Naughtie (*Lobster 33 et seq*), Jonathan Freedland, Cathy Newman, Anushka Ashtana and James Ball.

A list of all recipients can be found at
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laurence_Stern_fellowship>.

⁵ For the parlous state of the New Labour's finances in the late Blair and Brown years see *Inside Out: my story of betrayal and cowardice at the heart of New Labour* by former General Secretary Peter Watt (Biteback Publishing, London 2010). Within months of his 2005 appointment Watts says: 'I couldn't really believe what was happening. Labour, the party of government, was about to go bankrupt, and hardly anyone knew.'

The secret donations by Labour Israel supporter David Abrahams were just one of the difficulties New Labour experienced. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25869867>>

⁶ Labour Party Annual Report 2017:

'Last year we had the great pleasure of reporting that the last of the legacy debt had been repaid. This year, we can take that a step further and report that all property mortgages have also now been repaid – there is now no external debt in the Labour Party.'

<<https://tinyurl.com/y2k57976>> or <https://davelevy.info/wiki/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/9880_17-NEC-Annual-Report-2017-v8-EMAIL-WEB.pdf>

⁷ <<https://westleedsdispatch.com/mp-rachel-reeves-jeremy-corbyn-resign/>>

recovery, and advance reasons why Boris Johnson was able to produce a big Conservative majority two years later with his 'Get Brexit Done' pitch.

Jones interviews many Labour participants and blends the results with his activist understanding, concluding that his former boss, McDonnell, was 'Labour's lost leader'. He provides no index and leaves the hardback reader to input on screen footnotes for which he only offers URL links. The *Left Out* authors produce a fast-paced narrative, strongly spiced with anecdotes and exchanges. Their book has an index but no footnotes.

Jones's effort is more credible in one respect in that he resorts sparingly to unidentified sources; though he does occasionally lapse into putting purported dialogue into direct quotes. Here, for example, is one exchange he says took place on election night 2019:

'An hour before polls closed, as he drove to meet Corbyn, Seumas Milne [Labour's head of strategy and communications] received a phone call from Ian Blackford, the SNP leader in Westminster. Blackford had heard that the voting returns were suggesting a hung Parliament. "I really don't know where you've got that from," responded Milne curtly. Then Blackford began to talk about negotiations to form a government. "If it helps, we'd want to negotiate," said Milne, "but I don't think that's on the cards." It had been clear to Milne for a long time that Labour were not going to win.'

This incident may have happened and these words may well have been Milne's 'curtly' expressed view. But how do we know? Is Blackford a dispassionate source? Does Milne have verbatim recall of words spoken in the disappointment of election defeat?

This practice of constructing dialogue is employed much more extensively by Pogrund and Maguire. As Westminster reporters, they also follow their colleagues' practice of frequently failing to identify sources. This is particularly disappointing from Pogrund who plainly didn't return from his *Washington Post* fellowship having absorbed the strict sourcing strictures of its legendary editor, the late Benjamin Bradlee.⁸

⁸ Bradlee's injunctions on attribution of sources are contained in *The Washington Post Deskbook on Style*, a useful measure of reporting reliability. Here they are:

'Before any information is accepted without full attribution, reporters must make every reasonable effort to get it on the record. If that is not possible, reporters should consider seeking the information elsewhere. If that in turn is not possible, reporters should request an on-the-record reason for concealing the source's identity and should include the reason in the story.'

In any case, some kind of identification is almost always possible – by department or by position, for example – and should be reported. No pseudonyms are to be used.

This footnote continues at the bottom of the next page.

Discounting much of the hearsay material with which *Left Out* fills out its gossipy pages, its authors and Jones tell similar stories of a Labour leader increasingly buffeted by pressures and events demanding of him almost superhuman qualities of focus, decision-making and energy. Both books offer defences of Corbyn in the face of attacks from inside and outside his party. They also describe his failure not only to overcome them but, they say, his unwillingness to join the battle at crucial times.

The suggestion is that the veteran Islington North MP, with appealing qualities of laid-back calm, transparent decency and comradely tolerance, also lacked discipline, determination and decisiveness. His long backbench years conscientiously supporting causes at home and abroad had not equipped him with the skills to manage the party and to bring onside most Labour MPs. On top of which he was expected to counter the conservative forces of the state and the media – and deal with the damaging impact of his increasingly critical deputy, Tom Watson.⁹

Both books end with 2019 Labour leadership office scenes reminiscent of Hitler's bunker in 1945 Berlin: fearsome disputes between some of Corbyn's leading allies and their staffs; resignations of advisers; others staying in post but sniffing out post-Corbyn futures; some ultra-loyalists remorselessly pursuing enemies and one senior figure leaking damaging material to a fiercely anti-Corbyn newspaper.

For many Labour supporters now enduring Covid lockdown under Boris Johnson, these books will make grim reading, despite the authors offering what defeated football managers often call 'important positives'. These include the inheritance by his successor, Sir Keir Starmer, of a revived party membership; the strengthening of progressive voices on the Labour benches by the election in 2017 and 2019 of talented young MPs; and the ending of the Conservative austerity agenda, if only to finance the immediate consequences of Covid lockdown.

Those seeking a stronger antidote in these dark times can turn to

Footnote 8 continued:

However, The Washington Post will not knowingly disclose the identities of US intelligence agents, except under highly unusual circumstances which must be weighed by the senior editors.'

When I returned from the United States to work at *The Guardian*, I quickly discovered how far below Bradlee's high bar for accuracy, reliability and transparency much British political journalism fell. It wasn't just a question of British standards not matching those of US openness: Westminster lobby journalism seemed exempt from the requirements adhered to by the rest of the British press, where attribution was standard routine.

⁹ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-47348174>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/y66r4yzt>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7355515/Tom-Watson-piles-pressure-Jeremy-Corbyn-change-Brexit-stance.html>>

Andrew Fisher, a former colleague of Jones in McDonnell's office, who became a senior Corbyn adviser credited with writing much of the party's 2017 manifesto. His 2020 *Open Democracy* article, 'I was at the heart of Corbynism. Here's why we lost', looks less at the personalities who feature strongly in *Left Out* and *This Land* and more at what he says were the structural issues with which Corbyn had to contend.¹⁰

Fisher offers a brief analysis for those who do not wish to be 'subsumed in a vortex of personal recrimination. Not only does such negativity and division delight the Right, it misdiagnoses the issue and actively prevents learning by expending our energy on peripheral trivia.'

He lists Brexit, the damaging activities of much of the party's senior organisational staff ¹¹ and many of its MPs and peers,¹² plus the baleful legacy of New Labour as key elements leading to the 2019 defeat. What he doesn't mention is the issue that dogged Corbyn for the whole of his leadership – the 'Labour anti-semitism crisis' – to which I shall return.

Left Out and *This Land* tell a similar Brexit story. The Labour membership that had swept Corbyn to leadership in 2015 and kept him there in 2016 after the attempted Shadow Cabinet coup, seemed unaware or careless of electoral reality; namely, that their pressure to force a second referendum was so resented in parts of the 'Labour heartlands' that general election defeat in 2019 was inevitable.

While Corbyn was inexpertly trying to hold together two irreconcilables – pro-EU Labour members with their 'Love Corbyn Hate Brexit' T-shirts and traditional Labour voters who had voted 'leave' in 2016 – many Shadow Cabinet colleagues, including would-be leader Starmer, rated 2019 election success second to their own futures. As a result, Corbyn became victim to Labour divisions over Europe much as John Major had suffered from Conservative divisions during his 1990s premiership: Major's opponent Blair reaped the benefit in 1997 as did Tory rival Johnson in 2019.

Anti-semitism

One issue uniquely to damage Labour and Corbyn personally was that of anti-semitism, the authors of *Left Out* entitling their treatment of it 'For the Many, Not the Jew'. Jones reminds his readers that Corbyn's Jewish

¹⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/y3paqpt2>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/i-was-heart-corbynism-heres-why-we-lost/>>

¹¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/y3qmv7f>> or <<https://off-guardian.org/wp-content/medialibrary/200329-Labour-Report-Final.pdf?x29353>>

¹² <<https://tinyurl.com/y2rd26oe>> or <<https://labourlist.org/2019/07/this-is-your-legacy-mr-corbyn-67-labour-peers-advert-on-antisemitism/>>

predecessor, Ed Miliband, had suffered criticism from the supporters of Israel that had never been directed at Blair and Brown.¹³ But this was as nothing, say both books, compared to the personal abuse and political attacks that descended on Miliband's gentile successor.

Veteran historian of Jewish life, Geoffrey Alderman, takes a dim view of this part of *Left Out* in his *Times of Israel* review.¹⁴ Here is Alderman on the fierce attack made on Corbyn's leadership by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis¹⁵ during the 2019 general election campaign:

'I am neither a member nor a supporter of any political party. But I can say that, as a British Jew, I was certainly never gripped by "anxiety" of the sort Mirvis recklessly referred to. Nor were any of the fellow Jews in whose circles I am privileged to move. But what I and these fellow Jews did deplore was the unrelenting panic-mongering undertaken by sections of the Anglo-Jewish press, egged on by the Board of Deputies and other communal bodies.'

In neither book is there any biographical detail about Corbyn's Labour well-publicised 'anti-semitism' critics. We are not told, for example, that Luciana Berger prefaced her parliamentary career with three years as director of Labour Friends of Israel.¹⁶ Allegations by another former Labour MP, Ruth Smeeth, led to the expulsion from the party of Marc Wadsworth, a long-standing anti-racism and justice campaigner who was a friend of Nelson Mandela. Smeeth had previously worked for BICOM, the well-funded pro-Israel campaign organisation.¹⁷ Their repeated interventions, plus those of Corbyn critic Dame Margaret Hodge – an animosity in Islington politics long predating her frequent 'anti-semitic Corbyn' attacks – helped sabotage

¹³ <<https://tinyurl.com/y56szvvg>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/criticism-ed-miliband-coded-form-anti-semitism-9885745.html>>

¹⁴ <<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/what-left-out-has-left-out/>>

¹⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/y5uw4xhx>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/chief-rabbi-launches-unprecedented-attack-on-mendacious-corbyn-over-jew-hate-1.493585>>

His predecessor, the late Lord Jonathan Sacks, made Enoch Powell references in one of his attacks on Corbyn. <<https://tinyurl.com/yysw9w3f>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-zionist-enoch-powell-antisemitism-rabbi-jonathan-sacks-labour-jewish-leadership-council-a8511391.html>>

¹⁶ <<https://tinyurl.com/y48jofuk>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/lfi-s-luciana-berger-to-see-election-in-liverpool-1.13742>>

¹⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/y4rhoz5p>> or <<https://www.prweek.com/article/505302/smeeth-exits-sodexo-pro-israel-lobby-group>>. For an example of BICOM's output see <<https://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/25415/>>.

Labour's effort to deal with anti-semitism allegations.¹⁸

Nor from these authors do we gain any sense of the party political element in those attacks on Corbyn. For example, we read about the 2018 Westminster 'Enough is Enough' rally jointly organised just before the local elections by the Jewish Leadership Council (JLC) and attended by several Labour MPs as well as veteran Tory Lord Tebbit.¹⁹ But no mention is made of the JLC's long-serving chairman, Sir Mick Davis, who, at the time of the well-publicised event, was chief executive officer and treasurer of the Conservative Party.²⁰ Did the authors not know this?

Were they similarly ignorant of what the Israel-based Reut Institute told the Herzliya conference in 2010 with its report *Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's Delegitimization*?²¹ What the institute outlines as a strategy for providing much stronger government support for Israel supporters around the world is a virtual template for what happened to Labour under Corbyn.

His years as leader were marked by an international political and media effort by supporters of Israel to blur criticism of the policies of that country with allegations of anti-semitism. One example among many was the campaign to introduce the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism,²² an issue that dogged the party during the Corbyn leadership and damagingly absorbed much of its members' confidence and energy through two general elections.

Missing too from both accounts are the direct interventions by the Israeli government and its London representatives in domestic party politics. There is no mention of the 2017 expulsion by the British government of Israeli 'political officer' Shai Masot after he was filmed covertly involving himself and

¹⁸ <<https://tinyurl.com/y37wopys>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/labour-mp-ruth-smeeth-storms-out-of-antisemitism-report-launch-a3285106.html>>

¹⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/y3n4pxhg>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/enough-is-enough-protest-labour-mps-join-hundreds-of-activists-outside-parliament-in-campaign-to-a3799546.html>>

²⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/yxd5pcp8>> or <<https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/former-jlc-chair-sir-mick-davis-made-conservative-party-ceo/>>

²¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/y387jnk8>> or <<https://www.reutgroup.org/Publications/Building-a-Political-Firewall--Against-Israel%27s-Delegitimization->>>

The full report is here: <<https://tinyurl.com/y4rlgppy>> or <https://20a1ea9b-cbf6-4da3-88fd-ab21d8ba06cc.filesusr.com/ugd/1bfc5_d59cc682a61444439b12462b75e1fbb5.pdf>.

²² <<https://tinyurl.com/y2996ozk>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/labour-should-ditch-ihra-working-definition-of-antisemitism-altogether/>>

his embassy in the internal workings of UK political parties.²³ This included discussing 'taking down' Foreign Office minister Sir Alan Duncan and suggesting to Labour Friends of Israel chair Joan Ryan that a large sum of money would be available for the Corbyn-critical organisation.

When *The Mail on Sunday* reported on the four-part Al Jazeera undercover film series, *The Lobby*, which revealed this covert activity, it included a statement by an unnamed Conservative former minister who said:

'British foreign policy is in hock to Israeli influence at the heart of our politics, and those in authority have ignored what is going on.

For years the CFI [Conservative Friends of Israel] and Labour Friends of Israel (LFI), have worked with – even for – the Israeli government and their London embassy to promote Israeli policy and thwart UK Government policy and the actions of Ministers who try to defend Palestinian rights.

Lots of countries try to force their views on others, but what is scandalous in the UK is that instead of resisting it, successive Governments have submitted to it, taken donors' money, and allowed Israeli influence-peddling to shape policy and even determine the fate of Ministers.

Even now, if I were to reveal who I am, I would be subjected to a relentless barrage of abuse and character assassination.'²⁴

If that was the real fear of a senior Conservative, what hope for a radical Labour leader leading the largest political party in Europe – and one no longer dependent on wealthy Israel-supporting donors to pay its bills?

Lobster readers have long known how the New Labour of Blair and Brown floated on large sums raised by Israel supporter Lord Levy and his successor, Lord Mendelsohn.²⁵ The organisational and financial influence of

²³ The Lobby: Al Jazeera four-part investigation <<https://tinyurl.com/y6frdqq7>> or <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceCOhdgRBoc&list=PLzGHKb8i9vTzCgnbENCKuz7fqU12xNBce>>

News report on The Lobby <<https://tinyurl.com/y4ccgb7q>> or <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-diplomat-worked-inside-labour-discredit-crazy-corbyn>>.

Peter Osborne and David Hearst discuss The Lobby <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TROYPU92qw>>.

²⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/y2fjbuh3>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4098082/Astonishing-undercover-video-captures-diplomat-conspiring-rival-MP-s-aide-smear-Deputy-Foreign-Secretary.html>>.

²⁵ <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster73/blair-israel.pdf>> This version of the article is the reprint from *Lobster* 73 in 2017. It was originally published in *Lobster* 43 in 2002

the Israel lobby is barely mentioned in these two accounts of British politics.

There are plenty of sources to draw on, including this one in the autobiography of Jack Straw.²⁶ In *Last Man Standing*, the New Labour Foreign Secretary describes his difficult dealings with Levy when Blair made his chief fundraiser the UK's special Middle East envoy. Straw writes:

'If you wanted to be Tony's Foreign Secretary, Michael was part of the package. On the tent principle I had had the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] find Michael an office in the building which he felt was suitable (no easy task), at the same time as resisting some of his grander requests, such as for his own ministerial-type red box. Even so I was consistently bemused as to what Tony thought Michael added to the peace of the Middle East. He was a good accountant who'd made his money in the music business managing Alvin Stardust, Chris Rea and many others. He was an effective fund-raiser for the Labour Party, especially with the UK's Jewish community. He had a home in Israel, as well as in London. Of Michael's loyalty to Tony I was never in any doubt. But when Michael was given this position the Israelis must have thought they'd won the lottery.'

Lords Levy and Mendelsohn became vocal Corbyn critics along with their friends in the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM)²⁷ and the Labour Friends of Israel (LFI),²⁸ both organisations having close links to the Israeli embassy as *The Lobby* series showed. Some of the Israel-supporting funders they had attracted in support of New Labour continued to fund Corbyn critics, including his deputy, Tom Watson, though you would be hard put to find this detailed in either *Left Out* or *This Land*.²⁹ Only after Sir Keir Starmer was elected leader in 2020 did we discover that his campaign benefitted from £50,000 donated by Sir Trevor Chinn, the pro-Israel supporter of Blair, Brown, Watson and other Corbyn parliamentary critics.³⁰

I don't expect much on the power of the media from Murdoch

²⁶ <<https://tinyurl.com/y2x3zjth>> or <<https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/jack-straw/last-man-standing/9781509824229>>

²⁷ <https://www.jewishlabour.uk/national_executive_committee>

²⁸ <<https://www.lfi.org.uk/lfi-parliamentary-supporters/>>

²⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/y4398hd2>> or <<https://news.sky.com/story/blairite-group-amasses-250-000-corbyn-fighting-fund-10539009>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/yc4vgjjo>>

³⁰ <<http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/English/Donations/C0495835>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/y2b24lgw>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/hard-left-attacks-labour-leader-sir-keir-starmer-after-donation-from-jewish-philanthropist-1.499078>>

journalists³¹ but Owen is disappointingly poor on 'Labour anti-semitism'. When he says 'the crisis led to months of media coverage' he couldn't be more wrong: the evidence points to years of adverse and often abusive coverage provoking and prolonging the 'crisis'. In *Bad News for Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief*, Greg Philo and Mike Berry write:

'A search of eight national newspapers shows that from 15 June 2015 to 31 March 2019, there had been 5497 stories on the subject of Corbyn, anti-semitism and the Labour Party. The issue was also extensively featured on television and in new and social media.'³²

Their conclusion – from focus groups in different parts of the United Kingdom and a national poll conducted by Survation – was that the public perception of a highly exaggerated proportion of allegedly anti-semitic Labour members was due to the 'volume of coverage and the persistence of the theme in reporting'.

Jones's own paper, *The Guardian*, and its sister publication, *The Observer* – both much read by Labour members and supporters – greatly contributed to it.³³ I won't hazard an explanation for Jones's failure to detail *The Guardian's* protracted hostility to Corbyn.³⁴ *The Observer's* critical reporting and commentary is easier to understand on at least one basis: it supported the Iraq war that Corbyn strongly opposed.³⁵

Both books also offer little detail on the contribution of the broadcasting media to the 'crisis'. The BBC was consistently critical of Corbyn. One of the worst examples was the 2019 BBC TV *Panorama* programme 'Is Labour Anti-semitic?'. It opened with an unidentified former employee of the Israeli

³¹ A typical example of what *can* be expected is Giles Coren, 'Try to be a mensch, Keir, and we'll get on fine', in *The Times* 11 April 2020.

In warmly welcoming his neighbour Starmer as Labour's new leader – 'my wife likes his wife' – Coren describes Corbyn as 'an apologist for race hate at home, murder abroad and political tyranny from Damascus to the Kremlin'.

³² *Bad News for Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief* by Greg Philo, Mike Berry, et al. (London: Pluto Press, 2019). Reviewed in *Lobster* 78 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster78/lob78-bad-news-labour.pdf>>.

³³ <<https://theguardian.fivefilters.org/antisemitism/>>

³⁴ *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel* by Daphna Baram (London: Guardian Books 2004) offers insights into the paper's relationship with Zionism and Israel dating from Chaim Weizmann's close association with *Manchester Guardian* editor C P Scott.

³⁵ <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/jan/19/leaders.politics>>

embassy, Ella Rose, attacking Corbyn.³⁶ ITV's political editor Robert Peston (previously in the same job with BBC) said in his Hugh Cudlipp lecture on 'impartial journalism' why he felt compelled 'as a Jew' to use material critical of Corbyn.³⁷

Without constant media amplification, the sustained five-year personal and political attack on Corbyn from inside and outside the party would not have been possible. It was largely because of journalists and their employers that a persistent and abusive Corbyn critic could claim credit for his defeat.³⁸ But we were unlikely to get a comprehensive account of that from these mainstream media authors.³⁹

Apart from Westminster tales of leadership office tensions, tears and tantrums, not much emerges from them that wasn't plain long before the 2019 election. That defeat precipitated Corbyn's departure and his succession by Starmer, like Blair before him, a North London lawyer.

The party's vulnerability in its so-called 'Red Wall heartland' seats had been obvious for years.⁴⁰ Did European Union enthusiast Blair really expect sceptical Sedgefield constituents in 2019 not to choose to get Brexit done? One-time Labour voters in Scotland had long since shown him and Brown that they had other places to take their vote. Could neither of these former leaders see that their oft-repeated attacks on Corbyn, alongside those of the rest of the Israel-supporting Labour MPs, peers and party staff, could only help ease Johnson into No 10?

The New Labour legacy of disappointed hopes was one any subsequent leader would have to battle hard to shift. Corbyn was ill-equipped for the key part of that task: to quickly grasp the levers of the party bureaucracy. Only by decisively managing Labour's national and regional apparatus could the enthusiasm and financial support of 500,000 members be turned into an

³⁶ <<https://ukjewishfilm.org/people/ella-rose/>>; <<https://tinyurl.com/y5b8w5z9>> or <<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/new-jewish-labour-movement-director-was-israeli-embassy-officer>>; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx6t01PHaLA>>; and <<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7d0xfe>>

³⁷ <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/robert-pestons-2020-hugh-cudlipp-21649121>>

³⁸ <<https://tinyurl.com/v72ct6n>> or <<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/we-slaughtered-jeremy-corbyn-says-israel-lobbyist>>

³⁹ *The Atlantic* and former *New Statesman* journalist Helen Lewis offers useful insights on the failures of her trade in this lecture: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/video/helen-lewis-failures-political-journalism>>.

⁴⁰ A recent train journey took me through the constituencies of Corbyn's three predecessors. Gordon Brown's Fife seat is now held by the SNP. Tony Blair's in County Durham has a Tory MP and Ed Miliband barely hung on to his South Yorkshire constituency in 2019.

election-winning machine. By the time Corbyn had appointed a supportive general secretary it was too late to capitalize on his early popularity. When Jennie Formby took on that role in 2018 Corbyn was bogged down in Brexit parliamentary manoeuvring and anti-semitism allegations. Which sapped not only his energy but that of many of his strongest supporters, including those he failed to support when faced with anti-semitism allegations.

After *Left Out* and *This Land* appeared, the report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into Labour's handling of complaints was published.⁴¹ It had been prompted by Corbyn critics claiming the party was 'institutionally anti-semitic'.⁴² Though the EHRC firmly rejected that verdict, its report was used by Starmer and his new general secretary⁴³ to underline his 'new leadership' commitment to end 'Labour anti-semitism'.⁴⁴ The prompt suspension of Corbyn quickly followed, resulting in great internal party controversy.⁴⁵

Some of that dissension was initially stoked when Starmer's first speech to Labour's (virtual) annual conference in 2020 was introduced by one of Corbyn's fiercest critics, the ex-Labour MP and former lobbyist for Israel Ruth Smeeth.⁴⁶ Starmer, in thanking her, said: 'You exemplify the values I want the Labour Party to stand for'.⁴⁷ Many Labour members with much longer

⁴¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/y5e993lb>> or <<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/investigation-into-antisemitism-in-the-labour-party.pdf>>

Critical articles on EHRC report <<https://tinyurl.com/y6heq92e>> or <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/statement/statements-and-articles-on-the-ehrc-report/>>.

⁴² <<https://tinyurl.com/y5rmqx62>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/the-labour-party-institutional-antisemitism-and-irresponsible-politics>> and <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/antisemitism-of-starmer/>>.

⁴³ <<https://tinyurl.com/y3qacrqg>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/27/keir-starmer-david-evans-labour-general-secretary>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/y2cs6tcv>> or <<https://labourlist.org/2020/05/exclusive-fbu-leader-warns-against-factional-general-secretary-frontrunner/>>

⁴⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/y5h9rh76>> or <<https://www.bod.org.uk/board-of-deputies-president-welcomes-keir-starmer-decision-to-withhold-whip-from-jeremy-corbyn/>>

⁴⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/y2s38ep8>> or <<https://labourgrassroots.com/nec-member-forensically-destroys-keir-starmer/#comment-14760>>

⁴⁶ <<https://tinyurl.com/yy2dx2as>> or <<https://www.indexonensorship.org/2020/06/index-on-censorship-announces-ruth-smeeth-as-new-chief-executive/>>
<<https://www.indexonensorship.org/trustees-patrons/>>
and <<https://tinyurl.com/y3opymjq>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/ruth-smeeth-in-new-role-as-chief-of-index-against-censorship-1.500731>>

⁴⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/y2xq4p3s>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-labour-keynote-speech-plans-a4553261.html>>

commitment to the party than both Starmer and Smeth do not share that view. Some have already left the party and many who remain are doing so in order to challenge its new direction.

These books are right to say that Corbyn was a leader lacking important qualities for the job: many of his closest advisers and supporters attest to that, as the authors duly record. But the authors are ultimately unfair in their coverage of the Corbyn years because they lack one key journalistic requirement my old boss Ben Bradlee insisted was crucial to honest reporting: 'No story is fair if it omits facts of major importance or significance. Fairness includes completeness.'

Jones, for example, says of the Labour leader in his struggle over the IHRA definition: 'It was another example of Corbyn choosing to die on the wrong hill'. In other words, he should have quickly accepted that his many opponents – MPs, peers, pro-Israel groups and most of the media – were going to win and so should have quickly conceded to that political reality.

A more complete version of events would include the fact that many prominent Jewish figures in public life with strong records of fighting discrimination, including senior lawyers and scholars, believed there was much wrong with the IHRA definition and its controversial examples. They saw it as a potential censorship tool and a serious threat to free speech. This was not a case of Corbyn perversely seeking martyrdom, but of him resisting determined and often dishonest opponents seeking to turn criticism of the policies of Israel into the toxic smear called 'anti-semitism'.⁴⁸

Both books describe the abuse that Corbyn's critics say they suffered but fail to detail that to which Corbyn's supporters were subject. These ranged from defamatory reports in Israel-supporting media, to meetings being broken up – with one at Party conference being cancelled because of a bomb threat.⁴⁹

Corbyn, for all his weaknesses and mistakes, was trying to move the country forward in a fairer and more hopeful direction by speaking the truth as he saw it. Over apartheid, Ireland, the Iraq war and many more issues Corbyn had been proved right and it was this commitment to principled truth-telling that led many to want him in No 10. It also guaranteed the orchestrated opposition of the many interests and forces at home and abroad

⁴⁸ See Antony Lerman in note 22.

⁴⁹ <<https://www.thejc.com/audrey-white-an-apology-1.497010>>

<<https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=01740-19>>

<<https://witchhuntfilm.org/>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/y25wo5pr>> or <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/bomb-threat-clears-out-jewish-sponsored-screening-at-labour-confab/>>

who wanted to maintain the status quo.⁵⁰

The 2017 general election was interrupted by the horrific atrocity at the Manchester Arena in which 23 people died and hundreds were injured. When the campaign resumed Corbyn made a remarkable speech in which he condemned terrorism but also sought to persuade the electorate how our foreign policy could be changed to minimize its future incidence.⁵¹

It was a courageous and intelligent effort at a delicate time to move on the British people from the 'war on terror' mindset previous leaders and their media backers had encouraged, a belligerent state of mind challenged in 2003 by Corbyn's friend Robin Cook when he opposed the invasion of Iraq.⁵²

Time will tell whether such hopes for a different, more equal, more tolerant, more enlightened kind of country briefly tendered by Corbyn are nurtured by his successor.

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⁵⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/y2zpwsgg>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/09/mike-pompeo-leaked-recording-corbyn-labour-jewish-leaders>>

⁵¹ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tuQOOzPfxo&list=ULRFJNZHx1IY4&index=237>>

⁵² <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9CqiiI2Irg>>