

## **Friends in high places**

*Friends of Israel:  
The Backlash against Palestine Solidarity*

Hil Aked

London and New York: Verso, £18.99

ISBN-13: 978-1-78663-765-9

### **John Booth**

**M**y only direct experience of the Friends of Israel network was as a Labour party member. It came during the 2017 general election campaign when I tried to volunteer in one of the Tory-held marginal constituencies that had to be won for Jeremy Corbyn to have any chance of becoming Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> His Islington North constituency where I lived had enjoyed a Labour majority of more than 20,000 in the previous election, so I needed to look for a handy and winnable Tory-held seat.

The nearest one was in suburban North London where I left messages at its campaign HQ tendering my help. Two days later a constituency officer called to thank me for my offer, but saying many of his members were actually working in Enfield North. The seat was already held by Labour MP Joan Ryan, but he said their help was needed there as she was in danger of losing her majority.

This didn't seem to me a winning national election strategy, so I took myself off to the Midlands for a few days where on 8 June a Tory marginal was duly won by Labour. Ryan, the chair of Labour Friends of Israel as I later discovered, benefitted from a 9.4 per cent swing to Labour, recording a five-figure majority in what I'd been told was a vulnerable seat.

Only with the publication in 2020 of the leaked Labour Party report<sup>2</sup> and then that of Martin Forde KC two years later<sup>3</sup> were we able to discover the extent of the internal party factionalism and organisational manoeuvring during

---

<sup>1</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/2p894mmz>> or <<https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/yvette-cooper-anti-semitism-fight-would-be-boosted-by-election-of-jlm-leaders/>>

<sup>2</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/5yspm6t2>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/21/revelations-leaked-labour-report-genuine-scandal>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://archive.org/details/the-forde-report/The-Forde-Report/page/n1/mode/2up>>

the 'Labour antisemitism crisis'. It was one which didn't have general election victory in 2017 as the top priority.

In Hil Aked we now have an author willing to examine the networks of UK support for Israel, one of which I had apparently stumbled across during that important general election. The author is careful not to trip over the tropes – a world manipulated by a conspiratorial ring of rich Rothschild-related Jews with prime loyalties to Israel etc – and systematically details the efforts made by that country and its supporters to resist those expressing solidarity with the Palestinians.

Aked takes us through Zionist movement history, including the time when support for newly created Israel stretched across the Labour Party.<sup>4</sup> She does so hoping to show that it is 'possible to write an anti-racist book about the pro-Israel lobby'. (p. 3)

Using the terminology of a "Jewish lobby" to speak about pro-Israel activism is empirically inaccurate, as well as politically irresponsible and harmful. The Israel lobby is very far from incorporating all Jewish people and is, moreover, far from exclusively Jewish. The contemporary power of Christian Zionism deserves special mention in this regard, and indeed, some of the most important supporters of Israel discussed in this book – including Arthur Balfour, Orde Wingate, Terence Prittie, Luke Akehurst, Nigel Goodrich, Sajid David, Michael Gove, Priti Patel and Joan Ryan – are non-Jewish Zionists. (p. 4)

The author goes on to say:

Since Israel defines itself as a "Jewish state" and is the embodiment of a Jewish nationalist movement, many of the people who feature in this book are indeed Jewish, but their activities are never represented as a function of their ethno-religious identity. Instead, what brings them into the purview of this study is their ideological commitment to, and *organised political activity in support of*, Israeli apartheid and some brand of pro-Israel activism. (p. 4) [author's italics]

Aked adds:

' . . . the leadership of several Jewish communal organisations (such as the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council) choose to present Zionist advocacy as an inherent part of their work and state explicitly that "they lobby for Israel" – but their work should not be presumed to represent the will of wider British Jewish communities'. (p.

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul Kelemen, *The British left and Zionism* (2012)  
<<https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719088131>>

4)

Having cleared some of the ground many writers and politicians find taboo, Aked says *Friends of Israel* needed to be written 'in the right way. Anti-Semitism is a very real threat to Jewish communities. The topic of the "Israel lobby" or "Zionist movement" requires sensitive handling and respect for the legitimate concerns around anti-Semitism that addressing it can provoke.' (p. 5)

While seeking to do so, the author sets the context for recent Labour party controversy over the definition of anti-Semitism in the world post 9/11 when

the opportunistic positioning of Israel as the "front line" of the "War on Terror" by many Israeli politicians and significant elements of the Zionist movement has accelerated. This plays into a "clash of civilisations" narrative preoccupied with a confrontation between "the West" and "radical Islam" which greatly appeals to the far right.

Perversely, despite the anti-Semitic affinities of far-right authoritarian leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, India's Narendra Modi and former US president Donald Trump, these men are among those who came to be counted, by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as Israel's closest allies. (p. 6)

In the face of growing popular support worldwide for the Palestinian cause and, in particular, for its grassroots Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign,<sup>5</sup> Aked sees the redefinition of anti-Semitism to include criticism of Israel as a key element of the country's political defence strategy. This 'new anti-Semitism' implies that calling out Israeli state racism is itself a form of racism, thus preventing scrutiny of the country and its policies. It was on this issue, and the many damaging political opportunities the promotion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition opened up, that Labour under Jeremy Corbyn became impaled.

Aked makes no claim of 'control' for the Zionist movement.

On the contrary, it demonstrates that although elements of the movement have access to significant resources and can, in certain areas at specific times, exert influence, pro-Israel actors are very far from all-powerful. . . . The Zionist movement has been profoundly challenged by the grassroots BDS movement and has had to mobilise a backlash *precisely because it lacks control* and because support for Israel is vulnerable to erosion through Palestine solidarity activism. (p. 9)  
[emphasis in the original]

---

<sup>5</sup> Omar Barghouti, *BDS – Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011)

*Friends of Israel*, Aked tells us, is based on years of 'investigative sociological methods' and informed by 'power structure research' to 'map out the interconnections between people and organisations constituting a power structure in any given context to demystify them'. (p. 11) Many will recognise this as basic political analysis of class, power and status.

The author examines 'Israel's intensifying legitimacy crisis' and outlines its government's initiatives to combat international BDS pressure by 'increased reliance on state-private networks'. This takes the reader through 'different arenas of society: Parliament, civil society and the cultural arena; local government and the legal sphere; academia; and the media'. (p. 12)

So we are introduced to the work of the Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) and Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI), highlighting 'these groups' non-transparent and unaccountable modus operandi and the intermittent scandals which occasionally illuminate their activities, as well the close informal working relationships cultivated by the Israeli embassy'. (p. 13)<sup>6</sup>

Aked styles the Zionist movement as a 'social movement from above' and contrasts its 'astroturfing' character with the Palestinian liberation struggle, BDS campaign and wider Palestine solidarity and anti-apartheid movement – one in which the author has long been a sympathetic activist – as a genuine grassroots one 'from below'.

The author emphasises that the original foundation of 'British support for the Zionist project was its usefulness to the British Empire, just as Israel's "special relationship" with North America today rests, to a very significant degree, on its utility to US imperialism'. (p. 23)

Aked writes:

It is vital to recognise that the contemporary situation in Israel/Palestine is one of many enduring legacies of the British Empire and that facing up to Britain's historic and ongoing role in the injustices inflicted upon Palestinians is part of facing up to our own history'. (p. 24)

In addition to the area's strategic importance through its geographical location, part of that history was linked to many generations of Britons through religious practice and belief.<sup>7</sup> The Rev Dr John Brown, father of former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, for example, was a Christian Zionist who played an important role in linking the Church of Scotland through frequent visits to the emerging

---

<sup>6</sup> <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/nov/30/labour.partyfunding>>.

<sup>7</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/28yzftkt>> or <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330130986\\_The\\_Balfour\\_Declaration\\_Scottish\\_Presbyterian\\_Eschatology\\_and\\_British\\_Policy\\_Towards\\_Palestine/fulltext/5c2eac7c299bf12be3ab3613/pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330130986_The_Balfour_Declaration_Scottish_Presbyterian_Eschatology_and_British_Policy_Towards_Palestine/fulltext/5c2eac7c299bf12be3ab3613/pdf)>

state and promoting solidarity action with it.<sup>8</sup> The Holocaust gave the country's founders a broad basis for humanitarian backing which extended to non-religious Gentiles too.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, acknowledged that the support of Zionists around the world was crucial to Israel's future. Aked quotes him as saying in 1952:

The State of Israel . . . . is obliged to operate like every other state, and its capacity outside its borders is restricted. It is the Zionist Organisation, built upon the voluntary association and activity, which is able to achieve what is beyond the power and competence of the State, and that is the advantage of the Zionist Organisation over the State . . . . The State and the Zionist Movement complement each other.

Aked adds:

Ben-Gurion's articulation of the relative advantages of unofficial Zionist actors operating in civil society, and their complementary relationship to the official organs of the Israeli state, remains key to understanding the role of the Zionist movement today. (p. 32)

The author illustrates the continuing importance of this alliance by describing the advice of the Tel Aviv-based Reut Institute on countering global criticism of Israel. 'While the government should "let the local pro-Israel community lead", Reut suggested the state should offer discreet support from behind the scenes.' (p. 42) This unobtrusive effort was exposed in 2017 by Al Jazeera in a series of investigative reports.<sup>9</sup> In one it showed Shai Masot, an employee of the Israeli embassy in London, caught on camera 'plotting to "take down" [Foreign Office minister Alan] Duncan', widely understood to mean discredit and thus silence him. Masot was disgraced, his employment terminated and he was forced to return to Israel.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12020990.rev-dr-john-brown/>>  
<<https://tinyurl.com/bdee4ym5>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/brown-heckled-as-he-tells-israelis-candidly-as-a-friend-to-withdraw-from-settlements-and-start-to-build-peace-6809267.html>>

<sup>9</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLzGHKb8i9vTzCgnbENCKuz7fqU12xNBce>>

<sup>10</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/ynz5fxta>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/82/in-the-thick-of-it-the-private-diaries-of-a-minister-alan-duncan/>>

Duncan says of Conservative Friends of Israel officials Lord Pickles and Lord Polak: 'In any other country the conduct of Eric Pickles and Stuart Polak would in my view be seen as entrenched espionage that should prompt an inquiry into their conduct.' (Alan Duncan, *In The Thick of It* [London: William Collins, 2021] p. 61)

Pickles and Ed Balls are co-chairs of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation.

But Masot was not some 'bad apple' gone rogue. On the contrary, his actions index a fundamentally anti-democratic effort to constrain the prospects for meaningful Palestine solidarity led by the Israel government. (p. 35)

That anti-democratic effort was organised on the advice of Reut and others, as 'a new initiative seeking to institutionalise cooperation on a global scale between the Israeli government and the transnational Zionist movement'. (p. 43)

In 2010, writes Aked,

the Global Coalition for Israel was co-founded by the Israeli government and the World Jewish Congress, an international federation of Jewish community organisations founded in Geneva in 1936, which has long been staunchly Zionist. . . . Reflecting the private sector orientation of much contemporary Zionist activism in the neoliberal era, the Global Coalition for Israel's key architects called it 'a public-private partnership'.

The World Jewish Congress described it as 'a cooperative and collaborative global approach to strengthening the position of Israel'. (p. 43)

## **The JLC**

**T**he Jewish Leadership Council (JLC) is one of the British organisations known to have participated in the Global Coalition. Aked lists Jeremy Newmark – a figure who figured prominently in the 'Labour anti-semitism crisis' during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the party – as its representative.<sup>11</sup>

Aked writes:

Founded in the wake of Zionism's post-2000 crisis, the Jewish Leadership Council was established in 2003 with the support of a number of men, the *Jewish Chronicle* described as "undeniably influential, wealthy . . . . figures who have in the past lacked the patience for the tiresome business of wider consultation and accountability". They included Tony Blair's chief fundraiser, Michael Levy, through whom it was deemed possible to access and lobby Downing Street.

The involvement of several donors to the major British political parties – including private-equity pioneer Ronald Cohen and former mining magnate Mick Davis – helped the Jewish Leadership Council secure high-level, bipartisan political access, such as an annual 'community' meeting with the prime minister – usually involving pro-Israel organisations like

---

<sup>11</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/4va4kt7y>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/police-shelve-investigation-into-ex-jewish-leadership-council-chief-executive-jeremy-newmark-1.481928>>

BICOM [Britain Israel Research and Communication Centre] as well as Jewish groups. (p. 70)

The JLC is a relative newcomer on the block compared to the Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD) founded in 1760. Historically anti-Zionist, the BoD changed direction during the rise of Hitler, seeing Israel's foundation as a safe haven for persecuted European Jews. It today continues to support Israel and took a very critical line against Corbyn and his leadership.

Aked writes:

It was to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain [formed in 1899], over a century ago, that British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour asked Lord Rothschild to communicate the seminal Balfour Declaration, signalling the British government's support for Jewish statehood – a goal which the organisation played a pivotal role in achieving. One of the Zionist Federation's earliest presidents, Manchester-based Chaim Weizmann, went on to become president of the World Zionist Organisation and later of Israel itself.' (p. 62)

*The Guardian's* close association with Zionism and Israel largely developed through Weizmann's friendship with C P Scott. He was the editor of what was then *The Manchester Guardian* at the end of the 19th century when the city's Jewish population included many campaigning Zionists.<sup>12</sup>

*Friends of Israel* details the funding of a large number of other Israel-supporting organisations from the Jewish National Fund UK founded in 1901 (Blair and Brown are two of its patrons) to more recent ones. These include UK Lawyers for Israel and We Believe in Israel which became very active during Corbyn's years as Labour leader. The latter's director since its 2011 foundation, Luke Akehurst, is a member of Labour's National Executive Committee.

The overall picture painted by Aked is of a UK legislature effectively captured by Israel supporters, with many Labour parliamentarians in particular allying with the country's supporters from their student politics days. During the Blair and Brown years membership of Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) seemed to become necessary to further career advancement.

Effective opposition to that underpinning of pro-Israel orthodoxy is curtailed by lawfare procedures in which Mishcon de Reya, which has also acted for the Israeli government, has played an important part. Israel enjoys the support of most of the mainstream media, Rupert Murdoch playing a major role in demonising the country's critics over many years and promoting the celebrity culture of entertainment in which Jews have often played an important part.

---

<sup>12</sup> Daphna Baram, *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel* (Guardian Books, 2004)

Aked, nevertheless, concludes that support for Zionism is dwindling:

Notably, most of the key pro-Israel actors in this book and *not* representative of Jewish communal groups. Instead, they include politicians affiliated with Conservative Friends of Israel and Labour Friends of Israel, Zionist lawfare groups like UK Lawyers for Israel, a small number of wealthy pro-Israel philanthropists (who don't represent Jewish communities), and manufactured astroturf groups with a significant evangelical Christian support base. (p. 205)

The author continues:

The Israeli government has avidly pursued public-private partnerships and has sought to manufacture civil society groups, both to wage lawfare and to create the impression of spontaneous "grassroots" support for Israel which is in large part superficial. (p. 206)

In this Aked sees historic parallels with the government of apartheid South Africa as it sought to undermine the boycott campaigning efforts of its opponents. But the author stops short of what she calls a 'foreign influence narrative'. This 'incorrectly externalises an issue which is, and always has been, about Britain too'. (p. 208)

Aked writes that

. . . the story of the Zionist movement in Britain is part of the history of British racism, and specifically part of the long and ignominious history of British support for Israeli apartheid. This is a history that, despite our tendencies towards colonial amnesia, we can ill afford to forget.

As a social movement from above, the Zionist movement certainly exploits the democratic deficit in Britain, which is particularly acute with regards to foreign policy, often mobilising in top-down ways. But it certainly does not *cause* it. Studying its activities provides a window into Britain's deeply unequal and unjust power relations, but any attempt to blame a nefarious lobby for Britain's acute political crisis would be absurd. Indeed, the problem is far broader, as power in Britain today is exercised in fundamentally undemocratic ways in a range of institutions. (p. 208)

The author sees a lot of the Zionist movement's influence work as actually cooperative.

The British establishment is a *partner* to the Israeli government and the Zionist movement in repressing opposition to Israeli apartheid, just as it repressed the anti-apartheid movement in solidarity with Black South Africans. The British government has this in common with other



oppressive state powers and its actions are an example of a larger global phenomenon in which numerous authoritarian countries seek to repress political dissent by restricting civil society. (p. 209)

Aked concludes with the warning that civil society and social movements are not always benign and can advance the capacity of the state.

Too little work pays attention to civil society bodies which support state power and contribute to the political repression of other, more antagonistic civil society groups. In the case at hand, the duality of civil society is pronounced, since Israel is, in effect, seeking to enlist some civil society bodies in support of state power while at the same time repressing others which challenge its power. (p. 210)

As the basis of the book was produced as academic research there are theoretical references that some readers – including this one – may find largely superfluous to their need to know more about how Israel and its supporters in the UK wield the influence they do. But it is an indexed and well-referenced study of an area of British life that needs much more light thrown upon it. It complements nicely Winstanley's new *Weaponising Anti-Semitism: How the Israel Lobby brought down Jeremy Corbyn*.<sup>13</sup>

In reflecting on the important issues raised by *Friends of Israel*, consider these words written before the Global Coalition for Israel was founded in 2010 and test their relevance for Britain:

Jews hold stunningly powerful positions and clout in the United States. The combination of the American state's power in the areas of legislation, administration, media, law, business, culture and entertainment have made the Jews a defining factor of contemporary America. Because Israel is inseparable from the identity of American Jews, Israel is inseparable from the American experience.

They were not written by some bigoted, anti-semitic conspiracy nut. They are the words of Avraham Burg, a former Speaker of the Knesset and chairman of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organisation.<sup>14</sup> In his *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from its Ashes*, first published in Hebrew in 2007 under the title *Victory Over Hitler*, Burg laments the use to which that powerful influence

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, <<https://tinyurl.com/mr2byrju>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/86/weaponising-anti-semitism-how-the-israel-lobby-brought-down-jeremy-corbyn/>>

<sup>14</sup> <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avraham\\_Burg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avraham_Burg)> and <<https://tinyurl.com/3kkn7kf2>> or <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-former-knesset-speaker-attacked-soldiers-west-bank>>

is put.<sup>15</sup> He writes:

Instead of harnessing modern Jewish fortitude to repair the world and oppose its injustices, we find too many Jews are haunted by past traumas. They cannot change and adapt, in the same way that a ship in the ocean cannot come to a full stop in less than a few miles.

Diaspora Jews, including many of their representatives, choose the side of authority and become partners in the world's injustices and insensitivities. . . . Too many of my American brothers and sisters have become the beating heart of neoconservatism. They are part of the white, right-wing, nationalist and powerful establishment, part of an administration and culture that withdraw [sic] from the global responsibility that defined America's spirit during World War II.

He concludes: 'The Jews' crossing of the "river of power" has major consequences for our national identity and perhaps even for the Western world's identity.'

Burg, the child of a mother from Hebron and a father from Dresden, grew up in the establishment bosom of the early Israel state. He is not someone to be credibly charged with the straw man 'worldwide Jewish conspiracy' accusation with which many of Israel's critics continue to be smeared. His experience tells him, as Aked's 'power structure research' clearly demonstrates in the United Kingdom, that Israel draws a lot of support from those with great influence over other countries.

Where Aked is careful not to trip over 'tropes', Burg has no such hesitation: for him many American Jews have crossed the 'river of power'. And so long as the United Kingdom remains so closely tied to the United States and its foreign policies, including its strong backing for Israel, the same pattern is likely to be replicated here.

That alliance structure was evident before Tony Blair became Labour leader in 1994, but was powerfully reinforced in Britain by the creation of New Labour with the strong financial backing of British supporters of Israel. As Aked writes:

One of Tony Blair's first acts upon becoming an MP was to join Labour Friends of Israel in 1983. A decade later, Blair developed what Toby Greene, former director of research for the British Israel communications and Research Centre (BICOM) and LFI, calls a 'fervent interest' in Israel after visiting the country on an Israeli embassy-organised trip.

In 1994, the year he became Labour leader, Blair met multi-millionaire music industry entrepreneur Michael Levy at a dinner party hosted by

---

<sup>15</sup> See < <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/57/the-jewish-holocaust/>>.

Israeli diplomat Gideon Mair. Levy would become a key influence on Blair's Middle East stance and, more broadly, a key figure in the New Labour project upon which Blair was embarking. (p. 87)

This Israeli embassy-Levy link was not mentioned by Jon Sopel, the Jewish early biographer of Blair<sup>16</sup> who went on to become the BBC's North America editor before joining former BBC Newsnight presenter Emma Maitlis at LBC's show *The News Agents*.

One of the other Jewish journalism figures holding what Burg called 'stunningly powerful positions and clout' is Robert Peston who figured prominently in the TV coverage when Jeremy Corbyn was Labour leader.<sup>17</sup> The former BBC economics editor and for years ITV's political editor, made explicit his reasons for reporting as he did on Labour under Corbyn in his 2020 Hugh Cudlipp lecture on the importance of 'impartial journalism'.<sup>18</sup>

Peston said:

I have always been a proud secular Jew. What matters to Jews like me is that if we had lived in Germany, Austria or Poland during the second world war, we would have been sent to the gas chambers, whether or not we thought of ourselves as Jews. It is a matter of birth. And it matters that all my life I've encountered antisemitism, and also that antisemitism has become much more prevalent in recent years. There is an argument, I suppose, that because antisemitism is a personal issue for me, I should not report on it, that as someone who believes in the importance of impartial journalism I should always stand aside when a story about antisemitism and Labour needs to be covered.

Possibly that is what Seumas Milne, Jeremy Corbyn's director of strategy and communications, believes. When I pointed out to him during the general election that Corbyn had refused to be interviewed by me – even though Johnson, Sturgeon and Swinson had each been interviewed by me twice – he said, and I quote from a text he sent, "your reporting on Labour has not been remotely fair or balanced and included a high degree of slanted editorialising, reaching a low point in your broadcast on the 10 on 26/11". He was referring to a two-way I did on the unprecedented decision of the chief rabbi Ephraim Mirvis to write an editorial in *The Times* newspaper in which he explicitly raised the

---

<sup>16</sup> *Tony Blair: The Moderniser* (London: Michael Joseph, 1995)

<sup>17</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/yjxjefpa>> or <<https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/bbc-and-itv-political-editors-apologise-for-false-hospital-punch-claim-in-tweets/>>

<sup>18</sup> <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/robert-pestons-2020-hugh-cudlipp-21649121>>

question, on behalf of the orthodox part of the Jewish community, to question whether Corbyn was fit for high office, given Corbyn's failure to root out antisemitism from Labour over the previous two and a bit years.

I reviewed that two-way. It was impartial, both in respect of Ofcom's rules and as a matter of common sense. The point I made was how shocking it was that the leader of an important section of the Jewish community should feel obliged to speak out during a general election, and that he was moved to do so by the deep hurt and fear felt by many of his congregation.

This alienation of an important part of a British community could not be ignored, which is why I was surprised – to put it mildly – that Milne cited it when disqualifying me as a suitable interviewer of his boss. Would Milne or any of us have qualms about a woman journalist reporting on gender pay inequality or a gay journalist covering gay marriage in the church? I doubt it. In a way it is extraordinary any of this needs saying. But it may do in this era of identity politics trumping the politics of economic distribution.

I am not so naïve as to believe that impartial journalists like myself are free from bias. Deep in my psyche are prejudices I can't see – even though I am especially privileged to have a partner who has an unusual ability to expose my capacity to confuse myth with fact. I was reminded of how really hideous prejudices can persist in institutions we think of as liberal when I read Cudlipp's history of the *Mirror*, written in 1953: Cudlipp pointed out that the trust deeds of the *Observer* newspaper at that time stipulated that neither a Jew or a Catholic could be its editor.

My point is that if no individual journalist or media institution has a monopoly on truth, the only way to provide citizens with the truths they need to run their lives and make rational decisions about who should lead us is through the intermediation of a rich ecosystem of news organisations that are consciously diverse employers and which are very different each from the other.

We should be grateful to Peston, one of many Jews occupying senior positions in British journalism and other areas of our public life, for making his position so explicit. How many others have, in Burg's phrase, 'crossed the river of power' and with it have helped produce 'major consequences for our national identity and perhaps even for the Western world's identity'? For that would be the consequence of having so many in our democracy, especially our legislators, identifying with the cause of Israel.

Like Aked, I do not place the responsibility solely on that state's

employees or its many non-state advocates and supporters in the UK. There is a long tradition in Britain of our public life being subject to foreign influences whether in the receipt of Moscow Gold<sup>19</sup> or American benevolence of one kind or another.<sup>20</sup> It is a post-war tradition of unhealthy democratic deficit which leaves the feeble institutions of our country vulnerable to those with the capacity – often a function of money – to move it in one direction or the other. That is often with the support of a generation of politicians who became part of the career-enhancing pro-US/Israel networks as students as Aked makes clear.

Rupert Murdoch, a strong supporter of Israel and US foreign policy, has been playing that manipulative role in British politics for more than 40 years. Where Murdoch and other media owners lead, broadcast media often follow in coverage and personnel. Former *Times* editor and Israel supporter James Harding, for example, became director of BBC News and Current Affairs.<sup>21</sup> His *Times* colleague David Aaronovitch has long made programmes for the BBC as has fellow Israel supporter at *The Guardian*, Jonathan Freedland.

It was the BBC's 2019 Panorama programme '*Is Labour Antisemitic?*' which added to Corbyn's problems shortly before the 2019 general election. Aked records that its presenter, John Ware, 'in 2015 accepted an award from the Women's International Zionist Organisation and in 2021 became a trustee of the same body'. (p. 193) Ware was joined by Sir Robbie Gibb, former BBC senior executive and adviser to Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, in a consortium to save the Corbyn-critical *Jewish Chronicle*.<sup>22</sup>

The way Britain's democratic deficit was exploited by the powerful supporters of Israel was shown very visibly during Corbyn's leadership of

---

<sup>19</sup> Discussed at <<https://tinyurl.com/37cpyfpe>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/25/moscow-gold-the-communist-threat-in-post-war-britain/>>.

<sup>20</sup> *Guardian* journalist Richard Norton-Taylor disclosed in 1991 that some 500 prominent Britons were paid by the CIA through the corrupt Bank of Commerce and Credit International, including 90 journalists, many of whom were in 'senior positions'.

See 'The British American Project for the Successor Generation' in *Lobster* 33.

Andy Beckett, 'Friends in High Places', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2004 at

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/06/usa.politics1>>;

'Secretive US embassy-backed group cultivating UK left' in *UK Declassified*, 25 November 2022

at <<https://tinyurl.com/mtrtnfc5>> or <<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/declassified-uk:-secretive-us-embassy-backed-group-cultivati>>.

Paul Wolfowitz, the neocon Pentagon Deputy Secretary at the time of 9/11 events, was previously the chair of the US committee of the British American Project.

<<https://johnpilger.com/articles/how-the-anglo-american-elite-shares-its-values->>

<sup>21</sup> <<https://electronicintifada.net/content/apologists-israel-take-top-posts-bbc/12395>>

<sup>22</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/2xkww7a2>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/23/jewish-chronicle-saved-by-consortium-after-messy-takeover-battle>>

Labour, but it continues more discreetly under his successor, Sir Keir Starmer. Not only does he have an employee of the Israel lobby, Luke Akehurst, on the party's National Executive Committee, he has former Israeli intelligence officer, Assaf Kaplan, on his social media team.<sup>23</sup>

The subsequent expulsion from Labour of Jewish members who do not support Israel has been a regular but largely unpublicised feature of his leadership since taking the role in 2020.<sup>24</sup> When he said of Ruth Smeeth, a former employee of the Israel lobbyist BICOM, soon afterwards, 'You exemplify the values I want the Labour Party to stand for', the message could scarcely be clearer.<sup>25</sup>

There is a sad, if not tragic, irony in the preoccupation of recent British politics with its support for Israel and the use of 'antisemitism' as a means to defend it. Let me illustrate it this way.

Years ago a good and earnest German friend in Munich thought that after enjoying a fun winter evening at the year's end, a good start to our new one would be a visit to Dachau, the first of Hitler's concentration camps. New Year's Day there was indeed a sobering experience, especially when she said that her country would for the foreseeable future be in moral debt to Israel. That is a situation that we see obtains today with that country's severe restrictions on Palestine solidarity supporters.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst, as Aked reminds us, Britons have much in their history to confront, including that related to Palestine and Israel, we do not carry that weight of guilt my German friend saw burdening the political life and direction of her country. It was Britain that during the Second World War resisted Hitler and Fascism, with many of our fellow citizens making the ultimate sacrifice in so doing.

---

<sup>23</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/4hkfa8hs>> or <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210119-uk-labour-leader-starmer-hired-former-israeli-spy-for-social-media-team/>>

<sup>24</sup> The Jewish Voice for Labour website is replete with examples: <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Smeeth was Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent North from 2015 to 2019 and is now a member of the House of Lords as Baroness Anderson. She was a prominent figure in the 'Labour antisemitism crisis'. Among other criticisms, her 2018 claim that she was subjected to 20,000 abusive messages in 12 hours has been challenged. See <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/searching-truth-line-abuse-allegations/>>. She is now chief executive officer of Index on Censorship. See <<https://www.indexoncensorship.org/staff/>>.

<sup>26</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/mtu7vas4>> or <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/germany-clamps-down-on-palestinian-solidarity-uk-will-be-next/>>

That the supporters of Israel organise to resist legitimate political change in this country on the basis of our alleged widespread antisemitism is a travesty. That the offspring of Holocaust survivors and the *Kindertransport* should be drummed out of the Labour Party for 'anti-semitism' is unconscionable. That a party which in 2010 had two Jewish candidates for leader (Ed and David Miliband) could be said to be institutionally anti-semitic is so far-fetched as to be laughable – if the consequences of that smearing allegation were not so serious.

Aked says in the final chapter that this behaviour damages British democracy. But it is even more serious than that. Step back for a moment from viewing the Israel/Palestine conflict in a British context and ask how it might ever be resolved. The time when Palestinians could look to the United States as an honest broker seems long gone. Europe is seen by some as assuming that role, but not so long as its most powerful member, Germany, is hobbled by its guilty past.<sup>27</sup>

Britain, no longer part of the European Union and still carrying considerable responsibility for the creation and sustaining of Israel, could be playing a quite different role to that as the friend of Israel currently portrayed by Aked. That doesn't look likely in the present dilapidated state of British democracy.

But I felt that about Britain when Margaret Thatcher continued to support apartheid South Africa in the face of growing world outrage. Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu is rapidly running out of international credit at the bank of Holocaust sympathy. Will a younger generation of the politically engaged here in the UK find their way to a different expression of friendship with Israel?

*John Booth is a freelance journalist and writer.*

*He tweets at @JohnBooth2017 and blogs at Forthzando.com*

---

<sup>27</sup> Burg addresses the German and generational issues at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuO5-ObYRa8>>.