

# The UK Labour Party's Attempts to Address its Antisemitism

Four years ago, a relatively obscure, left-wing politician shot to prominence when he became leader of one of the UK's two main political parties – the Labour Party. He brought with him an army of support, people who had felt marginalised by the Labour Party of Tony Blair, and particularly the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003, but who had now suddenly found, or re-found, their home in Jeremy Corbyn's left-wing Labour Party. The fringe-left had become the mainstream and 'Corbynism' was born.

With him, Corbyn also brought a long political history of radical, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist politics, crucially his anti-Israel activism forming a core and central party of his political identity.

The activist groups that Corbyn was involved with told us much about who he was – these included, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Stop the War Coalition and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Groups themselves not shy of controversy, especially when it came to their records on antisemitism, extremism and Israel.

These relative obscurities were thrust into the spotlight, along with Corbyn's own personal political history. Now well-documented events, such as Corbyn's decision to label Hamas and Hezbollah as "friends" and his support and backing for the extremist, Islamist preacher, Sheikh Raed Salah, were being publicly scrutinised.

This would prove to be only the beginning in the long-list of allegations against Corbyn, his political past, the words he had used and the people and groups he had supported. And so begun 4 years of controversy, not just surrounding Corbyn's political past, but the resulting influx of antisemitism into the Labour Party. Looking back now, it is worth considering how important this period was in the party's fight against antisemitism. An honest, serious and comprehensive effort to address the issue at this stage could have led to a vastly different outcome. However, the party failed to seize the opportunity and the last few years totally reflect that failure.

It was clear that this political fringe brought with it a new and intense level of scrutiny towards Israel, not seen under previous Labour Party leadership. This meant that many of the new members who joined the party in 2015 and who had a history of anti-Israel activism, had in many cases engaged in problematic and often antisemitic language, usually found through historic social media posts.

But what was also sparked was a vicious cycle of allegation and denial. Each claim made against the party, Jeremy Corbyn or party members were consistently rubbished and dismissed. Suddenly, anti-racist principles were being eroded – claims of antisemitism by Jewish people were not being listened to, but rather they were being portrayed as smears. Smears by Blairites, smears by the mainstream media, smears by the Tory party and smears by Zionists, the Zionist lobby and those that fund it. The responses to allegations of antisemitism, were starting to sound in and of themselves, antisemitic. All the while, the Labour Party insisted that it absolutely condemned antisemitism and was doing all it could to root it out from the party. Empty words.

The party that had historically been the natural home for many British Jews was suddenly the party where antisemitism, and the controversy over it, had become hard to escape and was now considered hostile by the majority of British Jews.

And only 2 weeks from now – a man who just over 85% of the British Jewish community consider to be personally antisemitic *could* become the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. This is the context for which I will briefly explore how the Labour Party have attempted to address its antisemitism problem, and why they ultimately failed.

To begin to understand this, it is worth going back to February 2016 when the then chair of the historic Oxford University Labour Club resigned, citing that a 'large proportion' of club members had "some kind of problem with Jews". This was to become the first real test and case study into how the Labour Party dealt with serious, organisational allegations of antisemitism.

An investigation was launched into the allegations by Labour Students, the official student wing of the Labour Party. The investigation took a week, after which its findings were passed onto the national party. At this stage, instead of publishing or acting on the evidence provided, the Labour party decided to launch another inquiry, this time led by Labour peer, Baroness Jan Royall.

In the meantime, it was revealed in the press, from the original Labour students report, that alleged incidents of antisemitism included the use of the word "Zio" as a racial slur, individuals describing Auschwitz as a "cash-cow" and singing songs about Hamas rockets raining down on Tel Aviv. These serious incidents were only a reflection of a far more pernicious atmosphere in which Jewish students were made to feel continually uncomfortable and victimised, the main reason being the intense levels of hostility towards Israel and Zionism.

The Royall investigation took three months, and even though the report concluded that the university club was not institutionally antisemitic, she did find that the club had a "cultural problem" meaning that "some Jewish members do not feel comfortable attending the meetings, let alone participating". Royall also outlined that there had been antisemitic incidents, enough to warrant disciplinary procedures to be invoked by the party.

These points were outlined in the executive summary of the report, the only part of the report that was published – much to Baroness Royall's own displeasure. In practice what this meant was that all the evidence in relation to the specific incidents of antisemitism were suppressed. Resultingly, and somewhat conveniently for the party, this meant that undue focus was simply paid to Royall's assessment that the club was "not institutionally antisemitic".

In January 2017, nearly a year after the initial allegations surfaced about Oxford University Labour Club, it emerged that the two members who had been recommended by Royall for disciplinary action, had the investigations into their behaviour dropped. To this day nothing more has come of it - no one from Oxford University Labour Club has been disciplined. It later emerged that these two activists were strongly pro-Corbyn, and one of them had played a significant role in writing Jeremy Corbyn's youth manifesto when he ran for the Labour leadership in 2015. Convenient.

And so the first real dagger in the trust between the Jewish community and the Labour Party was wielded. It became clear that the party was more interested in dealing with the political ramifications of antisemitism, as opposed to the antisemitism itself – a trend which would continue, and continues today.

This was the first real hurdle for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in dealing with antisemitism, and they failed.

Luckily, time presented an opportunity for the party to rectify this, as before long another inquiry came along, this time headed by barrister and civil liberties activist, Shami Chakrabarti.

The Chakrabarti inquiry was launched largely in response to the prominent incidents of antisemitism involving former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone and Labour MP, Naz Shah. Livingstone, whilst talking about antisemitism in the Labour Party on radio, had quite publicly alleged that Hitler had in fact supported Zionism – a comment that drew widespread outrage from the Jewish community and from members of his own party. Meanwhile, Shah was found to have posted several historic antisemitic Facebook posts. Both these cases received national media attention, partly driven by the profile of Livingstone who had previously been embroiled in controversy surrounding antisemitism in 2006, and the fact that he was also a longstanding Corbyn ally. The pressure mounted, and the party decided to launch an inquiry.

Chakrabarti was pushed forward by the party as an ideal candidate to lead the inquiry, an honest broker who's relatively good reputation would stand her in good stead to tackle the problem at hand. However, from day one problems started to emerge, not least because the terms of reference for the inquiry stated that it was going to look at antisemitism and other forms of racism, including Islamophobia. This decision reflected a narrative in parts of the left that often manifest itself in the fundamental inability to condemn antisemitism on its own merits without mentioning other forms of racism, often and especially, Islamophobia.

Secondly, it was also revealed that on the day that Chakrabarti accepted the role of inquiry chair she was also joining the party as a member, stating that she had previously been a Labour voter and supporter. It quickly became clear that in instances where investigation into antisemitism would clash with the best interests of the party – it would not be addressed in a totally independent, objective manner. This inquiry was about investigating antisemitism, but it was also about protecting the party.

The inquiry was fed submissions by a range of Jewish communal groups, academics, Muslim groups, as well as pro-Palestine campaigning organisations. The thrust of many of the Jewish communal submissions was to urge Chakrabarti focus on the culture of antisemitism that exists on the left as opposed to the detail of individual incidents for example. They argued that without a deep-introspection into left-wing antisemitism and why it exists – the inquiry would only be scratching the surface.

Yet, despite this, and after months of evidence collection – the inquiry did exactly that. Focusing on the processes and procedures of the party structure for dealing with the incidents, as opposed to the culture that exists behind it. This explains much about the Labour party's complete failure to deal with the crisis of antisemitism that has consumed them for the last four years. They have boiled the issue down to one of procedure, as opposed to one of political ideology and culture.

5 weeks later Shami Chakrabarti was given a seat in the House of Lords by Jeremy Corbyn and a seat in the Shadow Cabinet. The Jewish community was outraged at an inquiry that was largely seen as a whitewash, whose author was duly rewarded by the very people, culture and movement she was supposed to be investigating. Another big step taken in the erosion of trust between Labour and British Jewry and a case study in power, accountability and the lack of it.

There are a few immediate lessons that can be drawn from the failings of the Chakrabarti inquiry:

The first is the reluctance to properly understand the ideological underpinnings of left-wing antisemitism. Much like a doctor proscribing medicine for an illness without identifying the disease,

the problem will persist and in many cases the disease will simply get worse. This is what happened with Chakrabarti – it is fundamentally impossible to comprehensively deal with racism of any sort, without understanding why that racism may exist in that space in the first place.

The second is the complete reluctance to label antisemitic language as just that – antisemitic. There seems to be a complete inability in parts of the left to comprehend that some left-wing people may just be antisemitic. This seems to be borne out of the core ideological belief that the left is completely anti-racist, therefore logically speaking, it is impossible for people in the movement to be racist. They can only be offensive or insulting or wrong – which is how Chakrabarti often referred to antisemitic language. For example, comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany were simply labelled by Chakrabarti as “insensitive and incendiary” – not antisemitic. Once again, this seems to be a case of complete medical misdiagnosis.

The third is where concepts of power and accountability come into opposition with each other. It would be no stretch to say that a thorough and rigorous report into the Labour Party and antisemitism would have likely implicated the leadership of the party, including Jeremy Corbyn himself and his inner circle of advisors. It would have likely said that Corbyn’s own history of political activism, the things he had said and the people he had interacted with were all a reflection of the very same antisemitism that had come to grip the Labour Party. But, as leader of the party, the report did not go anywhere near this. It is very difficult to address the ideological underpinnings of left-wing antisemitism when the leadership of the party are very much part of that same ideological tradition.

This in a sense is why since the Chakrabarti report was published, the narrative quickly shifted onto the concept of the party being “institutionally antisemitic”.

Which brings me onto my next point highlighting Labour’s complete failure at addressing its antisemitism problem – institutional antisemitism.

The term institutional racism was originally used to describe the Metropolitan Police after their failings in the investigation of the racist murder of a black man, Stephen Lawrence, in 1993. Institutional racism was described in the inquiry that followed, as being “detected in processes, attitude and behaviour” of an organisation “which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping”.

What does this mean in practice and how does it apply to the Labour Party? It reflects the total organisational failure of the party to deal with the problem and more importantly, the apparent lack of desire to do so, often born out of specific factional interests. It means that when people are kicked out for antisemitism, such as Ken Livingstone and former Labour MP Chris Williamson, other party members can still openly support them. It means that the allegations of antisemitism are the things scrutinised and put on trial, not the antisemitism itself. And it means that the current state and atmosphere of the party is institutionally hostile to its Jewish members.

The Labour party have done little to help themselves. In what was a crisis summer for the party last year (2018), instead of simply adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance alliance definition of antisemitism with all its examples, the party decided to prevaricate, delay and eventually adopt the definition without all its relevant examples. Omissions included “accusing Jewish people of being more loyal to Israel than their home country” and “requiring higher standards of behaviour from Israel than other nations”. This drew further outrage from the Jewish community and beyond, and was seen as further proof of how the party were more interested in protecting themselves, as opposed to fighting antisemitism.

These shortcomings were exposed when the decision was taken by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, a body set up by the previous Labour government, to formally investigate the Labour Party for allegations of antisemitism. Notably, the EHRC are a statutory body and therefore hold legal power during their investigation. The Labour Party had become only the second political party to be investigated by the EHRC, the other was the far-right British National Party.

The EHRC's decision to investigate was followed by further damning revelations about the party's handling of antisemitism. These came to light in an expose carried out by the BBC's investigative Panorama programme in which former senior Labour Party staff, whistle-blowers, shed light on how Jeremy Corbyn's senior team had intervened in the disciplinary processes relating to antisemitism. This included the General Secretary of the Labour Party attempting to interfere in who sat on a panel examining a high-profile case, as well as Jeremy Corbyn's advisors overruling decisions made by the independent disputes team. These allegations totally supported the concept that the Labour Party was institutionally antisemitic and that the overriding concern continued to be the politics as opposed to the antisemitism. It is also worth mentioning that the programme also revealed the massive psychological impact on staff in the Labour office as a result of these issues. One staff member was signed off for depression and anxiety and another revealed that they had been left feeling suicidal. The Labour Party's response? To label the whistle-blowers as "disaffected" and to attack the BBC. This was another telling insight into how the Labour Party viewed antisemitism. It couldn't accept that those speaking out were doing so in good faith with a genuine desire to eradicate antisemitism from the movement. When it comes to antisemitism, the Labour Party has always seemingly placed the political and factional considerations first. This is a political battle, not an anti-racist battle.

I think it is also briefly worth touching on the impact of the last four years on the British Jewish community and especially on Jewish Labour party member and supporters. It is no exaggeration to say that the last four years have dramatically shifted understanding on what it means to be a British Jew. British Jewry has a long, proud and rich history and this period will be remembered as a time of intense hostility and strife for the community. Communal confidence has taken a large hit, it has questioned our fundamental role as Jews in the UK, and how our friends and neighbours understand and conceive of antisemitism in 2019.

Next is the specific experiences of Jewish Labour supporters who have been left marginalised, isolated and victimised by their party peers. The Labour Party was a party built with Jewish support, and for many that association has been handed down through generations. Labour was far more than just a political party for many, and yet those members have had to watch as the very hatred that the party had always opposed and repelled had taken root. Members have been castigated as outsiders, agents of the Israeli state, right-wingers and Zionist extremists to name but a few. They have been forced out of party meetings and made to feel uncomfortable in the political spaces they inhabit. These are the real-world consequences of the complete failure of the Labour Party to address its antisemitism problem.

I can only speculate how this may be impacted further come December 13<sup>th</sup>, the day after the election.

The title of this session was the Labour Party's attempts to address its antisemitism, however I think this was probably a misleading title. It is premised on the idea that the party has in fact made a genuine and proper attempt to address the antisemitism crisis that it has faced, but the evidence shows that this is not the case. Perhaps this session would have simply been better titled – "the Labour Party's attempts to address the political ramifications of its antisemitism".

