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ANTISEMITISM IN THE RADICAL LEFT AND THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY

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Executive Summary

Antisemitism has become a national political issue and a headline story in Britain for the first time in decades because of ongoing problems in the Labour Party. Labour used to enjoy widespread Jewish support but increasing left wing hostility towards Israel and Zionism, and a failure to understand and properly oppose contemporary antisemitism, has placed increasing distance between the party and the UK Jewish community. This has emerged under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, a product of the radical 1960s New Left that sees Israel as an apartheid state created by colonialism, but it has been building on the fringes of the left for decades. Since Corbyn became party leader, numerous examples of antisemitic remarks made by Labour members, activists and elected officials have come to light. These remarks range from opposition to Israel's existence or claims that Zionism collaborated with Nazism, to conspiracy theories about the Rothschilds or ISIS. The party has tried to tackle the problem of antisemitism through procedural means and generic declarations opposing antisemitism, but it appears incapable of addressing the political culture that produces this antisemitism: possibly because this radical political culture, borne of anti-war protests and allied to Islamist movements, is precisely where Jeremy Corbyn and his closest associates find their political home.

A Crisis of Antisemitism

Since early 2016, antisemitism has become a national political issue in Britain for the first time in decades. This hasn't come about because of a surge in support for the far right, or jihadist terrorism against Jews. It has happened, strangely, because of a crisis in Britain's Labour Party, a party of the left that defines itself as anti-racist and has enjoyed Jewish support for most of its history. Before exploring how and why this has happened, it should first be acknowledged just how unusual this is. This paper will go through some of the examples of antisemitism in the Labour Party; look at why it has happened, and why it is happening now; and try to explain why the party's attempts to address the problem have failed so far.

This public, media and political focus on allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party began in February 2016, when Alex Chalmers, the Chair of Oxford University Labour Club, resigned in protest at what he saw as antisemitic behavior, following the Club's endorsement of Israel Apartheid Week at the University. Chalmers announced his resignation on his Facebook page, writing:

Whether it be members of the Executive throwing around the term 'Zio' (a term for Jews usually confined to websites run by the Ku Klux Klan) with casual abandon, senior members of the club expressing their 'solidarity' with Hamas and explicitly defending their tactics of indiscriminately murdering civilians, or a former Co-Chair claiming that 'most accusations of antisemitism are just the Zionists crying wolf', a large proportion of both OULC and the student left in Oxford more generally have some kind of problem with Jews.¹

Chalmers claimed that Jewish students were routinely ridiculed and denounced, while Chalmers himself (who is not Jewish) was called a "Zionist stooge".² Other allegations subsequently emerged, included claims that Labour Club members mocked the victims of the Hyper Cacher terror attack in Paris when their funerals were on television, and that one member called Auschwitz a "cash cow".³ This all attracted significant media and political attention, due to the status of Oxford University and the fact that many famous Labour politicians, including several former party leaders, were members of the Labour Club there when they were students. Like many of the allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party, the language used by students at Oxford was not viscerally anti-Jewish but rather reflected a form of political antisemitism that has become common in some left wing circles.

As 2016 progressed, more examples came to light of Labour Party members and activists being suspended for alleged antisemitism, in cases that ranged from conspiracy theories about Israel being responsible for ISIS, to claims that Jews ran or financed the slave trade. For example, Vicky Kirby, the Vice-Chair of a local Labour Party branch in the south of England, had tweeted “Who is the Zionist God? I am starting to think it may be Hitler #FreePalestine”. Khadim Hussain, a Labour councillor in Bradford and former Lord Mayor of the city, had written on Facebook: “Your school education system only tells you about Anne Frank and the six million Zionists that were killed by Hitler.” He also posted material implicitly endorsing the conspiracy theory that Israel and/or the United States were behind the terrorist group ISIS. A party member and veteran Trotskyist called Gerry Downing was suspended for posting an article on his own website on “Why Marxists must address the Jewish Question”.⁴ Another activist, Jackie Walker, wrote in a Facebook discussion about the Holocaust that “millions more Africans were killed in the African holocaust and their oppression continues today on a global scale in a way it doesn’t for Jews [...] and many Jews (my ancestors too) were the chief financiers of the sugar and slave trade.” She continued in a further post: “what do you think the Jews should do about their contribution to the African holocaust? What debt do they owe?”⁵ The idea that Jews played a leading or primary role in the Atlantic slave trade is a myth that is promoted by the antisemitic Nation of Islam organisation, but has been debunked by reputable historians.⁶

This reached a peak in April 2016 when the right wing Guido Fawkes political blog reported that Naz Shah, the Labour MP for the Bradford West constituency, had written a Facebook post in 2014 that showed an image of Israel superimposed on a map of the United States, with the title: “Solution for Israel-Palestine conflict: Relocate Israel into United States.” She had also posted a link to a newspaper poll on that summer’s conflict in Israel and Gaza, with the comment: “The Jews are rallying to the poll.”⁷ Shah was suspended from the party the day after her comments were originally reported and then readmitted three months later. She apologized for her comments and underwent a process of engagement with the UK Jewish community in order to understand the offense she had caused. In an interview with the BBC following her readmission, Shah explained that she had simply been ignorant about antisemitism:

The truth is that some of the stuff I have since looked at and understood, I didn't know at the time. The language I used was antisemitic, it was offensive [...] One of the tough conversations I had to have with myself was about, God, am I

antisemitic? And I had to really question my heart of hearts. Yes, I have ignorance, yes everybody has prejudice, subconscious biases, but does that make me antisemitic? And the answer was no, I do not have a hatred of Jewish people.⁸

Ken Livingstone

Ken Livingstone, the former Mayor of London and one of the best-known politicians in Britain, then got involved, defending Shah and in the process saying:

I've been in the Labour party for 47 years. I've never heard anyone say anything antisemitic. I've heard a lot of criticism of Israel and its abuse of the Palestinians, but I've never heard someone be anti-Semitic [...] Let's remember, when Hitler won his election in 1932 his policy then was that Jews should be moved to Israel. He was supporting Zionism. [He then] went mad and ending up killing 6 million Jews [...] There has been a very well-orchestrated campaign by the Israel lobby to smear anybody who criticises Israeli policy as anti-Semitic [...] Frankly, there has been an attempt to smear Jeremy Corbyn, and his associates, as antisemitic from the moment he became leader.⁹

Coming after two days of headlines accusing the Labour Party of either being antisemitic itself, or of being soft on antisemitism, Livingstone's comments caused outrage amongst other Labour politicians. The Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, tweeted: "Ken Livingstone's comments are appalling and inexcusable. There must be no place for this in our Party." John Mann, a Labour MP and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, confronted Livingstone in public and called him "a disgusting Nazi apologist". Even Jon Lansman, the head of the hard left activist group Momentum, tweeted: "A period of silence from Ken Livingstone is overdue, especially on antisemitism racism & Zionism. It's time he left politics altogether". Five Shadow Cabinet members and many other Labour MPs called for Livingstone to be expelled from the party, and he was suspended pending disciplinary investigation within a few hours of having made his original comments.¹⁰

Unlike Naz Shah, Livingstone did not apologize or withdraw his comments and has never accepted that they were antisemitic. Instead, he has repeatedly insisted that Hitler "was supporting Zionism" and that he is "not going to apologize for telling the truth."¹¹ He insisted

that allegations of antisemitism were untrue and politically motivated, telling the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee:

If I had said something that was untrue and caused offence, I would have apologized, but what I said was true. What caused offence was a group of embittered old Blairites running around lying about what I said. The MPs who smeared me have been criticizing Jeremy Corbyn and stabbing him in the back for the last nine months. What I find appalling about the motivation of these MPs is they are prepared to cause worry and doubt and confusion amongst our Jewish community in this country for short-term political gain.¹²

A Labour Party disciplinary hearing found Livingstone guilty of bringing the party into disrepute with his comments, but allowed him to remain a member. (He was subject to minor internal sanctions by the party). His comments, and his refusal to withdraw them, turned alleged relations between Hitler, Nazi Germany and the Zionist movement into a subject of national debate. Leading historians such as Professor Timothy Snyder, Professor Yehuda Bauer, Professor Rainer Schulze and Professor Deborah Lipstadt all wrote articles or gave interviews for the British media explaining why Livingstone's comments were historically inaccurate or misleading.¹³ The whole affair was hugely damaging for the Labour Party's image in the Jewish community. A week after the suspension of Shah and Livingstone, the *Jewish Chronicle* newspaper published the results of an opinion poll showing that just 8.5 per cent of British Jews would vote Labour if there were a General Election then, compared to 18 per cent who voted Labour in the election the previous year. The poll also showed that 66 per cent of British Jews felt Corbyn had not done enough to tackle antisemitism and 38 per cent felt that Labour had a "high" level of antisemitism.¹⁴

Why Now?

Why did this all happen in 2016? The short answer is that Jeremy Corbyn was elected Labour Party leader in September 2015, but in reality it was a result of much longer trends. Labour was, historically, Britain's most pro-Zionist and pro-Jewish party and British Jews were mostly left wing. Labour supported the aims of the Zionist movement during the pre-state years and was solidly pro-Israel after its creation in 1948. In the General Election of 1945, 27 of the 29 Jewish MPs elected to Parliament were Labour – and one of the others was a

Communist. This alignment of the left with the mainstream Jewish community in Britain began to change in the 1960s, when the idea appeared on the radical left that Israel was a racist, apartheid state, and that Zionism was not, in fact, an expression of Jewish national longing but was actually a colonial movement in cahoots with Western imperialism, that collaborated with fascism before and during the Second World War, conspired with imperialism after it, and created an apartheid state in place of Palestine.

This narrative appealed to a youthful Western left that did not remember the Holocaust, did not see Jews as victims of racism and romanticized the nationalist violence of anti-colonial liberation movements in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It spread through anti-colonial and anti-apartheid networks in the 1960s, appeared in British Students' Unions in the 1970s and made its first real impact in the Labour Party during its last turn leftwards in the 1980s. That was the decade when Ken Livingstone first articulated his theories about Nazi-Zionist collaboration—a slander that was developed and enthusiastically promoted by the Soviet Union from the 1950s onwards—which led to an unsuccessful appeal for his prosecution by the Board of Deputies of British Jews. It was also the decade when Jeremy Corbyn became an MP. He entered Parliament in 1983 as a sponsor of the most radical anti-Zionist group operating in the Labour Party, called the Labour Movement Campaign for Palestine. Needless to say, it opposed Israel's existence, and its aims included a pledge to “eradicate Zionism”¹⁵ from the British Labour movement.

Part of a Worldview

For Corbyn's part of the left, anti-Zionism is and was part of a radical package of foreign policy stances that is glued together by opposition to American and Western power. Find any conflict, and they will adopt the most anti-American position available. After 9/11, this part of the left built an alliance with Islamists in Britain who support the Muslim Brotherhood. This alliance was formalized in the Stop The War Coalition, of which Corbyn was a leading member including serving as Chair for several years. Corbyn personifies the left wing indulgence of violent, reactionary Islamism: he has described Hamas and Hezbollah as “friends”, praised Hamas for what he called its commitment to “long term peace and social justice and political justice” and took paid employment as a presenter for Iran's state broadcaster Press TV.¹⁶

The Stop The War Coalition was formed to oppose the invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but came to public prominence for its opposition to the 2003 Iraq War. That conflict remains a defining cleavage in the Labour Party. On one side is the Blairite legacy that includes a warm embrace of Israel, of Labour Zionists and of the free market; on the other stands Corbyn and other veterans of the Stop The War Coalition, many of whom have a background in Trotskyist or Stalinist politics and now work for Corbyn in his leadership team. It is symbolic that, while Labour's last two Prime Ministers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, were both patrons of the Jewish National Fund, Corbyn is a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. For Corbyn's part of the left, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is seen as much more than just a struggle between two peoples for the same small strip of land on the eastern Mediterranean. Israel is treated as symbolic of all Western domination, racism and colonialism, and the Palestinians have come to represent all victims of Western power and militarism. And as a symbol of global oppression, Israel evokes an emotional response different from any other conflict. In 2010, Jeremy Corbyn led a rally outside the Israeli embassy in London with the slogan, “In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians.”¹⁷ It doesn't matter how many people die in Syria, or even how many Palestinians die there, Corbyn will never lead a demonstration chanting “In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Syrians” unless he can blame the West for their deaths. This is about a political outlook that sees Israel, Zionism and those Jews who are not actively opposed to Israel—which, in reality, means most Jews in Britain—as part of a global network of power and racism, on the side of the oppressors against the oppressed. Campaigns against colonialism and apartheid, and the civil rights movement, are its formative political experiences, rather than anti-fascism and the Holocaust, and the old class politics has been replaced by identity politics.

Anti-Zionist Intellectual Acrobatics

Many left wing anti-Zionists struggle to square the facts and meaning of the Holocaust, and its impact on Jewish people's understanding of their own identity and their place in the world, with anti-Zionism's fundamental rejection of Israel. One way that some anti-Zionists overcome this problem is by trying to pin part of the blame for the Holocaust onto the desperate and often futile attempts by some Zionists to negotiate with the Nazi regime. Another is to declare the Palestinians to be both the indirect victims of the Nazi Holocaust

(because of Jewish immigration to Palestine by those fleeing Nazi rule in the 1930s, and Holocaust survivors after 1945) and the subjects of their own genocide at the hands of the new Nazis in Israel. Ken Livingstone did not invent the idea that the Zionist movement collaborated with Nazism; he is merely regurgitating Soviet propaganda for a mainstream Labour audience. Others argue that the Holocaust is just another genocide carried out by colonialism, or is a crime of capitalism: in both cases diminishing the singularity of European antisemitism and its motivating role in the Holocaust.

This leads to another problem with this political culture, which is its attitude to antisemitism. For various reasons, largely connected to the legacy of colonialism and the sources of post-war immigration to Britain, racism has come to be seen as a prejudice determined by skin colour that manifests as socio-economic discrimination and exclusion. It is found in the lack of minority ethnic representation in the media, or in the judiciary, or at the best universities. Racism is defined by the structures of power and inequality in society, and, according to this view, those who have power cannot be victims of racism while those without power cannot be racist.¹⁸

This same strand of left wing thought sees antisemitism as a relic of history, only to be taken seriously when it is paraded by one of the tiny groups of Britain's failing far right. It can't come from people on the left, so this thinking goes, because people on the left are anti-racist and therefore, by definition, can't be antisemitic. Nor can it come from other minorities, such as antisemitism from within Muslim communities, because they are victims of discrimination themselves. Consequently antisemitism is seen as a relatively minor problem compared to anti-Muslim hatred or racism towards people of color. And because left wing people self-define as anti-racist, many of them think that it is impossible for antisemitism to exist on the left or in the Labour Party.¹⁹

A Failure to Understand Antisemitism

The problem is that antisemitism doesn't fit this framework: Jews are generally regarded as white—although that wasn't always the case, and ignores intra-Jewish ethnic diversity—and are relatively well integrated. There are few, if any, obstacles to Jews in housing, education or employment. Antisemitism operates not through concrete discrimination in Britain, but through ideas, myths and conspiracy theories that encourage hatred of Jews precisely because they are seen as powerful: so powerful they can allegedly manipulate the US government,

control the media, incite Islamophobia or even organize fake terrorist attacks in Europe. If racism is only about socio-economic discrimination and structured disadvantage, then by that narrow definition *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* wouldn't be a racist document.

This failure to understand and recognize contemporary antisemitism helps to explain why so many cases have come to light involving Labour Party members, activists and councillors using antisemitic language. This isn't about people with a visceral, conscious hatred of Jews: it's about a particular way of thinking that has spread unchallenged and often unrecognized, and become normalized, across swathes of the left. So the conspiracy theory that 'Zionists' are behind ISIS (it stands for 'Israeli Secret Intelligence Service', apparently)²⁰ is remarkably common in radical left wing spaces, as is the idea that the Rothschilds control the world's banking system. Comparisons of Israel to Nazi Germany are ubiquitous in this part of the left. And so on.

This is why the problems of antisemitism in the Labour Party have been so damaging: because for many people in the Jewish community, they are not an anomaly, but actually form a pattern of behavior that reveals something about the left. The reason that many of the cases of antisemitism involve similar antisemitic language, ideas and tropes is because they are products of the same political culture. There has always been an audience on the Left for an emancipatory antisemitism that sees Jews as the hidden hand behind capitalist exploitation and globalization. This is a minor tradition on the left—often referred to as a 'socialism of fools'—but it is an authentic left wing tradition nonetheless; and a part of its history of which many on the left are unaware.

Insufficient Attempts to Address the Problem

The Labour Party has tried to address the problem of antisemitism within its ranks through a series of inquiries and rule changes. The first inquiry was held by Labour Students to look into the allegations of antisemitism at Oxford University Labour Club. This was superseded by an inquiry by the Labour peer Baroness Jan Royall, which in turn was subsumed into a broader inquiry into antisemitism and other forms of racism in the party as a whole, led by human rights lawyer and campaigner Shami Chakrabarti. This inquiry made some limited recommendations around language and disciplinary processes, but did not address the underlying drivers of antisemitism in left wing politics.²¹ Its credibility was further

undermined by the decision of Chakrabarti to join the Labour Party when the inquiry began, and by the party's decision to give her a peerage and a seat in the House of Lords shortly after it concluded. Baroness Chakrabarti now serves in Jeremy Corbyn's Shadow Cabinet and is likely to have a ministerial post in any future Corbyn government.

The content of Chakrabarti's report was overshadowed at its launch event by the behavior of some of Corbyn's supporters, one of whom, a veteran anti-racist campaigner called Marc Wadsworth, handed out leaflets calling Labour MPs who oppose Corbyn "traitors". He refused to give one of these leaflets to Ruth Smeeth MP, a Jewish Labour MP who was at the launch, and publicly attacked her for "working hand in hand" with the *Daily Telegraph*, a right wing newspaper opposed to Labour. Smeeth walked out of the launch event and later issued a statement saying: "Until today I had made no public comment about Jeremy's ability to lead our party, but the fact that he failed to intervene is final proof for me that he is unfit to lead, and that a Labour Party under his stewardship cannot be a safe space for British Jews."²² Corbyn himself was criticised for comments he made at the launch when he appeared to compare Israel to ISIS, saying that Jews should not be blamed for Israel's actions just as Muslims should not be blamed for the actions of "self-styled Islamic states or organizations".²³ Wadsworth was suspended from the party on a charge of alleged antisemitism which, at the time of writing, is yet to be resolved.

Despite these criticisms, the Royall Report and Chakrabarti Inquiry Report marked the beginning of a process of the Labour Party trying to implement a system to better deal with complaints of antisemitism. In December 2016, the party's National Executive Committee (its main governing body) adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which had previously been adopted by the UK Government. It also agreed to introduce a new disputes and disciplinary procedure, while the Labour Party conference in September 2017 voted for new, stronger punishments for party members who express antisemitism or other forms of hate speech.²⁴

Problems Ahead

However, procedural measures and generic declarations from the leadership condemning antisemitism haven't, so far, changed the political culture that is the source of the left's antisemitism, and they are unlikely to do so. Corbyn and many of his closest advisors are not

only products of this political culture, but are also its leaders: they condemn antisemitism but never describe exactly what they understand contemporary antisemitism to be, or ask why it keeps appearing in their party.

Another reason for this failure is that the issue of antisemitism has been subsumed within much larger political battles inside Labour and between Labour and the Conservatives. People on the right of the party, or Labour's opponents in other parties, are the ones who warn about antisemitism; and people on the left of the party deny it is a problem. When Jeremy Corbyn became leader two years ago, it was as a result of a huge operation by the far left that managed to capture the support of a much larger group of people. Labour is now a different party from before Corbyn's leadership, with hundreds of thousands of new members, and the far left is slowly taking over the different structures and committees that make up the party bureaucracy at local and national levels. Allegations of antisemitism by people on the right of the party, and the denial of antisemitism by people on the left, have become, at times, a proxy for this struggle for power and control of the party itself. Whereas antisemitism has long been a cross-party issue in British politics, inside the Labour Party it has become a partisan battleground. Len McCluskey, Britain's most powerful trade union leader and a key Corbyn ally, said in September 2017 that the issue of antisemitism should be "one of left versus right."²⁵

A third factor is that there is a loud and active group within Labour who insist there is no problem of antisemitism, and accuse anyone who says otherwise of acting dishonestly. This group is largely made up of anti-Zionist Jews who support Corbyn's left wing project and cannot bear the idea that Jews and antisemitism might get in the way of it. For the first time in decades, having been completely marginalized in the Jewish community, they have powerful friends and allies in the Labour Party and are enjoying their moment. So for example, while the main Jewish group in the Labour Party is the Jewish Labour Movement, which is broadly left Zionist in its positioning and (under its former name of Poale Zion) has been affiliated to the Labour Party for almost a century, there is now also a new, much smaller group, Jewish Voice for Labour, set up by anti-Zionist Jews specifically to argue that there is no antisemitism in the party. It is hard to overstate how important anti-Zionist Jews and Israelis have been in encouraging the British Left to relate to Israel through an anti-Zionist lens, while reassuring them that there is no antisemitism in their movement.

With Corbyn firmly in place as Labour's leader and doing well in the opinion polls as a possible future Prime Minister, and with the hard left's efforts to take control of the Labour Party machine gaining ground, the rise of left wing anti-Zionism and the related phenomenon of anti-Zionist antisemitism is likely to be part of the British political mainstream for some time to come. This problem now dominates British Jewish thinking about the future prospects for antisemitism in the UK. Combined with the ongoing threat of terrorism and the uncertainty of Brexit, and with the growing appetite in the UK and abroad for radical politics, it holds only worries for most British Jews.

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¹⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQLYXJUH2uY.

¹⁸ For example, "Racism against white people is of no consequence because it has no historical resonance ... Given the distribution of power in our world, discrimination by blacks or Asians against whites will almost always be trivial. Jews are a different case. They no longer routinely suffer gross or violent discrimination; indeed, in the US and Europe at least, Jews today are probably safer than most minorities. But the Holocaust remains within living memory, as do the language and the iconography used by the Nazis to prepare the way for it. We have a special duty of care not to revive them." Peter Wilby, 'The New Statesman and anti-Semitism', *New Statesman* (11 February 2002). See also: 'Black people cannot be racist, says former Ken Livingstone aide', *Daily Telegraph* (24 April 2012).

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