

Labour, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism



Last April a row engulfed Ken Livingstone, former Labour mayor of London, and Naz Shah, Labour MP for Bradford West, following remarks they made about Israel and Zionism. They were suspended from the Labour Party, with Naz Shah having the parliamentary whip withdrawn. Shah has been reinstated, and though Livingstone has demanded that he too be reinstated, a decision has yet to be made by Labour's National Constitutional Committee.

The row prompted Jeremy Corbyn to set up an enquiry into anti-Semitism in the Labour Party headed by human rights lawyer Shami Chakrabarti. She produced a report at the end of June. After Livingstone's and Shah's remarks a wave of accusations of anti-Semitism swept across the media and the Parliamentary Labour Party. But attempts to smear Corbyn with the tag of anti-Semitism were made even before he was elected Labour leader in September 2015.

The establishment media, led by the liberal *Guardian*, worked itself into a frenzy of hysteria against Corbyn, focusing on his long-standing commitment to Palestinian rights. The implication was that he was a closet anti-Semite or least that he had a close association with such alleged anti-Semites as the leaders of the Palestinian Hamas or the Lebanese Hizbollah organisations. Corbyn responded by saying that in order to

reach a peaceful settlement, one had to talk to everyone, including leaders one didn't wholly agree with.

Chakrabarti's report makes clear, as she puts it in the foreword, that "the Labour Party is not overrun by anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or other forms of racism". However, she adds, "there is much clear evidence...of minority hateful or ignorant attitudes and behaviours festering within a sometimes bitter incivility of discourse." She also refers to "an occasionally toxic atmosphere" which "is in danger of shutting down free speech".

Last February the co-chair of the Oxford University Labour Club resigned, citing instances of anti-Semitism. An internal Labour inquiry conducted by Baroness Royall concluded that OULC did not have an institutional issue of anti-Semitism, though also claiming that the student body has a "clear cultural problem" around this topic meaning that "some Jews do not feel welcome". She highlights what she describes as the racist epithet "Zio", an abbreviation of Zionist, recommending that it should have no place in Labour Party discourse.

Condemns

She also condemns the use of ethnic stereotypes whereby individuals or whole groups are said to think or act in a particular way due to their race or religion. She stresses that this kind of thinking is not prevalent in the Labour Party "but nor is it completely absent". She cites the example of a Labour councillor who was told he would be particularly good at a finance role simply because he was Jewish. Rumours circulated around a Jewish MP that she was a Mossad agent.

Ken Livingstone was suspended from the Labour Party following his claim that Hitler had supported Zionism "before he went mad and ended up killing six million Jews". His comments were probably referring to the Haavara agreement of 1933 whereby German Jews emigrating to Palestine as a result of Nazi

persecution were allowed to take some of their wealth out of Germany in order to buy German goods for the Yishuv (the Zionist settlements in British Mandate Palestine). This was in violation of the boycott of Nazi Germany supported by most Diaspora Jews and the international left.

Tragically, Zionism also became the ideology justifying the ethnic cleansing of the majority of Palestinians in 1948-9. And it did so by emphasising a racial definition of Jewishness, one which is embodied in Israel's Law of Return. As Joachim Prinz, a prominent German Zionist leader, declared in 1934, "The theory of assimilation has collapsed... A state, built according to the principle of purity of the nation and race [ie the Third Reich], can only be honoured and respected by a Jew who declares his belonging to his own kind."

Indeed, Zionism accepts anti-Semitism as the normal attitude of the Gentile world. It responds to it by self-exclusion and the creation of a state where Jews are a majority. Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism, was a journalist in Paris covering the Dreyfus affair in the 1890s, when a wave of anti-Semitism swept across French society. He wrote, "I achieved a freer attitude towards anti-Semitism, which I now began to understand historically and to pardon."

However, as John Rose argued in his reply to Norman Finkelstein in *Open Democracy*: "Even in its most reactionary form, Zionism, before the Second World War, which had no guarantee for its claims on Palestine, was one of the voices of oppressed Jews facing the growth of violent anti-Semitism as a mass movement everywhere, though of course in widely differing degrees of intensity. That strand of Zionism which tried to grovel with its tormentor, camouflaged as 'negotiation', even to the point of mimicry, remained always at its mercy" (8 May 2016).

Zionists were also at the forefront of the fight against Nazism in Eastern Europe, displaying extraordinary courage

under appalling circumstances. Moreover, according to Francis Nicosia, by 1937 the Nazis had become opposed to the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine as it would become a universally-recognised power base for international Jewry, with the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies making Germany a natural enemy.

Livingstone's comments missed out half the story and as such gave a misleading, and wrong, picture of historical events. However, the notion that anti-Zionism is automatically anti-Jewish must be challenged.

The conflation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism by Zionists suggests that all Jews must inevitably support Israel simply by virtue of being Jews. This implies that Jews have no independent mind of their own, no ability to stand back and criticise Israel or the idea of Zionism, that they are simply part of a mass of uncritical pro-Israel supporters.

Institutional

Of course, Israeli leaders have always claimed to speak in the name of all Jews as they carried out barbarous policies against the Palestinians. Tragically, the majority of Israelis, and the institutional representatives of world Jewry, have failed to dissociate themselves from these crimes, even if many individual Jews have. It is not surprising that some pro-Palestinian militants take the Israeli and Zionist leaders at their word and accept that "Jew" and "Zionist" are the same.

This is a far cry from the pre Second World War days when a majority of Jews were on the left and were anti- or at least non-Zionist. Before the Second World War Zionism was a movement supported by a small minority of Jews. In municipal elections in Warsaw in 1936 Zionists polled 22 percent of the Jewish vote compared to 30 percent for the socialist anti-Zionist Bund. It was mainly the Holocaust, but also Stalinist anti-Semitism post-World War Two, that enabled Zionism to win

the allegiance of a majority of the world's Jews.

Chakrabarti also highlights the way in which “the word ‘Zionist’ has been used personally, abusively or as a euphemism for ‘Jew’, even in relation to some people with no stated position or even a critical position on...modern Israel”. This is a mirror image of the manner in which Zionists seek to brand criticisms of Israel as anti-Semitic. This identification of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is a key method used by Zionists to de-legitimise criticisms of Israel, as a way of deflecting attention away from the brutality of the Israeli occupation and the violence by means of which Israel was created. But supporters of Palestine have always roundly rejected any attempt by Zionists to smear them as anti-Semitic or in the case of Jewish supporters of Palestine as “self-hating Jews”.

However, allegations of anti-Semitism against Jeremy Corbyn continue, perhaps unsurprisingly in the light of the right's renewed challenge to his leadership. At the launch of Chakrabarti's inquiry Corbyn affirmed that Jews were no more responsible for Israel's actions, such as the continuing theft of Palestinian land and natural resources, or the siege of Gaza, than Muslims were for “those self-styled Islamic states”. The Chief Rabbi accused him of making “offensive comments” and former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks called it “demonisation of the highest order, an outrage and unacceptable”.

But last May, Jeremy Corbyn issued a code of conduct covering political meetings, social and mainstream media, which outlawed heckling and personal abuse, and celebrating the diversity of the Labour Party “as a place where sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic, or other discriminatory or offensive abuse has no place”.

Attacks

This is to be greatly welcomed given that there has been a rise in anti-Semitism across Europe. In Britain, according to the Community Security Trust – a pro-Zionist charity whose figures need to be taken with caution – anti-Semitic incidents rose by 11 percent in the first six months of this year. The most common type of incident was public verbal abuse. Other manifestations included graffiti, abuse via social media, damage and desecration of Jewish property. However, the 41 violent assaults represented a fall of 13 percent on 2015. And according to the Metropolitan Police, anti-Semitic attacks in London rose by 61 percent in 2015. In 2014, Israel's assault on Gaza also led to a big rise in anti-Semitic incidents.

In conclusion, it is untrue that real anti-Semitism is a serious problem in the Labour Party. Moreover, while anti-Semitic attacks are on the rise in Europe and less so in the UK, it remains on a significantly smaller scale than Islamophobia. All anti-racists and socialists must, as Corbyn states, oppose any and all manifestations of racism and other forms of oppression. But we should also stand firm in our opposition to the crimes of the state of Israel and continue to build up campaigns in support of Palestinian rights, such as the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, which has seen real success in colleges across Britain.

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