

Fascism on the march: Why the preoccupation with antisemitism in the Labour Party?

The sight of the Proud Boys marching on Washington in recent weeks was chilling. Their t-shirt slogan read 6MWE (Six Million Jews Weren't Enough). Youngsters in my carriage on a German train two years ago were wearing black shirts with Nazi slogans. Fascism is on the march in Europe and the USA – and we are worried about antisemitism in the Labour Party!

The barney about antisemitism in the Labour Party is a naked strategy, Israeli in origin, to gag any support for the Palestinians being brutally suppressed under Israel's apartheid system. In the words of Berkeley University Professor Judith Butler, 'It's part of a global effort by Israel and its allies to silence legitimate speech and prevent Palestinians and those who support Palestinian rights from holding the Israeli government to account for its unjust policies of dispossession, occupation, disenfranchisement and incarceration.' The strategy works. Here we are in the midst of a global pandemic, Israel basking in praise for its response and an apparently successful vaccination campaign. But in the Occupied Territories the Palestinians with a few exceptions have been denied the jab. Where is the world outcry about this scandal?

The 'antisemitism scare' serum inoculates Israel from a probing media and international condemnation. The campaign borrows much from McCarthyite techniques: the witch-hunts, continuous repetition of lies, smears and guilt by association. Its effects are corrosive of freedoms of speech, assembly and artistic expression, for anybody expressing criticism of Israeli government policy can and will be accused of antisemitism and hounded off platforms, stages and debating forums.

To take one example, artist Brian Eno told Guardian readers after his show was cancelled last month: 'I am just one of many artists who have been affected by the new McCarthyism that has taken hold amid a rising climate of intolerance in Germany.' Listing poets, musicians, rappers, artists and philosophers who have been caught up in a system of political interrogation, blacklisting and exclusion in Germany under a parliamentary resolution in 2019, he says, 'ultimately this is about targeting critics of Israeli policy towards Palestinians'. As former judge Stephen Sedley has said (of the flawed International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – IHRA – 'definition' of antisemitism), 'the purpose is to neutralise serious criticism of Israel by stigmatising it as a form of antisemitism.'

So why is the [club newsletter] giving credence to the myth of widespread antisemitism in the Labour Party? I was shocked to see the article by [Louis] in last month's edition, given spirited endorsement by the editorial. Ostensibly a commentary on the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report, it was simply an opinion piece from a faction (Socialists Against Antisemitism) in the Labour Party. It flies in the face of the ethos of the [club] and has angered many members.

I am the son of East End Jewish communists whose parents and grandparents had fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many relations were murdered in the Holocaust. Mum and dad had fought to stop Mosley's fascist Blackshirts at Cable Street in 1936. I was born just after the Second World War and inherited much of their political outlook and values. Forty years working as both a journalist and national trade union official have given me ample scope to express those values. During that time I have never once encountered antisemitism in the Labour Party

My late wife worked for some time on a kibbutz and my sister is married to an Israeli (for whom I played matchmaker). I had visited Israel in the 1980s as a guest of Histadrut (Israel's TUC) and then my son 10 years ago

when he was working there. I know something of the region. But nothing could have prepared me for the experience I described to the [club] in 2019, as 'the single most harrowing but informative trip of my life'. It was an eleven-day visit to Israel and the West Bank organised by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICADH). It brought home to me the reality of life for Palestinians, be they in East Jerusalem, Palestinian towns and villages or refugee camps. Since 1967 over 50,000 Palestinian houses have been demolished.

I asked [club members] to imagine what it must be like to experience the daily miseries and humiliations of living under occupation. What it was like:

To be constantly harassed by hostile settlers and the Israeli military;

To live with the fear of your children and relatives being arrested and incarcerated, often without charge;

To have your communities divided and economies disrupted by the obscenity of a wall up to 8 metres high and 700 km long;

To see settlements in the West Bank growing by the day, occupying the best land with plentiful water supplies, whilst barren Palestinian areas are deliberately starved of water.

There are now over 700,000 settlers in the West Bank in contravention of international law and UN resolutions. Bedouin are being expelled from their age-old grazing grounds on the pretext of security. You would have to have a heart of stone not to be outraged by what's going on, knowing that the Palestinians are powerless to resist. But their resilience is truly moving. I believe it is up to the rest of the world to respond to these violations, just as we did with the apartheid system in South Africa.

I arranged to repeat my [club] talk at a public meeting in an Enfield church hall. The meeting was called off by the vicar at short notice as he had received complaints of antisemitism. Fortunately another braver vicar refused to succumb to intimidation. One of few.

[Louis] writes that antisemitism in the Labour Party ‘came much more sharply into focus after 2015 when Jeremy Corbyn became leader.’ Of course it did, as a stick to beat him with. It served two purposes: firstly to unseat Corbyn from the leadership of a party set on challenging our establishment’s hold on the neo-liberal economy as it presides over ever-growing wealth inequality, collapse of welfare, public services, local authorities and the NHS; secondly to muzzle any criticism of Israel, knowing Corbyn’s sympathy with the Palestinians, by equating it with antisemitism. A coalition of finance and corporate interests, Conservatives and Labour MPs (after two failed coups and out of step with a mushrooming and revitalised membership) – feeding the ever-open maw of mainstream millionaire media – took up the cudgels to preserve our ruling class and its policies on defence and foreign affairs.

The EHRC report rightly criticises the Labour Party’s complaints and disciplinary procedure. But by failing to place incidents in context it leads the press to point the finger at Corbyn. In fact, the blame lies squarely at the door of the anti-Corbyn party administration. A leaked report last Easter showed staff and office holders working to sabotage the Corbyn leadership, even to the extent of contributing to Labour’s narrow defeat in 2017. They also failed to act on antisemitism cases or implement the Chakrabarti report into antisemitism, again condemned by the EHRC. The fourth estate decided not to pursue this affront to democracy, but to find out who leaked! Meantime ex-general secretary Ian McNicol has been ennobled.

In fact, after Jennie Formby’s appointment as Labour Party general secretary in 2018, the complaints procedure was shown to have been considerably improved.

Formby reported that a third of antisemitism complaints received in 2019 were made by the same person. The vast majority related to social media posts, scoured by pro-Israel groups often from several years ago. [Club] members include at least one victim of suspension from the party, reported as antisemitic for old social media comments and being overheard in a pub expressing criticism of Israel government policy

With unsubstantiated bravado, [Louis] asserts 'There can be no doubt that most of Britain's 270,000-strong Jewish community have for some time felt that the Labour Party was not a safe place for them.' There is scant evidence for the claim – but if it were so, it would prove that smearing works. I must say that I don't feel comfortable in a party that clamps down on discussion, expels branch officers who wish to talk about Israel/Palestine and Corbyn's suspension of the whip, and is now employing a former Israeli military spy in Keir Starmer's office.

Al Jazeera exposed Shai Masot, four years ago, working in the Israeli embassy to 'take down' Conservative foreign minister Alan Duncan as too sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, and set up youth movements to undermine 'crazy Corbyn and his weirdo friends'. Masot was sent home but his associate, former spy Assaf Kaplan, has been welcomed into Keir's office – no doubt able to exercise his cyber-skills for the greater good!

And I'm not the only Jew to feel that way. There are at least 35 recent or ongoing investigations by the Labour Party into Jewish members related to antisemitism. A group of them issued a statement last December:

'We are appalled by the large and growing number of Jewish members of the Labour Party – including ourselves – who have recently been subject to disciplinary proceedings related to alleged antisemitism. This fact alone – over and above the trumped up and political nature of the charges – makes a mockery of Keir Starmer's commitment to ensuring

Labour is a safe place for Jews. It is now absolutely clear that this commitment does not cover discrimination against Jewish socialists. On the contrary, Starmer's abuse of our Jewish identity and his willingness to exploit antisemitism as a political football is shameful. It is harmful not only to freedom of expression, but also to the fight against real antisemitism and racism of all forms, both inside and outside the Labour Party.' The signatories include a former chair of the Bar of Human Rights, Stephen Solley a retired QC.

— 'Charlie Kaplan'