



Director, News and Current Affairs

9 August 2018

Dear Pamela Blakelock,

Thank you for your letter.

I am sorry that you are concerned about our recent coverage of the argument between Dame Margaret Hodge and the Labour Party. I am afraid I do not agree with your analysis. Let me explain why.

The BBC has not of course suggested that the issue of anti-Semitism is specific to the Labour Party, but it is required to report news developments as and when they arise - wherever they arise.

For this reason, the row between a senior Labour figure and the party leadership over this particular issue merited our attention, whether or not an opinion poll has suggested that anti-Semitic attitudes are more prevalent in other political parties.

You also criticise our coverage because Mr Corbyn's denial of the apparent charge made against him by Dame Margaret Hodge was not carried in our headlines, or at the top of a report.

We are not in fact required to carry a particular point in a specific place and I do not think that the BBC can be held to be in breach of its editorial guidelines for not so doing.

While you may have wished us to investigate more deeply than we did the roots of the dispute, and the precise language that Dame Margaret may or may not have used, even allowing for the conflicting views of events, there were many Labour voices who questioned the political sense in the row given the particular background of discontent with the Labour leadership among the Jewish community, irrespective of what precisely happened on this occasion.

This was recognised by the shadow chancellor himself when he appeared to distance himself from the proceedings against her on Today, before they were in fact dropped.

You also criticise the questions we asked Dame Margaret and her supporters. We have of course put the key points to them. In the interview with Margaret Hodge on Today on 23 July, Martha Kearney put to her Jeremy Corbyn's comments that he will not tolerate anti-Semitism in the party and the action he has taken as leader to root it out directly. She also pressed her on the claim that the Code of Conduct would not cover some forms of anti-Semitism and repeatedly challenged her on the language she had used when she confronted the leader in the House of Commons.

I quite understand your point about the particular details of the different definitions of anti-Semitism. We have in fact explored the issue in some depth - for example here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45030552>

"The recent backdrop to this is the new code of conduct Labour has adopted on anti-Semitism - critics, including Jewish leaders and some Labour MPs, say it is not as comprehensive as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's guidelines.

Labour does not accept this, saying it has replicated the international definition word-for-word in its code of conduct.

The row centres on a list of "contemporary examples of anti-Semitism" cited by the IHRA. Labour has come up with its own list, "derived in part from the IHRA guidelines".

Labour says it has "expanded and contextualised" the IHRA examples to provide "legally sound guidelines that a political party can apply to disciplinary cases".

Critics say the Labour code leaves out examples of how criticism of Israel can be anti-Semitic. For example, it omits a line that warns against "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour".

Labour says that "without contextualisation" this line "could curb legitimate criticism of the Israeli State", and could deny Palestinians the right to speak about the oppression and racism they feel they have suffered.

But the party says its code of conduct expressly prohibits criticism of the Israeli State that holds it to a higher standard than that expected of other democratic states, and which denies Jewish people the same right to self-determination as other peoples, in line with IHRA guidelines."

I can of course assure you that we will report on any future developments in this story with impartiality and accuracy and I hope this answers your concerns.

Yours sincerely,



Fran Unsworth