

Labour Party fringe meeting, 24 September 2021

Jewish Voice for Labour was founded in July 2017 and we had our public launch here at the Labour Party Conference that year.

We did so as Jewish members of the Labour Party attracted by the radical programme offered by Jeremy Corbyn, recently elected – then re-elected – as leader against the hostility of the Party machine, the majority of MPs, and the old Blairites and others. These others included the Labour’s Zionist affiliate – the so-called Jewish Labour Movement which campaigned and voted against Corbyn on both occasions

Despite its name it obviously does not speak for all Jews in the Labour Party. It cannot and does not speak for those of us who do not accept, for example, “the centrality of Israel to Jewish life” everywhere.

It is not that Jews are “naturally” radical or “naturally” conservative. But as Murray Glickman argued in a recent post on our website, the ‘dissident’ views of Jewish socialists are rooted in both our historical experience of living as minority, diaspora communities and our ethical traditions. As he puts it, “we are dissidents *because we are Jews*”.

We are obviously talking of a predisposition, not an iron law, born in specific historical circumstances!

The Labour Party has always attracted Jewish members. In the immediate postwar period Jews were much more likely to vote Labour than Conservative. Some remained there and many others were drawn to or returned to Labour attracted by its radical turn at the end of 2015. But the Jewish world had moved over time. When Ed Miliband was leader [see here and here] only about 15% of Jews voted Labour at all. And Labour’s organised Zionist affiliated society was hostile to the radicalism we wished to support.

We needed a Jewish, not a Zionist, voice for Labour.

Our political priorities are universal human rights and dignity; justice for all; freedom of expression; and democracy in the Labour Party.

Our mission is to contribute to making the Labour Party an open, democratic and inclusive party... As such we aim to strengthen the party in its opposition to all forms of racism including antisemitism, broadening the party’s appeal to all sections of British society.

We take inspiration from the long history of Jewish involvement in the socialist and trade-union movements and in antiracist and antifascist struggles, including the anti-apartheid and civil-rights movements.

Just as many Jewish groups emerged in the wider society saying Not in My Name in relation to Israel, so it was essential to have a Jewish voice standing out against the mad rush to label Labour as an unsafe space for Jews. It isn’t and it never has been –except recently, for us...

Fighting all forms of racism was always a key JVL objective but our work was increasingly focused on opposing what rapidly developed into a witch-hunt ostensibly for antisemites but, in practice largely of left wingers, especially advocates for Palestinians rights.

I can only repeat that the evidence shows that the incidence of antisemitism in the Labour Party, while real, is small and certainly lower than in the Tory party and further to the right; fewer than 0.4% of members have been so accused while popular perception, promoted by the mainstream media, is that it is one in three!

Many of those accusations were of what was actually trenchant criticism of Israel, in the face of its cruel wars on Palestinians and its ongoing settler colonial encroachment on Palestinian lands. It is here that the highly contentious IHRA definition of antisemitism has done huge damage, eroding our right to free speech by feeding a culture of fear about saying anything at all on the topic of Israel (I will say more in a moment)

Most of the so-called “antisemitism” took the form of so-called “tropes” on social media – the use of phrases and images which can sometimes be problematic. From cases we have seen, a few showed real antisemitism, but more often they were the product of a lack of understanding of the issues, rather than hatred of Jews.

We have no doubt that the only effective way to dealing with them is by education and discussion, with disciplinary action a last not a first resort.

Antisemitism of course needs to be discussed and opposed. The [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#), drafted recently by more than 200 Jewish scholars worldwide, is a good place to start: antisemitism, it says is a form of racism – racism towards Jews – and defines it like this: *Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).*

It offered this in response to the widespread adoption of the IHRA saying that the latter’s effect, by bringing certain kinds of criticism of Israel into the definition of antisemitism, had been to sow “confusion and generate[d] controversy, hence weakening the fight against antisemitism”. You will recall the pressure Labour was put under at the time, to adopt the definition. And when it had the temerity to interpret it with a Code of Conduct making sense of it, Labour was accused of being antisemitic for even daring to question what had arisen as a working draft and was now being treated as holy writ.

There is no doubt the IHRA definition has had a chilling effect on discussion of Palestinian rights precisely because they can’t be discussed without mentioning Israel... What it has done is to render criticism of Israel suspect, likely to be antisemitic, unless and until you prove it is not.

Let us try to put antisemitism into the context of racism in general – *including anti-Palestinian racism*: in our society, our Party and look at how Labour has chosen to tackle it.

The evidence is patchy and Dr Alan Maddison has made heroic efforts to interpret it in a variety of articles we have published (e.g. [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Without citing statistics it is

patently obvious that the percentage of those in the population who express prejudice towards racial others is distressingly high. And it is clearly a problem in the Party

Labour's response at every turn has been to focus on the disruptive effects of the Black Lives Matter Movement, the threat to law and order of the demolition of the Colston statue in Bristol for example, not its liberatory potential. Black members feel increasingly disenchanted with the Party, and further dismay is caused by the ever further delay in publishing the Forde report into the institutional racism of Labour's own structures revealed in the leaked report. Dismay not only to Black members but also to Muslim members where Labour's formal commitment to fighting Islamophobia translates into nothing on the ground. Even worse: a senior official prepared to scapegoat the Muslim community in Batley and Spen in anticipation of a defeat in the by-election there and no repudiation was ever issued from the Leader's Office. *And we know from the Labour Muslim Network that over 1 in 4 of Muslim members has experienced Islamophobia inside the Labour Party; over 1 in 3 has witnessed incidents of Islamophobia*

Instead of actually considering antisemitism as part of a broader spectrum of racism, it has been exceptionalised in the Labour Party. It is treated as though it is the only form of racism that matters today.

Here is my own MP, Sir Keir Starmer who in a wide-ranging series of interviews with Stephen Bush, published in the New Statesman on 15 September last week, said:

The battles we've had in the Labour Party in the last 18 months have pretty well all been about anti-Semitism, so they're set up or described as a left-right-centre battle: they're not. I said I was going to tackle anti-Semitism, and we've had to take action."

This period covers, remember, the leaked report, many of the Black Lives Matter upheavals, related directly to anti-Black prejudice and discrimination in the wider society; as well as the David Evans bans on discussion of the EHRC Report, the purges of those who refused to accept this diktat. As Evans put it, "our responsibility to double down on anything that may cause members to continue to feel unwelcome and unsafe must take precedence over our rights at this time".

Makes who feel unwelcome and unsafe? Which of the many Jewish communities? Or do Evans and Starmer subscribe to the manifestly antisemitic view that all Jews think alike?

As a suspended Jewish member of JVL's committee, Tony Booth put it, "by making "rooting out antisemitism" their "number one priority" they establish a hierarchy of racism and discrimination, which is itself cringingly discriminatory against all vulnerable groups including against Jews."

It just so happens that the trawl for antisemites has, as far as we can see, largely netted Jews, including 11 of JVL's 17-member committee. It should be a bad joke but it is real enough. It is incredibly painful for a single Jewish person to be accused of antisemitism, recalling the dark days of what real antisemites did to Jews in earlier times: open abuse, foul life-threatening accusations, exclusion, physical violence up to and including extermination.

Just think, for example, of what this label of antisemitism means, thrown at Diana Neslen, 81-year old orthodox Jew and widow, antiracist activist all her life...

Or of our friend Riva Joffe, a Jewish LP member, who died this week with the stain of an antisemitism allegation, false of course, hanging over her and without the ability to clear her name.

And the many other Jewish activists – Stephen Marks, Jo Bird, Mike Howard, Jenny Manson, Leah Levane, Graham Bash, Heather Mendick and more. Does the LP not have a duty to make the party a safe and welcoming space for them as well?

We have seen antisemitism – and the legitimate fears of it that *all* Jews have– cynically exploited and manipulated to gain factional advantage in a project that threatens the very future of the Labour Party as a radical force.

The so-called struggle against antisemitism is, in reality, largely a phoney war, a cover for getting rid of socialists and an excuse for not dealing with the patently visible other racisms that pervade our society and, inevitably, express themselves in our Party too.

And it has not made the position of Jews safer, in our Party or in the wider society. On the contrary!

Richard Kuper