

A Fish Rots from the Head Downwards

by Michael Curtis



Something is rotten in the state of the British Labour Party. It appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

Probably the most famous newspaper front page ever published is that of the French paper *L'Aurore* of January 13, 1898 with an open letter titled "*J'Accuse*," written by Emile Zola to the President of the French Republic, Felix Faure, defending Alfred Dreyfus who was accused of treason by the leaders of the French Army. Zola blamed the Army for concealing the truth about the false charge and conviction of the Jewish officer Dreyfus. His impassioned plea, countering the antisemitic agitation of his day, is a landmark in the use, and the power of the media, in rousing and influencing, public opinion.

In the midst of the campaign in Britain for the general election to be held on December 12, 2019, an unusually strong

article was published on the front page of the *Jewish Chronicle*, JC, of November 7, 2019. It is titled, "To all our fellow British citizens," and addressed to those who do not normally read the paper, in other words, non-Jews. It is a devastating criticism of Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, expressing dismay that he could ever be elected to become prime minister. It deplores the near total inaction of Corbyn and the rest of the Labour leadership in dealing with the antisemitism in the Party that has both emboldened them and encouraged others.

The JC acknowledged that voters would obviously consider the great issue of Brexit facing Britain, and other issues such as the National Health Service, and Education, but the racist views of a party, a fear that he inspires in an ethnic minority, is also a fundamental issue. The JC believes that the overriding majority of British people abhor racism. It asks only that when people cast their vote they act on that issue.

The evidence of the extent of antisemitism of a considerable number of the Labour Party, LP, and of Corbyn himself has led to extraordinary politics; a number of Labour MPs have called on their supporters not to vote Labour but to vote for the Conservative party. On November 6, 2019 Ian Austin, close associate of Gordon Brown, the last Labour PM, called on decent, traditional, patriotic Labour voters to vote conservative, because the scandal of antisemitism has poisoned the LP since Corbyn has been leader since September 2015. Austin accused Corbyn of creating a culture of extremism and intolerance. Moreover, throughout his career Corbyn has allied with and supported antisemitism. It is necessary to stand up to this or "disappear into a vortex of eternal shame or embarrassment."

Simultaneously, Tom Watson, long time Labour MP, and 35 years in full time politics, resigned on November 6, 2019, as deputy leader, and as a candidate for the next election. Though he

did not specifically raise the issue of antisemitism in his resignation letter, Watson has been not only a key moderate in the LP, but critical of the inaction of the Labour leader and the rest of the leadership in dealing with the antisemitism in the party. Other well-known Labour figures, Luciana Berger, Dame Louise Ellman, and Joan Ryan, non-Jewish chair of the Labour Friends of Israel have resigned from the LP.

Ryan, MP for a London constituency, announced her resignation and was the eighth LP member to quit the party because of its culture of anti-Jewish racism. She accused the Labour leadership of allowing Jews to be abused with impunity, and declared that Corbyn, and the "Stalinist clique that surrounds him," was not fit to lead the country. She, in similar fashion as other critics, held that the party had become institutionally antisemitic, and that Corbyn had presided over the culture of anti-Jewish racism and attacks on Israel that now "afflicts my former party."

Corbyn of course purports not to be antisemitic, yet allegations to the contrary seem justified. He has clearly had questionable associations with anti-Semites, such as Paul Eisen, Rev. Stephen Sizer, and Raed Salah, while has treated leaders of Jewish organizations such as the Jewish Board of Deputies, and the Jewish Leadership Council with indifference or worse.

Eisen, self-confessed extreme Holocaust denier, said he has been close to Corbyn for 25 years and the Corbyn had attended all his annual events and donated money to his pressure group. Even the Palestinian Campaign group disowned him because he was in thrall to antisemitic conspiracy theories. Rev. Sizer was banned in February 2019 by the Church from using social media because of his antisemitic remarks, and his statement blaming Israel for 9/11 in New York. Corbyn wrote a letter defending Sizer, arguing he was under attack by a pro-Israel smear company. Sizer, he said, had been victimized because he had "dared to speak out against Zionism." Salah, who has been

charged in Israel with anti-Jewish racism, was called by Corbyn a "very honored citizen."

The indictment can continue. Corbyn was not a distant participant. He hosted representatives from Hamas and Hezbollah. He defended the existence of a mural in East London that was widely condemned as antisemitic. In 2014 he attended and laid a wreath at a ceremony in Tunisia honoring Palestinians who were linked to the murders of the 11 Israelis at the 1972 Munich Olympic games. Corbyn hosted meetings with representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah. He was a member of Facebook groups that posted antisemitic remarks.

The head of the party rots the body of it. Antisemitism coming from the LP is not subtle. Examples are plentiful but two in recent days will suffice. One is Chris Williamson, a Corbyn defender, who asserted that those who asserted that Corbyn is antisemitic were conducting a "proxy war and bulls..t." The LP, he said, had been too apologetic over antisemitism, and was being demonized as a racist and bigoted party. Yet, Williamson had booked a room in Parliament to show a film about an activist suspended for alleged antisemitism. Deliberately inflammatory, Williamson defended people such as Jackie Walker, the activist who was expelled from the LP because of her comments on the role of Jews in the slave trade. Jackie Walker, black Jewish, had declared that "many Jews (my ancestors too) were the chief financiers of the sugar and slave trade, which explains why there are so many synagogues in the Caribbean." Corbyn has defended Williamson as "a very good, very effective Labour MP."

Another recent comment comes from Kate Ramsdem, senior official with Unison TU, and once a LP candidate. Claims that Corbyn was an antisemite, she argued, were orchestrated by the wealthy establishment who do not want a socialist government. The historic antisemitic tropes are mixed with Holocaust denial. She compared the actions of Israel to those of a child abuser: "Like many abusers, unable to reflect on their own

abuse, and ending up in the abuse of others, exerting their power on those weaker than themselves, because once they were the powerless.”

Antisemitism keeps rearing its ugly head everywhere in recent months. In October 14, 2019 in Sofia, fans of a Bulgarian soccer team gave Nazi salutes, as well as shouting racist and antisemitic remarks in their international game against England. In Halle where Jews have lived since the 11th century, attack was made on a synagogue on Yom Kippur. A sad story concerns the Italian Jewish community, which most estimates suggest is about 30,000. The elderly Jewish Senator Lilian Segre , now 89, called for a parliamentary committee to tackle antisemitism and racism in the country. She received hundreds of hostile messages on the social media, after she revealed her proposal. Also, prominent political figures, Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy, all abstained on the motion.

Will the Jewish Chronicle have the same effect of *J'Accuse*, and change the voting of non-Jews as well as Jews because of the LP antisemitism? In the past, the majority of British Jews voted Labour. This has changed in recent years: estimates, though not unanimous, regarding the 2017 general election indicate that 63% of Jews voted Conservative while 26% voted Labour. Not surprisingly, Labour lost the “Bagel Belt,” the Jewish areas in north London. The Jewish Labour Movement, JLM, which claims 2,500 members and is affiliated to the LP, announced on October 31, 2019 that it would not support the LP in the December election. The JLM however, still supports Labor’s values and will not back a conservative for PM.

Whatever the impact of the JC article, it focused attention on a key issue, whether the LP is institutionally antisemitic and whether a racist can possibly become Prime Minister. British voters will decide.