

Investigating Antisemitism in the British Labour Party

by Michael Curtis



The most unusual and unexpected event of 2020 was the appearance and rapid spread of the pandemic Covid-19 that has led to dramatic loss of human life and disturbance of any normal way of life. An equally surprising, though less consequential, event is the decision by the tourist board of Kazakhstan, a country now distinguished by its non -citizen, the fictitious character Borat, invented by Sacha Baron Cohen, to adopt his catchphrase "It's very nice," as the perfect marketing tool to encourage tourism. More significant is the publication by the official British Equalities and Human Rights Commission on October 29, 2020, of a scathing landmark Report on the British Labour Party, "Antisemitism in the Labour Party." Even more dramatically, hours later, came the suspension from the Party, pending investigation, of the former leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Far from welcoming the Report, Corbyn released an insulting statement that the scale of the problem, antisemitism in the Labour Party, was

“dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party, as well as by much of the media.”

The basic premise of the Report is that politicians on all political sides have a responsibility to set standards in public life and to challenge prejudice, harassment and discrimination in all its forms. Obviously, freedom of expression and ability to engage in robust debate is a vital basic facet of a democratic society, but equally, language sows division and can become unacceptable.

Unfortunately, the behavior of politicians often falls far below an ideal standard. Nowhere is this more true than in the British Labour party whose culture did not do enough to aspire to a desirable standard regarding the issue of antisemitism. For years allegations have been made that elements in the Labour Party, LP, are institutionally antisemitic, and did not reprove Holocaust denial and Jewish conspiracy theories. The Report indicates the validity of these allegations.

The Report is not a complete analysis of the main issue and needs amplification, but it is a valuable starting point for understanding, and it is a devastating commentary on the litany of mistakes and missed opportunities by the LP in dealing with the presence of antisemitism in the party, supposedly pledged to zero tolerance of antisemitism. It speaks of 900 party members who were investigated or suspended for anti-Jewish hate, and the expulsion of 63 over the past three years.

The Report found the LP under the leadership of Corbyn was guilty of unlawful acts of harassment, discrimination, and political interference in antisemitic complaints. It was equally concerned about the lack of leadership on these issues, which has ignored legitimate and genuine complaints of antisemitism by members of the party. It concluded the past leadership had failed to properly address the issue or to take

decisive action. Three factors are interesting. One is that, of the 70 complaints investigated, 59 concerned the social media. A second is that of the more than 220 allegations were made since 2011, most came from the social media. A third factor is that the LP behavior towards antisemitism can be contrasted with the comprehensive guidance and training to handle sexual harassment complaints, showing the LP's ability to act decisively when it wants to.

The Report found the LP had breached the Equality Act of 2010 that states that political parties must not discriminate, harass, or victimize members or associates on the basis of characteristics, including race and religion. It did so in three ways; political interference in complaints; harassment; failure to provide adequate training to those handling antisemitic cases. The former leader Corbyn was guilty not simply of failing to act, but actually interfering in the processes concerning antisemitism. The party did not do enough to prevent antisemitism and even could be seen to accept it. Its response to complaints has been inconsistent, poor, and not transparent, whether in terms of reasons for decisions, record keeping or delay.

The Report found that the party committed unlawful harassment through the decisions of its agents. It dismissed complaints of antisemitism as fake or smears. Complaints were not investigated properly in a fair and transparent manner, or not investigated at all.

It found evidence of political interference in the handling of antisemitic complaints.

It reviewed 70 complaints made between March 2016 and May 2019 and held there were 23 cases of political interference by the leader of LP or his staff, actions that were discriminatory and unlawful. One case in April 2018 concerned Corbyn who had posted a comment supporting an artist, a Los Angeles street artist Mear One who had produced an antisemitic

mural, in the East End of London, including caricatures of hook-nosed Jewish bankers playing a game of monopoly with tablets resting on the backs of naked workers. As justification for his later position, Corbyn cited the case in which the mural by Diego Rivera in Rockefeller Center, NY, was plastered over. His office held that the complaint against Corbyn fell well below the threshold required for investigation.

The Report recalls incidents involving two individuals: Ken Livingstone, successful hard leftist politician and MP, mayor of London 2000-2008 before losing to Boris Johnson, and Naz Shah. Born in Bradford to Pakistani parents, Naz Shah is MP for that district. Before she became an MP she made some remarks on Facebook in April 2016, mainly that "Israel be relocated to the U.S." She later apologized for her words which were not "excusable," and vowed to build a better relation "between faith communities." She then acknowledged her comments were antisemitic, that her language was offensive, and that she did not realize it was antisemitic or racist. Her comments in fact went beyond what can be considered as legitimate criticism of the Israeli government, and it is doubtful they could be considered as protected by rights to free expression.

Ken Livingstone, "Red Ken," is not well known as a history analyst, and his reputation in that field depends on his conclusion that Adolf Hitler supported Zionism, and that Hitler passed a law that the Zionist flag and the swastika were the only flags that could be flown in Germany.

Then a member of the national executive committee of the LP, Livingstone approved Shah' comment .He sought to minimize the offensive nature of Shah's remarks by arguing they were merely criticism of Israeli policy in conflict with Palestinians. For him the criticism of Shah was a smear campaign by the "Israel lobby" to paint critics of Israel as antisemitic and to undermine the party leadership of Jeremy

Corbyn. The Report concluded that Livingstone can be accused of “unwanted conduct related to Jewish ethnicity” for his defense of Shah.

Livingstone was suspended by the party in 2017 and resigned in the following year.

The question is now open of whether the new leader of the LP, Sir Keir Starmer will take further disciplinary action against Corbyn and others. It is dispiriting that there has been no contrition on the part of Corbyn but only shameless comments, insisting the Report was dramatically exaggerated for political reasons and the product of party factionalism.

Keir Starmer on becoming LP leader pledged regarding antisemitism to “tear out this poison by its roots.” He showed action in sacking Rebecca Long-Bailey, Labour MP who was a supporter of Corbyn and a candidate to replace him as leader, from her position as shadow education minister. The reason was she had retweeted the comments, in essence a Jewish conspiracy theory, made by Maxine Peake who she called an “absolute diamond.” Peake, well known actress and political activist prone to contentious remarks on Israel and other matters, remarked in an interview that the U.S. police learned their neck-kneeling restrain techniques to use on George Floyd from seminars with Israeli secret services. She is used to play fantasies in her roles on TV series and did not apologize for her fantasy of a conspiracy, but she did “clarify” her diatribe by saying she was “inaccurate in my assumption of American police training and its sources.”

There are signs of change. In July 2020 as a result of the decision in the British High Court the Labour Party agreed to pay “substantial” damages to seven former employees who sued the party for making false and defaming comments about them when, as whistleblowers, they had criticized Corbyn’s refusal to investigate complaints of antisemitism.

At a time when antisemitism has been increasing in the UK with 1,690 incidents in 2018, and 1,805 in 2019, the Report comes none too soon, with its reminder that it is essential for British politicians to consistently demonstrate the values of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect.