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Britain - No Other Minority: Keir Starmer's Silence on the Islamophobia Report Speaks Volumes About Labour's Hierarchy of Racism

Saturday 21 November 2020, by [SARKAR Ash](#) (Date first published: 19 November 2020).

This wouldn't happen to any other minority" has been a rallying cry for the Labour party's fiercest critics of its handling of the antisemitism crisis. It's certainly true that the specific characteristics of antisemitism have sometimes resulted in the British left's reluctance to see it in the same way as other antiracist struggles. Antisemitism does not claim colonialism as its origin story; makes cyclical appearances in history; and its violence (at this present day, in this context) is not tied to systemic disadvantage in either the jobs market or the criminal justice system. The left's lack of literacy on this issue - its blundering incomprehension, and occasional outright hostility - is real. But the idea, [favoured by the Board of Deputies](#) amongst others, that "no other minority" would be treated so poorly by the Labour party, is a fiction.

Take the report into Islamophobia released last week, commissioned and compiled by the Labour Muslim Network. The survey of 422 Muslim members found that a quarter had directly experienced Islamophobia within the party, while a third had witnessed it firsthand. Nearly half reported that they did not have confidence that Labour had the ability to deal with such complaints effectively, and 55% of respondents said they do not "trust the leadership of the Labour party to tackle Islamophobia effectively". And despite the key role Muslim voters have played in winning Labour seats (one researcher estimated that [85% of the Muslim electorate](#) broke for Labour in 2017), 59% of Labour Muslim Network's respondents reported that they did not feel "well represented by the leadership of the Labour party."

While the statistics alone are damning, the experiences of Muslims within Labour's ranks make for even more depressing reading. Ali Milani, who stood as Labour's candidate in Uxbridge and South Ruislip, disclosed that a fellow party member had said that Muslims shouldn't be MPs because of their "propensity for violence" and asked if he was a terrorist. After filing a complaint, Milani had to wait a year for the party to respond - only to be told that the complaint had been lost.

Another anonymous member reported that they'd been accused of "weaponising" their religion after having asked to take a break at a local meeting, as they'd been fasting all day for Ramadan. They have yet to receive any kind of response from the Labour party to their complaint.

In the same [leaked report](#), which appeared to show a pattern of bullying and verbal abuse of Black MPs such as Clive Lewis and Diane Abbott, it was alleged that in 2016, an extensive complaint had been made by an independent councillor regarding the conduct of Jim Fitzpatrick. It accused the then Poplar and Limehouse MP of displaying "a pattern of racist behaviour", including [tweeting disparagingly](#) of "same old, same old worst of Bengali politics." Iain McNicol, Labour's general secretary at the time, is alleged to have replied to the councillor that they could not have a

complaint heard by the party, as she was not a member and was “a political opponent”. As such, no investigation into Mr Fitzpatrick’s behaviour took place, and no formal disciplinary action was taken. According to Labour’s own rules, however, there is nothing which bars an individual who isn’t a party member from submitting a complaint.

In a statement issued by Labour and attributed to Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner, the party has at least acknowledged the Islamophobia report’s existence (“We thank Labour Muslim Network for this important report, as well as their work to ensure our Muslim members are represented, included and heard. Islamophobia has no place in our party or society and we are committed to rooting it out.”) But so far neither Starmer nor Rayner have issued a public statement about its contents – despite the report’s findings of a lack of faith in the leaderships’ handling of Islamophobia by Muslim members being covered in national broadcast media. Nor have either commented on the report on [“Black people, racism and human rights”](#), published on 11 November by the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights. As well as documenting a systemic pattern of Black people being disadvantaged by the healthcare system and treated unfairly by the police, the cross-party committee found that the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) “has been unable to adequately provide leadership and gain trust in tackling racial inequality in the protection and promotion of human rights.”

If the Labour leadership’s wall of silence on these two reports into Islamophobia and anti-blackness says one thing, it’s that the perpetual insistence of “no other minority” falls apart the minute you look at the Labour party’s treatment of, well, other minorities.

We do not exist in a political reality in which the pain of Black people or Muslims is universally recognised, seen as legitimate, and acted upon as an urgent priority – even in an organisation which considers itself ‘the party of antiracism’. There’s a powerful temptation for we, the “other minorities”, to look at the bandwidth afforded to the antisemitism crisis in politics and media – indeed, its very recognition as a crisis – and say “I want some of that.”

Indeed, there’s no virtuous excuse for the press’ comparative indifference towards the racism faced by Muslims and Black people across party politics, and within Labour specifically. The media’s merry construction of a hierarchy of racism deserves nothing but contempt. But a replication of the form and content of antisemitism coverage wouldn’t look like a good result for communities of colour, even if such a thing were possible. In order for there to be anything which looks like progress on the issue of racism within the Labour party, two things must be acknowledged:

1. That through no fault of the Jewish community, the press and the party’s response to antisemitism has made it more difficult to deal with racism more generally, and
2. That effective and meaningful antiracism is about so much more than just the recognition of identity – it’s a matter of dismantling racist structures and political orientation.

If Labour has been ineffective in combating racism, it is at least in part because their chosen strategy has made it so. How could Keir Starmer possibly have criticised the EHRC’s record on tackling anti-blackness when less than a fortnight prior, his general secretary warned that CLPs could face sanction if they impugned the independence or integrity of the EHRC? And how could anyone take Islamophobia within the Labour party seriously when the mere mention of the treatment of other community groups is met with accusations of ‘whataboutery’? Intentional or not, an effect of the antisemitism crisis has been to delegitimise – and indeed, cast as suspect – the left

and the wider Labour movement speaking out on antiracism.

Meanwhile, across broadcast and print media, individuals with chequered records on race relations – from [Ian Austin](#) to [Michael Gove](#), [David Baddiel](#) to [Michael Fabricant](#) – have been elevated to positions of seeming moral authority on the issue of racism. The effect of this pattern in party strategy and press coverage has been to turn racism into a zero-sum game: for one community's concerns to be taken seriously, others must be implicitly and explicitly marginalised, denigrated, and treated as lesser.

But better party strategy, or fairer media coverage, does not result in a healthier antiracist politic. Put it this way: the bullying of black MPs might be stamped out, but it would not mean that Labour's policy on policing or immigration would improve. Milani might be treated in a respectful fashion at CLP meetings, but that would not necessarily change how Muslims are perceived in politics more generally. It's absurd that when we discuss the question of Islamophobia in politics, the conversation focuses on the ill-advised tweets of politicians or insults lobbed amongst the membership. Why isn't it considered an indictment of the Labour party's race politics that the individuals involved in driving the country to war with Iraq – bombing the living daylight out of the Middle East on flimsy and discredited pretexts – still enjoy a comfortable place in public life? Perhaps it says something that the humanity of those countless Iraqi dead has never been seen as the business of politics proper. Racism has never been the mere sum total of how individuals treat one another. It's about domestic policy, geopolitics and power.

It is these structures which determine the hierarchy of racism that have emerged. The antisemitism crisis in Labour is a crisis of the fragmented terrain of antiracism, of communities being set into competition with one another to be heard. I don't have any particular optimism that this will improve any time soon. But we can start by rejecting the toxic logic of "no other minority".

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P.S.

- Novara Media. 19 November 2020:
<https://novaramedia.com/2020/11/19/no-other-minority-keir-starmers-silence-on-the-islamophobia-report-speaks-volumes-about-labours-hierarchy-of-racism/>
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