

Controversies in the British Labour Party: Antisemitism and the left

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [KELEMEN Paul](#) (Date first published: May 2016).

Paul Kelemen, author of *The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce*, looks at the roots of the recent controversies in the British Labour Party

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If the mainstream media is to be believed, the Labour Party is seriously afflicted with antisemitism. Although most of the remarks cited as incriminating were directed at Israel and pro-Israeli activism, and not at Jews, they have been fused into a picture of a party leader that as a supporter of the Palestinian cause is indulgent of anti-Israel sentiment, sliding into antisemitism.

For creating this perfect storm, elements in and outside the party, wanting for a range of rightwing reasons to undermine Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, latched on to a controversy initiated by pro-Israeli activists seeking to pre-empt Labour moving away from its traditional pro-Israeli stance. Several of the newspapers that have eagerly joined the hunt to root out Labour's antisemites are unlikely champions for this cause. Not so long ago, they had been insinuating that the previous Labour leader's Jewish origins – highlighted by such apparently telltale signs as his foreign-born Marxist father and alleged ineptness in eating a bacon sandwich – made him unsuitable material to be a British prime minister. But their newfound outrage over antisemitism has a wider agenda than undermining the current Labour leader.

The Bradford MP Naz Shah and the newly elected first Muslim president of the National Union of Students, Malia Bouattia, have been prominent among those accused of antisemitism – and this against the immediate backdrop of a London mayoral election in which the Muslim background of the Labour candidate, Sadiq Khan, was turned into a campaign issue. Notwithstanding Khan distancing himself from Corbyn and declaring fidelity to the interests of the financial sector, he has been tagged, not least by David Cameron, as someone who may be a Trojan horse for Islamic extremists. It is not without bitter irony that London's Jewish community, which prior to the First World War was stigmatised as the hotbed of dangerous fanatics infected by such foreign ideologies as anarchism and communism, is now cheered on by the *Daily Mail* to lead the charge in castigating another ethnic minority as the carriers of antisemitism and other contagions.

In seeking to win Anglo-Jewry's tacit approval for this ignominious task, leading communal organisations such as the Board of Jewish Deputies, the National Union of Jewish Students and the Zionist Federation have played up the threat of antisemitism which, as recent YouGov and Pew surveys show, is at an all-time low in the UK. The fear that really haunts them is that a future Labour government might abandon its traditional close ties with Israel, which under the Blair and Brown governments had seemed beyond challenge.

Righteous indignation

Blair's Middle East interventions, in tamely following US policy, included giving unreserved backing to the Israeli bombings of civilians in Gaza and Lebanon. Although he distanced himself by a whisker from some of the cruder neo-conservative versions of the 'clash of civilisation' thesis by arguing that Islam had a moderate wing with which the West could engage, he nevertheless maintained that what fuelled Islamist movements were not political and economic grievances but intolerant values, inimical to liberal ideals and modernisation.

Failing to acknowledge that the politics of Hamas and Hezbollah was born from the debris of Israeli occupation and military aggression, he sought to placate pro-Palestinian pressure from the party's grassroots by a rhetorical triangulation. Thus Blair repeatedly affirmed that addressing Palestinian grievances was central to resolving the conflicts and enmity in the Middle East but instead of demanding that Israel end its occupation and settlement expansion he prioritised Israeli security concerns, focusing on underpinning the occupation with the Palestinian Authority's collaboration, thereby discrediting it in the eyes of its own people.

Years of successive British governments underwriting the status quo in the Occupied Territories have dulled the sensibility of Anglo-Jewry's leadership to Israel's brutal military rule and to its consequent right-wing drift and ever more racist political culture. This leadership, which launched an avalanche of righteous indignation at Shah's flippant remark that Israel should be moved to the US to resolve the Palestine conflict, has for years watched in silence as Israeli politicians routinely advocate that Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza be 'transferred' to neighbouring countries.

"What 'singles out' Israel is not the 'original sin' of the Palestinians' expulsion... but that it is continuing its ethnic cleansing to this day"

And Israeli threats of 'transfer' are not just musings on the internet. By a host of measures – some by administrative ploys such as the revoking of work permits or ID passes on all manner of pretexts, some by military muscle such as house demolition and decreeing areas to be security zones – Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the Negev, Jordan Valley and East Jerusalem are being systematically ethnically cleansed. In Israel itself, withholding from Palestinians certain state provisions, concentrating them into smaller territory or removing them altogether is the reality of deepening the Jewish character of the state, the Zionist goal to which all Israel's main parties are committed.

Double standards?

But why single out Israel for criticism? There are, after all, other states born through the ethnic cleansing of their indigenous population. The US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile and countless others, argues Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian*, 'were hardly born of immaculate conception. Those nations were forged in great bloodshed. Yet Israel alone is deemed to have its right to exist nullified by the circumstances of its birth' [1]. Leaving aside Freedland's use of 'nullified' (was South Africa 'nullified' with the dismantling of apartheid?), he overlooks an important difference. Each of the states he mentions has come round to subscribing to a multi-ethnic nation. What 'singles out' Israel is not the 'original sin' of the Palestinians' expulsion, though that unleashed a dynamic that would be hard to remedy, but that it is continuing its ethnic cleansing to this day, still faithful to the logic of settler colonialisms.

The passions unleashed and mutual incomprehension of the two sides in the Israel/Palestine conflict stem from two disastrously intertwined but nonetheless relatively distinct histories. For most Jews,

Israel is linked to being a persecuted minority in Europe and regards the state's formation as at least a partial redemption for the Holocaust. For Palestinians, and others in the Arab and Muslim worlds, Israel is the product of the Western imperial aggression and colonisation.

These are two narratives deeply rooted in conflicting collective memories but unequal in relevance to informing a resolution to the conflict in the Middle East. The Zionist aspiration for self-determination in the form of a Jewish state could not be, and still cannot be, realised without relying on Western imperial power and denying the self-determination of the indigenous people. The emotional charge of left wing hostility to Israel comes not from its claim to be Jewish but from the fact that in relation to the Palestinians it is 'white': an extension of Western power and racial privilege.

If the West European left is to be criticised, it is for the length of time it has taken to rally in support of the Palestinians [2]. In the post-9/11 globalised Islamophobic mobilisation in which the Israeli government claims frontline status, Palestine solidarity has become integral to the anti-racist struggle. The support for the Palestinians through the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign builds on the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles of the past.

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P.S.

* "Antisemitism and the left". Red Pepper. May 2016:
<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/antisemitism-and-the-left/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/29/left-jews-labour-antisemitism-jewish-identity>

[2] ESSF (article 38105), [History of the British Left and the Palestine issue: Conscience little stirred](#).