

Official JVL statement

# A briefing document on the IHRA definition of antisemitism

Tuesday 24 July 2018, by [Jewish Voice for Labour](#) (Date first published: 17 July 2018).

**The following document was sent to all members of the Parliamentary Labour Party ahead of last night's (16 July) meeting.**

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16 July 2018

To all members of the Parliamentary Labour Party:

## ***Briefing - IHRA definition of antisemitism***

**Antisemitism guidelines agreed by the Labour Party National Executive Committee on July 3 have been criticised on the basis that they do not include all the examples attached to a definition of antisemitism adopted in May 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. Critics say that failing to adopt all the IHRA examples represents a betrayal of the Jewish community and undermines the fight against antisemitism. This briefing note is a response to those critics.**

1. The new NEC guidelines are the result of careful consideration by a working party set up for the purpose and including among its number two Jewish NEC members, Jon Lansman and Rhea Wolfson.
2. The IHRA definition has never had unanimous support from British Jews. Its adoption by the Conservative Government in December 2016 was swiftly followed by the publication of a Legal Opinion [1], commissioned by a Jewish-led consortium, warning that the IHRA document was badly drafted and confusing and that it risked "unlawfully restricting legitimate expressions of political opinion". The Opinion said [2]: "...pro-Palestinian campaigners who, for example, describe Israel as a settler-colonialist state enacting a policy of apartheid, or call for policies of boycott, divestment or sanctions against Israel, cannot properly be characterised as antisemitic."
3. The IHRA definition has been used to prevent such criticism of Israel. A headline in *Jewish News* in February announced [3]: "Supporters of the Jewish state to concentrate on the IHRA definition, in order to highlight that it's anti-Semitic to call Israel a racist state." In March, the Israel-Britain Alliance and We Believe in Israel lobbied the Prime Minister [4] to introduce legislation to prevent events taking place on UK campuses under the umbrella "Israel apartheid week" on the basis that to call Israel an apartheid state was a violation of the IHRA definition. This contradicts both the Legal Opinion mentioned in paragraph 2 and the Jewish statement in paragraph 6.
4. Critics of the NEC code have suggested that Labour has shown itself to be antisemitic by

abandoning the “MacPherson principle”, which they say establishes that groups experiencing racism have the sole right to define it. This is a serious misreading, as explained by Professor David Feldman (Director of the *Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism* at Birkbeck College, London University). In his 2015 sub-report to the All Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, Feldman said [5]: “...it is unambiguously clear that Macpherson intended to propose that such racist incidents require investigation. He did not mean to imply that such incidents are necessarily racist. However, Macpherson’s report has been misinterpreted and misapplied in precisely this way.” All forms of discrimination are defined by Parliament and interpreted by the courts; not decided by the groups with protected characteristics.

5. In May this year, Britain’s leading civil liberties NGO, Liberty, overwhelmingly endorsed a resolution at its AGM warning public bodies not to adopt the IHRA definition [6]. Members were concerned that, “by blurring the previously clear understanding of the nature of antisemitism, the IHRA definition risks undermining the defences against it.” They also took the view that by conflating ‘antisemitism’ with ‘criticism of Israel and legitimate defence of the rights of Palestinians,” it threatened to undermine freedom of expression.

6. On June 15, 27 prominent British Jews concerned about the dangers of conflation issued a statement calling for clarity in identifying what antisemitism is and what it is not [7]. They said: “criticism of Israel is not antisemitic unless motivated by anti-Jewish prejudice” and “criticising laws and policies of the state of Israel as racist and as falling under the definition of apartheid is not antisemitic.” Two weeks later this statement was endorsed by leading public figures across a range of professions and political affiliations [8].

7. On July 17, 30 Jewish organisations in a dozen countries will be issuing a Global Jewish Statement which urges “our governments, municipalities, universities and other institutions to reject the IHRA definition.” The definition, it says, is intentionally worded so that legitimate criticisms of Israel and advocacy for Palestinian rights can be equated with antisemitism “as a means to suppress the former.” This conflation, it says, “undermines both the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality and the global struggle against antisemitism”.

8. Against this background, the NEC code should be welcomed as a principled and useful contribution towards providing much needed clarity both about what is truly antisemitic, and what constitutes legitimate political discourse about Israel and Palestine. As explained by a Labour source in response to a critical article in the *New Statesman*: “These guidelines cover all the same ground as the IHRA examples, but they go further, providing more examples and details so they can actually be applied.”

## **Jewish Voice for Labour**

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**P.S.**

\* 17 Jul 2018 :

<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/blog/a-briefing-document-on-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism/>

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## Footnotes

- [1] [http://192.168.1.1/blocking.asp?cat\\_id=76&mac=20C9D0CACBD3&domain=freespeechonisrael.org.uk](http://192.168.1.1/blocking.asp?cat_id=76&mac=20C9D0CACBD3&domain=freespeechonisrael.org.uk)
- [2] [http://192.168.1.1/blocking.asp?cat\\_id=76&mac=20C9D0CACBD3&domain=freespeechonisrael.org.uk](http://192.168.1.1/blocking.asp?cat_id=76&mac=20C9D0CACBD3&domain=freespeechonisrael.org.uk)
- [3] <http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/campaign-to-counter-israel-apartheid-week-will-focus-on-anti-semitism-definition/>
- [4] <https://www.matthewofford.co.uk/news/matthew-joins-protest-outside-parliament-condemn-israel-apartheid-week>
- [5] <http://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=1582>
- [6] <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/resolutions%20passed%202018.pdf>
- [7] [https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/15/we-must-define-antisemitism-to-fight-it-effectively?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/15/we-must-define-antisemitism-to-fight-it-effectively?CMP=share_btn_tw)
- [8] <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/06/steps-towards-defining-antisemitism>