

Britain: Labour's antisemitism code is the gold standard for political parties

Tuesday 24 July 2018, by [LANSMAN Jon](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2018).

The new code makes clear that discrimination against Jewish people is unacceptable while allowing for legitimate criticism of Israel.

Last week, the Labour party introduced a code of conduct on antisemitism, stronger than anything of its kind adopted by any political party in this country. This follows our adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) full definition of antisemitism in 2016 and Labour's annual conference voting overwhelmingly last year to strengthen its rules against antisemitism and racism.

But as well as some welcoming this positive and progressive move, Labour has come under criticism from some MPs and Jewish communal organisations for not simply reproducing the IHRA's working examples word for word. But, far from lowering the bar for what constitutes antisemitism, this code lifts it. It requires a higher standard of behaviour than the IHRA examples do. Labour's code should be seen as the new gold standard.

I have been vocal in talking about my experiences of antisemitism and in calling out the blindness to antisemitism and unconscious bias against Jewish people that pervades our society and politics, including when it appears on the left. I have argued for a long time that Labour must lead the way in tackling this evil within our own party, and pressure other political parties to follow suit. That's why I was so pleased to support this code when it was unanimously approved last week by Labour's national executive committee, of which I'm a member.

The code fully adopts the IHRA definition, and covers the same ground as the IHRA examples, but it also provides additional examples of antisemitism while giving context and detailed explanations to ensure it can be practically applied to disciplinary cases within the party. Three of the four examples that the party has been falsely accused of omitting are explicitly discussed in the code. It states that Jewish people should not be accused of being more loyal to Israel than other countries, that Israel should not be held to higher standards than other countries, and that members should not use Hitler, Nazi and Holocaust metaphors, distortions and comparisons.

The only part of the IHRA working examples that is not explicitly referenced relates to claims about the state of Israel being a racist endeavour (this is a subset of an example, not a standalone one). Of all the elements in the IHRA examples, this is the one that runs the greatest risk of prohibiting legitimate criticism of Israel. It cannot possibly be antisemitic to point out that some of the key policies of the Israeli state, observed since its founding days, have an effect that discriminates on the basis of race and ethnicity.

Labour's code explicitly says that denying Jewish people the same right to self-determination as any other people is discriminatory and therefore antisemitic, and it makes clear that all countries should be held to the same, internationally recognised standards. This explanation and contextualisation is

essential to ensuring that people are able to make legitimate criticisms of Israel, while prohibiting comments that discriminate against Jewish people, deny their right to self-determination or treat Israel differently to the universal standards that apply to all countries.

If legitimate criticism of Israel were to be curbed, that would infringe on the rights of other oppressed groups, who have suffered at the hands of discriminatory Israeli state policies. The Palestinians have experienced decades of occupation, gross human rights violations, and war crimes. The Bedouins have had their homes destroyed, the latest example being the demolition of Khan al-Ahmar. And ethnic minorities within Israel have been treated appallingly, such as the Sudanese and Eritrean refugees who have been detained and deported, and questions over the treatment of Ethiopian women, including allegations they were given birth control without their consent.

I've just been in Israel, where I met people from all different backgrounds, organisations and political persuasions. Those I met, Jewish as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel, spoke about racist state policies, not just in relation to the occupation and settlements, but also within Israel itself – the segregation of housing, education, employment, and systematic economic disadvantage. The Palestinian minority within Israel is as entitled as Jews in Britain to define the discrimination they have experienced as racism. Such criticisms cannot, and must not, be silenced.

It cannot be right that one vaguely worded subset of one IHRA example can deny other oppressed groups their right to speak about their own oppression. That doesn't mean that there aren't contexts in which claims about Israel being a racist endeavour are antisemitic or made with antisemitic intent. But the IHRA's wording is not sufficiently clear. Labour's code of conduct provides the necessary explanation to ensure that legitimate criticism of Israeli policies is not silenced, while not tolerating comments which deny Jewish people the right to self-determination or hold Israel to unfair standards not expected of other states.

I regret that for some Jewish communal organisations, the IHRA wording is so sacrosanct that it cannot be expanded and built upon, contextualised, and turned into a practical, usable document for a political party to enforce. It does beg the question whether these organisations, which claim to speak for the diverse Jewish community, do speak for the 75% of British Jews who say "the expansion of settlements on the West Bank is a major obstacle to peace", or for the 61% who, in the same survey, backed pursuing peace with the Palestinians as one of their top three priorities for Israeli government policy, the top priority of British Jews.

I don't think these organisations, many of which failed to come out against the Blackshirts marching through Cable Street, or those that welcomed the presidency of Donald Trump have the credibility to criticise a political party's robust, thorough and far-reaching code of conduct. The only real difference between the IHRA examples and Labour's code of conduct is that the latter provides clarity, context and detail, whereas the former is vague and open to interpretation.

Conflating legitimate criticism of Israel with antisemitism is dangerous and undermines the fight against antisemitism. Clear and detailed guidelines are essential to ensure that antisemitism isn't tolerated, while protecting free speech on Israel's conduct within a respectful and civil environment. This is what Labour's code of conduct provides. We should be celebrating and replicating it.

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P.S.

* Thu 12 Jul 2018 10.09 BST Last modified on Thu 12 Jul 2018 15.28 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/12/labour-antisemitism-code-gold-standard-political-parties>

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