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A protracted crisis

How the British Labour Party's anti-Semitism problem damages its leader Jeremy Corbyn

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Just at the moment the Conservative government comes even more unstuck over Brexit and the Tories turn against themselves, the British Labour Party cooks up its own internal crisis and manages to let the government off the hook. What could this terribly timed crisis be about? How the left should deal with Brexit, electoral strategy, the threat of new technology to jobs and pay or even how to deal with climate change as the country swelters? No, incredibly, it is a crisis about the extent and the response to anti-Semitism within Labour.

Since Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader in 2015, there have been growing noises about anti-Semitism in Labour's ranks, with claim and counterclaim becoming ever more shrill. Former left stalwart Ken Livingston was in a long-running dispute over his willingness to connect Zionism and Nazism. He eventually resigned from the party. More and more Jewish protestations were made about more and more offensive on-line posts and comments. Jewish Labour MPs felt themselves to be under attack. A pro-Jewish protest was held outside parliament and 68 Rabbis wrote to Jeremy Corbyn to protest. The three leading Jewish newspapers in the UK then combined with a common front page speaking of the existential threat to Jews if Labour won office.

Labour responded by adopting the internationally recognised definition of anti-Semitism – but instead of adopting all the codes and examples, they left out four. This sparked even more anger: was this wriggle room for yet more anti-Semitism? The crisis culminated in two Labour MPs being investigated by the party for alleging that the leadership was racist. The charge against one, Margaret Hodge, has since been dropped and Corbyn recently both wrote an article in the Guardian and sent round a video apologizing for all the hurt caused and pledging to crack down on anti-Semitism claims. The crisis may have abated but is unlikely to go away.

Anti-Semitism claims hijacked to attack Corbyn?

The crisis has two drivers. It is undoubtedly the case that some on the right of Labour are using the issue of anti-Semitism to undermine the Corbyn leadership. For these former Blairites, the political earthquake that hit Labour in 2015 can never be understood nor accepted. In 2016, after the reckless parliamentary coup attempt to challenge Corbyn was overwhelmingly rebuffed by the party membership, and the surprisingly successful 2017 general election performance, they have been waiting for their chance. Not only do they think Corbyn is wrong about the politics of the Middle East, but his views, actions and who he has associated with in the past, show him, in their eyes, to be unfit for high office. So it is important here to disentangle genuine outrage against anti-Semitism with on-going outrage against Corbynism.

With the looming threat of a new centre party being launched and Brexit unfolding as a national disaster, not least for the Tories, Labour is fighting itself and not fighting for the country.

But Corbyn and some on the left must take their share of the blame. In the far reaches of the party, that have now entered more of the mainstream with his victory, some have worryingly blurred the lines between hostility to Israel, the plight of the Palestinians and anti-Semitism. The wider left tendency, of some, to believe that the failure of socialism could only be down to the betrayal of the likes of the 'bankers' plays to other common and distasteful anti-Jewish tropes. The leadership failed to act on these people and these issues. It also spectacularly failed to engage with the many Jewish leaders who aren't disgruntled Blairites furious with Corbyn for taking their jobs and deflecting their party – as they see it – into the wilderness.

That there is far too many incidents of anti-Semitism in Labour is clear, that the issue has been hijacked by some to attack Corbyn is also clear. But why has the leadership handled the issue so badly and what does it mean for its future?

Labour needs to fight for the country

Corbyn won the party leadership by a landslide because he was viewed as a man of principle, who stuck to his guns and wouldn't be swayed by electoral pragmatism, the media or anyone. His moral certainty was his

sword and shield. But what the anti-Semitism crisis has done, justifiably or not, is dent both his moral armour and shown him to be too clunky, at best, when responding to a crisis that should and could have been dealt with better and faster.

This issue can't possibly continue indefinitely. There is little appetite in the wider party to unseat Corbyn over this or any other issue – probably at least until after he fights the next election. But the leadership has been badly shaken by the crisis. Splits in the left have started to appear – not least over whether the left NEC candidate Pete Wilsman should be back for re-election after being recorded ranting about how the anti-Semitism claims were overblown. And the party itself is now more polarised than ever with wounds going deep and becoming very personal.

With the looming threat of a new centre party being launched and Brexit unfolding as a national disaster, not least for the Tories, Labour is fighting itself and not fighting for the country. The fact that each side blames the other, bodes badly for unity, just when unity is most needed.



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