



PERSPECTIVES

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How Labour's Antisemitism Changed the Attitudes of British Jewry

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,424, January 27, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Jeremy Corbyn was elected Chairman of the British Labour Party in September 2015. Ever since then, elected representatives of the party have expressed a steady stream of antisemitic invective, a problem that has never seemed to concern Corbyn or his associates to any great or genuine extent. Labour's antisemitism eventually prompted public expressions of dismay from Jewish organizations, rabbis, parliamentarians, and individuals—a radical departure from the previous behavior of British Jewry, which has long preferred to keep a low profile.

Jeremy Corbyn was elected chairman of the British Labour party with almost 60% of the vote in September 2015. Since then, the public attitudes and behavior of many British Jews and their leaders have changed a great deal. This change was in response to the sharp increase in antisemitic vitriol expressed by elected representatives of the Labour party following Corbyn's ascent.

Corbyn, whose politics place him on the extreme left, is an open sympathizer with Hamas and Hezbollah, which are both genocidal antisemitic terrorist organizations. Many in Labour consider him largely responsible for the party's resounding defeat in the December 12, 2020 parliamentary elections. He has announced he will resign as party leader at some time in the near future.

British Jewry's public attitudes and behavior changed significantly during Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader. Traditionally, British Jewish leaders have preferred to maintain a low profile. This made sense, as Jews represent only about 0.4% of the country's population. On matters of communal interest, Jewish leaders approached the authorities directly to obtain their support.

According to former Labour officials who dealt with complaints within the party, antisemitism was rarely, if ever, a topic before Corbyn's chairmanship—though later research found that extreme antisemitic remarks had been uttered by Labour figures (primarily Muslims) during the administration of Corbyn's predecessor, Ed Miliband. Verbal attacks on Israel were more common. Former Labour Deputy Chairman John Prescott, for example, wrote in 2014 in the *Daily Mirror* that Israel "is acting as judge, jury and executioner in [the concentration camp that is Gaza.](#)"

The first public complaints about Labour antisemitism after Corbyn's election came in early 2016 and concerned the Oxford University Labour Club (OULC). At first, only the key conclusions of the investigation, which was conducted by non-Jewish Labour peer Baroness Royall, were published. The full, initially covered up report was leaked a few months later, probably by Royall.

Publicly disclosed cases of antisemitism within Labour gradually started to pile up as 2016 progressed, prompting Corbyn to charge non-Jewish human rights expert Shami Chakrabarti with investigating it. Her report, published on June 30, 2016, was poorly composed and unprofessional, and did little other than expose her own staggering ignorance about what antisemitism is. Shortly thereafter, on Corbyn's recommendation, she became Baroness Chakrabarti. It is unclear when that peerage was promised to her.

The reaction of the Board of Deputies of British Jews—the community's official umbrella organization and public representative—to the botched report was moderate. However, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis had already said, in May 2016, that the crisis engulfing Labour had "lifted the lid on bigotry." After Corbyn's conference on the Chakrabarti report on July 1, Rabbi Mirvis said Corbyn had caused "greater concern rather than rebuilding trust with the Jewish community." Former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks called Corbyn's words at the conference "dehumanization of the highest order, an outrage, and unacceptable."

Rabbis played a significant role in publicly opposing Corbyn. In July 2018, 68 rabbis published a letter in *The Guardian* urging Labour to listen to the Jewish community and adopt the full International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. This was an unprecedented step, not least because of the pluralistic character of the signatories. They included senior rabbis of the Orthodox, Reform, Masorti, and Liberal Judaism streams as well as Rabbi Avraham Pinter of the Ultra-Orthodox community.

In August 2018, Rabbi Sacks gave an interview to the *New Statesman* in which he said:

We can only judge Jeremy Corbyn by his words and his actions. He has given support to racists, terrorists and dealers of hate who want to kill Jews and remove Israel from the map. When he implies that however long they have lived here, Jews are not fully British, he is using the language of classic pre-war European antisemitism. When challenged with such facts, the evidence for which is before our eyes, first he denies, then he equivocates, then he obfuscates. This is low, dishonest and dangerous. He has legitimized the public expression of hate, and where he leads, others will follow.

Prior to the December 2019 parliamentary election, the former Chair of the Movement for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Romain, wrote to his congregation urging them to vote for whatever political party stands the best chance of beating Labour candidates in the election. This was highly unusual, as British rabbis almost invariably refrain from advising congregants how to vote.

Some of the strongest attacks on Labour antisemitism have come from individuals. David Collier wrote that it is clear that Corbyn's issue with antisemitism "runs far deeper than a few counsellors and MPs." In 2018, sociology lecturer David Hirsh published a book entitled *Contemporary Left Antisemitism*. In March 2019, Labour member and scholar Alan Johnson published a document entitled *Institutionally Antisemitic: Contemporary Left Antisemitism and the Crisis in the British Labour Party*.

In September 2016, the small organization Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA) filed a formal complaint against Corbyn accusing him and his allies of having a long association with antisemites.

Jewish Labour MPs also started to expose the party's antisemitism. MP Ruth Smeeth walked out of Corbyn's press conference on the Chakrabarti report after she was insulted by a reporter. Smeeth claimed Corbyn had failed to intervene when antisemitic slurs were hurled at her in front of him. Later that year, Smeeth defined herself as "British first: 'British, Labour, socialist, Jewish, woman.'"

The Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) was established in 1901. It has been affiliated with the Labour Party for about 100 years. When the party's antisemitism first came out into the open, the JLM tried to muddle through—but it became a tenacious force in later years in response to Corbyn. (Smeeth became Parliamentary Chair of the JLM in April 2018.)

Many Jews who traditionally voted Labour have deserted the party. In April 2019, a survey by the advocacy group the Jewish Leadership Council found that 87% of British Jews believe Corbyn to be antisemitic. Many British Jews began speaking out about possibly emigrating if Corbyn were elected PM, with the survey reporting 47% considering such a move. Even if one doubts that many

Jews would in fact have left Britain had Corbyn become PM, even talking about emigration was a radical departure.

A meeting with Corbyn by leaders of the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council in April 2018 concluded that Corbyn's proposals "fell short of the minimum levels of action." A few weeks earlier, the two organizations had written in an open letter: "Again and again Jeremy Corbyn has sided with antisemites rather than Jews." On March 26, the Board of Deputies organized a demonstration outside Parliament. In May 2018, outgoing president of the Board of Deputies Jonathan Arkush said Corbyn holds antisemitic views and added that British Jews were asking for the first time whether they have a future in Britain.

In July 2018, the *Jewish Chronicle*, the *Jewish News*, and the *Jewish Telegraph*—all rivals—took the remarkable and unprecedented step of publishing the same front page. They said the step was motivated by the "existential threat to Jewish life in this country that would be posed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led government."

Others, including Jewish personalities outside politics, Jewish leadership, or activism, came out against Labour antisemitism. British TV presenter Rachel Riley, whose mother is Jewish, spoke out in September 2018 against Corbyn. The copious hate mail she received in response caused her to think even more about her Jewish roots (though she is an atheist). She pointed out that when British people voice support for Israel, they are targeted and abused by antisemitic messages. She mentioned an unpublished instance of violence against a supporter of Israel, as well as a suicide attempt that was the result of antisemitic abuse. Tracy-Ann Oberman, a Jewish actress and Labour supporter who also came out against antisemitism in the party, said: "We all get the death threats, the sex threats, the body comments."

The heaviest price for Jewish opposition to Corbyn has been paid by Jewish MPs. Smeeth was not reelected in the recent parliamentary elections. At Labour's annual party conference—this was as long ago as September 2016—Smeeth had to arrive with a bodyguard after having received 25,000 abusive messages. MP Luciana Berger had received thousands of hate e-mails by April 2016, some of which threatened her with rape or murder. In September 2018, she attended the Liverpool conference of Labour flanked by police. In February 2019, she quit Labour due to the party's institutional antisemitism and was then defeated while standing for Parliament as a Liberal Democrat. In December 2018, MP Ivan Lewis, who had been suspended by Labour, left the party. Jewish MP Louisa Ellman left the party in October 2019.

The only remaining Jewish female Labour MP is Dame Margaret Hodge. In 2018, she called Corbyn a racist and antisemite in the lobby of Parliament.

The first parliamentarian to leave Labour over the party's antisemitism was Lord Parry Mitchell in September 2016. He said about Corbyn: "Jeremy has no leadership qualities whatsoever. His little group like him and they think he's the Messiah, but he will never become the leader and Prime Minister of this country." Lord Mitchell added: "I'm Jewish and I'm very strongly Jewish and I make no bones about it and there's no doubt in my mind that Jeremy himself is very lukewarm on this subject. He's never been as vociferous in condemning antisemitism as he should be. I think it's very difficult if you are Jewish and you support Israel to be a member of the Labour Party."

In July 2019, former general secretary of Labour Lord Triesman wrote that the party was "no longer a safe political environment for Jewish people or others who opposed antisemitism." He added: "We may one day be the party of anti-racism once again but it certainly isn't today. My sad conclusion is that the Labour party is very plainly institutionally antisemitic, and its leader and his circle are antisemitic having never once made the right judgment call about an issue reflecting deep prejudice. The number of examples is shocking." Triesman resigned from the party, as did a second Jewish peer, Lord Turnberg.

Corbyn will soon resign, but Chief Rabbi Mirvis has said the Labour Party's antisemitism is here to stay. British Jewry's attitudes about that problem, and their willingness to speak out about it publicly, have greatly changed. Those attitudes are now out of the bottle and cannot be pushed back in.

This is an expanded version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on January 4, 2020.

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