



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Suspension of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn: A "Conflict in Progress"

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,832, November 27, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The extremely negative report of the Equality Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on antisemitism in the UK Labour Party was published on October 29. The party's former chairman, Jeremy Corbyn, criticized it, saying allegations of antisemitism had been dramatically overstated for political reasons. He was thereupon suspended as a party member. Since then he has been reinstated, but party chairman Sir Keir Starmer has refused to take him back in the Labour parliamentary faction. Corbyn thus continues to sit in the House of Commons as an independent MP.

The report of the Equality Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on antisemitism in the Labour party took 16 months to prepare. The document, which is highly critical of the party, was finally published on October 29. It was expected to be a central or even dominant issue in party discussions.

The 130-page report contained much material for such discussion. It stated that Labour had broken the law by failing to prevent "acts of harassment and discrimination." It also said Corbyn's leadership "did not do enough to prevent antisemitism and at worst, could be seen to accept it." The report furthermore found "a lack of leadership" within the Labour Party on these issues and said this was "hard to reconcile with its commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism."

The report also "uncovered serious failings" in the way complaints were handled until at least 2018. In addition, it wrote: "The committee found that Mr. Corbyn's office unlawfully 'politically interfered' with almost two dozen cases of alleged antisemitism."

The text of the report was almost immediately overshadowed by Corbyn's reaction to it and what followed. He said allegations of antisemitism had been "dramatically overstated for political reasons." The party's general secretary, David Evans, who is responsible for Labour's disciplinary procedures, is reported to have made the decision to suspend the former chairman in consultation with the party's governance and legal unit. Corbyn also lost the Whip, which means he then sat as an independent MP in the House of Commons. It took several days until the current chairman, Sir Keir Starmer, confirmed that he agreed with the suspension.

Jonathan Goldstein, the chairman of the Jewish Leadership Council, the umbrella body of British Jewry's central organizations and charities, reacted with these words to the publication of the EHRC report:

For the first time in British political history, a major political party was found guilty of harassment and discrimination. The Labour Party had allowed racist members to victimize Jewish people (...). There are lessons from our experience here in the UK that I hope enable swifter and sustained victories in the worldwide effort to confront anti-Jewish racism. Antisemitic behavior such as that of former London Mayor Ken Livingstone, which features in the report, is a daily occurrence in progressive circles around the world.

When Starmer was elected Labour chairman in April of this year, he stressed that he would eliminate antisemitism in the party. He had apparently concluded that it was a major hindrance for Labour to suffer from the image that it was antisemitic. (According to many commentators, however, antisemitism wasn't a major reason for Labour's defeat in the 2019 parliamentary elections.)

Starmer also had personal reasons to come out against antisemitism. His wife and children are Jewish and members of a synagogue, and he had been criticized for failing to oppose Corbyn in past years and for backing him in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

After Starmer's election as Labour chairman, he was frequently asked what his position would be toward Corbyn and the Corbynites. While the issue was related to antisemitism, it was far from clear just how that was the case. A first indication came in June of this year when Rebecca Long-Bailey, Starmer's Corbynite opponent for the position of chairperson, retweeted a vehemently antisemitic message. Starmer then fired her as member of the Shadow Cabinet, where she was secretary of education.

After Starmer was elected, his main options with respect to Corbyn and the Corbynites were two alternative strategies: to seek party unity, or to expel the Corbynite faction and thereby gain additional support for Labour in the middle of the political map to compensate for its loss of the leftist vote.

In the meantime, there are encouraging indications on the general political scene. In April the polls showed Labour far behind the Conservatives, sometimes well over 20%. Yet more recent polls gave Labour a bit more support than the Conservatives. It is a remarkable performance.

This is not only due to Starmer's merits. It also reflects the public's lack of the trust in the COVID prevention policies of the Conservative government. PM Boris Johnson's approval rate at the end of October was only around the mid-thirties, while almost 60% of the population considered his performance negative.

The suspension of Corbyn created new dynamics. It also brought the antisemitism issue and the future of Corbyn and the Corbynites somewhat closer together.

The Corbynites were shell-shocked by the suspension. When discussing what their next steps should be, they reached the obvious conclusion. First, major efforts should be concentrated on having Corbyn's suspension lifted through internal procedures. For instance (one among many), Corbyn's long-time ally MP Diane Abbott asked her supporters to sign a letter asking the party to reinstate him.

If that did not succeed, the next step would have been for Corbyn to go to court to force the lifting of the suspension. Through crowdfunding, over £300,000 were raised to defend Corbyn against earlier possible legal action. That money was also available to be used in a legal fight against the suspension.

There were claims that Labour Peer Baroness Shami Chakrabarti was working on a legal case to get Jeremy Corbyn's suspension revoked, if it could not be achieved via internal means. Starmer reacted: "I don't think anybody wants to see yet more legal cases. I want to see the Labour Party focused on campaigning to win elections. We have got a massive set of elections next May 2021 and we have got a general election in 2024. We absolutely have to be focused on that." All this was just one indication of how the Corbyn affair has a major influence on Labour's general situation.

The approaches to get Corbyn reinstated into Labour at that time were likely to involve a lengthy struggle. Yet Corbyn and his associates would have been wise to carry out the fight until its very end.

The alternatives were poor. A third option was for the Corbynites to leave Labour and create a new left socialist party. This would probably not be a wise move, as the performance of minor parties in the UK has been very poor. For instance, none of the MPs who were candidates in the 2019 elections and who left Labour because of the antisemitism scandal were returned to the House of Commons.

If all Corbynite sympathizer MPs had left the Labour Party, the impact on the House of Commons would have been minor. The Conservatives have a majority of 80 seats over Labour. A further dilution of the number of Labour Party MPs would not have changed the reality in a significant way until the next parliamentary elections, which will not take place until 2024.

Elections for Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) took place on November 20, with the Corbynite Momentum faction winning seven of the 15 seats. It was potentially a powerful opposition to Starmer and his supporters. On November 18, the NEC reinstated Corbyn as a member of the Labour party. Starmer reacted by saying Corbyn would not be given back the Labour Whip and would thus continue to sit as an independent MP.

In the meantime, Starmer made it clear that Labour will accept the EHRC report—which he called a day of shame for the Labour party—“in full and without qualification.” He promised to provide the Commission with an action plan within six weeks and to establish an independent complaints process. Starmer also mentioned that more cases of complaints about antisemitism were completed in the past six months than in the whole of 2019. He repeated his promise that under his leadership there will be zero antisemitism.

Many issues will likely put the Labour party in the limelight in the months to come. Its current situation can best be described as “a conflict in progress.”

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center, a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and author of The War of a Million Cuts. Among the honors he has received was the 2019 International Lion of Judah Award of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research paying tribute to him as the leading international authority on contemporary antisemitism.