

Anti-semitism Is Cover for a Much Deeper Divide in Britain's Labour Party

Breakaway MPs hope that smearing Corbyn will obscure the fact that they are remnants of an old political order bankrupt of ideas

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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The announcement by seven MPs from the UK Labour Party on Monday that they were breaking away and creating a new parliamentary faction marked the biggest internal upheaval in a British political party in nearly 40 years, when the SDP split from Labour.

On Wednesday, they were joined by an eighth Labour MP, **Joan Ryan**, and three Conservative MPs. There are predictions more will follow.

With the UK teetering on the brink of crashing out of the European Union with no deal on Brexit, the founders of the so-called Independent Group made reference to their opposition to Brexit.

The chief concern cited for the split by the eight Labour MPs, though, was a supposed “anti-semitism crisis” in the party.

The breakaway faction seemingly agrees that anti-semitism has become so endemic in the party since Jeremy Corbyn became leader more than three years ago that they were left with no choice but to quit.

Corbyn, it should be noted, is the first leader of a major British party to explicitly prioritise the rights of Palestinians over Israel's continuing belligerent occupation of the Palestinian territories.

‘Sickeningly racist’?



Luciana Berger (image on the right), a Jewish MP who has highlighted what she sees as an anti-semitism problem under Corbyn, led the charge, stating at the Independent Group's

launch that she had reached “the [sickening conclusion](#)” that Labour was “institutionally racist”.

She and her allies claim she has been hounded out of the party by “anti-semitic bullying”. Berger has suffered online abuse and death threats from a young neo-Nazi who was [jailed for two years](#) in 2016. There have been other incidences of abuse and other sentences, including a 27-month jail term for [John Nimmo](#), a right-wing extremist who referred to Berger as “Jewish scum” and signed his messages, “your friend, the Nazi”.

In an interview with the Jewish Chronicle, the former Labour MP said the Independent Group would provide the Jewish community with a “[political home](#) that they, like much of the rest of the country, are now looking for”.

In a plea to keep the party together, deputy leader Tom Watson issued a video in which he criticised his own party for being too slow to tackle anti-semitism. The situation “poses a test” for Labour, he said, adding: “Do we respond with simple condemnation, or do we try and reach out beyond our comfort zone and [prevent others](#) from following?”

Ruth Smeeth, another Jewish Labour MP who may yet join a later wave of departures, was reported to have broken down [in tears](#) at a parliamentary party meeting following the split, as she called for tougher action on anti-semitism.

Two days later, as she split from Labour, Ryan accused the party of being “infected with the [scourge](#) of anti-Jewish racism”.

Hatred claims undercut

The timing of the defections was strange, occurring shortly after the Labour leadership revealed the [findings](#) of an investigation into complaints of anti-semitism in the party. These were the very complaints that MPs such as Berger have been citing as proof of the party’s “institutional racism”.

And yet, the report decisively undercut their claims – not only of endemic anti-semitism in Labour, but of any significant problem at all.

That echoed an earlier report by the Commons home affairs committee, which found there was “no reliable, [empirical evidence](#)” that Labour had more of an anti-semitism problem than any other British political party.



Nonetheless, the facts seem to be playing little or no part in influencing the anti-semitism narrative. This latest report was thus almost entirely ignored by Corbyn’s opponents and by

the mainstream media.

It is, therefore, worth briefly examining what the Labour Party's investigation discovered.

Over the previous 10 months, 673 complaints had been filed against Labour members over alleged anti-semitic behaviour, many based on online comments. In a third of those cases, insufficient evidence had been produced.

The 453 other allegations represented 0.08 percent of the 540,000-strong Labour membership. Hardly "endemic" or "institutional", it seems.

Intemperate language

There is the possibility past outbursts have been part of this investigation. Intemperate language flared especially in 2014 - before Corbyn became leader - when Israel launched a military operation on Gaza that killed large numbers of Palestinian civilians, including many hundreds of children.

Certainly, it is unclear how many of those reportedly anti-semitic comments concern not prejudice towards Jews, but rather outspoken criticism of the state of Israel, which was redefined as anti-semitic last year by Labour, under severe pressure from MPs such as Berger and Ryan and Jewish lobby groups, such as the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Labour Movement.

Seven of the 11 [examples](#) of anti-semitism associated with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition adopted by Labour concern Israel. That includes describing Israel as a "racist endeavour", even though Israel passed a basic law last year stripping the fifth of its population who are not Jewish of any right to self-determination, formally creating [two classes](#) of citizen.

Illustrating the problem Labour has created for itself as a result, some of the most high-profile suspensions and expulsions have actually targeted Jewish members of the party who identify as anti-Zionist - that is, they consider Israel a racist state. They [include](#) **Tony Greenstein, Jackie Walker, Martin Odoni, Glyn Secker and Cyril Chilson.**

Another Jewish member, [Moshe Machover](#), a professor emeritus at the University of London, had to be reinstated after a huge outcry among members at his treatment by the party.

Unthinking prejudice

Alan Maddison, who has been conducting statistical research on anti-semitism for a pro-Corbyn Jewish group, Jewish Voice for Labour, put the 0.08 percent figure into its wider social and political [context](#) this week.

He quoted the findings of a large survey of anti-semitic [attitudes](#) published by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 2017. It found that 30 percent of respondents from various walks of society agreed with one or more of eight anti-semitic views, ranging from stereotypes such as "Jews think they are better than other people" to Holocaust denial.

However, lead researcher Daniel Staetsky concluded that in most cases, this was evidence

of unthinking prejudice rather than conscious bigotry. Four-fifths of those who exhibited a degree of anti-semitism also agreed with at least one positive statement about Jewish people.

This appears to be the main problem among the tiny number of Labour Party members identified in complaints, and is reflected in the predominance of warnings about conduct rather than expulsions and suspensions.

Far-right bigotry

Another of the institute's findings poses a particular problem for Corbyn's opponents, who argue that the Labour leader has imported anti-semitism into the party by attracting the "hard left". Since he was elected, Labour membership has rocketed.

Even if it were true that Corbyn and his supporters are on the far-left – a highly questionable assumption, made superficially plausible only because Labour moved to the centre-right under Tony Blair in the late 1990s – the institute's research pulls the rug out from under Corbyn's critics.

It discovered that across the political spectrum, conscious hatred of Jews was very low, and that it was exhibited in equal measure from the "very left-wing" to the "fairly right-wing". The only exception, as one might expect, was on the "very right-wing", where virulent anti-semitism was much more prevalent.

That finding was confirmed last week by surveys that showed a significant rise in violent, anti-semitic attacks across Europe as far-right parties make inroads in many member states. A Guardian report noted that the "figures show an overwhelming majority of [violence](#) against Jews is perpetrated by far-right supporters".

Supporters of overseas war

So what is the basis for concerns about the Labour Party being mired in supposed "institutional anti-semitism" since it moved from the centre to the left under Corbyn, when the figures and political trends demonstrate nothing of the sort?

A clue may be found in the wider political worldview of the eight MPs who have broken from Labour.

All but two are listed as [supporters](#) of the parliamentary "Labour Friends of Israel" (LFI) faction. Further, Berger is a former director of that staunchly pro-Israel lobby group, and Ryan is its current chair, a position the group says she will hold onto, despite no longer being a Labour MP.

So extreme are the LFI's views on Israel that it sought to exonerate Israel of a massacre last year, in which its snipers shot dead many dozens of unarmed Palestinian demonstrators in Gaza in a single day. Faced with a social media backlash, it quietly took down the [posts](#).

The eight MPs' voting records – except for Gavin Shaker, for whom the picture is mixed – show them holding consistently hawkish foreign policy positions that are deeply antithetical to Corbyn's approach to international relations.

They either "almost always" or "generally" [backed](#) "combat operations overseas"; those

who were MPs at the time supported the 2003 Iraq war; and they all opposed subsequent investigations into the Iraq war.

Committed Friends of Israel

In one sense, the breakaway group's support for Labour Friends of Israel may not be surprising, and indicates why Corbyn is facing such widespread trouble from within his own party. Dozens of Labour MPs are [members](#) of the group, including Tom Watson and Ruth Smeeth.

Smeeth, one of those at the forefront of accusing Corbyn of fostering anti-semitism in Labour, is also a former public affairs director of BICOM, another stridently pro-Israel [lobby group](#).

None of these MPs were concerned enough with the LFI's continuing vocal support for Israel as it has shifted to the far-right under **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** to have stepped down from the group.

'Wrong kind of Jews'

Anti-semitism has taken centre stage in the manoeuvring against Corbyn, despite there being no evidence of significant hatred against Jews in the party. Increasingly, it seems, tangible abuse of Jews is of little interest unless it can be related to Corbyn.

The markedly selective interest in anti-semitism in the Corbyn context among the breakaway MPs and supposed anti-semitism watchdogs has been starkly on show for some time.

Notably, none expressed concern at the media mauling of a left-wing, satirical Jewish group called Jewdas when Corbyn was widely attacked for meeting "the wrong kind of Jews". In fact, leading Labour figures, including the Jewish Labour Movement, joined in the [abuse](#).

And increasingly in this febrile atmosphere, there has been an ever-greater indulgence of the "right kind of anti-semitism" - when it is directed at Corbyn supporters.

A troubling illustration was provided on the TV show Good Morning Britain this week, when Tom Bower was invited on to discuss his new unauthorised biography of Corbyn, in which he accuses him of anti-semitism. The hosts looked on demurely as Bower, a Jewish journalist, defamed fellow Jewish journalist Michael Segalov as a "[self-hating Jew](#)" for defending Corbyn on the show.

Revenge of the Blairites

So what is the significance of the fact that the Labour MPs who have been most outspoken in criticising Corbyn - those who helped organise a 2016 leadership challenge against him, and those who are now rumoured to be considering joining the breakaway faction - are heavily represented on the list of MPs supporting LFI?

For them, it seems, vigorous support for Israel is not only a key foreign policy matter, but a marker of their political priorities and worldview - one that starkly clashes with the views of Corbyn and a majority of the Labour membership.

Anti-semitism has turned out to be the most useful – and damaging – weapon to wield against the Labour leader for a variety of reasons close to the hearts of the holdouts from the Blair era, who still dominate the parliamentary party and parts of the Labour bureaucracy.

Perhaps most obviously, the Blairite wing of the party is still primarily loyal to a notion that Britain should at all costs maintain its transatlantic alliance with the United States in foreign policy matters. Israel is a key issue for those on both sides of the Atlantic who see that state as a projection of Western power into the oil-rich Middle East and romanticise Israel as a guarantor of Western values in a “barbaric” region.

Corbyn’s prioritising of Palestinian rights threatens to overturn a core imperial value to which the Blairites cling.

Tarred and feathered

But it goes further. Anti-semitism has become a useful stand-in for the deep differences in a domestic political culture between the Blairites, on one hand, and Corbyn and the wider membership, on the other.

A focus on anti-semitism avoids the right-wing MPs having to admit much wider grievances with Corbyn’s Labour that would probably play far less well not only with Labour members, but with the broader British electorate.

As well as their enthusiasm for foreign wars, the Blairites support the enrichment of a narrow neo-liberal elite, are ambivalent about austerity policies, and are reticent at returning key utilities to public ownership. All of this can be neatly evaded and veiled by talking up anti-semitism.

But the utility of anti-semitism as a weapon with which to beat Corbyn and his supporters – however unfairly – runs deeper still.

The Blairites view allegations of anti-Jewish racism as a trump card. Calling someone an anti-semite rapidly closes down all debate and rational thought. It isolates, then tars and feathers its targets. No one wants to be seen to be associated with an anti-semite, let alone defend them.

Weak hand exposed

That is one reason why anti-semitism smears have been so maliciously effective against anti-Zionist Jews in the party and used with barely a murmur of protest – or in most cases, even recognition that Jews are being suspended and expelled for opposing Israel’s racist policies towards Palestinians.

This is a revival of the vile “self-hating Jew” trope that Israel and its defenders concocted decades ago to intimidate Jewish critics.

The Blairites in Labour, joined by the ruling Conservative Party, the mainstream media and pro-Israel lobby groups, have selected anti-semitism as the terrain on which to try to destroy a Corbyn-led Labour Party, because it is a battlefield in which the left stands no hope of getting a fair hearing – or any hearing at all.

But paradoxically, the Labour breakaway group may have inadvertently exposed the weakness of its hand. The eight MPs have indicated that they will not run in by-elections, and for good reason: it is highly unlikely they would stand a chance of winning in any of their current constituencies outside the Labour Party.

Their decision will also spur moves to begin deselecting those Labour MPs who are openly trying to sabotage the party – and the members’ wishes – from within.

That may finally lead to a clearing out of the parliamentary baggage left behind from the Blair era, and allow Labour to begin rebuilding itself as a party ready to deal with the political, social, economic and environmental challenges of the 21st century.

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***Jonathan Cook**, a British journalist based in Nazareth since 2001, is the the author of three books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He is a past winner of the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His website and blog can be found at: www.jonathan-cook.net He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.*

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