

Labour's Explosive Report Shows How Right-wing Officials Sabotaged the Party

A leaked report shows how right-wing Labour officials sabotaged the party during Jeremy Corbyn's time as leader, writes Alex Snowden

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A leaked 850-page report provides a wealth of information about how senior officials undermined Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. Titled 'The work of the Labour Party's Governance and Legal Unit in relation to antisemitism, 2014-2019', it particularly documents systematic sabotage by the party apparatus between Corbyn's election in September 2015 and Jennie Formby taking over as general secretary in April 2018.

The report was compiled by party staff in the context of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's investigation into how Corbyn-led Labour handled complaints of antisemitism. The EHRC findings are expected soon. Party lawyers have, for reasons that are not yet entirely clear, decided not to submit the report to the EHRC.

Exposing the truth

The report blows apart the myth that Corbyn's LOTO - Leader of the Opposition's Office - was responsible for undermining efforts to deal effectively with antisemitism in the party. It instead shows that Blairite officials, motivated by hostility to Corbyn's left-wing politics, made a concerted effort to scupper the handling of complaints.

The report exonerates Corbyn personally, and those close to him in LOTO, of failing to take antisemitism seriously. It instead demonstrates that hostile senior officials operated in a highly factional manner to turn the issue into a crisis for the party. The media normally amplify any story to do with Labour and antisemitism, yet they have so far remained mostly silent on this report.

The focus of the report is largely on the behaviour of senior staff in Labour Party headquarters - led by Iain McNicol, the right winger who was general secretary until being replaced by Formby in 2018 - and the Governance and Legal Unit (GLU), responsible for disciplinary matters, in particular. The report finds that 'in this period, before Jennie Formby became General Secretary in spring 2018, GLU failed to act on the vast majority of complaints received, including the vast majority of complaints regarding anti-Semitic conduct'.

This allowed a massive backlog to develop. It was used, entirely without justification, to suggest that Corbyn and the left were responsible for failures to investigate and deal with complaints about antisemitic conduct.

The main evidence base is a mass of communications between senior staff, especially message exchanges on two WhatsApp groups used by senior managers. One group was for six top officials including McNicol and Emilie Oldknow, who was then a highly influential party official and is now assistant general secretary of Unison. The other group included the same six key officials, but also other senior managers at party HQ.

I have divided this overview into three sections, followed by a concluding section suggesting some lessons to take from the investigation. The first part is concerned with the material on how antisemitism claims were dealt with.

The second section is about the devastating revelations of how officials undermined the Labour Party's electoral chances, above all in the historic general election of June 2017. Officials were appalled by the better-than-expected results for the party, following a campaign during which they frequently expressed contempt for their own party and its prospects.

The third section is about the culture of routine abusive language about party colleagues, especially those on the left, which existed at Labour Party HQ. The unremitting hostility was often expressed in sexist, unpleasant and highly personalised terms.

Antisemitism claims

The central conclusion of the report is that the old Blairite apparatus systematically failed to investigate complaints about antisemitism for factional and political reasons. It dismantles the claim, popularised by a Panorama programme last year and amplified by the press, that the Leader's Office was responsible for these failures.

There was no proper logging of complaints, many of which were simply treated as 'spam' for months. The report states: "By the time a new general secretary took over Party HQ in April 2018 there was a backlog of cases that had been ongoing, often for years, with little to no progress." There is an example from October 2017 of a member who had shared Holocaust denial material online, but was not suspended.

Examples are cited of officials at HQ giving the Leader's Office inaccurate information or outright lying about the progress being made with investigations or the handling of complaints. The recommendations of the Chakrabarti Report were routinely ignored. Indeed there is even an exchange where officials discuss not posting the report on the party's website, with Oldknow expressing the "strong view" that it shouldn't appear on the site.

The report does a thorough job of putting the record straight on who was responsible for failures to deal adequately with antisemitism complaints. However, the narrow focus and underlying assumptions in relation to the antisemitism issue led to some difficulties too. The narrow focus on how complaints were dealt with obviously precludes any discussion of the politics of what's often been referred to as 'Labour's antisemitism crisis'.

There is no acknowledgement that antisemitism has been cynically weaponised to attack the left, still less any discussion of what might have motivated that or the wider political context in which it took place. Instead the report introduces the concept of "denialism", a word used 17 times in the report - mostly in the context of 'a culture of denialism' or 'denialism narratives'.

It is valid to criticise someone for suggesting that antisemitism is never a problem in the Labour Party – and indeed to label that a kind of denial. But this concept is deployed more broadly to delegitimise any discussion of the weaponising of antisemitism. In fact it is clear from the report that a high proportion of complaints were spurious, often relating to people who were not even party members.

The media obsession with this alleged crisis has been totally out of proportion to the extent to which antisemitism has been a real problem among Labour members. Questioning the dominant framing of ‘Labour’s antisemitism crisis’ is entirely proper, not ‘denialism’. Labour made things far harder for itself than was necessary precisely because it failed to challenge this framing. Its adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, including examples that risk conflating antisemitism with criticisms of Israel, was especially damaging.

Hoping for defeat at the polls

Senior party officials were plunged into gloom by the exit poll at 10pm on Thursday 8 June 2017, which showed Labour set to do considerably better than expected. An extraordinary WhatsApp exchange followed. There are references to being ‘in need of counselling’, to being ‘stunned and reeling’ and an ‘awful’ atmosphere in response to the news that Labour were set to actually gain seats.

One official refers to a room where people, including Leader’s Office staff, are celebrating as the ‘room of death’. Iain McNicol complains that ‘it is going to be a long night’. Another senior figure contrasts Corbyn allies (‘They are cheering’) to HQ workers (‘we are silent and grey faced’), adding ‘Opposite to what I had been working towards for the last couple of years’.

What a revealing comment that is. This is someone employed full-time to work for the Labour Party. She responds to the party achieving very good election results by declaring it the opposite to what she had been trying to achieve for the last two years. The desire to end the Corbyn project, to regain control of the Labour Party for the Blairites, ran so deep that these party officials were rooting for electoral failure.

The previous pages in the report outline plenty of evidence that these election night reactions were part of a pattern. During the campaign any positive polling is greeted with mockery or horror, while Corbyn’s speeches are derided and ridiculed. There are also examples of conspiring to secretly funnel money into seats where MPs on the hard right of the party were standing. Ludicrously, this even included Tom Watson, the party’s deputy leader, who went on to win his seat with a massive majority.

There is a moment when Nia Griffith, shadow defence secretary, is lauded among the group for making comments that undermined Corbyn on foreign policy. One official calls her ‘a bloody hero’ and writes: ‘shes just stabbed corbyn and thornberry’. Corbyn’s anti-war speech after the Manchester Arena bombing prompted special venom. Pro-Corbyn members are referred to as ‘vile, opportunistic morons’, but it is hoped that the electorate will turn against Labour following Corbyn’s speech as ordinary voters ‘do not blame foreign intervention they blame immigration’.

They then discuss how the election will be a serious rout for Labour and that this will ‘shock a lot of them... including JC’. The Right should capitalise on that shock to drive Corbyn out – ‘it has to be clean and brutal’, writes one. The only obstacle will be the membership who are

'communists and green supporters'. Elsewhere there are examples of the officials plotting how to destabilise and ultimately remove the leadership.

Abusive language, sexism and paranoia

Many people have reacted to the report by observing that they already knew how vicious and hostile some elements of the party apparatus had been, but it is still shocking to discover exactly what they said among themselves.

There are literally scores of references to 'Trots' among the quoted evidence in the report. It is evidently an obsession to the point of paranoia: anyone even slightly to the left of Ed Miliband is characterised this way. At one point there is even the audacious characterisation of 'most of the PLP' as 'Trots'. It is revealing, too, that even such moderate figures as Miliband, Andy Burnham and Sadiq Khan are on the receiving end of derogatory comments, so fanatical is their centrism.

Seumas Milne, director of communications, is referred to as a "nutter" (not the only time that word is used) and a "total mentalist". Emily Oldknow is among those who mock black MP Dawn Butler for raising the issue of racism in the party. There is discussion of 'hanging and burning' Corbyn, while those MPs who nominated him should be 'taken out and shot'. And, apparently, 'death by fire is too kind for LOTO'.

In February 2017 there is an exchange about Diane Abbott, Labour's best-known black female politician. One claims that Abbott has 'been found crying in the loos' and another suggests they tip off Michael Crick, the Channel 4 journalist, about Abbott's whereabouts. On another occasion Abbott is described as 'a very angry woman' with another official adding that she is 'truly repulsive'.

Left-wing women are particularly likely to have deeply unpleasant language used about them. A discussion about Katy Clark, Corbyn's political secretary, includes Oldknow writing 'Fuck off pube head'. On another occasion, Oldknow calls Clark a 'smelly cow' and seems aggrieved that she had 'the exact same clothes on yesterday'.

Oldknow's preoccupation with judging women negatively on their appearance is a recurring theme. Of Laura Murray, a young party worker, she wrote: 'You'd think with all that money she could afford to buy a jacket and a bra'. She also castigates Karie Murphy from LOTO as 'fat'. Murphy is the subject of another exchange, involving several people, during which she is referred to as 'a fuckwit', 'Crazy woman', 'crazy snake head lady', 'Bitch face cow', 'a good dartboard' and 'Medusa Monster'.

Lessons from the report

Three key things stand out.

Firstly, the report offers an enormously powerful rebuttal to the dominant narrative about 'Labour antisemitism'. Despite the report's limitations on this matter, it demonstrates – with tremendous detail – that failures to address antisemitism in the Labour Party were the responsibility of Blairite officials hostile to the left-wing leadership, not the responsibility of the left.

The report ought to be the starting point for kicking back against the remorseless attacks on Corbyn and Labour over the antisemitism issue. There should be more forthright opposition

to the EHRC over its tendentious investigation, especially if it produces unjustifiably harsh findings. More widely, it is time to confront the cynical weaponising of antisemitism that has simultaneously tarnished the left, stigmatised the cause of Palestine solidarity and undermined the struggle against racism.

Secondly, it shows how unwaveringly hostile the Labour Party right wing is to the left and what extremes it will go to in seeking to defeat the left. The Blairite senior managers who sabotaged disciplinary processes, electoral campaigning and the party's work more generally went as far as wishing for electoral defeat because it would weaken the left. They should be dealt with firmly.

For example, Unison members should be demanding the removal of Oldknow from her role as the union's assistant general secretary. Diane Abbott has already tweeted that it's unthinkable for Oldknow to be considered as the party's next general secretary. Dave Ward, CWU general secretary, has called for the former party employees exposed by the report to have their party membership suspended.

This isn't merely a matter of dealing with Blairite rogue elements either. They have been defended by politicians across the Labour spectrum. At a leadership hustings in February all four of the candidates then involved in the contest – Starmer, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Emily Thornberry and Lisa Nandy – spoke up in favour of the former staff featured in the new report, characterising them as hard-working, loyal and politically neutral party workers who had been treated badly and were owed an apology. Starmer's front bench appointments signal a sharp shift to the right and include figures from the same right-wing factions as the disgraced former senior managers.

Thirdly, this tells us a great deal about the limits of the Labour Party as a vehicle for socialist advance. The left around Corbyn was reluctant to confront McNicol and his colleagues because they feared the Right splitting the party. The striving for 'party unity' overrode everything. But, as Ken Loach once put it in relation to the constant attacks on Corbyn, 'a broad church doesn't work when the choir is trying to stab the vicar in the back'.

These revelations indicate that the problems go way beyond individual or even group behaviour, obnoxious as that has been. It is a deep structural and institutional problem to do with the nature of the Labour Party itself.

Labour's right wing is ultimately more loyal to the establishment and the state than it is to the labour movement and, through that, the interests of the working class. The Labour Right will wreck the Left even if it means profoundly damaging the aspirations of the party as a whole, as seen most vividly in the sabotage ahead of the June 2017 election.

The left's severe reluctance to firmly deal with the problem stemmed from conviction that the Right would split the party. This could not be countenanced because of the commitment to maintaining the existing 'broad church'. The Right, however, has never shown similar tolerance or forgiveness. It is prepared to be ruthless and will enforce the left's subordination to its dominance.

We must therefore resist any pressure to not make a fuss, to keep quiet and carry on regardless, in the name of a spurious 'unity'. That only emboldens the Right, demobilises the Left and consequently weakens the opposition to a Tory government that is failing terribly over its handling of the coronavirus crisis. A fighting unity, which presupposes

independent left-wing politics, is required.

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Featured image: Jeremy Corbyn and Tom Watson at Labour Party Conference in 2016. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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