

SUBMISSION TO THE LABOUR PARTY INQUIRY INTO ANTI-SEMITISM AND OTHER FORMS OF RACISM

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Biographical note

Dr Keith Kahn-Harris is a sociologist and Jewish community activist. He currently holds the following posts: Lecturer at Leo Baeck College, Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck College, Director of the European Jewish Research Archive at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Jewish Culture, Society and Politics at Durham University.

Dr Kahn-Harris has conducted social research for a number of Jewish organisations and has volunteered in various capacities across the community. He is the author of 4 books including *Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community* (2014), *Judaism: All That Matters* (2012) and (with Ben Gidley) *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today* (2010).

Of particular relevance to this inquiry is Dr Kahn-Harris's long commitment, as both researcher and activist, to understanding and ameliorating intra-Jewish conflict over the issues of Israel and antisemitism. Between 2009 and 2011, he convened a number of confidential dinners at his home with key Jewish leaders and opinion formers, from across the Jewish communal spectrum, to discuss their differences over Israel and antisemitism.

THIS SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN A PERSONAL CAPACITY AND ANY QUOTATION FROM IT IN THE PUBLISHED REPORT SHOULD MAKE THIS CLEAR.

Introduction

The following submission is intended to direct the inquiry's attention to a difficult issue that complicates discussions of Jews and antisemitism today, and that has direct relevance to the ongoing controversy over antisemitism in the Labour Party. That issue is the profound disagreement among Jews over what constitutes antisemitism. Jewish accusations of antisemitism directed at certain Labour Party figures in recent months, have often been accompanied by a defense of those figures by other Jews. It is therefore likely that the inquiry will receive contradictory and competing submissions from Jews and Jewish groups that hold very different opinions over antisemitism.

The following submission is therefore intended to put these claims and counter-claims in context. Further, it aims to suggest ways in which the Labour Party might

develop an effective response to antisemitism without exacerbating and exploiting Jewish differences on the subject.

A brief survey of Jewish differences over Israel, Zionism and antisemitism

It is clear that most contemporary controversies over antisemitism, such as the one that the Labour Party is currently confronting, cannot be separated from controversies over Israel and Zionism. In this respect, any attempt to understand antisemitism today has to recognize the fundamental importance that the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 has had on antisemitism. This is partially because the existence of Israel has raised the intractable question of where the boundary lies between antisemitism and criticism of the country and of Zionism. But, perhaps more profoundly, the existence of a Jewish state raises questions about whether Jews can be still seen as 'powerless'. The salience of this question is exacerbated by the rapid upward mobility and prosperity of Jews in the UK, US and elsewhere in the post-war period. The Jewish targets of antisemitism have moved from a vulnerable, dispersed people, to a people that has considerable agency in the modern world. This development suggests that understanding antisemitism today requires a different set of conceptual tools to those that were once relevant.

This shift in the status of the Jewish people has also had implications for the nature of intra-Jewish disagreement. The Jewish people have never been united, religiously, culturally and ideologically. The process of emancipation, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, created new forms of disagreement as Jews began to adhere to a variety of political positions. The issue of antisemitism was one of the areas where Jews developed a range of responses – including total assimilation, greater religiosity, Zionism, Jewish Diaspora autonomy and socialism. However the existence of antisemitism was not, in itself, the subject of much dispute; rather, it was the analysis of why it occurred and how to respond to it that was fiercely debated. In contrast, today's intra-Jewish debates about antisemitism are as much of what constitutes antisemitism as much as what Jews should do about it.

Whereas Jewish disagreement about antisemitism are, in some respects, more profound than ever before, disagreements about Zionism (although not Israel) are less complex. Pre-1948 (the year of Israel's independence) and certainly pre-World War Two, Zionism was one of a range of political ideologies that contended for influence in the Diaspora. Post-independence, however, and in particularly post-1967 (the year of the Six Day War), support for and the belief in the legitimacy of Israel as the Jewish state, largely became the consensus across Diaspora Jewish communities. Further, Israel became the focus of educational programming, fund-raising and cross-communal celebration.

This consensus was, however, never total. Significant sections of the secular Jewish left and the ultra-orthodox right continued to oppose Zionism. Further, since the early 1980s and particularly since 2000, significant differences have emerged within the Zionist camp, leading to considerable intra-Jewish conflict even amongst those who support the principle of a Jewish state. In my own work, I have identified 14

main 'positions' take by British Jews on Israel¹. These range from support for the Israeli religious right, through left-of-centre Zionism, to Jewish anti-Zionism. These political differences do not simply concern what Jews believe Israel should do or be, they also concern whether Diaspora Jews should publicly criticize Israel. Part of the intensity and difficulty of intra-Jewish Diaspora conflict over Israel derives from the feeling that other Diaspora Jews are undermining, variously, the security of Israel, the security of Diaspora communities and the very nature of what it means to be Jewish. The issue of antisemitism further complicates these intra-Jewish conflicts.

Nonetheless, the majority of the British Jewish community remain committed and attached to Israel. According to a 2010 survey by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR), for 82% of British Jews Israel plays a 'central' or 'important but not central' role in their Jewish identities. A 2015 survey by City University² found 93% agreeing to a similar question and 90% supported Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. Interestingly, while a large minority of British Jews clearly agree with the Zionist principle that there should be a Jewish state of Israel, a smaller majority – 72% in the JPR study and 59% in the City University one – explicitly define themselves as Zionist. The reasons for this disparity are not clear, but it is nonetheless apparent that even Jews who don't identify as Zionists do not, in the main, demand the end of the state of Israel.

Given that much of the controversy in the Labour Party to which this inquiry is a response, concerns the nature of the relationship between criticism of Israel/Zionism and antisemitism, British Jewish attachment to Israel is a major factor to be taken into account. The most important thing to bear in mind is that this attachment is not necessarily as simple as support for a political ideology. Rather, attachment to Israel is, as the survey shows, an intimate matter of Jewish identity, reinforced by the importance in British Jewish communal life of Israel-related programming and visits to the country. As such, it is inevitable that, for many Jews, criticism of Israel and Zionism will be a highly sensitive matter at the very least.

Nonetheless, the minority of British Jews who do not share this sensitivity, are not numerically insignificant, nor should they be dismissed as being so. It is a principle of multiculturalism and pluralism that being a minority should not condemn one to marginalization and this should apply as much within communities as in society as a whole. For this reason, there is no justification for dismissing the concerns of those Jewish groups such as Independent Jewish Voices³ and the Jewish Socialist Groups⁴ who have criticized some of the accusations of widespread antisemitism in the Labour Party. While the statements these groups have issued are unlikely to represent anything more than a minority opinion within the British Jewish

¹ Kahn-Harris, Keith. 2016. *Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community*. David Paul Books.

² Miller, Stephen, Margaret Harris, and Colin Shindler. 2015. "The Attitudes of British Jews Towards Israel". London: Department of Sociology School of Arts and Social Sciences City University London.

³ <https://ijv.org.uk/2016/05/01/ijv-statement-on-allegations-of-antisemitism-in-the-labour-party/>

⁴ <http://www.jewishsocialist.org.uk/news/item/statement-on-labours-problem-with-antisemitism-from-the-jewish-socialists-g>

community and it is likely that secular Jews who are uninvolved in other forms of Jewish communal life are over-represented in these groups, that is no reason not to consider their concerns carefully. Within the Jewish community members of these groups are sometimes smeared as ‘AsAJews’⁵ whose only interest in Jewish identity is using it as a way of underpinning their criticisms of the Jewish state. They are sometimes treated as pariahs and marginalized from Jewish communal life⁶. Such practices do much to create considerable bitterness amongst their ‘victims’ and should be opposed.

Inevitably then, the controversy over Labour Party antisemitism has become implicated in struggles over who represents Jewish opinion. This is simultaneously an ‘external’ struggle, in which non-Jewish actors in the controversy treat some Jewish voices as more worthy of paying attention to, and an ‘internal’ controversy in which Jewish actors compete for legitimacy in representing what it is to be Jewish.

Jewish diversity has therefore been recognized by non-Jewish political actors. It is abundantly clear that whatever position one takes on the Labour Party antisemitism controversy, one can find a Jewish voice supporting it. At the same time, some forms of Jewish political diversity have become occluded. The considerable differences within the Jewish Zionist camp have become less visible as most take a position of, at the very least, suspicion of anti-Zionism. That is not to say that all Jews who support the Jewish state in some way will view the accusations of antisemitism in the Labour Party in the same way, but the nuanced differences between political positions have become – temporarily at least – less easy to identify from the outside.

Implications of Jewish differences over Israel, Zionism and antisemitism for the current inquiry

I would like to highlight two disturbing aspects of the current antisemitism controversy within the Labour Party: First of all, the controversy has stimulated and exacerbated intra-Jewish conflict. Second, the controversy has normalized the practice of ‘exploiting’ particular Jewish voices in order to legitimize one’s own view on antisemitism.

While the first concern does not directly impact on this inquiry, the second certainly does. There is a real danger that competing factions within the Labour Party will only seek to build relations with those Jews whose views on antisemitism and Israel they share, discrediting and ignoring the rest. This may lead to a view of antisemitism that sees it simply as hatred of those whose Jews with whom one identifies.

This inquiry needs to consider how the Labour Party, and its various factions, might avoid this kind of exploitation of Jewish difference. There is no doubt that there is a

⁵ See, for example, <https://ukmediawatch.org/2011/06/23/as-a-jew-explained/>

⁶ Karpf, Anne, Brian Klug, Jacqueline Rose, and Barbara Rosenbaum, eds. 2008. *A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Identity*. London: Verso.

serious dilemma here: It is clear that there is no official position that the Labour Party can take on antisemitism – or, indeed, that this inquiry can take on antisemitism – that will satisfy all British Jews.

While the Labour Party and this inquiry cannot and will not please all British Jews in how it responds to antisemitism, it can and should aspire to more than simply legitimizing one particular set of Jewish views. Labour's constitution states that 'The NEC will work to deliver a Labour Party that reflects the communities it serves.' In this context, that should mean that the Labour Party should be open and welcome to a broad swathe of the Jewish community, rather than a particular sub-section. A way needs to be found for the Labour Party to take a position on antisemitism that, even if not all Jews support it fully, does enable a diverse range of Jews to feel that their voices are being heard and that they are not being abandoned.

One argument made by some Jews who have sought to highlight antisemitism in the Labour Party, is that all too often their understanding of antisemitism has simply been dismissed. This, so the argument goes, is a breach of the 'MacPherson Principle' that minorities should be able to define racism for themselves. Greater attention to this principle would certainly ameliorate some Jewish concerns. However, the MacPherson Principle does raise the problem of what happens when different sections within minority communities hold to competing definitions of racism. If the Labour Party and this inquiry do seek to maintain the MacPherson Principle, then it should be an 'expanded' version that recognizes the need to attend to a range of minority voices without necessarily dismissing any of them.

Given that this inquiry is also concerned with other racisms, it should be noted that the exploitation of intra-Jewish political diversity has some parallels with other minority communities. While intra-Jewish disagreements are perhaps more visible than other minority intra-communal disagreements, there is an increasing awareness that, in the Muslim community in particular, there are a plurality of competing opinions over Islamophobia and much else. In this respect, an attempt to grapple with the implications of Jewish political diversity will pay dividends with regard to relating to other minority communities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations concern only the issue of responding to the diversity of Jewish opinion over antisemitism and Israel. They do not, in themselves, offer a complete response to the question of antisemitism in the Labour Party, but provide an essential component in developing such a response.

- 1. The report from this inquiry should acknowledge the diversity of Jewish opinion over antisemitism. When it upholds some Jewish opinions, the report should do so without de-legitimising other Jewish opinions and the sincerity with which they are expressed.**

- 2. Labour Party politicians and activists who reject Zionism should acknowledge the reality of majority Jewish support for Israel and the concomitant need for sensitivity in how anti-Zionist opinions are expressed. Non-Jewish anti-Zionists should not treat Jewish anti-Zionists as the only 'acceptable', 'real' or 'legitimate' kind of Jew.**
- 3. The Labour Party leadership should publicly acknowledge the responsibility of the party to maintain cordial relations with Jews across the Jewish spectrum, including with those who are not Labour Party supporters. Concomitantly, the Labour Party leadership should actively publicly encourage non-Jewish politicians and activists to, where possible and practical, develop and maintain relations with a diversity of Jews.**
- 4. The Labour Party should consider developing forms of diversity training that inform members of the internal diversity of Jewish and other minority communities, taking due and explicit care to avoid seeing internal diversity as presenting opportunities for the exploitation and legitimization of particular factions within those minorities.**