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UK Elections: Jeremy Corbyn, Anti-Semitism, & Islamophobia

By Paul Hedges and Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

How far allegations of Anti-Semitism against Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party affected the recent general election is unclear, but they have dogged the party for years and provide a lens on Anti-Semitism on the political left. The Anti-Semitism controversy highlights the need for vigilance against other forms of prejudice, including Islamophobia.

COMMENTARY

ON 12 DECEMBER 2019, the United Kingdom had a general election (“GE19”), its third in a little over five years. Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party won 43.6% of the vote, up only 1.2% on Theresa May’s 2017 result. But with a Labour Party collapse (from 40% to 32.1%) Johnson attained a resounding majority, winning 365 out of 650 seats in the House of Commons. The leader of Labour, Jeremy Corbyn, was a surprise winner of the party’s leadership contest in 2015, being perceived as far left after Tony Blair led the party to the centre ground in the 1990s.

The reasons for Labour’s loss are manifold. Strong Conservative Party messaging, and media focus, on Brexit was important. But, trust and truthfulness was a widespread issue in the election, and trust in Corbyn [is low](#) among the wider British public. Connected to this, allegations of rising Anti-Semitism in Labour under Corbyn’s leadership and allegations that Corbyn is personally Anti-Semitic have been prominent in UK political discourse in recent years. Given that one [poll](#) found 39% of the British public generally think Corbyn is Anti-Semitic, we can speculate that the Anti-Semitism storm played a role in Labour’s defeat as part of the reason many were suspicious of him.

Investigations and Political Point-Scoring

Allegations of religious prejudice were used for political point-scoring in the election campaign. This was evident during a live heated [clash](#) between Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and shadow Transport Secretary Andy McDonald.

McDonald criticised the Conservative Party for failing to act on the recommendation of Baroness Sayeeda Warsi to launch an independent inquiry into Islamophobia in the Party; even the Conservative Party leader has been dogged by allegations of Islamophobic comments. Raab countered that only Labour and the very far right British National Party have been investigated by the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (“EHRC”).

In May 2019, the EHRC launched a formal investigation into the Labour Party on suspicion that Labour had unlawfully discriminated against Jews because of their ethnicity and religious beliefs. This followed a 2016 internal Labour Party inquiry conducted by senior human rights lawyer Shami Chakrabarti.

Chakrabarti found that there was a visible Anti-Semitism problem in the party but that it was not “endemic”. Some criticised the Chakrabarti report as a whitewash, particularly when Chakrabarti was awarded a peerage by Corbyn within months. But its findings were also welcomed by [some](#) who submitted evidence to the inquiry.

Whether or not Anti-Semitism has been weaponised for political gain, it is a very real issue for British Jews. The anxiety felt by some Jews at the prospect of Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister was real. On 26 November, Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox community, Ephraim Mirvis, accused Corbyn of allowing a “poison” to take root in the Labour Party. Though other Jews refute such claims as politically motivated. This partly relates to the way that criticism of Israel can be conflated with Anti-Semitism.

The New Anti-Semitism

Allegations of Labour Anti-Semitism relate to the so-called New Anti-Semitism. Whereas right-wing, especially Neo-Nazi, Anti-Semitism is often expressed in direct assaults on Jews, including physical attacks, the New Anti-Semitism is often tied to Anti-Zionism. It occurs when opposition to the State of Israel spills over from legitimate political critique to stereotypes or prejudice against “the Jews”. On the left, this is often also tied to support for Palestinian rights and agency as well as anti-capitalism.

Corbyn, a lifelong campaigner against racism, has been criticised for supporting an artist who produced an anti-capitalist mural that many consider Anti-Semitic. It depicted a circle of bankers around a monopoly table held up by the oppressed working masses. But, seemingly stereotyped notions of “the Jew” were evident in the caricatured bankers.

Corbyn later said he regretted his supportive comments, noting that he had not previously examined the mural closely but having done so considered it “deeply disturbing and Anti-Semitic”.

He was also criticised for saying that “our Jewish friends are no more responsible for the actions of Israel or the Netanyahu government than our Muslim friends are for those of various self-styled Islamic states or organisations” at the launch of the

Chakrabarti report, appearing to draw an equivalence between ISIS and Israel. Corbyn later said he regretted his choice of words.

Again, Corbyn has come under fire for [comments](#) in 2013, and his later defence of how he used the term “Zionism”. Sometimes used as a critique of Israel, the vast majority of Jews would describe themselves as Zionists, denoting minimally support for Israel’s right to exist, but many Jewish Zionists are deeply critical of the policies of the State of Israel vis-à-vis the treatment of the Palestinians. By equating Zionism with anti-Palestinian actions Jews are hit in the crossfire.

Combatting Prejudice

While left-wing Anti-Semitism is rising, [evidence suggests](#) that it remains more prevalent both on the right-wing and in certain parts of Islamist discourse. In the UK, a 2017 poll conducted by the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism found that, mirroring national averages, 32% of Labour Party supporters endorsed at least one Anti-Semitic trope, but 40% of supporters of the Conservative Party did so.

Moreover, both Islamophobia and other racisms are more typical of the right. Indeed, prejudice often does not just come in one guise, with Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia often being linked.

Nevertheless, that Anti-Semitism can arise within supposedly anti-racist groups also raises the question of the need for vigilance against not just Anti-Semitism but also other forms of prejudice such as Islamophobia.

Elie Wiesel and Frantz Fanon have warned that hatred against Jews may be linked to wider hatreds, prejudice, and the possibility for enacted discrimination against other groups. Muslims and Jews have often found common ground against prejudice and this tradition needs to be reinforced.

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