

Radical Statistics and the Academic Boycott of Israel

Jonathan Rosenhead

This is not so much a progress report as an apology.

Last February at the Annual Rad Stats Conference in York (actually at the AGM which took place at the Conference) I proposed a motion calling for an academic boycott, disinvestment and sanctions against Israeli institutions which was carried with only 1 vote against but a substantial number of abstentions. The text of the motion was carried in full in Radical Statistics #114, so I won't repeat it here. The essence of it was that a proper discussion of the academic boycott of Israel should take place in the UK statistical community, and to this end Rad Stats would organise a working group to assemble and disseminate relevant information, and promote such a debate, in particular in the Royal Statistical Society.

Clearly the onus was on me to assemble and call together such a group. And my apology is for the fact that I simply have not done that. I did have some initial email communications with Rad Stats members who expressed interest or even enthusiasm for taking part. But I didn't take the crucial step of actually starting the group processes.

I do have some circumstantial excuses, or actually one big one. The AGM was last February. What also started in February was the biggest antisemitism scare in this country since Oswald Mosley's heyday. But this time the antisemitism was, it seems, not on the far right but in our very own Labour Party.

I first joined the Labour Party in 1962 and have been a member for around half of my adult life. One of my strategically placed resignations enabled me to miss the Blair years, but I have been back as a member for the past year. In all my time as a member I have not experienced a single antisemitic incident. Increasing indignation among other Jewish Party members with similar experiences led to the formation of a group *Free Speech on Israel*, aiming to hose down the moral panic with some reality checks.

That has been my priority, along with the convulsions within the Labour Party as the antisemitism controversy joined up with the attempt to defenestrate Jeremy Corbyn from its leadership. The frenetic pace of developments coupled with the need to invent a new

organisation while this was happening has caused other things to slip, and one of them was the formation of the Rad Stats working group on boycott.

I will pick this up now that I have been forced to this embarrassing public admission, and will progress the initiative as I should have done all those months back. If anyone who has not already been in touch with me would like to be involved, please contact me at j.rosenhead@lse.ac.uk.

One part of my displacement activity does have a marginal statistical relevance. I have written at some length in the BRICUP Newsletter about the report by the Home Affairs Select Committee on *Antisemitism in the United Kingdom* (<http://www.bricup.org.uk/documents/archive/BRICUPNewsletter104.pdf>). My piece is polemical, because I believe that the Report reaches a new low in official Parliamentary reporting. And that is not only because I disagree with its conclusions – i) that antisemitism is rampant within the Labour Party; and ii) this is somehow Jeremy Corbyn’s fault. The Report is ungrounded because it set itself no terms of reference. It is unreliable because of its selective neglect of evidence, and indeed of key witnesses (including Shami Chakrabarti) who it refused to call. It is untrustworthy because (to quote my article) of its “bias, denial, denigration, distortion, exclusion, innuendo, partisanship, pejoration, and wilful credulity”.

Among these sins against intellectual probity there are a number of crimes committed against statistical rationality. One is that while claiming to address ‘Antisemitism in the UK’ the Report manages both to cite a finding that 75% of politically motivated antisemitism comes from the far right, and yet spend 75% of its wordage on the political left. It cites some recent percentage increases in antisemitic incidents recorded by the Community Security Trust. But it fails to mention i) that these figures are appreciably below those recorded in 2008/9 and in 2014, at the time of the Israel’s massive assaults on Gaza; and ii) that the actual number behind the percentages is currently around 1000 per year (the police have it a little lower at around 600), while the total number of all hate crimes recorded by the police is running at around 220,00 annually. The report even cites a survey’s finding that an astronomical 87% of British Jews believe that the Labour Party is too tolerant of antisemitism. But this was a ‘self-selecting survey’; and yet they fail to point out the possible effects of self-selection bias all too likely to have come into play in such a charged area.

Based on this process of flawed reasoning the Committee come to the recommendation (which one thinks may have been decided ahead of the 'analysis') that a definition should be passed into law that conflates antisemitism with a range of perfectly non-racist criticisms of Israel. Quite possibly sense will prevail. But that's what we thought in the US Presidential elections.

Postscript

To substantiate my alibi, here are some other traces of the displacement activity that has delayed me. The Free Speech on Israel website is at <http://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/> . Articles that I have written on various stages and aspects of the linked controversies in this area are:

- FSOI submission to Chakrabarti Inquiry (principal author) – see FSOI website
- *Chakrabarti Rocks* – see FSOI website
- *The Duel: Is it anti-Semitic to boycott Israel?* (with Alan Johnson) , in Prospect Magazine – (<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/the-duel-is-it-anti-semitic-to-boycott-israel>)
- *Is Zionist a Rude Word?*, in Open Democracy (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/jonathan-rosenhead/is-zionist-rude-word>)
- *Israel's Right to Exist*, in Open Democracy (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/jonathan-rosenhead/israel-s-right-to-exist>)
- *Jackie Walker – a suspense mystery*, in Open Democracy (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/jonathan-rosenhead/jackie-walker-suspense-mystery>)