

# **Uses and abuses of statistical evidence: how much antisemitism is there in the British Labour party?**

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The context for this article lies in the relatively recent rise of antisemitism and especially the increasing violence associated with it. For a large and recent survey of antisemitism and how it impacts on Jews across Europe, see the report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). My particular concern is with the ways in which political and media commentators have focussed a genuine worry with this rise, on the activities and policies of one political institution, namely the British Labour Party. The issue concerns the extent of antisemitism in Labour and whether it has become 'institutionalised'. Following an analysis of the statistical evidence for the assertions that have been made, I will go on to comment on some of the general issues about the use of evidence in public discourse.

Whilst it is not my intention to provide a full historical account of this particular case, it is nevertheless useful to start with the Parliamentary Home affairs Committee report on antisemitism in British life published in October 2016 (House of Commons 2016), just one year after Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party. This report provides a useful overview and history of racism more generally in British society. In one respect, namely on the issue of defining 'antisemitism' it unfortunately effectively dodges the real issue by broadly accepting the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) definition, which is actually highly contentious and has proved very divisive by appearing to confound antisemitism with criticism of Israeli government actions. I shall return to a discussion of this later.

As far as statistical evidence goes, reference in this report is made to an apparent increase 2014-2015, but the report also points out that up to 2016 the 'worst' year on record for reported antisemitism was 2009 and that there does appear to be a long-term, upwards trend in reported levels of antisemitism since 2000. They note that heightened media discussion and general awareness about antisemitism will affect reported cases. It is also noted that data on reported antisemitism is problematic due to very different police reporting standards. While they do refer to some of the survey evidence about the extent of antisemitic attitudes in the population, they do not extensively quote estimates of antisemitic attitudes by political attitudes or within any political party, although they repeat claims that most antisemitic abuse comes from individuals associated with, or motivated by, far-right parties. They are also critical of some of the 'disciplinary' procedures in place within the Labour Party.

In the rest of this article I will review the evidence that does exist relating political affiliation and antisemitic views, relating it the debate about its extent within the Labour Party.

Before doing so it is worth commenting on one or two widely publicised claims about the extent of antisemitic abuse from within the Labour Party. The general secretary, Jennie Formby, has pointed out that of the 111 complaints from separate individuals submitted by Margaret Hodge MP, in July 2018, 91 of them were actually not members of the Labour Party, a response that appears to have been ignored by Hodge who claims, without any clear evidence, that there is doubt about Labour's own statistical information regarding the complaints received. Similar issues are present with the allegations by Luciana Berger MP who seems to have relied upon a small number of incidents within her constituency to make generalisations about the extent of antisemitism within Labour.

One of the problems in this area is that there is no direct evidence about actual antisemitic episodes within Labour or other parties. Indirect evidence from polling does exist however. Thus, YouGov carried out repeat surveys in 2015, when Corbyn assumed leadership of Labour and two years later. Overall the results showed that among supporters (essentially Labour voters) antisemitic views had if anything decreased and more than any decrease among conservative supporters. Thus:

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According to YouGov, in [2015](#), 22% of Labour voters agreed with the statement that ‘Jews chase money more than other people’, whilst in [2017](#) the number of Labour voters agreeing with the statement had declined to 14%. This compares with 31% of Conservative voters who agreed with the statement that ‘Jews chase money more than other people’ in [2015](#), whilst in [2017](#) this had declined to 27% who still agreed with the statement. This constitutes some of the best evidence on this whole topic, yet is almost never quoted by the media. More detail about how one can define antisemitic attitudes is discussed in a second survey.

This survey was carried out in late 2016, for the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR), it does provide a working definition of antisemitic attitudes that can be elicited using surveys. The JPR report also demonstrates how far people associate antisemitism with criticism of Israeli Government policies towards Palestinians. The report shows that of those people who score highly on their anti-Semitic scale, some 80% score highly on their anti-Israel scale compared to the overall figure of 9%, and of those who score highly on the anti-Israel scale some 17% score highly on the anti semitic scale compared to the overall figure of 4%. Clearly there is a strong association here between anti-Semitic and anti-Israel attitudes, although most people scoring highly on the anti-Israel scale do not in fact score highly on the antisemitic scale and some 28% show no tendency at all to hold anti-Semitic views.

We do not know, of course, how causation operates. Do anti-Israeli attitudes encourage anti-Semitic ones or does it work the other way around, and for how many people? For those who appear to be keen to equate anti-Israeli attitudes with anti-Semitic attitudes, such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, there may well also be a sad irony. If anti-Israeli attitudes actually do encourage anti-Semitic ones, then if Israeli policies towards Palestinians persuade more people to be critical of Israel, then this is likely to encourage an increase in anti-Semitic attitudes.

The rest of the JPR report is also useful. It explores the extent of anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli attitudes among different religious groups and among those with various political leanings. For the latter, while it does not identify party membership, it does quite clearly show a higher degree of anti-Semitic attitudes among the right than among

the left, while for the former it also identifies a greater degree of antisemitism among Muslims than among other religious groups.

The particular debate around antisemitism and links to criticism of Israel as well as criticism of Zionism more generally, has become more prominent over the last few years, and much of it has centered around the statement by the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) that sought to both define antisemitism and also to provide examples of anti-Semitic statements . One example in particular; “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour”, has been criticised on the grounds that it implies that criticism of Israeli policies, for example by claiming that it is an apartheid State, is anti-Semitic. In fact the IHRA statement exhibits a certain amount of internal confusion since it also says “criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic”. The full IHRA definition and examples, for all their flaws, in fact, were eventually adopted by the Labour Party after considerable pressure from its critics and despite the Party originally providing a reasoned critique for accepting a modified version. Nevertheless, the Party and especially its leader continue to criticise Israeli policies that are seen as racist. More recently several voices have been raised that are critical of the attempt to link antisemitism and criticism of Israeli politics and Zionism, most notably the piece that appeared in the Guardian newspaper (itself a strong critic of the Labour Party’s handling of antisemitism) by Peter Beinart

( <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/mar/07/debunking-myth-that-anti-zionism-is-antisemitic> ). Beinart’s argument is persuasive and he carefully demolishes the claim that being critical of Israeli policies is inherently anti-Semitic. He also says “In the real world, anti-Zionism and antisemitism don’t always go together. It is easy to find antisemitism among people who, far from opposing Zionism, enthusiastically embrace it.” The JPR report provides some empirical support in the general population for this statement. But, as far as the second sentence is concerned, he is largely referring to well-known historical figures such as Balfour, who was not only largely responsible for the declaration that sought to establish a Jewish home in Palestine, but who also argued earlier in favour of restricting the ‘influx’ of Jewish immigrants (see for example,

[http://www.balfourproject.org/the-other-arthur-balfour-protector-of-the-jews/ \)](http://www.balfourproject.org/the-other-arthur-balfour-protector-of-the-jews/)

The JPR report in particular shows that of those people who score highly on the anti-Semitic scale, some 80% score highly on the anti-Israel scale compared to the overall figure of 9%, and of those who score highly on the anti-Israel scale some 17% score highly on the antisemitic scale compared to the overall figure of 4%. Clearly there is a strong association here between anti-Semitic and anti-Israel attitudes, although most people scoring highly on the anti-Israel scale do not in fact score highly on the anti-semitic scale and some 28% show no tendency at all to hold anti-Semitic views.

The statistical evidence, while not conclusive, does not merit singling out the Labour Party for special treatment. Yet the Party itself seems to have made little use of the existing evidence in defending itself. It has provided its own evidence (Labour list, 2019) that demonstrates the apparent size of the ‘problem’ within the party, pointing out that less than 0.1% of complaints required following upon the basis of potentially being deliberately antisemitic.

Other evidence adduced by Labour critics consists largely a kind of ‘guilt by association’ by linking Corbyn to acknowledged antisemitic persons or to comments he has made about events. Thus, Corbyn commented favourably on a clearly antisemitic mural in 2012, subsequently apologising for not having thought more carefully. He also provided a preface for a reprinted version of Hobson’s volume on contemporary capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, failing to note that Hobson also wrote antisemitic text. While such a lack of attention on Corbyn’s part is inexcusable, and perhaps is considered by Corbyn as of little relevance, it hardly constitutes consistent antisemitism. Nor does occasionally sharing a debating platform denote antisemitic attitudes. It is hard, if not impossible, to make a convincing case against Corbyn on the grounds of antisemitism, just as it is hard to use the statistical evidence, as making a case for ‘institutional antisemitism.

Perhaps one of the most worrying aspects of this whole affair is the role played by the media. A detailed analysis of media coverage can be found in Schlosberg and Laker (2018), but it is worth mentioning one or two examples of how media outlets have either ignored evidence or even wilfully assumed that rampant antisemitism is an established

fact within Labour. Thus, the BBC on its web site claims to provide a synopsis of the ‘facts’ about the controversy, without any mention at all of the various pieces of polling evidence. Likewise, the Guardian newspaper consistently emphasises the claims of Corbyn’s enemies both in its news items (Schlosberg and Laker, 2018) and especially in various opinion pieces, especially by Jonathan Freedland (see for example Freedland, 2019). The financial Times, in its main editorial (23 July, 2019) assumes that antisemitism ‘infect(s) Labour’. Nowhere does the Financial Times question its assumptions: one must conclude that this is either very lazy journalism or a newspaper simply wishing to use ‘accepted’ opinion to attack Corbyn.

Having been critical of the media, I also believe that the Labour Party itself needs to shoulder some responsibility for what has happened. As Chris Williamson MP pointed out, the Party has been too hesitant in its own defence, a remark that earned him first an expulsion from the Party, then a reinstatement, followed by a further expulsion, even though his remarks were not actually antisemitic (see Jewish Voice for Labour, 2019). Having made the mistake of caving in to pressure from its critics over the IHRA definition, the Labour Party has signally failed to seek independent evidence about antisemitism within its membership. For example, it could well have commissioned an independent polling agency to carry out a membership survey using well established instruments to measure degrees of antisemitic attitudes. This would also have had a likely side effect of encouraging other major parties to carry out similar surveys, or else explain why they didn’t. While its own internal evidence of complaints may be indicative of the extent of the problem, it is hardly enough.

So we see, throughout this affair, how a respect for good evidence has been absent all round. Yet for organisations such as the Labour Party, with limited access to the formal media, and despite its defenders within the informal media such as Jewish Voice for Labour, it remains confronted by overwhelmingly hostile written and broadcast media organisations (but see Aljazeera for both a more balanced news and a more nuanced series of commentaries). For this reason it cannot expect to win arguments by simply rebutting its attackers, unless it utilises clear and independent evidence in its defence. In my view this is ultimately the only secure, and ethically robust, way to proceed. Even if such evidence only finds an outlook on social media rather than the traditional outlets, it remains powerful, and if carried out in

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the spirit of full transparency, admitting shortcomings as well as strengths, at least stands a chance of influencing debates. Indeed, conducting debates principally on the basis of sound evidence ought to be an ambition for the Left generally, and, hopefully, become a defining characteristic of what being 'left wing' is all about.

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