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The Livingstone Formulation fails to rescue Livingstone – David Hirsh

April 28, 2016 — David Hirsh



John Mann Explains things to Ken Livingstone

[An edited version of this piece, by David Hirsh, appears on the JC blog here](#)

Ken Livingstone has been suspended from the Labour Party today. He has been a significant figure as leader of the Greater London Council, a Member of Parliament, and the Mayor of London, for decades.

He is famous for the Livingstone Formulation: the insistence that Jews raise the issue of antisemitism dishonestly in order to silence criticism of Israel; that they don't even believe it themselves. Talk of antisemitism on the left is a conspiracy to mobilize Jewish victim power against the Palestinians.

Last month Livingstone [said](#) that in his 45 years in the Labour Party he had never once seen any antisemitism. On that occasion he was jumping to the defence of Labour in the wake of accusations against Gerry Downing, a Labour Party member who wanted to 're-open the Jewish Question' and Vicki Kirby, a member who tweeted about the Jews that the Brits 'invented Israel when saving them from Hitler, who now seems to be their teacher'. He was also trying to douse the scandal at Oxford University Labour Club after its Chair resigned, saying that members seemed to have 'some kind of a problem with Jews'. These were the students who taunted Jewish members calling them 'Zios' with the song: '*Bombs over Tel Aviv*'.

There is no kind of hostility to Israel which Livingstone would recognize as antisemitic. Not even if somebody called for the forcible 'transport' of every Israeli Jew to Nebraska, as Naz Shah, Labour MP for Bradford West did; Livingstone would say it was criticism of the Israel. Of course, he would not have the same leniency with Jews who call for the transport of Palestinians out of the West Bank; that he would rightly characterise as racist.

Today Livingstone said that Hitler supported Zionism. Most people know that Zionism was a response to antisemitism; most people know that Hitler wasn't in the business of responding to antisemitism but was himself the greatest antisemite of all time. Livingstone smears Jews, at least those who refuse to identify as anti-Zionist, by saying that they are like Nazis. He encourages people on the left and in the student movement to relate to Jews as though they were Nazis; unless they disavow Israel. Antisemitism? No, just criticism.

These latest comments came when he was trying to jump to Naz Shah's defence. Shah had [published an image on facebook](#) which portrayed 'Apartheid' Israel as being similar to 'Hitler'. She had [warned](#) that 'The Jews' were 'rallying' against a claim that Israel was committing war crimes. And she had [published](#) on facebook a plan to ethnically cleanse all the Jews from Israel and send them to Nebraska, complete with an estimate of 'transportation' costs. Naz Shah had also tweeted her warm congratulations to Malia Bouattia, the New President of the National Union of Students, who had warned of 'mainstream Zionist-led media outlets' as she supported violence against Jews in Israel.

In fact Naz Shah [went public](#) with what may have been a genuine and thoughtful apology for the antisemitic things she had been responsible for.

But this was not good enough for Livingstone. He appeared on the radio to deny that anything Shah had said was antisemitic.

The *Livingstone Formulation* is named after Ken Livingstone. Back in 2006 Livingstone got into an argument with a Jewish journalist, Oliver Feingold. Feingold asked Livingstone for a comment about a birthday party from which he had just emerged. Livingstone got angry and Feingold responded that he was 'only doing his job'. Livingstone latched onto this phrase, replying that Feingold was like a Nazi war criminal for using that defence. Feingold told him that he was Jewish and he objected to that. Livingstone told the journalist that his paper was 'was a load of scumbags and reactionary bigots' and that it had a record of supporting Fascism.

In this ostensibly embarrassing and inconsequential dialogue, Livingstone spotted a political opportunity. He wrote an article in *The Guardian* criticising the occupation of the West Bank in which [he wrote](#): 'For far too long the accusation of antisemitism has been used against anyone who is critical of the policies of the Israeli government, as I have been' (Livingstone 2006).

This *Livingstone Formulation* is a response to a charge of antisemitism. It is a rhetorical device which enables the user to refuse to engage with the charge made. It is a mirror which bounces back onto an accuser a counter-charge of dishonest Jewish (or 'Zionist') conspiracy.

Firstly, the *Livingstone Formulation* conflates anything allegedly antisemitic, in this case repeatedly insulting a Jewish reporter by comparing him to a Nazi, into the category of legitimate criticism of Israel. Secondly, it goes further than accusing people who raise the issue of antisemitism of being wrong; it accuses them of being *wrong on purpose*; of crying wolf, of playing the antisemitism card. It alleges an intent, often a collective intent and so a conspiracy, to mobilize Jewish victim-power for illegitimate purposes.

Ken Livingstone was neither the first nor the only one to respond to a person, typically a Jew raising a concern about antisemitism, with an angry counter-accusation of '*Zionist!* 'Protector of Israel, oppressor of Palestinians!' The function of this response is to evade a reasoned discussion of the issue and instead to place the person who wants to discuss it outside of the democratic community.

So what did Livingstone say after Naz Shah was called on her antisemitic posts on social media? She apologized. But Livingstone said that she was a victim of a "*well-orchestrated campaign by Israel lobby*".

Shah apologized, but Livingstone went on to [defend](#) her in yet another way. She proposed to 'transport' the Jews of Israel to America. His defence? 'It's a bit of criticism of Israel and Israel supporters. Let's not forget that in that horrendous conflict for every Israeli that was killed, 60 Palestinians were killed and an awful lot of innocent men, women and children.' Imagine Livingstone proposing ethnic cleansing as a solution to some other social problem or some other perceived injustice.

Livingstone's antisemitism problem goes back decades, but he has only been suspended today. In 1981, when he was already leader of the Greater London Council, Livingstone was made the figurehead editor of a Newspaper called *Labour Herald*. The WRP was an antisemitic Trotskyist group which eventually broke apart when it became clear that its leadership was guilty of routine and serial rape of younger members. *Labour Herald* was also [financed](#) by the WRP, which was in turn financed by Colonel Gaddafi and other Arab Nationalist dictators; the WRP spied on Arab dissidents in London too, reporting back to the murderous regimes in the Middle East. Already in the 80s, Livingstone's paper was running cartoons depicting the Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, wearing a Nazi uniform and doing a straight arm salute. Portraying the Jews as Nazis is deep in Livingstone.

When Livingstone was the Mayor of London he hosted Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi at City Hall. He is pictured cuddling up to the Islamist ideologue. Livingstone insisted that Qaradawi was 'one of the leading progressive voices in the Muslim world'. Qaradawi is the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is the Palestinian affiliate. Qaradawi [speaks in favour](#) of wife-beating, Female Genital Mutilation and the execution of gay people. He [says](#) that Hitler put the Jews in their place; he described the Holocaust as both exaggerated and also as divine punishment.

In 2006, while discussing regeneration plans, Ken Livingstone said the following about [Simon and David Reuben](#), property developers involved in the project: 'If they're not happy here, they can go back to Iran and try their luck with the ayatollahs, if they don't like the planning regime or my approach.' The Reuben brothers are from India and are of Iraqi Jewish descent. Livingstone has been immersed in anti-racist politics for his entire adult life. Why did he use one of the oldest and most cliched racist put-downs in existence against these two 'foreigners'?

On March 21 2012, a group of life-long Jewish Labour supporters sat down with Livingstone to try and come to some agreement so that they could back him in the Mayoral election. They [reported](#) that at 'various points in the discussion Ken used the words Zionist, Jewish and Israeli, interchangeably, as if they meant the same, and did so in a pejorative manner.' They also raised the issue of Livingstone having taken money for fronting a programme on the antisemitic Iranian propaganda channel Press TV. Livingstone told the group that Jews are rich and so are not likely anyway to vote Labour.

In his absurd spat with Oliver Feingold Livingstone had asked him if he had thought of 'having treatment.' In 2015 he turned on Kevan Jones, a man who had talked publicly about his mental health difficulties, and who was currently questioning the appropriateness of asking Livingstone to conduct Labour's defence review. Livingstone said: 'I think [Jones] might need some psychiatric help. He's obviously very depressed and disturbed. He should pop off and see his GP before he makes these offensive comments.'

Ken Livingstone says antisemitic things; he leaps to the defence of antisemites and antisemitic movements; he supports the positions of political antisemitism; he gave his name to a particular variant of antisemitic conspiracy theory whereby those who stand up against antisemitism are accused of doing so in bad faith; he recycles antisemitic tropes. He loves getting into a fight with the Jews. He crosses the street to pile in. He's hungry for the spotlight in this fight.

Ken Livingstone and a significant minority of people in the UK still do not see that there is a problem of antisemitism.

They see a right wing Zionist witch-hunt against good people who oppose austerity, imperialism, the Israeli occupation and Islamophobia. They are enraged by the injustice of the antisemitism smear. They are entrenched in their position that the influence of Israel, and the Jews who support it, is toxic. They are worried how this influence seems to seep into the dominant ideology of the ruling class and the mainstream media. Their blood boils more and more intensely about Israel, its human rights abuses, its vulgarity, and the racism that is to be found there; their anger is mixed with shame at this European Colonial outpost, created under British rule. They see Islamophobia, imported from Israel and America, as the poison of the post national Europe hope. They feel that everybody has learnt the lessons of the Holocaust except for the Zionists, who, having rejected Christian forgiveness and love, find themselves stuck more and more in the Nazi era.

In spite of the fact that these people oppose Nazis and skinheads with all their hearts, and in spite of the fact that they stand in the tradition of Cable Street, these people are antisemites. But they think they are opponents of antisemitism.

I spoke to a Labour activist earlier, somebody who has been fighting antisemitism in the party for decades. She was absolutely jubilant: 'We've been after the bastard for 30 years. We finally got him'.

Footage was going round the internet today of John Mann MP, longtime opponent of antisemitism on the left, challenging Livingstone in a corridor and on a staircase, jabbing his finger in the direction of the now un-masked Livingstone: 'You've lost it mate. Factually wrong. Racist remarks. You have lost it. You read the Nazi history. What did Mein Kampf say about Zionism?'

And what will the Labour leadership do? Jeremy Corbyn shares many of the same core values as Livingstone regarding Israel and the Jews who are held to support it. Corbyn also supports Hamas and Hezbollah; Corbyn has also fronted for Press TV; Corbyn has also jumped to the defence of antisemites.

But at the moment, Corbyn isn't jumping to the defence of Livingstone.

David Hirsh

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