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The UK Election 2019 | Corbyn's legacy is that political antisemitism has re-entered the British mainstream

by David Hirsh



David Hirsh, author of Contemporary Left Antisemitism argues that Corbyn's movement has left behind many thousands of people who have been educated to

believe that between 'us' and 'socialism' sits the formidable obstacle of Jewish power. The rage and shame that they are feeling after their humiliating defeat should not be under-estimated. For many it will be a key formative experience. Political antisemitism has re-entered the British mainstream, and it is not going to just disappear, especially in a Britain being remade by Brexit populism.

JEREMY CORBYN

The country as a whole understood that Jeremy Corbyn and the people around him were dangerous cranks.

Their antisemitism was proven beyond doubt in the submissions to the Chakrabarti Inquiry, in John Ware's Panorama, in Dave Rich's book, in Alan Johnson's Fathom report, in the documentation produced by Labour Against Antisemitism and the Campaign Against Antisemitism; in the Community Security Trust reports; in the journalism of Gabriel Pogrund; in the leaked evidence compiled by the Jewish Labour Movement to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission; daily on the Jewish Chronicle and Jewish News websites; in the testimony of the Labour staff whistle-blowers; in the tweets and facebook posts of hundreds of people who made it their business to confront the antisemitism; in the quantitative data of Daniel Allington and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research; in the experience of hundreds of Labour activists, both still in and forced out of the Party; in the antisemitic responses to well-known figures who spoke out like Rachel Riley and Tracy-Ann Oberman; in Judith Ornstein's 'Whitewashed' and 'Forced Out' projects; in the stories of heroic Labour MPs, Ian Austin, John Mann, Mike Gapes; and particularly the women Labour MPs who endured a special antisemitism laced with sexually violent threat, Luciana Berger, Ruth Smeeth, Margaret Hodge, Joan Ryan, Louise Ellman and Anna Turley.

Of course not many voters were familiar with the evidence but people they trusted said it was true and they believed it. The sliminess of how the Corbynites responded to the accusation was corroboration. I spoke to a French journalist who had been in Cardiff and Dudley and heard working class voters say that Corbyn was an antisemite; somebody heard Corbyn's antisemitism being discussed in a barber's shop in Essex; more and more stories are emerging of people far away from Jewish communities caring about Corbyn's antisemitism. Party canvassers heard about Corbyn's antisemitism on the doorsteps.

By and large, the electorate understood that Corbyn's antisemitism was symptomatic of his anti-democratic politics and they wanted nothing to do with it. When Russian spies murdered people in Britain, Corbyn seemed to trust Putin's word; when Venezuelan socialism collapsed into hunger and state violence, Corbyn blamed America; when security services shot a terrorist in a

suicide vest on London Bridge, voters knew they didn't want Corbyn in charge of Britain's armed forces.

A rational case could be made for any single spending pledge in the Labour manifesto but taken as a whole, people understood that Corbyn was incapable of delivering any of it. Voters knew that things have to be paid for and they knew they'd be doing the paying.

A majority of voters didn't like Corbyn, they sniffed his antisemitism and they knew that it was symbolic of his extremism.

Some of the Corbynites have tried to spin the result as a success. 'Ten million people voted for socialism!' Of course this did not happen. Most people who voted Labour did so because they feared Johnson's Brexit Tory Party even more.

BORIS JOHNSON

This election was a two horse race. If you didn't want Corbyn then you voted for the other guy. All we know for sure from the election result is that the country as a whole thought Boris Johnson was less of a dangerous crank than Jeremy Corbyn. Johnson had only to jump over a very low bar to win a comfortable majority.

BREXIT

If you count Labour as a 'remain' party, which you might because Brexiters voted Tory, only a minority of the country voted for Brexit. Further, many people who oppose Brexit also voted Tory out of fear of Corbyn.

But that discussion is over now because in Britain if you want to govern, you need to win and sustain a majority in Parliament. The electorate preferred a Brexit Parliament over a communist Parliament. And the communism on offer was already, as David Seymour warned, a nostalgic Brexit communism, a communism of the 'white working class', with an ethnic nationalist edge, and a communism which preferred the sentimental nostalgia of 'community' to the socialist ideal of 'society'.

In 2016 the Brexiters told Britain that Brexit was a fantastic and exciting opportunity which could make us rich, happy and free. But in 2019 they presented 'getting Brexit done' as the easiest way to make it go away, because it was boring and unpleasant and then we could move on to do what was important and useful. The economic and political risks both to Britain and Europe are still as they were, but many people have been persuaded that the risks were invented by a conspiracy of 'fake news' called 'Project Fear'.

It appears that Boris Johnson himself, and his advisers, still believe that Brexit is going to be easy. The Government's own economic analysis sets out how raising the cost of doing business with EU countries will result in less business being done and so a lower tax-take. Perhaps Johnson believes that he is now strong enough to implement some kind of 'Brexit in name only' which does not raise barriers. The downside of this has always been that Britain would become a rule-taker of its powerful neighbour and that the democratic deficit which was invented by the Brexit purists will be made real. The bottom line is that Boris Johnson is going to need lots of money. If 'austerity' was necessary in 2010, why isn't it necessary now, when Brexit is creating a much more difficult economic climate? If it is not necessary now, why did disabled people and victims of crime and children in schools have to suffer so much for it then?

POPULISM

Brexit was always at heart a populist conspiracy fantasy. It blames foreigners for our problems and it paints a picture of an 'establishment' here in Britain, consisting of people more loyal to those like themselves abroad than to their own countrymen. The 'elite' is imagined as cosmopolitan, liberal, educated, cunning, saying one thing and really wanting another, connected to the banks and 'finance capital' and secretly in control of the 'mainstream media'. If Brexit goes badly, that is where the blame will be directed. Anyone familiar with how antisemitism works can recognise the potential here for building an antisemitic movement.

Populism also invents 'the people': the opposite of the actually existing diversity of flesh and blood human beings whose interests are mediated through the complex institutions of the democratic state and the liberty of civil society. 'The people' is singular and indivisible and abstract rather than material. It only speaks through the strong-man leader and so politics becomes a ruthless struggle between such leaders for recognition as 'voice of the people'.

Boris Johnson promises two radically opposite things. On the one hand he promises that his populism was only a genius ruse to get things back to normal; he gives us reason to hope that he is a one nation Tory who will end the threat of extremist politics, replenish the NHS and implement a pain-free Brexit. But on the other hand, the day after his great victory he is, like a character from Game of Thrones, riding into the North as liberator-hero, promising that the 'white working class' is to be rewarded for its fealty to the crown.

Remember why we opposed Brexit. Remember the threat to the jobs which do exist in the Northern towns. Remember the motor industry with its delicate supply chains, remember Airbus, whose production line spans the whole of Europe, remember the chemical and pharma industries with their skilled

workers and their hunger for scientists and engineers.

Brexit does not help to fix the North, it harms that campaign. The problems of the 'left behinds' could have been addressed without Brexit. The two issues were only ever connected via the strangely patterned resentments and furies of the culture wars.

The towns of the North have suffered and they have been neglected by predominately Tory central governments and by sclerotic and corrupt Labour one party local states. The moment to address their needs was in the early 1980s when the mines and the factories were closing. But at that moment even if Margaret Thatcher had been willing to address the needs of the refugees from obsolete manufacturing, the Scargillites would not have allowed it. The Labour movement fought to keep the mines open, it wasn't ready to think about how the children of miners would make a post-industrial living. So the Northern towns were the 'enemy within' and were defeated and then punished. Only two generations later have they rejected Scargill and later Corbyn's Stalinism, albeit to some extent in exchange for nationalist and xenophobic Brexit populism. It took until 2019 for them to vote Tory and only now do the Tories appear ready to help.

The Northern towns did lend their support to Tony Blair's liberal democratic pluralist governments, which consolidated and modernised schools and hospitals and which helped facilitate employment with tax credits. They were certainly nowhere near as useless as the populists painted them, but they could have done more.

It is easier to destroy than to create. Britain is over-centralised. Brexit does not so much bring power home but concentrates it even further in Westminster. The populist leader-hero himself is going to be in charge of rewarding the loyal northerners, he is not going to facilitate the building of accountable local structures by which northerners can scrutinise and direct the regeneration themselves.

And as the 'white working class' is being rewarded, what of the fears of Scotland and Northern Ireland, of migrants and refugees, of Europeans and the 'non-white working class'? What of the City of London, with Paris, Dublin and Frankfurt competing for its business, protected by the European Union? What of the artists, engineers, entrepreneurs, what of the young who are flexible and mobile and able to learn languages? Oh, scoffs the populists, they've had it too good for too long. But governing, and paying the bills, requires more than populist, moralist, vengeful scoffing.

The Thatcherite lessons of the value of market discipline – not to mention the senses in which markets facilitate liberty and justice – have been forgotten as

we re-discovered the other side of the dialectic: the dangers of poorly regulated markets, skewed towards monopoly kleptocracy. The European Single Market is one of the greatest achievements of humankind – a huge sphere of freedom created, maintained and limited by a democratic liberal framework. Is there still a place in Johnson's populism for liberal internationalism?

Johnson is promising all things to all people and generally populism cannot deliver its utopian dreams and it usually fails to consolidate power. It creates crisis and misery and is then forced to keep radicalising and to keep blaming the 'enemies of the people' for its failure. If things go well for Johnson, perhaps he can wean us off the populist drug which he himself pushed, and for which some people in Britain have acquired a taste. Perhaps we can return to rational democratic politics and address the justified material grievances of those who have been neglected. On the other hand, we may already be addicted to the heroin of populism.

The obvious danger of Corbyn was that he was incompetent and would condemn Britain to permanent Tory rule. But there was always a small chance of a greater threat: that he might succeed. With hindsight this seems far-fetched now, but the danger has not gone away completely.

Corbyn's movement has left behind many thousands of people who have been educated to believe that between 'us' and 'socialism' sits the formidable obstacle of Jewish power. The rage and shame that they are feeling after their humiliating defeat should not be under-estimated. For many it will be a key formative experience. Political antisemitism has re-entered the British mainstream, and it is not going to just disappear. There is reason to believe that on the populist left people who have been learning to understand the world through antisemitism will find ways to actualise that in the development of antisemitic social movements. Antisemitism has not yet joined xenophobia and racism in the populist right wing mainstream, but if Johnson's utopian ambition gives us crisis rather than solutions, antisemitism may easily migrate from the far right to the mainstream right too.

NO RESONANCE FOR PRO EUROPEAN LIBERALISM

A number of anti-populist politicians who had been demonised, threatened, harassed and forced out of the two main parties stood as independents or as Liberal Democrats. None of them won. The Liberal Democrat party made no headway and the campaigns for tactical voting were ineffective. Even when both major parties are taken over by extremist factions, British politics is still a two party game. Both parties were unpopular but people fell into line nevertheless, voting for one for fear of the other.

The struggle against populism within each party appeared doomed to failure.

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but attempting to defeat the populist parties from outside failed also. The failure of liberal democratic European politics in this election can be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of that which caused the current crisis. On the other hand, it may turn out that the failures of Tony Blair and David Cameron are small indeed compared to the terror which may result from the current taste for populist and radical contempt. Theresa May tried to ride the populist tiger but she lost her courage when things got serious. Boris Johnson is abundantly feeding the tiger and he still hopes that he can control it and live off its energy. History tells us that the tiger may eat him and then eat us all. But for a moment Johnson appears rather majestic on his tiger.

FINCHLEY AND GOLDERS GREEN

In Finchley and Golders Green, a strongly remain constituency, and one which contains the highest concentration of Jews in the country, Luciana Berger, freshly bloodied from her resistance to Corbynite antisemitism, ran an anti-populist campaign. Her appeal to voters was that she could positively represent their liberal values in Parliament. They did not have to choose between one populism and the other, she told her electorate. They could send her to Parliament to resist and to oppose the populist culture as a whole. It was an attempt to build a prototype for a response to populism. If it could succeed here, now, in a conducive climate, perhaps it could act as a model for the future. Liberals, led by Jewish liberals, in the constituency fought hard and with spirit, and they achieved a decent vote, but they lost.

The result was reminiscent of what routinely happens in Israeli elections. A significant minority voted for hope, reconciliation and for something which could help to end the conflict; but they were defeated by a slender majority which voted out of fear; they voted for the strong man who could most be trusted to hurt and punish the enemy that they fear the most. They put their own safety first. This analogy may tell us something not only about the Jews in the constituency but also about the non-Jewish Tory majority further afield too.

REASON AS THE ROSE IN THE CROSS OF THE PRESENT

Hegel reminded us to start by understanding what is rational in the actual. It is easy to see the rationality in putting your own safety first. The Jewish fear of Corbyn – and not only the Jewish fear of him – and the Jewish fear of terrorism – and not only the Jewish fear of it – are rational. What we need to do is build a politics that takes the fear seriously but without falling back into tribalism and the resentment which only reproduces the reasons for the fear.

The metaphor for Jews as the canary in the mine is hateful for Jews. Miners take the canary underground because it is expendable. Jews do not feel themselves to be expendable. It is not accidental that both the huge twentieth

century totalitarian movements had antisemitism at their core. And it is not accidental that with the rise of populism new generations are again learning antisemitism. We hope for a new stability and for a government which will materially address genuine grievances. But we fear that the vulgar, pumped up dishonest little men who sell snake oil to the masses may end up ushering in new and bigger crises.

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