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Britain

Jeremy Corbyn's Opponents Burned the House Down to Stop Him — Now Keir Starmer Is King of the Ashes

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Since this article was published in late June, Starmer has taken a further major step in attacking the legacy of his predecessor Corbyn, when the Labour Party agreed to [pay substantial damages to former employees](#) despite legal advice that the case could be won. Jeremy Corbyn was right to say his was a [political not a legal decision](#) - and is now being sued by [John Ware](#) for doing so. [IVP]

It seemed a safe bet as the year began that British politics was about to enter into a period of calm. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic has plunged Britain into a crisis without any precedent in the last century, combining the mortality rates of a conflict with the economic devastation of a global slump.

It's far too early to say what the long-term political fallout of the pandemic will be. No developed capitalist state has gone through an economic crisis on this scale in tandem with mass fatalities and disruption to everyday life. To say we're about to enter uncharted waters doesn't do justice to the situation.

However, one thing is already clear. Under Keir Starmer's leadership, the Labour Party is taking an approach that differs sharply in both style and content from that followed by Jeremy Corbyn after 2015. At a time when the gravity of the crisis demands a break with the status quo — for better or for worse — Labour is retreating from the ambitious reformist agenda developed under Corbyn.

The arguments made by Starmer and his shadow cabinet team over the public health crisis have already supplied ample evidence of that turn. But we've also seen how the new leadership intends to tackle some key issues that are internal to the Labour Party. Starmer has now set the seal on this political turn by sacking his leadership opponent Rebecca Long-Bailey from Labour's shadow cabinet on trumped-up grounds.

This is no trivial matter for British politics. Without taking account of the information that's come to light about Labour's inner-party struggles, we can't fully grasp how Britain came to be in its current position, with a manifestly incompetent crew of shysters and sociopaths responsible for the management of a catastrophe.

Official Inquiries

The first major development after Starmer took over as leader was the publication of a leaked report on the Labour Party's internal culture. Party officials compiled the report under the supervision of Jennie Formby, Labour's outgoing general secretary. It puts forward a devastating indictment of the party officials against whom Jeremy Corbyn had to struggle after 2015, backed up by voluminous evidence.

We'll come to the particulars of that indictment in a moment. For now, it's important to say why Formby ordered the report to be drafted in the first place. It was intended as a submission to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), a government-funded body which is currently investigating Labour over allegations of "institutional antisemitism."

The EHRC announced a formal investigation of the Labour Party at the end of May 2019, in response to submissions from two groups, the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA) and the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM). [1] In the

run-up to the 2019 election, Corbyn's opponents repeatedly cited the fact that his party was now under investigation by an official body as a devastating blow against his leadership. They took the investigation itself to be proof of Labour's guilt: no smoke without fire, as the saying goes.

Of course, this only held true if the EHRC itself was guided by the evidence when it decided whether or not to launch investigations into the conduct of political parties. The EHRC has now confirmed in the most emphatic way possible that this is not the case. Its criteria for launching investigations are strictly political, in the worst sense of the term.

Whitewash

That confirmation came on May 12, when the EHRC announced that it would not be investigating the Conservative Party for racism. The statement concluded a lengthy saga. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) first asked the EHRC to investigate the Tories in May 2019. [2] It repeated that request in November after receiving no reply. Once again, the EHRC kicked the issue into touch. [3]

The Conservative Party is racist in every conceivable way. Its leader Boris Johnson has a history of inciting racism against British Muslims, as do some of his senior cabinet colleagues, and the party ran an openly racist campaign against Sadiq Khan in the 2016 London mayoral election. [4] Johnson's predecessor David Cameron used parliamentary privilege to lie about a British imam, falsely claiming that he was a supporter of ISIS in order to taint Khan by association.

A poll conducted last year found that nearly two-thirds of Conservative Party members believed Islam to be a "threat to Western civilization." [5] 43 percent said they could not accept the idea of a Muslim prime minister. It beggars belief that the EHRC could see all this and still hesitate before starting an investigation.

By dragging its heels, the EHRC ensured that the Tories would go into last year's election campaign without the stigma of being officially investigated for racism. Several months after the horse had bolted, the Commission was still unable to decide whether it was going to shut the stable door. The MCB submitted a new dossier in March 2020, with exhaustive documentation of Tory racism, but the EHRC could only say that it was "actively considering what, if any, action" it might take. Two months later, it ceased "actively considering" anything and authorized the Conservative Party to investigate itself. [6]

Protective Shield

To describe this as a case of double standards would be the understatement of the decade. It is objectively impossible for anyone to believe that the Labour Party merits investigation for racism, yet the Tories do not. Instead of defending the rights of ethnic minorities, the EHRC is functioning as a protective shield for racism in high places.

Disgraceful as this may be, it's not difficult to understand why it should be the case. The EHRC does not exist in a vacuum, after all. Most of Britain's private media outlets support the Conservative Party, and even the ones that don't were bitterly hostile to Jeremy Corbyn.

If the EHRC announced an investigation into the Tories, it would be setting itself up for relentless flak from the Tory press. It faced no such backlash when it put Labour in the spotlight. One path leads to brickbats, the other leads to

praise. One might as well ask why more people go to Spain than Scotland for their beach holidays.

Setting the Record Straight

We can therefore dispose of the idea that the investigation itself constitutes proof of guilt for Corbyn's Labour Party. Needless to say, the EHRC's track record doesn't constitute proof of innocence, either. After all, following the path of least resistance can sometimes lead you to the right destination, purely by chance. This is where the leaked Labour report comes in. [\[7\]](#)

For those who don't have time to read the full thing — it's over 800 pages long — *Novara* have published an excellent series of articles summarizing its most important findings. [\[8\]](#) To the extent that mainstream British journalists have acknowledged the report at all, the usual response has been to belittle its significance, playing down the contents as tittle-tattle, which in any case has no connection to the party's handling of antisemitism. [\[9\]](#)

This approach is brazenly disingenuous. The report punches a series of holes in the dominant media narrative about the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. The only way for journalists who promoted that narrative to deal with the challenge is to put their fingers in their ears.

Three main points emerge from the report. First of all, the officials who controlled Labour's party machine until Jennie Formby took over in 2018 were bitterly hostile to Corbyn and the Labour left. They desperately wanted Corbyn to fail, and responded to the party's electoral advance in 2017 as if they had experienced a personal bereavement.

For many Corbyn supporters, this revelation came as little surprise. They had seen the way that Labour's right-wing element acted before, during, and after the 2017 campaign. If they needed visual confirmation, they could watch the clip of Labour MP Stephen Kinnock dumbstruck with horror at the sight of the exit poll, which revealed that Labour had deprived the Conservatives of their majority. [\[10\]](#)

But it's still bracing to read the messages exchanged between party officials on election night, describing their own reactions to the poll: "stunned and reeling," "silent and grey-faced," "in need of counselling," and — most striking of all — "opposite to what I had been working towards for the last couple of years!" It's not so much a smoking gun as a detailed confession signed by all the defendants.

Normal People

Secondly, their hostility to Jeremy Corbyn clearly stemmed from profound ideological disagreements rather than concerns about "electability." Corbyn's speech after the Manchester terrorist bombing during the 2017 campaign encapsulated this division between opposing worldviews. [\[11\]](#)

Two party officials, Jo Greening and Francis Grove-White, were horrified by the thought of what Corbyn was planning to say. Greening hoped that it would cause the party grave electoral damage: "With a bit of luck this speech will show a clear polling decline and we shall all be able to point out how disgusting they truly are."

Grove-White was worried that Corbyn's perspective "won't go down as badly as it deserves to, thanks to the large groundswell of ill-informed opposition to Western interventions." Greening reassured him that there was no cause for

concern: “In the face of a terror attack normal people do not blame foreign intervention, they blame immigration.”

As it turned out, Grove-White was right to be apprehensive: British public opinion overwhelmingly endorsed Corbyn's analysis. [12] 53 percent agreed with the statement that “wars the UK has supported or fought ARE responsible, at least in part, for terror attacks against the UK”; just 24 percent disagreed. The same poll showed pluralities of voters agreeing with Corbyn's opposition to every war that Britain has fought in the Middle East since 1991 (rising to 55 percent for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 — just 18 percent thought it was the right thing to do).

The Manchester speech was one of the most hopeful moments for public debate in any Western country since 9/11. It shattered the conventional wisdom about the way left-wing politicians have to approach questions of national security. [13] But some of the officials who received generous salaries from the Labour Party to help maximize its vote would have preferred to see “normal people” blame immigrants for terrorism instead.

“A Catalogue of Reporting Failures”

Thirdly, the report contains alarming documentation of the attitudes held by party officials. Their position on racism towards black people could most generously be described as complacent (some might want to use stronger adjectives). Three of the officials — including Emilie Oldknow, who had been Starmer's choice to replace Jennie Formby as general secretary — expressed their horror when Corbyn appointed a black Labour MP, Dawn Butler, to his shadow cabinet. Butler's main sin appears to have been suggesting that the Labour Party itself had issues with racism.

Another party official, Patrick Heneghan, discovered that Corbyn's ally Diane Abbott was crying in a toilet cubicle, having been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of racist and sexist abuse that she was receiving online. Instead of expressing sympathy with Abbott, Heneghan boasted that he had passed on this juicy piece of gossip to a television reporter.

Most striking of all is the evidence — carefully summarized by Charlotte England in this article — that Labour officials in charge of the party's disciplinary process were at best profoundly incompetent in their handling of antisemitism complaints. [14] This is a vital point, because the very same officials appeared on the BBC's flagship documentary slot *Panorama* in the guise of “whistleblowers,” accusing Corbyn and his associates of having sabotaged their efforts to root out antisemitism in the party.

This is not the first time John Ware's documentary has been called into question. The Labour Party issued a strong rebuttal as soon as it was aired in July 2019, showing that the program-makers had distorted the meaning of emails from the leader's office. [15] Ware's choice of “experts” could only be described as outlandish: he presented Alan Johnson, who works for Britain's leading pro-Israel campaigning group, BICOM (Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre), as a neutral academic authority on antisemitism (in particular, its alleged overlap with left-wing criticism of Israel). [16] The Media Reform Coalition listed “a catalogue of reporting failures” in the documentary that violated the BBC's editorial guidelines. [17]

However, none of this had much impact on public discourse. As far as the British media was concerned, *Panorama* crashed through the arguments of the Labour leadership like Boris Johnson at the wheel of a bulldozer. The anguished testimony of its “whistleblowers” brings to mind an infamous line from the *Simpsons*: “Your tears say more than real evidence ever could.”

Sabotage

To put this controversy in its proper context, it's important to remember the wider political scene in July 2019. Theresa May had failed to push her Brexit deal through parliament and resigned after the European elections, in which both main parties took a hammering at the hands of pro- or anti-Brexit forces. Boris Johnson was about to become Tory leader, having promised to “get Brexit done” in the hardest possible form.

That was more than enough for the Labour leadership to worry about, as they shifted towards a policy of support for a second referendum on Brexit that posed grave dangers for Labour-held seats in Leave-supporting areas. And yet they had to deal at the same time with a manufactured controversy cooked up by factional opponents within their own party.

For all the importance attached to it by the British media, the Panorama documentary only accounted for one part of that false narrative. Jennie Formby was able to show that the documentary's claims were diametrically at odds with reality: far from protecting antisemites in the Labour Party through malice or neglect, Formby had substantially increased the number of people expelled for antisemitism after taking over from Iain McNicol in April 2018. [18] The fresh evidence of negligent behavior by the old guard adds substance to a picture that was already apparent from emails published last year and commented upon by Momentum's Jon Lansman: [19]

Former compliance unit officials from the Labour Right may have delayed action on some of the most extreme and high-profile antisemitism cases, including Holocaust denial, allowing a backlog of cases to build up that would damage the party and Jeremy's leadership . . . these emails now expose that the party bureaucracy when under the control of Labour's right even went so far as to turn a blind eye to antisemitism, to destabilize Jeremy's leadership. And this is partly why the party has not yet managed to get to grips with this problem.

However, it's important to put the question of party discipline in perspective, because we are still talking about a tiny proportion of the Labour Party membership. According to Formby's figures, disciplinary panels heard 274 cases “relating to antisemitism” in 2019; 149 members were expelled or left the party before the proceedings concluded. As a proportion of the total membership — 520,000 — that adds up to a little under 0.03 percent.

When academic researchers asked members of the public to guess what percentage of the Labour membership had been disciplined for antisemitism, the average estimate was one-third — a thousand times greater than the actual figure for 2019, and scarcely less absurd if all the disciplinary cases from 2015 onwards are added up together. [20] One could hardly blame them for getting it so wrong, if they had been relying on the British media to convey an accurate picture.

“Deeply Irresponsible”

The Labour leadership also had to deal with prominent figures in their own party — not least its deputy leader Tom Watson — grossly and maliciously exaggerating the scale of the problem. As Jennie Formby wrote in a letter to Watson, soon after the Panorama documentary went on air:

By choosing to ignore the steps taken by this party, and commenting so uncritically about the Panorama programme, you are complicit in creating a perception that antisemitism is more prevalent in the Labour Party than wider society. This is deeply irresponsible for the deputy leader of a party which seeks to be in Government, and risks exacerbating the fear that Jewish communities will feel.

Shortly after Formby composed that letter, the Observer interviewed Emily Thornberry, a prominent member of Corbyn's shadow cabinet. [21] The interviewer, Rachel Cooke, started off by asking "how much longer the vast majority of Labour MPs intend to put up with the stench that currently rises from their party." For Cooke, Labour's detailed rebuttal of the Panorama documentary constituted further proof of its guilt: "The denial goes on."

Jennie Formby had recently taken a break from cancer treatment to brief the shadow cabinet on Labour's response to the EHRC investigation. Tom Watson attended the briefing, said nothing, then went on to compose an open letter, demanding answers to a whole series of questions that he hadn't bothered to ask Formby in person. The Unite trade-union leader Len McCluskey spoke for many when he described Watson as a "fucking disgrace."

But not for Rachel Cooke, who pointedly asked Emily Thornberry if she didn't think it was "a bit cheap of McCluskey to deploy Formby's cancer in the way that he did?" Thornberry delicately set her straight:

She took a break from her chemo and gave a presentation on antisemitism and what was happening. I asked her some questions. She looked glorious, but she had no hair, and we know how ill she is, and from what I can remember Tom didn't ask her any questions — and then he writes a public letter having a go at her. On a human level, I just don't think it's right.

For Britain's liberal broadsheets, Tom Watson was a man who combined the virtues of Harold Wilson, Brian Clough, and Mother Teresa, so this devastating character-portrait could not be allowed to stand. Cooke insisted that Thornberry couldn't really mean what she had said, and must have been hoping to curry favor with McCluskey ahead of a future leadership bid.

Saint Thomas

This interview is worth dwelling on, not because it was exceptional, but because it wasn't. There's no reason to think that Rachel Cooke is an especially callous person: she was merely channelling the house orthodoxy of her own paper and its sister title. This adulation of Watson reached a farcical apotheosis shortly after Christmas last year, when the Guardian trumpeted Watson's claim to have stepped down as a Labour MP because he found the "brutality" of Corbyn and his associates intolerable. [22]

If José Mourinho announced that he was retiring from football management because the cynical gamesmanship of Pep Guardiola and Jürgen Klopp was too much to bear, the derisive hooting of the nation's sportswriters would be audible from space. But an equally preposterous claim from Watson, a notorious factional bruiser with a taste for the dark arts, can be reported with the utmost solemnity.

Formby decided to step down as general secretary after Corbyn's departure, instead of remaining in her position for as long as possible to wage a war of attrition against the Labour right, just as Iain McNicol did against the Labour left. One might regret that choice in political terms, but it's hard to reproach her on a personal level.

Tom Watson took advantage of the fact that Formby was undergoing chemotherapy to drag her name through the mud. A liberal journalist saw this happening in plain sight, and still managed to insinuate that it was Formby and her defenders who had done something wrong, with specific reference to her cancer. Who on earth would want to carry on working in such a toxic environment, after the possibility of doing something constructive with the Post had largely evaporated?

“A Giant of This Land”

There was never really a campaign against antisemitism in the Labour Party — there was a campaign to brand Corbyn and his supporters as antisemites, which is something very different. That campaign relied upon the debating tactic known as the Gish gallop, in honor of the creationist ideologue Duane Gish. Gish would wheel out a whole series of false or misleading claims, each of which took longer to refute than to make, in the hope of bamboozling his audience. [23]

In this case, we would have to imagine a debate where Gish had several hours to make his case, with the assistance of a megaphone, while his opponents had a few minutes for rebuttal at the end, struggling to make their voices heard over a chorus of booing. Journalists and politicians have repeated the main points of this particular gallop so many times that they've hardened into conventional wisdom, despite their inherent fatuity.

Reflecting on Corbyn's leadership in the pages of the *New Statesman*, the ex-Labour MP Phil Wilson blamed Corbyn for his difficulties with the media: “If you don't want the press to write you are a terrorist sympathizer, don't lay a wreath at the grave of a terrorist.” Wilson was referring, of course, to the controversy about Corbyn's presence at a 2014 ceremony in Tunisia. [24] The *Daily Mail* accused the Labour leader of laying a wreath for the PLO commander Salah Khalaf, better known as Abu Iyad, and the matter quickly passed into legend.

As it happens, Corbyn didn't lay a wreath for Khalaf, but so what if he had? Khalaf was accused of helping plan the Black September attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics (with characteristic disregard for trifles of fact, the Jewish Labour Movement's EHRC submission denounced Corbyn for “laying a wreath next to the graves of Black September terrorists, who murdered Israeli Olympic athletes in 1972” — the actual hostage-takers are buried in a different country, Libya). Abu Daoud, who certainly did help organize the Munich attack, stated that Khalaf was involved — but he also testified that the current Palestinian National Authority president Mahmoud Abbas took part in the planning. [25]

If Khalaf is beyond the pale, then logically the same principle must apply to Abbas. The idea that Khalaf was an irredeemable terrorist with whom no decent person could associate had to be retrospectively concocted by the British media to justify another round of shrill polemics about Jeremy Corbyn's moral depravity. In fact, Khalaf was one of the chief architects of the PLO's peace strategy in the late 1980s, before agents of Saddam Hussein murdered him in 1991. Dovish, center-left Israeli politicians welcomed his conciliatory message to the Israeli people in 1989. [26]

The following year, *Foreign Policy* published an article by Khalaf in which he expressed the PLO's support for a two-state peace settlement:

A unitary, binational state cannot be built without the acquiescence of both communities; and if it is established by force against the will of one of the two, it cannot stand the test of time. The day may come when the Jews of Israel and the Arabs of Palestine, their mutual trust nurtured by a period of peaceful, prosperous and cooperative coexistence, decide that their interests lie in some form of union. But unless and until that day comes, both peoples' interests would be served best if each went its separate way. [27]

Corbyn's detractors generally claim to be in favor of a “two-state solution,” yet they anathemize a man who used all the authority of his track record — including his role in Black September — to argue for Palestinian acceptance of an Israeli state.

Needless to say, the British commentariat never applies the “terrorist” label to Israeli politicians with a record of violence against civilians far in excess of anything that Khalaf could be accused of. David Cameron and Tony Blair

attended the funeral of Ariel Sharon — Blair even praised Sharon as “a giant of this land” — without facing any backlash from respectable opinion-formers.

Beneath the double standard lurks a single, racist standard. Jeremy Corbyn never internalized the principle that Palestinian lives are worth less than Israeli lives: one Israeli death is a tragedy, a thousand Palestinian deaths are a statistic. For much of the “Labour antisemitism” controversy, anti-Palestinian racism served as a load-bearing wall. Without that underlying assumption, many of the attacks against Corbyn and his allies would have crumbled.

The Daily Mail recently had to pay a large sum in damages to the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC), a British-based group, after publishing false claims about the PRC in the course of another anti-Corbyn hit job. [28] The Mail's error was to defame a particular organization that could sue for libel. If it was possible for an entire people to sue collectively, the Palestinians could easily bankrupt the British newspaper industry.

Self-Serving Elites

Not content with enshrining anti-Palestinian racism as part of the consensus view in British politics, at a time when Israel's political mainstream brazenly denies the right of Palestine to exist, Corbyn's factional opponents have even chosen to promote antisemitism themselves. That's the only way to describe a claim made by the Labour MP Wes Streeting in a pamphlet setting out his stall for the post-Corbyn era: [29]

Labour's antisemitism crisis stems from a worldview that puts Jews or Zionists at the center of a global capitalist conspiracy working to create a rigged system that works for the wealthiest few at the expense of the many. It was this worldview that voters found repulsive and that we must comprehensively abandon.

This theory is no innovation of Streeting's: the Guardian columnists Jonathan Freedland and John Harris have previously expressed it in print. [30] In March 2019, Harris claimed that the Labour Party “now tends to present the very real failings of modern capitalism not as a matter of anything systemic, but the work of a small group of people who are ruining things for the rest: what Corbyn calls a ‘self-serving elite,’ who ‘monopolize the wealth that should be shared by each and every one of us.’” According to Harris, this could only result in the scapegoating of Jewish people.

It's difficult to convey in words how pernicious this line of argument really is. The speech of Corbyn's that Harris singled out for rebuke was in fact a boilerplate exercise in left-populist rhetoric. It could have been delivered by any politician standing up to the power of big business, from Franklin Roosevelt to Pablo Iglesias. [31] There is absolutely no reason to think that Corbyn had Jewish people in mind when he spoke about “the cosy cartels that are hoarding this country's wealth for themselves.” Nor is there any evidence that his supporters understood it in that way.

To give a thoroughly cynical and meretricious talking-point more engagement than it deserves: at a very abstract level, we might say that capitalism can reproduce itself without any need for human agency. In practice, that's not how the system works. Individuals like Jeff Bezos exercise agency in a very real and tangible way — for example, by deciding to sack union organizers while reaping a fortune from the COVID-19 lockdown. [32] Amazon may still be subject to certain structural imperatives that even Bezos cannot overcome. But it is not a price-taking firm in an idealized world of perfect competition.

In any case, there is no contradiction between a systemic analysis of the British economy — something that was central to Labour's campaigning platform, as John Harris knew perfectly well — and sharp condemnation of the

individuals who appear as the personification of structural forces. [33] When left-wingers called for bankers to be jailed after the 2008 crash, it was meant to be a complement to structural change, not a substitute for it, and it certainly did not imply a belief that the financial system was basically healthy.

The arguments made by Streeting, Freedland, Harris, and others only make sense if they believe that Jews actually do play a disproportionate role in the functioning of modern capitalism. In the guise of opposing antisemitism, they are promoting a deeply antisemitic conflation, forcibly conscripting Jewish people into the role of human shields for our economic system. If antisemitism really was a matter of great concern for the British media, these individuals would be driven out of public life before their feet could touch the ground.

Out of the Bottle

The “Labour antisemitism” narrative has already done incalculable harm to public debate about racism in Britain. For one thing, it has probably given many people from ethnic-minority groups the mistaken impression that antisemitism is taken more seriously than other forms of racism. In fact, we have already seen that antisemitism gets a free pass so long as it comes from the political right and targets liberal and left-wing Jews. Conservative MPs can promote antisemitic conspiracy theories about George Soros and “cultural Marxism” without fear of sanction. [34]

This culture of impunity reached a nadir during the 2019 election campaign, when the Sun’s political editor Tom Newton Dunn promoted a far-right hit list drawn directly from neo-Nazi sources. At a time when charges of antisemitism dominated the news agenda, a prominent journalist could channel readers to a group called Aryan Unity without exciting the interest of his colleagues. Apart from a Guardian opinion column by a freelance contributor, Britain’s mainstream media outlets left the matter well alone.

The response of the British right to anti-racist protests bears the stamp of this toxic campaign. Conservative Party supporters now feel emboldened to claim that left-wingers are the real racists (and in this context, that clearly means “anti-white”). Risible as such claims may be, these knuckle-dragging xenophobes are just following a lead from people higher up the food chain.

After all, it’s barely six months since a motley crew of celebrities signed an open letter urging people not to vote for Labour, supposedly because of concerns about antisemitism. [35] They issued no such appeal against a vote for the Conservatives, implicitly granting their approval to the party of Windrush and the “hostile environment.” [36] Instead of being laughed out of town, these pompous hypocrites received front-page treatment from the liberal press.

“Why Hasn’t He Sorted This Thing Yet?”

Keir Starmer was not responsible for any of this. But his leadership campaign proved to be its indirect beneficiary. It didn’t really matter whether people believed that Jeremy Corbyn had done more to inflame antisemitism than any politician since the Second World War (as one of John Ware’s alleged “whistleblowers” suggested last year). [37] The long-running saga fed into damaging perceptions of Corbyn as an incompetent leader: he was always in trouble, always embroiled in controversy about issues that seemed obscure to the average person, and always at odds with senior figures in his own party. [38]

One of the most revealing comments on this protracted affair came from the New Statesman journalist Stephen Bush, shortly after the election was over: “Very few conversations I had during this campaign about antisemitism

were about it as a moral failing, but as [a] 'why hasn't he sorted this thing yet?' failing." (Tellingly, Bush made this point as an aside in a Twitter thread, not in a published article.) A question like that appears superficially reasonable — "if he can't put this to bed, how does he expect to run the country?" — but ignores the fact that Corbyn's opponents had successfully defined the problem in a way that made it impossible to "sort."

There was a coda of sorts to John Ware's Panorama documentary in April 2020, when a consortium took over the ailing Jewish Chronicle newspaper and kept its editor Stephen Pollard in his post. [39] Pollard has turned the Chronicle into a right-wing propaganda sheet with a costly track record of publishing falsehoods about his political opponents. [40] He directed its fire against Corbyn from the earliest stages of his leadership and played a significant role in constructing the overall narrative.

The head of the consortium was Robbie Gibb, erstwhile director of communications for Theresa May. It also included the ex-Labour MP John Woodcock — who resigned from the party in a haze of controversy and campaigned for a Tory victory last December — and none other than John Ware himself. [41] Gibb, Woodcock and Ware clearly believe that Stephen Pollard and his Muslim-baiting columnists have a valuable role to play. [42]

The BBC even nominated Ware's Potemkin village for a prestigious BAFTA award, the institutional equivalent of flicking triumphant V signs at Labour supporters after the broadcaster's egregious display in last year's election campaign. [43] American readers might like to imagine a scenario in which the New York Times submitted Judith Miller's reporting to the Pulitzer judges instead of apologizing to their readers. [44] A more fitting verdict came from academic research that revealed a staggering decline in trust for the media among left-leaning voters: from 46 percent in 2015 and 38 percent at the start of 2019 to just 15 percent today. [45]

Rewarding the Guilty Parties

In his pitch for the Labour leadership, Starmer promised incompatible things: to keep the greater part of Labour's 2017 and 2019 manifestos, while unifying the party and forging a better relationship with the press. Reeling from the election defeat and worn down by years of infighting, the majority of Labour members decided to buy what he was selling.

The leaked report, which only surfaced after Starmer was home and dry, shows in exhaustive detail exactly why the Labour Party was so divided after 2015. When Starmer spoke of "unity," his intention was to reward the guilty parties for their behavior — and this is the point at which he does become culpable.

The report itself may have derailed Starmer's plan to appoint Emilie Oldknow as general secretary, but his inquiry into its contents is a transparent whitewash. [46] By brushing the report under the carpet and pressing Jennie Formby to resign, Starmer has sent a clear message to the EHRC: Labour's new leadership won't put up any serious defence of the party's record. [47] After Oldknow's eclipse, Starmer pushed through the appointment of an equally partisan Labour-right apparatchik, David Evans.

If the EHRC publishes a report that is a tissue of lies from start to finish, most of the British media won't bat an eyelid. But it can also deliver a more elegant stitch-up, identifying some minor failings and transgressions — which are sure to be present in any large bureaucratic organization — and exaggerating their significance in the executive summary (an approach already pioneered back in 2016 by the report of Westminster's Home Affairs Committee on antisemitism in British politics). [48]

The Road to Nowhere

Starmer's evident desire to placate the Labour right will come with a hefty price tag in terms of political orientation. Already Labour MPs have started grumbling that they had to vote against xenophobic immigration laws: "a significant number of us were incandescent at the whip," one backbencher claimed. Starmer probably won't face the same kind of open mutiny as Corbyn, but that's because a strategy of attrition is likely to be more effective in chipping away at residual left-wing policy commitments. [\[49\]](#)

Meanwhile, Starmer has sacked his left-wing opponent Rebecca Long-Bailey from the shadow cabinet on a farcical pretext. Long-Bailey had shared an interview with the actress Maxine Peake, a prominent Labour supporter who campaigned tirelessly for the party in the last two general elections. Peake noted in passing that the Israeli military provides training for US police forces — a well-established fact that underlines the elective affinity between two forms of state racism. [\[50\]](#)

Claims that Long-Bailey was promoting an "antisemitic conspiracy theory" should be dismissed with the contempt they so richly merit. Long-Bailey's critics are the ones guilty of antisemitism, by holding Jewish people collectively responsible for the actions of the Israeli state. At a time when Benjamin Netanyahu's government is preparing the formal annexation of the occupied territories, such tawdry exercises in mudslinging are the only thing Israel's supporters can offer in its defence.

In any case, Starmer was clearly grasping for the first excuse he could find to remove Long-Bailey from her post as shadow education secretary. It may have been a relatively marginal role, but Long-Bailey's presence in Starmer's front-bench team still made it more difficult for him to shift right — for example, by siding with Boris Johnson against teachers over the reopening of schools.

The Labour leadership has also signalled its intention to move away from the Green New Deal platform that Long-Bailey helped devise. [\[51\]](#) As Owen Hatherley pointed out, Long-Bailey was the candidate who actually possessed the "forensic" policymaking skills that Starmer's enthusiasts credited him with: she was well-placed to carry on the work of John McDonnell, developing a left-wing economic program that's adapted for modern conditions. [\[52\]](#) Instead, Labour has an empty suit with a vision spliced together from focus groups.

Rewriting History

Ultimately, the idea of "Labour antisemitism" in the British media — like the "Bernie Bros" narrative in the United States — was a placeholder for the real message that media outlets wanted to put across: we don't consider this politician and his supporters to be legitimate, and we'll churn out a limitless supply of disinformation to prevent their arguments from being heard. If they want to achieve anything in politics, they'll have to wade knee-deep through a thick sludge of our nonsense.

Neither Corbyn nor Bernie Sanders were able to overcome the opposition they faced, for multiple reasons in both cases. In Britain, the Labour left is going to be on the defensive for the foreseeable future, and one of its main tasks will be resisting attempts to rewrite the history of the past five years in the most shameless manner — a process that is already well underway.

Soon after the election, Andy Beckett warned against dismissing what Corbyn had achieved, and rejected glib comparisons between Labour's infamous 1983 election defeat and its more recent setback:

Unlike [Michael] Foot, Corbyn won the support of a cohort of voters that will only become more important. According to the Conservative pollster Michael Ashcroft, last week Labour received almost three times as many votes from the under-35s as the Tories. In 1983, the Tories led Labour comfortably in this group . . . Labour's youthful support, and policies addressing what are by common consent the biggest contemporary issues — the climate emergency, the inadequacies of the modern economy and Britain's proliferating social crises — suggest a party with the potential to do much better at future elections. [53]

You'll struggle to hear good sense like that over the conformist din, but this kind of insight is vital to keep hold of.

A Job Well Done

Meanwhile, the best epitaph for Corbyn's inner-party opponents comes from one of their own: Gavin Shuker, the Labour MP who helped form a new party, Change UK, at the start of 2019, with the goal of preventing a left-wing government. Many of Shuker's fellow MPs agreed that Corbyn had to be stopped at all costs, but refrained from joining his splinter group on tactical grounds.

Looking back on a now defunct party, and the wreckage of his own parliamentary career, Shuker consoled himself with the thought that it had all been worth it: [54]

People might ask me in 30 years "what did you achieve in your time in politics." I'm no fan of this government obviously. But still, I will be able to say I helped prevent Jeremy Corbyn from leading us through a huge national crisis. And to be honest, I'll take that.

Shuker wasn't just speaking for himself or his Change UK colleagues. He was unquestionably speaking for a host of influential figures who preferred a Tory government to one led by Jeremy Corbyn: from Tom Watson and Margaret Hodge, to Iain McNicol and Emilie Oldknow. They look at the record of Britain's Tory government — the vertiginous death toll, the normalization of prejudice, the sheer wanton cruelty — and congratulate themselves on a job well done. This is what they wanted; this is the world they made.

June 25 2020

[Jacobin](#)

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