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Submission to the Labour Party inquiry into antisemitism

David Hirsh

Lecturer in Sociology
Goldsmiths, University of London
New Cross
London SE14 6NW

d.hirsh@gold.ac.uk
+44 79 5713 6654

I have tried to keep this submission short, descriptive and clear. If the inquiry would like me to expand on anything, to clarify any points, to provide examples or evidence, then I would be happy to do so.

1. There is antisemitism on the left

There is nothing alien or surprising about the existence of antisemitism on the left. It has dogged our movement since the beginning.

Antisemitism on the left is not only a reflection of the general prejudice that occurs throughout society, there is a specifically left wing tradition of antisemitism. It is a premise of the left that the world could be better. Left wing thought seeks to find what is stopping the world from being better. Some on the left have always been tempted by the proposition that ‘the Jews’ stand between us and the good life. Jewish tribal selfishness is portrayed as the block to things being better for everybody. The notion that the Jews prevent universal redemption has a specific Christian heritage. The notion that the Jews are at the centre of all that is wrong with the world is common to all historical antisemitisms.

The temptation to define left wing antisemitism out of existence should be resisted. Some say that the left is, by definition, opposed to antisemitism. It seems to follow that if there is antisemitism it cannot really be on the left or that if it is on the left then it cannot really be antisemitism. But taking left antisemitism seriously requires us to rely on political judgment of what is actually going on, not on definitional sophistry.

2. There is antisemitism without conscious hatred of Jews

We are accustomed to the concepts of institutional and cultural racism. We are used to the idea that there can be racist ways of thinking, racist outcomes, racist norms and practices, discrimination and structural power imbalances in the absence of conscious or specifically race-motivated hatred. Racism is not only a subjective emotion inside people's heads, it is also an external and objective social phenomenon. We need to get used to the idea that antisemitism is like other racisms in this respect.

If somebody says or does something antisemitic, if they share antisemitic ways of thinking and if they participate in antisemitic norms and practices, they are not absolved from political responsibility by the fact that they feel no subjective hatred towards Jews, or that they think of themselves as opponents of antisemitism.

Antisemitism is recognized by what is said and done, not by the purity of a person's soul.

3. Bad apples or a problem with the barrel?

A bad apple theory will not do as an explanation for the current phenomenon of antisemitism on the left. We need to understand what the problem is with the barrel which has allowed so many apples to turn bad.

I do not suggest that the whole left is antisemitic nor that the left is necessarily antisemitic; on the contrary, there have always been strong democratic left traditions which have understood and opposed antisemitism.

There is a relationship between a broad culture of emotional, disproportional and irrational hostility to Israel which is accepted as legitimate in much of left politics, and the specific examples of Jew-baiting by Labour people which were the catalyst for setting up this inquiry.

The examples which most people can recognise as being problematic are symptoms of the broader culture, which many people cannot recognise as being problematic. This broader culture is increasingly strong and self-confident but it is by no means uncontested.

4. The distinction between criticism of Israel and antisemitism

Everybody agrees that there is a distinction between criticism of Israel and antisemitism. The problem is that this truism is often interpreted such that everything is judged to be criticism and nothing is judged to be antisemitism.

Another way of articulating the principle is that there is a distinction between legitimate criticism of Israel (which we may judge to be justified or not) and demonizing or antisemitic criticism of Israel.

We are well used to judging the distinction between criticism and bigotry in other contexts. For example one may want to make political criticisms of Hilary Clinton or Margaret Thatcher. But we know that when they are criticized for their bossiness or their masculinity, or when there is endless discussion of what they wear, or when Hilary is criticized for standing by her man, that something else is at play.

Given the long history of different antisemitisms in our culture, and specifically in left wing and radical political culture, and given the campaigns to fuel an emotional anger with Israel, it would be extraordinary if antisemitic or demonizing criticism did not appear in our Party.

If some things are recognised as legitimate criticism and others are recognised as demonizing or antisemitic, then we are brought back into the democratic realm of rational politics. The task then is by debate and discussion to find consensus on how to draw the boundaries.

If, on the other hand, some people in practice insist that every example brought before them is legitimate criticism; while others insist that every example is antisemitic; then we remain outside the world of democratic and rational politics.

It is crucial, therefore, that the inquiry recognizes and describes why certain examples before it are not only vulgar, ignorant, rude or uncivil, but are specifically antisemitic. It must not be tempted to find cases guilty, but of a lesser charge. This would have the effect of bolstering those who insist that nothing in the antiracist movement is ever antisemitic.

Those who insist that nothing is antisemitic, that everything is just 'criticism', tend to try to construct the whole problem as a battle between supporters of Israel and supporters of Palestine. They think of those who are concerned about antisemitism as being on the opposite side of those who are concerned about the plight of the

Palestinians. They want us to take sides with the ‘oppressed’ in this battle and against the ‘oppressors’. Some on the edges of the trouble looking in are tempted to see it as a bad tempered and uncivil struggle between two sets of angry ‘foreigners’, and their supporters, within our movement. This is tempting because it assigns blame in a seemingly balanced way on all sides while also absolving the poor old Brits who have to try to ensure fair play and comradely good manners.

Incidentally, we see an analogous problem in judging what is criticism of Islam, what is opposition to Islamism and what is Islamophobia. Islamophobes love to declare that all they are doing is criticising Islam; Islamists enjoy portraying genuine criticism of their politics as Islamophobic.

5. It is possible for racist discourse to be made up of legitimate elements

Sometimes the quantity of hostility to Israel manifests itself qualitatively in easy to recognise antisemitic tropes. For example, when people use the ostensibly antiracist vocabulary of the 'Israel lobby' to do antisemitic conspiracy theory; or when people move from concern about under-age Palestinians dying in the conflict to allegations that Israel is a child-murdering, blood-thirsty, state.

But there is a further complication. Sometimes individual claims, which may be entirely legitimate on their own, can swirl together into antisemitic discourse. In order to judge what is antisemitic and what is legitimate criticism it is necessary to judge the politics of a situation as a whole, taking the context whole and complex into account.

If a newspaper reports street crime and rape by black men, day after day, with menacing pictures of perpetrators and bruised white innocent victims, it may well produce a racist discourse, even if every element, in itself, is not only legitimate but also true. It is not only the elements of discourse which may or may not be racist, but the way in which it all swirls together in the real world to make a whole.

For example, some might say that the analogy of Israel with apartheid South Africa is antisemitic while others might say that it is legitimate. The problem is that it could easily be either. It could be a serious and rational debate about similarities and differences; on the other hand a Jewish society on campus might be harassed, banned and isolated over a period of time as apartheid, racist and supremacist; this could constitute an antisemitic way of relating to Jewish students. The apartheid analogy is often deployed by the boycott campaign in a way which encourages people to think less rather than more.

6. The construction of the 'Jewish Question'

It has often been said that the claim that Labour has an antisemitism problem is invented by Zionists, Blairites and Tories to damage Palestinian solidarity, the Corbyn faction or the Party.

Some say that there is an antisemitism problem; others respond that there is a Jewish problem; at least a problem concerning the overwhelming majority of Jews, including Labour Jews, who are defined in a hostile way as 'Zionists' or as apologists for Israel.

There is a long history of antisemites trying to make a 'Jewish Question' part of public debate; antiracists have always responded by insisting that the 'Jewish Question' is a racist question and the real problem is one of antisemitism.

Is there a woman problem or a problem of sexism?

Is there a black problem or a problem of racism?

Is there a gay problem or a problem of homophobia?

Is there a Muslim problem or a problem of Islamophobia?

The conclusions of this inquiry cannot be neutral between the claim that there is a Jewish problem and the claim that there is an antisemitism problem. Between these two claims there is no room for compromise or for balance.

7. The Livingstone Formulation:¹

A standard response to anyone who raises the issue of antisemitism on the left is the counter-accusation that this is a bad-faith smear, mobilized to silence criticism of Israel; a playing of the antisemitism card; a conscious attempt to mobilize Jewish victimhood to Jewish or 'Zionist' advantage. This standard response has been called the *Livingstone Formulation*, after it was employed by Ken Livingstone who was then the Mayor of London.

Coal Miners Unions may have a selfish interest in making the case against nuclear power but the case itself still needs to be judged on its merits.

Jews may have good reason for raising the issue of antisemitism, as black people have for raising the issue of racism and as women do for raising the issue of sexism. Indeed if people who have a long and intense memory of antisemitism racism or sexism occasionally recognise something as threatening which others may judge is not, the authentic Labour way is to relate with empathy rather than with defensive or aggressive accusations of bad faith.

People whose primary concern is to support Israel may still have good reason to raise the issue of antisemitism. They may feel that Israel was, and is, necessary because of antisemitism. They may feel that Israel is threatened by antisemitic movements amongst its neighbours. They may feel that the construction of Israel as the pariah nation is analogous to the construction of 'the Jews' as the pariah people. They may feel that talk about the decisive global power of the 'Israel lobby' reflects the older antisemitic trope of Jewish power.

There are four problems with the *Livingstone Formulation* as a response to concern about antisemitism:

- a. It is a way of avoiding discussion of the actual issue of antisemitism by deflecting attention onto the imputed hidden motive for raising it.
- b. It often functions as a form of antisemitic conspiracy theory in itself. It does not accuse Jews of being wrong - they could all be wrong independently and there is no shame in being wrong; but it accuses them

¹ For a paper which explains more about the *Livingstone Formulation* and in particular why it was, in 2006, named after Ken Livingstone, see <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2016/04/29/the-livingstone-formulation-david-hirsh-2/>

of acting dishonestly, following a common, secret plan to try to help Israel in this disgraceful way. The accusation is one of bad faith, not of misjudgement.

- c. The *Livingstone Formulation* is a key mode of bullying. When a Jewish person raises the issue of antisemitism, instead of being heard respectfully, they are often themselves accused of acting as an agent of a foreign power, as an agent of a foreign faction or as an agent of a foreign party. This form of bullying makes left wing spaces uncomfortable for most Jews. It hurts when you point out an example of antisemitism and you are told in response that you are part of a conspiracy to silence criticism of Israel. It hurts in particular if you happen to have a long political history of being critical of Israel and of supporting the aspiration for Palestinian sovereignty.
- d. The *Livingstone Formulation* trains our youth to recognise a claim of antisemitism as an indicator of Zionist dishonesty. It acts as a barrier to their genuine education in recognising, understanding and taking seriously antisemitism.

The Macpherson principle does not state that somebody reporting an experience of racism is necessarily right. The principle is that it should be assumed that they could be right; that they should be listened to seriously in the process of coming to a judgment as to whether or not they are right.

The *Livingstone Formulation* is a clear and explicit violation of the Macpherson principle.

8. The relationship between the politics of hostility to Israel and antisemitism

The committee is faced with a formidable political problem. The problem is a profound and an established one within our broad movement and with our thinking. Solutions are far from straightforward.

There is a widespread and menacing assumption that antisemitism, when it is related to hostility to Israel, is part of the defensive violence of the oppressed against the oppressors. The socialism of fools, as Bebel called it, is still felt to be some form of socialism, it is felt to be something from within the family of the left. The 'Zionists', by contrast, are often situated as existing outside of the community of the oppressed and therefore outside of the community of the progressive.

Antizionism and its allied campaigns to dismantle and to boycott Israel form the intellectual and the emotional underpinnings of the culture in which antisemitic speech and actions are tolerated.

Antizionism is not simply criticism of this or that policy or characteristic of Israel. It is a political movement which takes hostility to one particular state and it makes it into an "-ism", a worldview. It is a worldview which has a tendency to position the Jewish state as being central to all that is wrong with the world. Antizionism also has a tendency to position Jewish people, anyway those who refuse to identify as antizionist, as central to all that is wrong with the world.

Everything bad that happens in Israel is constructed, within this ideology, as the necessary result of the supposedly racist essence of Zionism.

The aspiration to dismantle the state of Israel, against the will of its citizens, leaving them defenceless against military and political forces which threaten their lives, is part of the antisemitism problem.

Politically, the analogies of Zionism with Nazism, apartheid, colonialism and racism are weaponized, not to clarify understanding but to prevent it. This encourages and licences people to relate to Jews, anyway those Jews who refuse to disavow Israel, as one would relate to Nazis, to racists and to apologists for apartheid and colonialism. Relating to Jews and Jewish collectivities in this way is to relate to them in an antisemitic way.

To bait Jews by calling them Nazis, by saying their national movement against antisemitism is really Nazi, and by saying Nazis supported their national movement,

is specifically antisemitic, Jew-baiting behaviour – even if it is done by people who consider themselves to be opponents of antisemitism.

Empirically it is demonstrable that where antizionism and the boycott campaign take hold, antisemitic discourse, exclusions and bullying follow.

A significant number of people involved in left wing and radical politics and thought in Britain today will not come close to agreeing with the description of the problem that I have offered here. That is another way of saying that there is a problem of discursive and institutional antisemitism on the British left. Many apparently serious, good, left wing people just cannot see it.

9. **The democratic consensus on the issue of antisemitism**

There is a clear consensus within the Jewish community on the issue of contemporary antisemitism. Jewish intellectuals, writers and leaders, as well as the institutions of the Jewish community, agree that:

- a. There is a relationship between hostility to Israel and antisemitism and
- b. The claim that they themselves are involved in a conspiracy to smear, is part of the problem, not a helpful response to it.

There is a parallel consensus in the Jewish community in favour of a politics of peace between Israel and Palestine and a rejection of a politics of each demonizing the other.

The key institutions of the Jewish community – CST (Community Security Trust), UJS (Union of Jewish Students), BICOM (British Israel Communications and Research Centre), The Board of Deputies of British Jews, The Chief Rabbi, the leaders of all mainstream religious movements, the Jewish Leadership Council, the Jewish Chronicle, Jewish News – are all solidly within the democratic consensus. They broadly agree on how to recognise antisemitism and they broadly agree with the perspective that Israel should aspire to find a way to end the occupation and to welcome the creation of a Palestinian state willing to live in peace with its neighbour.

This Jewish consensus is mirrored in democratic discourse in Britain as a whole. All three mainstream political parties were always firmly within this consensus, which has meant that government policy was consistently within it too.

The place where it is not mirrored is in parts of the radical left, parts of the trade union movement, amongst some intellectuals, and within parts of the Labour Party. This is an elite section of society, small, but influential and opinion-forming.

10. The existence of antizionist Jews is not evidence that there is no Jewish consensus

There is a small minority of Jews which strongly rejects the consensus in favour of a position which accuses the mainstream community of mobilizing an accusation of antisemitism in order to smear the left and to silence those who support the Palestinians. That there are a few Jews outside of the democratic consensus should not be taken as evidence that broad consensus does not exist.

It is easy to understand why many Jews have a particular interest in Israel.

Some Jews feel especially concerned by, and sometimes ashamed of, things that they believe are wrong about Israel. It is easy to understand why they are specifically interested in opposing Israeli human rights abuses, both real and exaggerated, more than Thai, Saudi, Congolese, Indonesian or any other human rights abuses. As Jews, they feel especially concerned by what Jews do. But the slippage which occurs when Jewish concerns with Israel are exported into wider civil and political society is worrying. If the Labour Party adopts a specifically Jewish obsession with the wrongdoings of Israel and if it allows itself to be reassured by a small but confident group of antizionist Jews, then it is making a mistake. Jews have a reason to be especially concerned about what happens in Israel but the Labour Party needs to have a consistent and rational approach to human rights and to international solidarity.

If Labour fixes on Israel as a key evil on the planet then it is reflecting the antisemitic practice of fixing on Jews as being at the centre of all that is wrong in the world. Labour should take care not to be led into that position a fringe of unrepresentative Jews who fix on the centrality of Israel for the understandable reason that it relates to their own Jewish identity.

The inquiry should listen respectfully to the claims made by antizionist Jews. But when it relies on the old Jewish joke that where you have two Jews, you have three opinions, the inquiry should think carefully about the actual situation in the Jewish community. In truth, while many influential antizionists in the UK are Jewish, not many Jews in the UK are antizionist.

The Macpherson principle does not rely on the victims to define racism but it does take what victims say seriously. If it is true that there is a broad consensus in the Jewish community about antisemitism, it does not follow that the consensus is correct; but it does mean that the existence of such a consensus is relevant.

The broad consensus might exist if the Jewish community is overwhelmingly Zionist, and so racist, and so disgracefully willing to play the antisemitism card in order to silence criticism of Israel and hurt the Labour Party. If the inquiry is tempted by this

conclusion then it needs to think through what else follows from this way of understanding the Jewish community in the UK.

In truth, of course, Zionism, or various kinds of identification with Israel, is not racism; it is a perfectly respectable set of political positions, wholly compatible with democracy, antiracism and democratic values. Indeed, the defense of Israel against those who mean it harm is itself a democratic value. The Jewish community has always been home to a rich diversity of political views in which left and liberal politics has been strongly represented.

If there is a clear consensus in the Jewish community about antisemitism, it is more compelling to assume that this reflects a genuine feel for the problem than that it reflects a disgraceful attempt to silence criticism of Israel. If this is true, according to the Macpherson principle, this fact should be given appropriate weight, at least in the way the inquiry sets about its task.

There is another wing of the Jewish community which has a keen eye for antisemitism but which slides off the democratic consensus into its own demonizing and Islamophobic understanding of Arabs and Muslims. Labour, and in particular Labour Jews, oppose this tendency. The democratic consensus of Jews and of Jewish institutions also stands vigilant against this threat.

11. The antisemitism crisis is due to the mainstreaming of formerly marginal politics

Antisemitism, as I have described it, had been a minority phenomenon on the cranky corners of the British left. Since 2001 however, it has been moving into the mainstream, and that process of mainstreaming is the cause of the current crisis.

- a. All previous Labour leaders have rejected one-sided hostility to Israel and they have opposed the boycott movement. They embraced the consensus of the Jewish community and of democratic politics in favour of peace, a two state solution and in rejection of the demonization of Israel and its associated antisemitism.

The current leader has been intentionally ambivalent on these questions. He has said he is in favour of peace and he has said he opposes antisemitism; yet he has also been hosted a number of times by the antisemitic Hamas in Gaza and he has articulated clear political support for Hamas; he has jumped to the defence of antisemites like Raed Salah and Stephen Sizer, saying that they are victims of Zionist smears; he has acted as a figurehead for *Stop the War*, which advocates war against Israel, and he has implied, for example in his response to Lord Levy, that the current antisemitism crisis is manufactured; he has been a patron of the *Palestine Solidarity Campaign*, which is dedicated to the politics of demonization and of boycott; he has worked for the Iranian state English language propaganda TV station, Press TV.

- b. Len McCluskey, General Secretary of the biggest union in Britain, blames the crisis not on antisemitism but on a campaign to smear Jeremy Corbyn. McCluskey is an antisemitism denier.
- c. Malia Bouattia, while not narrowly Labour, is now the President of the most significant youth organisation in Britain, the National Union of Students, and as such she is an influential leader of the left in Britain. She openly opposes the politics of peace and she advocates instead support for the politics of what she calls 'resistance'; this position is open to the interpretation that violence against Jewish civilians is supported as defensive violence against Zionist oppression.

These three leaders are not the cause of the problem of antisemitism but they are symptomatic of its journey into the mainstream.

12. Antisemitism is a political problem not to be solved by administration alone

The key solution to the problem of antisemitism in the Labour Party is political leadership.

The party must be clear in its choice to embrace a politics of peace, reconciliation and engagement and to reject the politics of the demonization of Israel.

Israelis and Palestinians have both been caught in the global sweep of 20th and 21st Century events. Neither are villains and neither are global powers. Both nations contain people who should be Labour allies in the struggle for democracy and others who struggle against democratic values, of whom we should be sharply critical.

The politics of peace forms a virtuous circle: it mutually reinforces democratic movements on all sides of the conflict and it takes the wind out of the sails of those who seek to mobilize hatred, racism and war.

This inquiry can and should recommend practical actions to educate the membership on the issue of antisemitism and to clamp down on people who refuse to accept the boundaries of democratic and antiracist politics.

There is, however, a possible danger in setting out a code of conduct. The inquiry might decide to 'legislate' some kinds of language and some kinds of claims as being inappropriate within the Labour Party. For example it might say that members should refrain from talking about the 'Jewish lobby'; it might say that members should not compare Jews to Nazis; it might say that members should not play with the idea of the ethnic cleansing of Israeli Jews. The danger of this approach is that people may find their way to antisemitic politics by employing only language which cannot be legislated against. For example people might articulate antisemitic conspiracy theory using the ostensibly antiracist language of the 'Israel lobby'; people might say that Israel is a racist, criminal genocidal state but then leave the analogy with the Nazis unstated; they might say that Israelis are not 'indigenous', they are colonial settlers, they have stolen the land, but stop short of calling for their removal.

Political change is key. Administrative solutions will only take us some of the way; and they also have the potential to backfire, feeding narratives of the Zionist wish to close off free speech. If the party leadership cannot move Labour back into the mainstream democratic consensus on Israel and on antisemitism then this issue will continue to throw up crisis after crisis and it will continue to alienate most of the Jewish community; no doubt it will alienate many swing voters too.

Denial (the *Livingstone Formulation*), expulsions (the bad apple theory) and a code of conduct (allowing people say antisemitic things using antiracist language) are tempting responses to the antisemitism crisis. But they will not solve the problem.

13. Muslim antisemitism

Another social space where antisemitism is over-represented is the Muslim community. It should not need saying that the Muslim community is diverse and contains people of all political outlooks, including people who understand the history and the threat of antisemitism.

Labour must avoid situating the problem of antisemitism as a problem of Muslims, immigrants or foreigners; equally it must avoid a racism of low expectations which fails to take Muslim antisemitism seriously and fails to require that Labour Muslims embrace democratic and antiracist politics.

There is a striking difference between the way in which Naz Shah responded to the issue of antisemitism and the way, for example, Shah Hussain responded. She apologized openly and honestly; she resolved to take steps to understand what she had done, why she had done it, and how she was going to rectify the situation. Shah Hussain, by contrast, appeared on television stony faced, denying all guilt, repeating meaningless formulations and mobilizing embarrassing counter accusations of Islamophobia.

Of course Shah Hussain must not be infantilized, he is responsible for the politics he chooses to embrace. But there is a wider antisemitic culture in the Party, amongst scholars, amongst antizionist Jews and in left and liberal culture, which offers a sophisticated underpinning for his attitudes and his denials. The left needs to learn the lessons taught most explicitly by the experience of '*Respect*', the Trotskyist-Stalinist-Islamist alliance against Israel, imperialism and democracy, which did so much to mis-educate radical young people, both Muslim and not Muslim. Sections of white radical and left wing opinion have done serious damage within the Muslim community.

Naz Shah and Sadiq Khan both appear absolutely clear in their opposition to antisemitism and their willingness to engage seriously with the crisis. They are acting as leaders and fighting for a democratic politics, both within the Muslim and also the Labour communities.

The apparently delicate course Labour needs to navigate, both within and outside the Muslim community, can be defined in terms of democratic norms and values. Labour must recognise and oppose antisemitism; Labour must recognise and oppose Islamophobia; Labour must fight poverty and economic exclusion, issues which impact Muslims in particular ways.

Labour must also fight anti-democratic Islamist politics; it should seek to create a pole of attraction for young people away from totalitarian resentments and towards constructive and democratic ideas. It must defend the democratic state against the totalitarian threat; and it must also defend Muslim secularists, socialists, women, lesbians and gays and dissenters against that threat.

And it is with the same democratic and egalitarian values that Labour, led by Muslim Labour members, can be at the forefront of opposing antisemitism within Muslim communities.

14. The EUMC Working Definition of antisemitism

The Working Definition is not a machine for judging what is antisemitic and what is not, it cannot substitute for political judgment; but it is a set of guidelines which can help us make informed and careful political judgments. I would recommend its explicit adoption, not as legislation but as summary and as a guide of what the relevant issues are in recognising antisemitism.

15. Antisemitism is an indicator of a retreat from democratic and rational politics

Antisemitism is a danger to Jews but it is also a danger to the Labour Party and to any other space in which it is tolerated.

There is a danger of Labour's antisemitism problem becoming a wider British antisemitism problem. At the moment, the presence of antisemitism in the party is a vote loser. We would worry even more if it became a vote-winner.

Antisemitism weakens our solidarity with those Palestinians who strive to build a democratic and free Palestinian state. It empowers their enemies and it mis-educates their youth.

Endnote.

Having tried to be precise and analytical in this submission, I will finish with something different.

I took my mum to vote the other day in the Mayoral election. She is 86 and Jewish; she escaped from Hitler's Germany in 1938, aged eight, leaving her wider family behind. She considers herself British. She is not politically sophisticated but she is no fool. As she went to vote, she said to me that she didn't like Jeremy Corbyn but that she was afraid that if Labour did badly then people would blame the Jews for making all that fuss about him.

I remember my dad telling me that when he was brought up in the East End, nobody, but nobody, in the Jewish community voted Tory. Everybody was Labour.

This is the context in which allegations that the Jewish community is trying to hurt the left by manufacturing dishonest smears of antisemitism are particularly painful.