

Bad News for Labour

‘The essays in this book provide evidence and arguments that are deeply troubling for all concerned, and demand careful attention.’

Peter Golding, Emeritus Professor, Northumbria University

‘At last! Here is a book that rigorously examines the facts behind the allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party. The reality is more shocking, and more surprising, than the headlines in the press would have you believe. Here is the evidence – read it. Then learn the lessons suggested here.’

Ken Loach

‘What the careful research reported in this book reveals is a successful disinformation campaign. Anyone who cares for facts needs to read it.’

Colin Leys, Honorary Professor at Goldsmiths University of London

‘Reading this timely book convinces me that the media campaign against antisemitism in the Labour Party is similar to the media onslaught on the “loony left” in the 1980s. Both campaigns connected to some disturbing truths: and both inflated and weaponised these truths for political purposes.’

Professor James Curran, Goldsmiths, University of London

‘This compelling, thoughtful text is essential reading for everyone on the left wanting to confront antisemitism. It provides a benchmark for future research and strategy when tackling this explosive issue of our time.’

Lynne Segal, Birkbeck University of London

Bad News for Labour

Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief

Greg Philo, Mike Berry, Justin Schlosberg,
Antony Lerman and David Miller

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Preface

To say that the issue of antisemitism in the Labour Party has received a great deal of national attention hardly does justice to the sheer volume of coverage in press, television and social media. A search of national newspapers for coverage that mentioned Corbyn, Labour and antisemitism between 15 June 2015 and 31 March 2019 shows five and a half thousand articles. We have included a timeline at the end of this book to help follow this extraordinary panoply of events and news output. In trying to explain the issues involved, we have interviewed a large number of people who offered different perspectives on what occurred. Not everyone we approached was available to comment and where that was so, we used secondary sources to ensure that we featured a wide range of opinion.

One purpose of our work here is to examine the possible impacts of the volume of media coverage on public beliefs about the Labour Party. In pursuing this, we commissioned a national poll and used focus groups to examine the processes by which people make judgements and have formed opinions. The results showed that on average people believed that a third of Labour Party members had been reported for anti-semitism. A key research question for us was to examine how it could be that so many people came to believe this when the actual figure was far less than 1 per cent. In the first chapter, we examine the conditions under which people accepted or rejected what they were seeing and hearing in the media, as well as the sources of information which they used in forming their beliefs.

As a left wing political party, it is at the core of Labour's mission that it must be anti-racist. In that sense, one case of antisemitism is too many. But the huge disparity between public perception and the actual number of reported cases must make this one of the worst public relations disasters that has been recorded. It raises the question of why the Party was so unable to deal with the issue. Part of the reason for this is the extraordinary divisions which existed within it following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015. From these divisions, different accounts emerged about the nature and the extent of antisemitism within the movement. In Chapter 2, we examine this range of arguments as well as the suggestion that they were linked to the internal politics of the Party and to conflicts over attitudes and policy towards Israel. There was debate over what was acceptable criticism of that country and whether any attempt to 'delegitimise' it would be antisemitic. Alternatively, it was argued that a movement such as Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions was simply a legitimate political strategy against what some saw as a racist state.

In Chapter 3, we examine what might have been done to resolve the crisis, and why it took the Party so long to develop a coherent and planned response. We look at the conflicts which developed between the leadership, members of the Parliamentary Party and Labour's own bureaucracy. Another important dimension is the role of the media and we look at how the story was sometimes distorted. In Chapter 4, Justin Schlosberg presents a content analysis of media coverage showing a catalogue of reporting failures. This was particularly so in relation to the adoption by the Labour Party in 2018 of the working definition of antisemitism offered by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

In Chapter 5, Antony Lerman offers a detailed commentary on both the IHRA definition of antisemitism and the claims that the Labour Party is institutionally antisemitic. He

examines these two areas of the criticism levelled at Labour for its handling of the perceived problem of antisemitism. In the first, he shows how the IHRA definition of antisemitism was widely condemned for not being fit for purpose. He asks whether its adoption has helped the Party deal with the issue of antisemitism, or has it made Jews more vulnerable to anti-semitism. The second is charges levelled against Labour for ‘institutional antisemitism’. In effect, this is the accusation, currently being investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, that is, that Jews in the Party, and the Jewish community generally, face serious discrimination as a result of Labour’s dealings with them. Can such a charge against a complex organism like the Labour Party be credible? Both issues have the potential to create more difficulties for Labour going forward, with the second perhaps more serious since legal sanctions may be imposed. What might be done to mitigate further damage?

One of the issues in contemporary public arguments is how antisemitism is defined and the types of complaints that have been made to the Party over descriptions of Israel. This relates centrally to the interpretation of the IHRA definition of anti-semitism. In Chapter 6, David Miller describes the course of one of these complaints to which he was subject, the processes and thinking behind it and why it was eventually dismissed. In the final chapter, we look at contemporary developments in racism and the struggle against it. From our own knowledge of communications and policy, we offer suggestions on a way forward for Labour as a key progressive force and we point to the need for unity against all forms of racism in the times that lie ahead.

Believe It or Not

Greg Philo and Mike Berry

We began this work by interviewing a small number of people for a pilot study. We wanted to get a sense of possible impacts of media on public beliefs about antisemitism in the Labour Party. This was in March 2019 and we knew that figures had just been published on cases that had been investigated. These related to about 0.1 per cent of the membership, but over the previous three years, there had been extensive media coverage of the issue and many allegations of antisemitism in the Party. A search of eight national newspapers shows that from 15 June 2015 to 31 March 2019, there had been 5497 stories on the subject of Corbyn, antisemitism and the Labour Party.¹ The issue was also extensively featured on television and in new and social media. These headlines give a sense of the accusations that were being made:

Labour Party Is Anti-Semitic And Racist

(LBC, 18 February 2019)

Jeremy Corbyn, the anti-racist who turned Labour into the party of anti-Semitism

(*Sun*, 18 July 2018)

1. This was based on a Nexis search using the search string [Corbyn or Labour party and antisemitism or anti-semitism]. The sampled newspapers were the *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Express*, *Mirror* and *Sun*.

**Chuka Umunna condemns ‘nasty, bullying and racist’
Labour Party**

(Evening Standard, 19 March 2019)

Scottish Jewish leader blasts Labour as racist party

(The Scotsman, 28 February 2019)

**Corbyn has brought anti-Semitism ‘into the
MAINSTREAM’**

(Express, 19 April 2019)

No wonder Corbyn’s Labour is riddled with anti-Semites

(Mail Online, 3 September 2018)

Labour should not have any racism within it. But the headlines give the impression of a party ‘riddled’ with antisemitism. This contrasts with the actual number of reported cases. So we asked our pilot interviewees this question:

What percentage of Labour Party members do you think have had complaints made about them for antisemitism?

The results surprised us since the answers ranged from 25–40 per cent of members. The interviewees also gave clear reasons for their judgements which mostly focus on the very high level of media coverage, which they assumed meant that many people were involved. As these interviewees put it:

I heard so much about it – there is an awful lot of these folk. It was things I have been reading or seeing on the news. (Middle class, female, retired, estimated 40 per cent, 1 March 2019)

Believe It or Not

I thought it because of this furore and upheaval and all this publicity in the media. (Middle class, female, retired, estimated 25 per cent, 2 March 2019)

The second of these also believed that there would be levels of prejudice latent in the population as a whole ‘whatever their politics were’. Another interviewee pointed to the financial cost of what she assumed were very extensive investigations and therefore judged it would involve about a third of the members:

You would think that with all the hoo-hah and the money spent on investigating it, that it would be about that (a third). (Low income, female, self-employed, estimated 30 per cent, 6 March 2019)

Given these early results, we thought we should test the question further with a national poll. This was undertaken by Survation in March 2019. They put two questions to 1009 people online. The first was to establish whether respondents knew about the issue:

Have you seen or heard anything about accusations of anti-semitism (hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people) made against members of the Labour Party?

Of the total, 62 per cent indicated that they had, and this group answered the second question:

From what you have seen or heard, what percentage of Labour Party members do you think have had complaints of anti-semitism made against them?

The result of this was that, on average, they believed that 34 per cent of Labour Party members had had complaints

for antisemitism made against them. Just 14 per cent of the sample believed that the number who had been complained about was below 10 per cent. The data on how estimations broke down by age, gender and voting in the 2017 General Election can be seen in Table 1.1.

As can be seen from the table, there are variations in how widespread different social groups think antisemitism is within the Labour Party. Women see it as a greater problem than men, as do younger people in comparison to those over 45. It is also seen as a more significant problem by Conservative voters than by those who support Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP – though the results for the Liberal Democrats and SNP should be treated with caution because the subsamples from which the data was drawn had very small numbers. However, while it is possible to point to demographic variations within the poll, these are very minor in comparison to the differences between the estimates and the actual number of people being reported for antisemitism within Labour.

We then decided to examine these beliefs in more detail using focus groups. The purpose was to analyse how people decided on a figure. What were the conditions under which they thought it was higher or lower? Did they accept media accounts or did they use other sources of information, such as personal experience, to criticise what they have seen or heard? We conducted four focus groups in April and May 2019.

1. **Glasgow focus group**, 5 April 2019

- Seven members (all female)
- Age range: 64–80
- Political allegiance: Conservative (3), SNP (3), Liberal Democrat (1)
- Newspaper consumption: *Herald* (3), *Telegraph* (1), *The Sunday Times* (1), *Daily Mail* (1), *The i* (1), *Guardian* (1), *The National* (1), *Huffington Post* (1)

Table 1.1 Estimates of the percentage of Labour Party members who have been accused of antisemitism by gender, age and 2017 voting behaviour

	Total	Male	Female	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	CON	LAB	LD	SNP
0-9%	14	16	12	10	16	13	15	17	10	20	26	14
10-19%	11	12	10	7	10	11	13	13	11	15	-	12
20-29%	13	14	12	20	9	10	15	11	16	14	11	-
30-39%	8	6	10	9	11	7	6	7	6	9	3	-
40-49%	5	4	5	6	4	6	3	4	7	2	3	2
50-59%	6	5	8	4	7	10	5	6	6	8	7	-
60-69%	4	3	6	7	8	2	2	3	5	4	2	-
70-79%	4	4	5	7	7	3	3	4	6	4	2	-
80-89%	3	3	4	6	5	4	1	0	3	2	-	5
90-99%	2	3	2	5	4	-	1	1	1	4	2	-
100%	0	0	0	1	1	1	-	-	0	1	-	-
Don't know (%)	29	32	27	19	18	35	38	35	29	18	46	68
Mean	34	30.6	37.5	41.6	39.9	32.4	25.7	28.5	36.4	30.8	25.3	21.9

- Estimates of percentage of Labour members accused of antisemitism: 30 per cent or less, 15 per cent, 5 per cent, 4 per cent, 3 per cent, 2 per cent, 0.1 per cent.
2. **Coventry focus group**, 22 April 2019
- Four members (two male and two female)
 - Age range 67–81
 - Political allegiance: Labour (3), Conservative (1)
 - Newspaper consumption: *Daily Mail* (1), *Coventry Evening News* (1), *Daily and Sunday Telegraph* (1)
 - Estimates of percentage of Labour members accused of antisemitism: 10 per cent, 5 per cent, 5 per cent, 0.2 per cent.
3. **Newport focus group**, 21 May 2019
- Four members (three female and one male)
 - Age range 32–58 (two female and two male)
 - Political allegiance: Conservative (1), Liberal Democrat (1), UKIP (1), Non-voter (1)
 - Newspaper consumption: *Daily Mail* (1), *Sun* (1), *Telegraph* (1)
 - Estimates of percentage of Labour members accused of antisemitism: 40 per cent, 20 per cent, 20 per cent, 5 per cent.
4. **Cardiff focus group**, 24 May 2019
- Four members
 - Age range 38–75
 - Political allegiance: Conservative (1), Labour (1), Liberal Democrat (1), Plaid Cymru (1)
 - Newspaper consumption: *The Sunday Times* (2), *Guardian* (2), *The Times* (1), *Telegraph* (1)
 - Estimates of percentage of Labour members accused of antisemitism: 30 per cent, 20 per cent, 20 per cent, 15–20 per cent.

The focus group meetings began with a series of brief questions about beliefs to which people gave written answers and these were then discussed over a period of an hour. We also gathered basic data on occupation, gender, age, media use and voting intention. The initial questions asked were:

1. From what you have seen and heard, what percentage of Labour Party members have had complaints of anti-semitism made against them?
2. What made you think that, how did you arrive at that percentage whatever it was?
3. What sources of information would you use to inform your opinion? Which would you trust the most?
4. Do you think the public argument over antisemitism has damaged the Labour Party?
5. Do you think it might affect how people vote?

We grouped the answers to these and the subsequent discussions into three key areas:

1. Reasons for higher estimates and influences on decisions made about these.
2. Reasons to doubt the story and give lower estimates.
3. Beliefs about impacts of the story on perception of the Party and voting.

1. Reasons for higher estimates

The media and the extensive coverage that the story has received featured very prominently in the reasons that were given. This related both to the volume of coverage and the persistence of the theme in reporting. As one member of the Cardiff focus group put it: 'it's because of the coverage isn't it? It's constant' and another participant replied 'it's had

a really high profile'. Even amongst people who claimed to never read a newspaper and declared themselves completely uninterested in the subject it was clear that the story had cut through because of its sustained prominence in newspaper headlines. One participant who had given an estimate of 20 per cent of Labour members explained the source of his belief in this way:

Headlines I see. I work in Tesco's. As I walk into the shopping mall I read the headlines every day ... Most of my perception was based on – as I say I didn't read newspapers – my perception was based on the number of headlines and how long it was in the papers. [participant 4 nods in agreement] (Newport group, 21 May 2019)

As well as headlines, photographic evidence was also significant. One participant said that part of the reason he thought antisemitism was a problem in the Labour Party was that 'Corbyn came in with his Hezbollah lot ... that's when it started ... it went on he [Corbyn] never checked it then and it grew and grew'. When then asked why he believed Corbyn was 'with Hezbollah' he replied:

There are photographs of him in Libya, one of the terrorist funerals laying a wreath or it was at one of the gravesides and there's photographs of him with the IRA and there's his Hezbollah friends ... those photos they've not been photo-shopped. (Coventry group, 22 April 2019)

It was also clear that some of the televised testimony of those directly experiencing racism had a strong impact on beliefs about the prevalence of antisemitism. One participant argued the person they trusted most on the issue was:

Believe It or Not

someone who has suffered it like Margaret Hodge, she's been on the television saying I was told, this, this, this and this and making a song and dance about it. Is she lying I doubt it very much ... why is she on the television because she's suffered antisemitism. (Coventry group, 22 April 2019)

The heavy coverage given to Margaret Hodge was also seen as important by a member of another focus group who cited it as a factor influencing her estimate (30 per cent) of complaints of antisemitism against Labour members:

I heard a lot of interviews with Margaret Hodge and she said there's a lot more of this than is coming out ... she was so alarmed and concerned and she was quite vocal about it on the news and she was interviewed a number of times. (Cardiff group, 24 May 2019)

The media seem to have an impact even where people did not want to believe the story – for example, by disliking the idea that such a thing could exist. This interviewee, for instance, wanted to believe that antisemitism had been put behind us because of its terrible history:

I am surprised at the level of publicity that antisemitism has at the moment. I never thought it would rear its ugly head again, but it has. I was very unsure when I wrote it. [The idea came] because of the amount of media coverage. I don't know why I said 15 per cent, because you never actually see people speaking about it in the media, it's just written about in a general way – you know you never get any figures.

The interviewee cited the *Daily Mail* as the source of her information and specifically named Jeremy Corbyn for the problem:

There is a lot of publicity about antisemitism just now, and sadly a lot of it is directed at the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. And I have got to come right out to say it – I cannot think of any way he could ever run our country because of his associations with Hamas, Hezbollah and the antisemitic rumours that are about him, whether they're true or not. This is why I put it high, at 15 per cent, because this man has a tremendous following.

She had remembered the report of the laying of a wreath by Jeremy Corbyn. The story is explained in the words of the paper, in one of its sub-headlines:

Daily Mail obtained photograph of Labour leader holding wreath near graves of terror leaders linked to the 1972 massacre

(Mail Online, 5 April 2019)

The massacre referred to was of the Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Corbyn insisted he was there to honour those killed in another attack in 1985 by Israel on the PLO in Tunis. But a version of the *Daily Mail* account had stuck with the interviewee:

I believe that he is antisemitic – if he can associate with the people that he has associated with, if he can hold up a wreath to the bombers who, ahh, I can't remember who they bombed, if he can do all that and be all that, he could be antisemitic. (Glasgow group, 5 April 2019)