

'Who, me? A racist?'

The British Labour Party offers a weak response to the BBC's anti-Semitism investigation.

By Ben Cohen

(JNS) The exposé on anti-Semitism in the British Labour Party, broadcast in the United Kingdom last week by the BBC's flagship *Panorama* program, gave viewers [an opportunity](#) to see the extraordinary confrontation in April 2016 between John Mann, a Labour parliamentarian and leading fighter against anti-Jewish bigotry, and Ken Livingstone, the former Labour Mayor of London and leading promoter of conspiracy theories about Zionist "collaboration" with Nazi Germany.

Livingstone had given a radio interview in which he repeated the slander he'd uttered several times during his 40-odd-year career, namely that Hitler had been a supporter of Zionism before the Holocaust. Livingstone claimed that in the early 1930s, Hitler had merely wanted to deport the Jews to Israel (which didn't actually come into existence until 1948.)

As Mann knew all too well, the ultimate aim of this pernicious myth, which originated in post-war Soviet propaganda against Zionism, is to demonstrate that Jewish nationalism and German national socialism are ideological bedfellows, and that Hitler himself had recognized this. As Mann chased Livingstone into one of the government buildings near the Palace of Westminster, he called him an "apologist" for the Führer. "You've lost it mate," Mann told Livingstone bluntly. "You need help."

As the BBC's investigation showed conclusively, Mann's diagnosis of Livingstone applies to the Labour Party as a whole. In the four years of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, the party has offered various responses to the anti-Semitism crisis. These have included indignant denials of the "Me? A racist?" variety, playing down the extent of the problem and the hurt it has caused, recasting expressions of anti-Semitism as merely criticism of Israel or Zionism or portraying the entire scandal as one big Jewish conspiracy with the goal of undermining both Corbyn's Socialist leadership and smearing as "anti-Semitic"

those who articulate the view that Israel is a "racist endeavor."

What the Labour Party has not done—and will never do so long as Corbyn remains leader—is apologize to the British Jewish community, or specifically, to the thousands of Jews for whom Labour has been a traditional political home. There is a bit of a problem with anti-Semitism, the party's leadership will concede, but it's no worse in our party than it is elsewhere in our society. The idea that Labour, because of Corbyn's leadership, has become a magnet for political kooks for whom the Rothschild banking dynasty, the World Zionist Organization, the Pentagon and the International Monetary Fund are all parts of an organic whole is not—indeed, cannot be—entertained.

Instead, the party's response to the BBC program was to flagellate the national broadcaster for exaggerating anti-Semitism in the Labour Party while ignoring Islamophobia in the governing Conservative Party. The parts of the program that should have been painfully difficult to respond to, such as the confession of Sam Matthews, the party's non-Jewish former director of complaints that he'd contemplated suicide over the anti-Semitism crisis, were dealt with all too breezily. "All employees of the Labour Party have access to an Employee Assistance Programme, which is widely advertised throughout the organization," wrote the party's general secretary, Jennie Formby, to deputy leader Tom Watson, after the latter called, in the wake of the BBC exposé, for the anti-Semitism complaints process to be taken over by an independent body advised by the Jewish community. "Their role is to provide a confidential support service to employees on a range of personal and work issues and their details are shared with employees to ensure they have support in place. They can provide a range of support including counselling."

Amazingly, after giving this coldly bureaucratic response to the emotional toll on Matthews and other Labour staff members, Formby then depicted Watson as a callous bully who was targeting her even though she is suffering from cancer. "Trampling my reputation and publicly attacking me when you know I am undergoing chemotherapy and am unable to respond in the media is another example of the inappropriate way in which you choose to discuss this issue," she wrote. One is tempted to advise Formby to access the same staff resources that she urged Matthews and others to use, rather than airing this particular grievance in public.

The overriding fear, of course, is that this cast of characters will be governing Great Britain at some point in the near future. Given the tumult around Brexit, the United Kingdom's ever-shifting departure from the European Union, no one should dismiss that potential outcome. However, as I've argued in this column before, in many ways the anti-Semitism issue is an expression of Labour's staggering political decline under Corbyn, rather than a sign that an energized grassroots movement is on the cusp of taking power.

After all, Corbyn's single biggest achievement has been to keep the now-departing Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May in power when, in most other circumstances, her leadership and her government would have been brought down many moons ago. However bitter and ugly the internal fighting over Brexit has been among the Conservatives, the thought of Corbyn in power was traumatic enough to weld them together. And Corbyn's unanswered pleas for a general election to bring down the weakest British government in a century speak volumes about his ability to appeal across party lines.

At the same time, Corbyn has left British voters distinctly unimpressed with his performance over Brexit. A supporter of leaving the European Union who reluctantly campaigned for a vote to remain in 2016, Corbyn is now advocating a second public referendum on the matter. Meanwhile, a YouGov poll at the beginning of July showed that Labour's public support had plummeted to 18 percent—fourth in the overall party rankings, beneath the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, and the lowest polling score in its history.

In this light, the continued civil war within Labour over anti-Semitism appears more as a symbol of Corbyn's spectacular incompetence, rather than a profound moral failing on his part. Many people in Britain still don't really understand what anti-Semitism is or think it's an exclusively right-wing phenomenon, and the BBC's *Panorama* team dealt with this aspect of Labour's problem rather briskly—too briskly, one could argue—in favor of focusing on the human element of this tragic story. In any case, the net result has been to raise further doubts over Corbyn's suitability for office and to enable Labour supporters to glimpse past his leadership at the sort of the future they want for their party.

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Images

Filename: Jeremy_Corbyn_Leader_of_the_Labour_Party_UK.jpg

Caption: Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labor Party. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

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