

A Very Ugly Opposition: Anti-Semites Versus Islamophobes in British Politics
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We all know that democratic politics is about building coalitions of different interest groups, bringing people together to hammer out a common position that serves the majority. The inverse of this tendency, equally if not more important, is carefully managing where the inevitable divisions caused by such coalitions fall. European history is replete with cases where politics has fallen foul of sensitive fault-lines – most notably those of religion and ethnicity – with devastating consequences. The experience of even the last few decades should provide European leaders with more than enough warning of them. It is really rather dispiriting, then, to see British politics sleepwalking into a situation that could easily have been avoided.

On 27 April Naz Shah, MP for the northern English town of Bradford, was suspended from the Labour Party after a Facebook post came to light calling for Israel to be ‘relocated’ to the United States. The fact that these comments were made in summer 2014, at the height of Israel’s crackdown against the Occupied Palestinian Territories, did not shake the unsettling connotations of anti-Semitic ethnic cleansing, or prevent widespread allegations of racism against her.

As an isolated incident this may only have been a minor scandal, but it is the latest in a line of events leading to claims that the British Left has become increasingly tolerant of anti-Semitism. The last Labour leader Ed Miliband, himself the son of Jews who had fled Nazism in continental Europe, was responsible for shifting the party’s position in favour of Palestinian nationhood, a move praised by many but heavily criticised by Jewish commentators. The new leader, however, has a much more chequered background for his critics to draw on. For most of his political career Jeremy Corbyn has been staunchly on the hard-Left of the party and active in a number of pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian movements, going so far as to once describe the Islamist militia group Hamas as his ‘friends’. One of his close associates, former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone, provoked widespread disgust in his last campaign for the chain of overt slurs he made against the city’s Jewish population. And then there is the way in which outspoken anti-Zionism has captured many student unions, much to the concern of Jewish campus societies.

All this is happening at a time when Britain’s Right-wing establishment is hardly short of reasons to be even more unambiguously pro-Israel. David Cameron has pressed for military interventions in the Middle East and North Africa several times during his premiership, most recently winning a parliamentary vote to sanction airstrikes against ISIL in Syria. This sort of foreign policy assumes solid support for Israel, the only ‘Western’ country in the region, a stance that will only bolster the Tories’ claim to be the legitimate representatives of the Jewish community in Britain. Cameron wasted no time in decrying Shah’s comment in Parliament, and yet one would be hard placed to find an equivalent case of him warning against the rising tide of Islamophobia in Britain.

It goes without saying that the vast majority of MPs and party figures on both sides are neither anti-Semitic nor Islamophobic, and take a mature view of the difficulties facing both Jews and Muslims in Britain and Europe more widely. However, this is increasingly not perceived to be the case, especially after Corbyn’s shock victory in the Labour leadership ballot put figures like Livingstone in control of the party. We are now in the dangerous situation where the divide across the House of Commons floor is seen to be one between those who are pro-Jewish and those who are pro-Muslim. For the avoidance of doubt: of all the possible oppositions in politics, this is not a healthy one.

Perhaps the most depressing example of this phenomenon can be found in the campaign that is due to be concluded on 5 May with the election of the next Mayor of London. At the outset, it was heartening to see the leadership of Europe's biggest city contested on equal and civilised terms between two men of Jewish and Muslim origin, a symbol of how multiculturalism has succeeded in subsuming such differences within a democratic system. For a time, that seemed to be the case — until it became clear that the Conservative side was losing badly, and began lashing out against Labour candidate Sadiq Khan over his spurious links to Islamic extremists. In a classic case of opportunistic partisanship, Cameron took to the floor of the Commons to question whether London would be safe in the hands of such a mayor. The Islamophobic dog whistle was just about audible over the cheers and jeers.