



By: *Harvey Morris*

# The left still has a problem as British Jews face a resurgence of the 'socialism of fools'



In a week in which a reported surge in anti-semitism grabbed domestic headlines in the UK, it was difficult to escape the judgment of one Israeli newspaper that Britain had become a hub of anti-Jewish hate.

As a charity dedicated to the security of the Jewish community revealed a record increase in instances of hate directed at Jews, charges of anti-semitism also resurfaced to haunt the opposition Labour party.

Anti-semitism was suddenly such a hot issue that it even topped the BBC's weekly comedy News Quiz. The Jewish political commentator Danny Finkelstein raised a laugh when he said he had taken to replying to a growing number of conspiracists clogging his inbox by telling them: "Thank you for being in touch to warn me about the Jews".

He and his fellow 300,000 British Jews course know, of course, that the issue is no laughing matter after the Community Security Trust (CST) **reported** more than 4,000 hate incidents in 2023, the highest in the charity's 40-year existence.

It said reported threats, abuse and even violence against Jews shot up within hours of the October 7 Hamas assault on Israel, prompting the government within days to fund additional security at synagogues and schools.

"It indicates that it was celebration of Hamas' attack, rather than anger towards Israel's military response in Gaza," the CST said, "that prompted the unprecedented levels of anti-semitism across the country."

## Is it fair to describe Britain as a "hub of hate"

Other countries in Europe have also witnessed a growth in anti-semitic incidents since the Hamas assault on Israel on October 7 and amid an escalating Israeli military response that has devastated Gaza, killed thousands, and prompted concern even among Israel's closest allies.

So is it fair to describe Britain as a "hub of hate" as did the British-Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer in the liberal **Israeli daily Haaretz**? The Manchester-born journalist wrote that the intensity of the response to events in the Middle East betrayed what had become "a particularly perverse British obsession".

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Certainly, the UK is the only state in which a major political party almost tore itself apart in a civil war over the alleged persistence of anti-semitism within its ranks.

Party leader Keir Starmer has rebuilt the Labour party after one of its worst general election defeats in 2019, vowing to eradicate the cancer of anti-semitism he said had infected it under his left-wing predecessor Jeremy Corbyn.

However, the issue resurfaced over reported remarks about Israel and Jewish figures in the media made by Labour's candidate in a forthcoming by-election.

## Long-term shift of stance on Israel

In a fumbled response to this new crisis, Labour belatedly withdrew support for candidate Azhar Ali, previously regarded as a moderate Starmerite, prompting accusations from the governing Conservatives that nothing had changed inside Labour.

Labour's problems reflect the wider phenomenon of a long-term shift of stance on Israel among those who regard themselves as belonging to Britain's progressive left.

The party was historically a vigorous supporter of Zionism from the time of World War I, seeing the movement for a Jewish homeland as

linked to a wider advancement of democratic socialism.

Up until the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the British left vigorously defended the right of the new state to defend itself. Those who expressed sympathy over the price paid at its foundation by the Palestinians it displaced were barely given a hearing.

### With Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, elements of the left steadily switched their allegiance away from an Israel

With Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the rise an exile Palestinian guerrilla movement, elements of the left steadily switched their allegiance away from an Israel they regarded as ever more identified with US interests in the Middle East.

The collapse of the peace process and the formation of ever more right-wing coalitions in Israel led some to challenge Israel's legitimacy. Such "anti-Zionists" invariably reject any suggestion that their antipathy towards Israel is in any way linked to anti-semitism, even at a time when "Zio" has joined the street lexicon of anti-semitic abuse.

## Socialism of fools

British Jews should perhaps be forgiven if they fail to appreciate the difference. The tendency of the anti-Zionists to brand their Jewish critics in the media as stooges for Israel, and their denunciations of bodies such as the CST as Zionist entities, might sound all too eerily familiar.

The charity's policy director, Dave Rich, said that the main anti-semitic threat before the October Hamas attack was seen as coming from far-right extremists. Since then, he told an interviewer, it "increasingly comes from the far left and often comes much more from within parts of Muslim communities in Britain".



*For a lot of British Jews, there's a sense that something changed after October 7, and all of a sudden, this doesn't feel like the Britain that we thought we knew - Dave Rich*

Perhaps some on the left have fallen for the "socialism of fools", a phrase current among German social democrats in the 1890s to describe anti-semitism. It was a criticism of those who blamed society's failings on the perceived wealth and influence of Jews.

The CST's Rich told Haaretz it would be a mistake to link anti-semitism specifically to the right or left.

It was confined to a minority in a country which he described as a really good place to be Jewish. He nevertheless cautioned that, "for a lot of British Jews, there's a sense that something changed after October 7, and all of a sudden, this doesn't feel like the Britain that we thought we knew."

Perhaps some on the left should reflect that their laudable tendency to allow other minorities to define the prejudices that offend them might also be granted to the Jews.