

Who will stand against Brexit's darker forces?

By Ferry Biedermann, freelance journalist working both in the UK and in Europe. He has contributed to the Financial Times, CNBC, the Washington Post, Trouw newspaper in the Netherlands and many others. He is also a former correspondent in the Middle East for the FT and Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant.

Being mostly an outside observer of the UK political scene at the moment, the persistence of one particular affair has caught my attention, that of the antisemitism kerfuffle in the Labour party. What is has to do with Brexit? More than we might wish for.

Without being too blunt, Brexit is largely an expression of ultra-nationalism, tribalism and the othering of perceived non-native minorities. Just look at some of the overblown reactions to the recent Channel crossing panic, and we can detect the Brexit undertow. Oxford's Nuffield College established last year that hate crime did indeed increase markedly in the UK due to the 2016 referendum, albeit somewhat less than some had reported. Let's not fool ourselves about the dangerous and brutish forces involved in the Brexit project.

How does that relate to Labour's irksome antisemitism jam? This is not to tar anyone as an anti-Semite, because there's just too much politics and other stuff involved to make a clear pronouncement.

What can be said is that as a matter of political outlook, it's no accident that the two most powerful Labour waverers on Brexit, who conveyed decidedly lukewarm support for Remain in 2016, are the same figures, Jeremy Corbyn and Len McCluskey, who keep undermining the efforts to lay the antisemitism issue to rest by Keir Starmer, now the leader and famously pro-Remain.

Whatever their motives in 2016, be they electoral, political or otherwise, they can at the very least be rebuked for not sufficiently having pushed back against the nationalism and tribalism inherent in the pro-Brexit stance. McCluskey, for one, was very clear about his thoughts on the ills of migration from the newer EU member states and on "EU imposed" austerity. Valid political points, possibly, but not the most cogent to make as part of a Remain campaign. Corbyn's lukewarm attitude towards the EU has been attested to.

The majority of the Jewish community, by contrast, both Labour and Conservative supporters, it seems, clearly saw that its interests were aligned with a more open, tolerant and rights-based course, and voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. The same goes for ethnic minorities, according to the Runnymede Trust, for one. At least some in this constituency also felt targeted by nativist rhetoric coming from quarters associated with the Remain campaigns.

While it seems that Jews and ethnic minorities thus have a common interest in opposing the darker forces underpinning Brexit, and that their natural home for that would be the Labour Party, they are now being played against each other by Labour's warring factions. One twist in the saga is the parrying of complaints about the way the party handled antisemitism with allegations of crude racism and sexism by some of those involved.

Not taking these allegations seriously enough would create a "hierarchy of racism" it was suggested. It is par for the course in the politicisation of antisemitism and racism that has sadly overtaken Labour.

That is not to suggest that these are not political subjects, of course they are, but there used to be a much more blanket, bipartisan idea of what could and could not be said in polite society. Words do

matter and that is why the anti-EU pronouncements by Corbyn and McCluskey did so much damage in their wishy-washy pro-Remain campaign. Where the seeds of racism and anti-Semitism are concerned, it is even more insidious to allow these to slip in and go unchallenged.

Labour, which should have been the bulwark against the chill wind of nativism, collectively failed at that since before the Brexit referendum. Any and all allegations of racism, antisemitism and sexism should be taken seriously and thoroughly investigated. The best way to make certain this happens, is surely by supporting Starmer's attempt to draw a line under the affair and help the party face these issues, and the rest of the Brexit blowback, with a united front. Not by persisting in political scorched-earth tactics.

It is an issue of broader European relevance, as even after the UK's transition period all these interconnecting mechanisms will keep mutually influencing each other. Hungarian and other Eastern European jibes at George Soros, for example, as well as anti-migration sentiment there and in Western European countries, will keep both feeding off and reinforcing British nativism.

The determination to oppose such tendencies should not be held hostage to narrow factional politics.