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The British Journal of Politics and International Relations

The British Labour Party and the Antisemitism Crisis: Jeremy Corbyn and Image Repair Theory

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Abstract

This paper utilises the work of William Benoit on image repair theory as a theoretical framework for examining the crisis communication of Jeremy Corbyn in relation to antisemitism within the Labour Party. By examining the self-defence rhetoric of Corbyn on the antisemitism allegations the paper identifies the following. Of the five strategies for crisis communication, Corbyn was overly-reliant on *denial, evading responsibility* and *reducing offensiveness*; struggled to explain his attempts at *corrective action*; and reverted to *accepting responsibility* – i.e., apologies - reluctantly and belatedly. Utilising existing perspectives on the most effective strategies for image repair – which emphasise the importance of effective *corrective action* and *accepting responsibility* at the expense of *denial, evading responsibility* and *reducing effectiveness* – the paper argues that Corbyn undermined his own attempts at image repair in the crisis that defined his leadership.

Introduction

This paper contributes to academic debates on antisemitism in the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn (Hirsh 2018; Rich 2018). The paper utilises Benoit's image repair theory as a theoretical framework for examining the crisis communication that Corbyn used in relation to the antisemitism allegations. The rationale for assessing Corbyn via image repair theory is clear as the antisemitism crisis caused him significant reputational damage (Barclay *et al*, 2019).

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of image repair theory. It identifies the different strategies – *denial*, *evading responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness*, *corrective action* and *accepting responsibility* - alongside examples of individuals and organisations who have been evaluated against it; and an assessment of the strategies that have been identified as the most effective. The second section identifies the competing perspectives in relation to the antisemitism allegations against the Labour Party. The third section assesses Corbyn against the strategies outlined within image repair theory, before the concluding section summarises the main findings and identifies how and why the approach of Corbyn was inappropriate, inconsistent and contradictory.

Image Repair Theory

The starting point for image repair theory is when an individual or organisation has been accused of wrong doing that causes them reputational damage. The level of reputational damage will be shaped by first, the extent to which the individual or organisation is deemed to be *responsible*; and second, the extent to which the accusation is deemed to be *offensive*. The strategy that the accused adopts to limit the damage to their image is *goal-orientated* behaviour designed to alter *perceptions* – be that consumers in business; fans in the case of celebrities; or voters for political parties and politicians (Benoit 1995, 2015).

Image repair theory is recognised as the 'dominant paradigm' for assessing crisis communication (Dardis and Haigh, 2009: 101). It has been applied to political figures – e.g., Presidents Reagan (Benoit *et al*, 1991); Clinton (Blaney and Benoit, 2001); George W. Bush (Benoit and Henson, 2009); Obama (Benoit, 2014) and Trump (Benoit, 2017) – and beyond the political sphere in relation to the Queen (Benoit and Brinson, 1999); the actor, Hugh Grant (Benoit, 1997); the sportswoman, Tonya Handing (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994); and to corporate scandals (Brinson and Benoit, 1999; Benoit and Hirson, 2001).

What emerges from these studies is how those that are accused of wrong doing need to respond in the immediate aftermath of the onset of the crisis, so as to reassure followers that the accusation being made is mistaken or exaggerated. This represents a critical moment, for at the onset of the crisis there will be, depending upon the severity of the accusation and the significance of the individual or organisation involved, a media-driven demand for information.

Failure on behalf of the accused to respond can create an information vacuum as both the media and the public will demand immediate answers and explanations (Coombs, 2007). On the question as to whether to respond (rebuttal) or not, there is the risk that silence implies culpability, and the information vacuum will be filled by the media. This creates incentives for those accused to intervene and seek to minimize or challenge the validity of the accusations being made. An effective rebuttal to the allegations being made is one that challengers the established interpretation, with an account which enables followers, be they stakeholders, customers, voters or fans, to see a counter-argument which amounts to a credible explanation in mitigation (Heath, 2006). This represents the opportunity to 'filter' and 'frame' the message so as to potentially reshape public opinion of the accusation (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

What image repair theory provides is the strategies and techniques – see table one - for those engaging in crisis communication, and these provide the basis upon which the Corbyn antisemitism case will be assessed.

Table One: Image Repair Theory

Strategies	Techniques
1. **Denial**	(a). *Dispute* the existence of a crisis
	(b). *Shift* the blame in terms of responsibility
2. **Evading Responsibility**	(a). *Provocation* – a response to another wrong
	(b). *Defeasibility* – claim a lack of knowledge
	(c). *Excuses* – caused by factors beyond their control
	(d). *Justification* – claim actions based on good intentions
3. Reducing Offensiveness	(a). *Bolstering* – mitigate negative impact of issue by promoting positive alternative reputation
	(b). *Minimisation* – imply issue less serious than suggested.
	(c). *Differentiation* – lessen impact by distinguishing it from something more offensive
	(d). *Transcendence* – to place within a broader context and construct a less offensive frame of reference.
	(e). *Attack accuser* – to limit the impact of the accusation question the credibility of the accuser.
	(f). *Compensation* – making an offer to those effected to offset the reputational damage caused.
4. Correction Action	(a). *Initiate change* – acknowledge the negativity of the issue and move beyond rhetoric towards substantive action to demonstrate change.
5. Accepting Responsibility	(a). *Apologies* – admitting wrong doing.

Sources: adapted from Benoit 1995, 2015.

What have been identified as the most effective and least effective strategies of crisis communication? Strategies that are deemed to be more effective are: *corrective action* (demonstrating change) and *accepting responsibility* (apologies). Strategies that have been demonstrated to be less effective are: *denial*; *evading responsibility*; and *reducing offensiveness*. Effective image repair demands that the strategies used are a). appropriate for the circumstances – e.g., denial is only legitimate if the accusation lacks legitimacy (Coombs, 2006); b). and consistently applied – i.e., select the optimum strategy and stick to it, and

remember not to select strategies that are contradictory, such as *denial* and accepting *responsibility,* as apologies are not required if the accusation is unfounded (Benoit and Drew, 1997; Blaney *et al*, 2002; Lee, 2004; Pace *et al*, 2010).

The legitimacy of image repair theory, as a theoretical framework, has been clearly demonstrated within studies of American political leadership but what value can it offer in terms of how political leaders communicate in British politics? Existing interpretations within British politics focus on rhetorical political analysis. This approach identifies how political orators *construct* political debates and *persuade* others to accept their interpretations via appeals to reason, emotion or through the orators' reputation (see, for example, Crines and Hayton, 2015; Hayton and Crines, 2015; Crines et al, 2016). Although illuminating such approaches assess overall communication performance, but they do not explicitly focus on explaining (in)effectiveness in relation to specific circumstances. The crisis circumstances surrounding Labour Party antisemitism make the image repair theory more appropriate than rhetorical political analysis.

Labour Party Antisemitism

The allegations of antisemitism that have been made against the Labour Party, and their impacts, are covered extensively elsewhere (Hirsh 2018; Rich 2018). From these studies, it is clear that the allegations placed Corbyn in the position of engaging in crisis communication, making this a suitable case for analysing via image repair theory.

What was problematic for Corbyn was how the antisemitism allegations were being framed in terms of *responsibility* and *offensiveness*. On the latter issue of the *offensiveness*, an accusation of racism has to be regarded as serious; after all it has led to the Labour Party being investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019).

With regard to the *responsibility* for the crisis, it is clear that the focus on antisemitism increased after Corbyn won the Labour Party leadership. On the conundrum of how to construct a position that *does* permit legitimate questioning of the conduct of Israel, but *does not* permit antisemitic stigmatisation, it was alleged that Corbyn had, via his rhetoric, positions and associations, strayed into the latter categorisation. On his election to the party leadership critics argued that Labour was now 'led by an antizionist' who had 'jumped to the defence of antisemites' (Hirsh, 2018: 66).

We also need to acknowledge the fact that thereafter, Labour Party members, activists and occasionally even representatives, were exposed as having engaged in behaviours, often disseminated via social media, that *could* be construed as antisemitic (Allington, 2019). Media coverage on the issue would increase after the comments of Ken Livingstone, former Labour Mayor of London, in an interview in April 2016 (BBC, 2016). When Livingstone implied a correlation between Zionism and Nazism, a video recording of Labour MP, John Mann, calling Livingstone a 'disgusting racist' went viral on social media, and a peripheral issue moved into the mainstream (Hirsh, 2018: 18).

During Corbyn's leadership tenure the Labour Party would suffer the consequences of the ongoing antisemitism crisis, and for this he, as party leader, would be deemed responsible. For example, by July 2019, 42 percent of voters thought antisemitism within the Labour Party was a genuine and serious issue; 33 percent thought the Labour Party was an antisemitic party; and 49 percent thought that Corbyn should be doing more to address the issue (Savage and Helm, 2019). When we isolate this to its impact upon Jewish voters, evidence emerged of a 'distinctive negative Corbyn effect on Jewish voter support for Labour since 2015' as 'Labour candidates standing in areas of substantial Jewish communities' performed worse than they had before he was party leader (Barclay *et al,* 2019). Antisemitism was also identified as a contributing factor amongst eleven Labour parliamentarians who would resign the Labour

whip: one of them, Luciana Berger, lamented that the party had become 'institutionally antisemitic' (Marsh, 2019).

However, these observations have to be placed within the context of the following considerations:

(a) Disagreements exist on the line between legitimate and illegitimate discussion about the behaviours of Israel and that the charge of antisemitism *could* be used as a means of silencing criticism of Israel[i] (Philo and Berry, 2019a: 23-44).

(b) That the Jewish community does not speak with one voice. Critiques of Corbyn have been articulated effectively by the Jewish Labour Movement. However, some Jewish groups, such as the Jewish Voice for Labour, have challenged the notion of left antisemitism, arguing that they are conflating antizionism with antisemitism to undermine Corbyn (Rich, 2018).

(c). The issue *could* have been exploited by opponents of Corbyn within the Labour Party, to undermine his leadership[ii] (Johnson, 2019).

(d). The issue *could* have been exaggerated within the media coverage (Schlosberg and Laker, 2018).

The impact of this was clear: although only 0.1 percent of Labour Party members were actually under investigation for allegations of antisemitism (early 2019), research showed that voters estimated that the figure was somewhere between 25 to 40 percent. On this 'disparity', Philo and Berry argue that this stems from the following amplifying effect: between June 2015 and March 2019 the print media ran 5,497 stories on the Labour Party and antisemitism, which triggered further coverage on television and social media, which then created a distorted perception of the scale of the problem (Philo and Berry, 2019b).

For Corbyn, and his allies, the problem was not just that the issue was being exaggerated but that it was an accusation that, to them, seemed oxymoronic. They subscribed to the view that left-wing antisemitism could not exist, as 'by definition there can be no antisemitism within the community of the progressive' (Hirsh, 2018: 38). That created the conundrum for Corbyn, and his supporters, of having to defend his reputation against an invalid allegation – i.e., a smear (Gidley *et al*, 2020: 413).

Corbyn's Crisis Communication

The analysis below identifies the following in relation to Corbyn's crisis communication: first, his instinctive tendency towards *denial*, *evading responsibility* and *reducing offensiveness*; second, his misplaced attempts at *corrective action*; and third, his attitude towards *accepting responsibility*.

Denial, Evading Responsibility and Reducing Offensiveness

Corbyn instinctively challenged the legitimacy of the allegations being made. An early example of this would be the case of the Labour peer, Michael Levy, when he criticised Corbyn over antisemitism. Corbyn went on *Sky News* and accused Levy of not 'listening' and failing to note that 'I've absolutely condemned antisemitism; I've condemned Islamophobia, I've condemned any form of racism anywhere within our society' (Corbyn, 2016a). Here Corbyn utilised *denial*: he suggests that he personally could not be associated with antisemitism as a means by which to *dispute* the accusations being made and their potentially negative impact upon his reputation.

He also decided not to condemn antisemitism in isolation (the *reducing offensiveness* technique of *transcendence* by placing the issue in a broader and less offensive frame of reference). He listed his condemnation of antisemitism alongside his condemnation of all forms of racism, which made the accusation less plausible, given his widely acknowledged reputation as an anti-racist campaigner (Home Affairs Select Committee Report on Antisemitism, 2016: 44). This constituted the *reducing effectiveness* technique of *bolstering* your reputation as a means to mitigate the potentially negative impacts that the accusation could carry (as well as the *evading responsibility* technique of *justifications*).

He also did this by focusing on the reputation of the Labour Party for equality, as he identified that '*we* are the party that introduced the first Race Relations Act… *we* are the party that introduced the Human Rights Act…[and]… *we* are the party that introduced the Equalities Act. (Corbyn, 2016a). Corbyn would repeatedly rely on this technique of *bolstering* in conference speeches and parliamentary debates. For example, he informed conference that '*ours* is the party of equality for all' and we have 'pioneered every progressive initiative to root out racism from our society' (Corbyn, 2018a). At Prime Minister's Questions he attacked Theresa May by pointing out how the Labour Party was the 'first to introduce anti-racist legislation into law in Britain', because '*we* totally oppose racism in any form whatsoever' (HC Deb, Vol. 663, Col. 826, 17 July 2019).

His *denial* was personal and political. To dispute the claim that he was antisemitic he emphasised how the Labour Party was 'built on the values of solidarity, social justice, equality and human rights' and 'that is why I have devoted my life to it' (Corbyn, 2016b). This method to *dispute* the allegations was still being utilised by the time of the Labour Party Annual Conference two years later, as he argued that 'anti-racism is integral to our very being… it is part of who you all are and it is part of who I am.' (Corbyn, 2018a). Corbyn also explicitly rejected the personal allegations against him. During the Labour Party leadership election of

2015, he argued that 'the idea that I am some kind of racist or antisemitic person is beyond appalling, disgusting and deeply offensive' (BBC, 2015).

The Corbyn strategy also involved *minimisation*. If pressed to acknowledge the legitimacy of the antisemitism allegations, Corbyn would talk about how it involved a 'very, very, very small number of cases' (Corbyn, 2016a). To get this point across he would identify how 'the number represents less than 0.1 percent of Labour's membership of more than half a million' (Corbyn, 2018b). He still relied on *minimisation* during the General Election campaign of 2019 as he stated how it applied to a 'a very, very small number of people' of the membership (BBC, 2019a).

Corbyn repeatedly used the technique of *transcendence*, by placing the specific allegation within a broader context in order to construct a less offensive frame of reference. He would emphasise how 'antisemitism is there in society' (BBC, 2019a). It could be argued that this form of disassociation could be seen as being linked to the Benoit technique of *excuses* – i.e., this is a problem beyond the confines of the Labour Party. This allowed Corbyn to shift the emphasis from the specific accusation about antisemitism within the Labour Party, to wider problems that allowed him to accuse others. For example,

> 'Race hate is a growing threat that has to be confronted. Not just here in Britain, but across Europe and the United States. The far right is on the rise, blaming minorities, Jews, Muslims and migrants, for the failures of a broken economic system' (Corbyn, 2018a).

Placing antisemitism as a wider societal problem served three objectives for Corbyn. First, it aided his attempts at *minimisation* as it identified how the problem was not specific to the Labour Party. Second, it allowed him to switch the discussion onto economic considerations

and the inequalities within the current economic system, which played to his political base. Third, it created space for him to rhetorically change the parameters of debate. It provided the opportunity for what Benoit defined as *differentiation* – Corbyn could lessen the impact of the antisemitism allegations by comparing it with something that might be more offensive (e.g., the prejudices associated with the far-right).

This created the space for Corbyn to rhetorically counter-attack. He called the Conservatives 'hypocrites' when they 'accuse us of antisemitism' (Corbyn, 2018a). He argued that the Conservatives had created a 'hostile environment for all migrant communities' due to their 'nasty, cynical politics' and how their 'victims include the Windrush generation who helped rebuild Britain after the war and were thrown under the bus by a Government that reckoned there were votes to be had by pandering to prejudice' (Corbyn, 2018a). He could then unite his party by identifying that the Conservatives had 'received a letter from the antisemitic and Islamophobic Hungarian government, thanking them for their solidarity, just as the rest of Europe united against it' (Corbyn, 2018a). Corbyn could then focus in on how Labour 'will never stay silent in the face of growing Islamophobia, whether from the far right on the streets, or the former Foreign Secretary's [Boris Johnson] disgraceful dog-whistle jibes at Muslim women' (Corbyn, 2018a). Citing the scale of the problem within the Conservative Party also formed part of Corbyn's approach. In his final parliamentary exchange with May he criticised her failure to 'act on Islamophobia in her own party' and noted how 'sixty percent of Tory party members think Islam is a threat to western civilisation' (HC Deb, Vol. 633, Col. 826, 17 July 2019). When Johnson replaced May as Conservative Party leader, and Prime Minister, Corbyn could develop this line of attack. He argued that 'displays of racism, Islamophobia or antisemitism are not signs of strength, but of weakness' and it was clear that when Johnson 'compared Muslim women to letterboxes or bank robbers, it wasn't a flippant comment, it was calculated to play on people's fears (Corbyn, 2019a).

Identifying Islamophobia, and rhetorically located antisemitism alongside this and the broader issues of racism, worked effectively for Corbyn when dealing with accusations from Conservatives. He knew that Corbynites would be comfortable attacking the Conservatives, so he questioned the legitimacy of the accusations being made: e.g., 'other political parties and some of the media exaggerate and distort the scale of the problem in our party' (Corbyn, 2019b).

Attacking his accusers within the mainstream media – whom Corbynites were instinctively hostile to (Cammaerts *et al*, 2020) – was a rhetorical technique that Corbyn was comfortable utilising. For example, when questioned on Channel Four news about his association with Hamas and Hezbollah, Corbyn attacked the interviewer, Krishnan Guru-Murthy, accusing him of 'trying to trivialise the whole discussion' given that 'Hamas and Hezbollah are part of a peace process', before ending the interview with 'thanks for the tabloid journalism' (Channel Four News, 2015).

Politically it was more complex for Corbyn when fending off criticism of his leadership vis-à-vis antisemitism from within the Labour Party or from Jewish community leaders. With regard to the criticism made by Levy, Corbyn expressed how he was 'disappointed that Lord Levy has made these remarks', because 'he knows full well what my views are. He knows full well what the views of the Labour Party are. He knows full well the kind of decent inclusive society that we all want to live in. I look forward to having that discussion with him (Corbyn, 2016a). Corbyn also used the issue of wanting to hold a one-to-one consultation with his accusers during the General Election campaign of 2019, when Corbyn was criticised by the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis. The Chief Rabbi had argued that a 'new poison' of antisemitism had taken root in Labour and had been sanctioned by Corbyn – indirectly due to his failures of leadership (Stubley, 2019). The same rhetorical deflection technique that he used with Levy was deployed in response to the accusations of the Chief Rabbi, as Corbyn argued that: 'I am

looking forward to having a discussion with him because I want to hear why he would say such a thing' (BBC, 2019a).

Corrective Action

Corbyn clearly deployed some of the techniques associated with the Benoit typology in relation to *denial*, *evading responsibility* and *reducing offensiveness*. His attempts at repairing his own political image on this were undermined, however, by his failings in relation to *corrective action* or initiating change. In terms of actions we can analyse Corbyn in relation to the following interventions: first, the failure of the Chakrabarti Inquiry of 2016 to quell the crisis over the long-term; second, the mismanagement associated with the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism in 2018; and third, the accusation that Corbyn displayed a lack of leadership in terms of tightening up the procedures covering suspensions and expulsions for members engaging in antisemitic behaviour.

The first corrective action that Corbyn engaged in was setting up the Chakrabarti Inquiry. Although this represented a sensible political manoeuvre it failed to quell the furore over antisemitism, for a number of reasons, some of which Corbyn can be criticised for. It could be argued that the terms of reference for the inquiry were problematic to those who had doubts about Corbyn on the issue of antisemitism. Corbyn decided that the inquiry should examine antisemitism and 'other racisms' within the Labour Party. Framing the parameters of the inquiry around other racisms was unusual as there were no allegations within the Labour Party around racism generally - it was just specific to antisemitism (Hirsh, 2018: 83). It could also be argued that the appointment of the chair of the inquiry, Shami Chakrabarti, was problematic and post-inquiry developments undermined the legitimacy of her report. She did

not appear to be a 'neutral'[iii] figure who was positioned 'between those denying antisemitism' and 'those saying that there was a problem with antisemitism within the Labour Party' (Hirsh, 2018: 92). Another limitation with the Chakrabarti Inquiry, however, was the scepticism about the main findings of the report, amongst those who had been victims of antisemitism. Although a series of recommendations were made, covering offensive language and tightening up disciplinary procedures, the media coverage focused on the conclusions that Labour was 'not overrun by antisemitism or other forms of racism', although there was an 'occasional toxic atmosphere' and some 'ignorant attitudes' (Chakrabarti, 2016: 1).

However, one of the most problematic aspects of the Chakrabarti inquiry was the way in which it was presented by Corbyn in his speech to coincide with the launch of the inquiry's findings. This was despite the fact that much of what Corbyn argued was not controversial, for example: 'racism is racism, there is no hierarchy, no acceptable form of it' (Corbyn, 2016b). He also recognised the legitimacy of the concerns that were being expressed:

'I do not believe in name calling and I never have. "Zio" is a vile epithet that follows in a long line of earlier such terms that have no place in our Party. Nor should anyone indulge in the kind of stereotyping that can cause such hurt and harm. To assume that a Jewish friend or fellow member is wealthy, part of some kind of financial or media conspiracy, or takes a particular position on politics in general, or on Israel and Palestine in particular, is just wrong' (Corbyn, 2016b).

In an attempt to ensure that the distinction between legitimate debate and illegitimate behaviour, Corbyn was clear as he arguing that:

'We, as Labour Party members, must all be free to criticise and oppose injustice and abuse wherever we find it. But as today's Report recommends, can we please leave Hitler and Nazi metaphors alone, especially in the context of Israel' (Corbyn, 2016b)

However, the validity of this argument, as a form of *corrective action*, was to be drowned out by the following comparison that Corbyn made:

'Our Jewish friends are no more responsible for the actions of Israel or the Netanyahu Government than our Muslim friends are for those of various self-styled Islamic states or organisations' (Corbyn, 2016b).

The report had made it clear that comparing Israel with the Nazis was unacceptable and would not be permitted. In seeking to endorse the report Corbyn was engaging in Israeli comparisons, albeit not with the Nazis. Instead, Corbyn was drawing an 'inflammatory analogy' between Israel and ISIS – 'the closest contemporary equivalent to the Nazis' in terms of their 'genocidal antisemitism' (Hirsh, 2018: 88).

Ultimately, however, the Chakrabarti inquiry failed to fully engage with (a) how a culture of hostility towards Israel could manifest itself in members articulating antisemitic positions; (b) how to overcome issues of denial amongst members who dispute that their behaviours could be construed as antisemitic; and (c). the idea of adopting in full the McPherson principle – i.e., that an antisemitic incident requiring investigation is one in which the victim perceives that the action was antisemitic (Hirsh, 2018: 85).

Corbyn can also be open to criticism in terms of how the Labour Party handled the issue of accepting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism[iv]. An inter-governmental organisation made up of representatives from thirty-one

member nations, the IHRA had formally adopted a working definition of antisemitism in 2016, which was accepted by the UK Government. In 2018 the Labour Party formally adopted the definition, but only after considerable infighting over whether they should adopt (or amend) the eleven examples of antisemitism (Lerman, 2019).

The official position of the leadership was that their proposed amendments were designed to (a) strengthen the definitions and (b) aid their disciplinary processes in relation to accusations of antisemitism by members. The rationale for doing so stemmed from the argument that the IHRA definition was too vague and imprecise, and thus the leadership's motives were good (Lerman, 2019). That claim was disputed by mainstream representatives of the Jewish community who felt that the proposed amendments were being imposed without consultation (Schlosberg and Laker, 2018: 5). Of crucial importance was the following distinction. The IHRA definition was clear in that it stated that 'denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination – e.g., by claiming that the existence of the State of Israel was a racist endeavour'. Alongside this, however, the Labour leadership wanted to insert a longer clause that stated that it was not racist to discuss 'the circumstances of the foundation of the Israeli state, for example, in the context of its impact upon the Palestinian people, including critical comment upon the differential impact of Israeli laws or policies on different people within its population or that of neighbouring territories' (Kogan, 2019: 350-1). Corbyn would claim that was

'to make sure there can be open and proper debate about Israel and its foreign policy, and about the future for Palestinian people. Hence there has to be that space for debate, you cannot shut that down. But it can never, ever be conducted in an anti-Semitic way' (Corbyn, 2018c)

In July 2018, the PLP voted overwhelmingly to embrace the original definition and examples set out by the IHRA, whereupon the National Executive Committee (NEC) voted to approve the leadership approved amendments, but offered to engage in new consultations with the Jewish community (Kogan, 2019: 357). A joint frontpage editorial from *The Jewish Chronicle, Jewish News* and *Jewish Telegraph* indicated their distrust with the Corbyn leadership: they spoke of the 'existential threat to Jewish life in this country that would be posed by a Corbyn led government' (Watts, 2018). Faced with such an explicit threat to his image and thereby his electability, Corbyn responded with:

'I do not for one moment accept that a Labour government would represent any kind of threat, let alone an 'existential threat' to Jewish life in Britain, as three Jewish newspapers recently claimed. This is the kind of overheated rhetoric that can surface during emotional political debates' (Corbyn, 2018b).

That Corbyn issued this response indicated the difficulties that he was experiencing in terms of *corrective action*. As such he was falling back into techniques associated with *denial* – 'I do not for one moment accept' – and *minimization* – 'overheated rhetoric'. Corbyn also sought to distance himself from online antisemitic conduct by *shifting the blame*:

'People who dish out antisemitic poison need to understand: you do not do it in my name. You are not my supporters and have no place in our movement' (Corbyn, 2018b).

Ultimately, however, with the PLP backing the original IHRA definition and examples in full, the NEC backed down without a formal vote. Corbyn had engaged in a self-defeating exercise – i.e., he had sought to amend the proposed IHRA definitions and examples, and in

failing to secure his objectives had further alienated sections of the Jewish community and critics within his own parliamentary ranks; whilst ensuring that the media continued to fixate on framing antisemitism in the Labour Party as a problem caused by ineffective leadership.

Running parallel to criticism of Corbyn vis-à-vis the adoption of the IHRA definition and examples was criticism about how complaints against Labour Party members were being processed. The official data on complaints indicated that the scale of antisemitism within the Labour Party was indeed very low (at 0.1 percent of the membership) as Corbyn would continue to mention. However, such claims were undermined by relentless negative publicity about how slow their disciplinary systems were at processing complaints, followed on by whistleblower complaints by disaffected employees about the institutional failings within the party in addressing antisemitism (BBC, 2019a). This crowded out any coverage of the corrective action that Corbyn was initiating to trying to address the crisis – for example, how they launched an education programme for their membership to understand, confront and overcome antisemitism (Labour Party, 2019).

What also undermined Corbyn vis-à-vis the disciplinary process was the perceived gap between his rhetorical claims and the evidence of change. Corbyn was persistent in claims that 'all allegations are properly and thoroughly investigated', and that we 'take action' and the idea that there was any 'tolerance of any form of racism is wholly and totally fallacious' (Corbyn, 2016a). Despite mounting criticism Corbyn stuck rigidly to this line. During the ITV Leaders Debate in the General Election of 2019, Corbyn stated how 'I have taken action in my party', and 'when anyone has committed any antisemitic acts or made any antisemitic statements, they are either suspended or expelled from the party and we have investigated every single case' (ITV, 2019a). As an exercise in image restoration the problem with the claim was it was disputed: the Jewish Labour Movement called it a 'lie' as '130 outstanding antisemitism cases, some dating back years, still haven't been dealt with' (Harpin, 2019).

Accepting Responsibility:

The inability of Corbyn to quell the antisemitism crisis, alongside the personalised nature of that criticism, would repeatedly place him in the position of being asked to explain himself. These expectations can be said to relate to the final rhetorical technique within crisis communication and image restoration − i.e., *accepting responsibility* and admitting wrong doing and offering apologies.

However, although resistant to the idea of apologising the level of internal pressure within the party would force Corbyn to acknowledge the scale of the antisemitism crisis (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020: 99-127; 357). This was evident from his speech to conference delegates in 2019:

'The worst cases of antisemitism in our party have included Holocaust denial, crude Jewish-banker stereotypes, conspiracy theories blaming Israel for 9/11 or every war on the Rothschild family, and even one member who appeared to believe that Hitler had been misunderstood. I am sorry for the hurt that has been caused to many Jewish people. We have been too slow in processing disciplinary cases of mostly online antisemitic abuse by party members. We are acting to speed this process up' (Corbyn, 2019a).

However, his apology did not have desired effect due to the following factors: the delay in making a fulsome apology; the times prior to this when he has been forced to explain away his own prior conduct and rhetoric and avoided a formal apology; and the fact that in interviews (not speeches) he came across as offering grudging apologies.

His unconvincing responses helped to sustain the critique of him and his party vis-à-vis antisemitism. For example, he struggled to explain away why invited to Parliament representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah (in 2009) and described them as 'friends' (Corbyn, 2009). When asked by David Cameron to withdraw the remark that he was 'friends' with a 'terrorist group who believe in killing Jews', Corbyn could not bring himself to apologise, choosing instead to argue that 'I was hosting to try to promote a peace process. It was not an approval of those organisations' (HC Deb, Vol. 609, Col. 162, 4 May 2016). Later, when questioned in a Home Affairs Select Committee, as to whether he still regarded Hamas and Hezbollah as 'friends', Corbyn admitted that: 'the language I used at that meeting was about encouraging there to be a discussion about the peace process' but on reflection, 'it was inclusive language I used which with hindsight I would rather not have used. I regret using those words, of course', (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016). Built into his rhetorical defence was the Benoit technique of *evading responsibility* by relying on *justifications* (i.e., good intentions) - for example, 'in the past, in pursuit of justice for the Palestinian people and peace in Israel/Palestine, I have on occasion appeared on platforms with people whose views I completely reject' (ITV, 2018).

What was becoming increasingly evident was that Corbyn was being undermined by his actions and rhetoric from *before* he became party leader. This was an issue that he openly acknowledged as, for example, he said 'I am now more careful with how I might use the term 'Zionist' because a once self-identifying political term has been increasingly hijacked by antisemites as code for Jews' (BBC, 2018a).

Corbyn was also placed on the defensive about the fact that he had questioned, on the grounds of free speech, the removal of a mural by a graffiti artist in his constituency (Gabor, 2020: 72). The mural seemed to be antisemitic because it embraced the conspiracy motifs of big nosed Jewish bankers securing their wealth at the expense of exploited workers. When

questioned Corbyn responded using a form of the *evading responsibility* technique of *defeasibility* (lack of knowledge) as he said: 'I sincerely regret that I did not look more closely at the image I was commenting on, the contents of which are deeply disturbing and antisemitic' (BBC, 2018b).

Corbyn was also on the defensive when the media re-released a picture of him attending a wreath laying ceremony in Tunisia (from 2014) commemorating the victims of Israeli airstrikes back in 1985. This ceremony was at the cemetery containing the graves of members of the Black September Organization, who were responsible for the deaths of Israeli athletes attending the 1972 Munich Olympics. This again placed Corbyn on the defensive. He explained his conduct via the *evading responsibility* technique of *justifications* (good intentions), arguing that:

'I was there because I wanted to see a fitting memorial to everyone who has died in every terrorist incident everywhere because we have to end it…[as]… you cannot pursue peace by a cycle of violence; the only way you can pursue peace is by a cycle of dialogue' (BBC, 2018c).

His subsequent defence that 'I was present at the wreath-laying [but] I don't think I was actually involved in it' (BBC 2018c) was another example of the *evading responsibility* technique of *defeasibility* (lack of knowledge). It provoked widespread incredulity, and on the cumulative impact of these repeated accusations, Kogan concluded that:

'Corbyn's ability to ignore unpleasant facts about websites, online supporters, attendees at conferences and other places where his name had been freely used [can] no longer be accepted as pure naivety' (Kogan, 2019: 362).

Corbyn was at his least effective during the course of a television interview with Andrew Neil in the 2019 General Election campaign (Gabor, 2020: 70). He compounded his difficulties by failing to respond directly to a request to apologise for failing to effectively address antisemitism within Labour:

Neil: Wouldn't you like to take this opportunity tonight to apologise to the British Jewish community for what's happened?

Corbyn: What I'll say is this. I am determined that our society will be safe for people of all faiths. I don't want anyone to be feeling insecure in our society and our government will protect every community

Neil: So, no apology?

Corbyn: …against the abuse they receive on the streets, on the trains or in any –

Neil: So, no apology for how you've handled this?

Corbyn: …. or any other form of life.

Neil: I will try one more time. No apology?

Corbyn: No, hang on a minute, Andrew. Can I explain what we are trying to do?

Neil: You have and you have been given plenty of time to do that. I asked you if you wanted to apologise and you have not (BBC, 2019a).

Corbyn's unwillingness to offer an immediate apology ensured that a media frenzy about antisemitism derailed their attempts to focus on other campaigning issues (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020: 323). In an attempt to overcome this, Corbyn then offered his 'sympathies and apologies' to the victims of antisemitism within the Labour Party, before reassuring them that he would lead the 'most anti-racist government you've ever seen' (ITV, 2019b). The outcome

of the General Election of 2019, however, would deny Corbyn the opportunity to demonstrate this.

Conclusion

From the above analysis five questions emerge. First, to what extent was the accusation legitimate? Second, to what extent was he responsible for the accusation? Third, what was the optimal strategy to deploy in the circumstances? Fourth, was his approach to self-defence crisis communication consistently applied? And, finally, were there any contradictions in the approach that Corbyn relied upon?

On the first question of the legitimacy of the accusation made it is important to remember that denial is an appropriate strategy to utilise if the accusation is illegitimate, but is an unwise strategy if the accusation carries some legitimacy (Coombs, 2006). So, was the antisemitism accusation legitimate? There is a danger of oversimplifying and creating the two extremes of a). antisemitism does not exist and is a smear, the denialists position held by many Labour Party members (Gidley, 2020: 411-4) or b). antisemitism does exist and on a wide scale, the maximum critique argument pushed by some within the mainstream media, (Schlosberg and Laker, 2018). It does exist, albeit on a relatively small scale, but enough to become politically significant – and for reasons of self-interest, the critics of Corbyn identified it as his area of greatest vulnerability (Gidley *et al*, 2020: 411-5).

On the second question of whether he was responsible we can acknowledge that leftish antisemitism predates his tenure as leader of the Labour Party (Johnson, 2016). However, that minority who held antisemitic views within the left were emboldened by the election of Corbyn, giving them a disproportionate voice, which distorted perceptions on the scale of the problem. His selection gave them permission to be heard, but this also incentivised his

opponents to draw attention to the antisemitism behaviours of those on the left. Combine this with the rhetoric and choices of Corbyn prior to 2015 then he carries a degree of responsibility (Gidley *et al*, 2020: 411-5; Hirsh 2018; Rich 2018).

On the third question of what was the optimal approach to deploy in these circumstances then prior image repair research suggests that Corbyn should have been a). moved quickly to a dual strategy of *corrective action* and *accepting responsibility*, and b). avoided relying on *denial*; *evading responsibility* or *reducing offensiveness*, which would be less effective (Benoit and Drew, 1997; Lee, 2004; Blaney *et al*, 2002; Pace *et al*, 2010).

On the fourth question it is clear that Corbyn deployed an inconsistent approach which can be summarised as follows:

(a). In the early to mid-part of his leadership tenure, Corbyn clearly displayed a tendency towards *denial*, *evading responsibility* and *reducing offensiveness*. Notable amongst his rhetorical techniques were *excuses*, *justifications*, *bolstering*, *minimisation*, *differentiation, transcendence* and *attacking accusers*. However, given that these allegations *did* carry some legitimacy these were suboptimal strategies to adopt.

(b). Throughout his leadership tenure, Corbyn *did* engage in forms of *corrective action* – one of the two more effective means of image repair. However, the effectiveness of his attempts to demonstrate change was limited. For example, his maladroit handling of both the Chakrabarti inquiry launch and the debates about adopting the IHRA definition of antisemitism, enabled his critics to construct a narrative of leadership failure vis-à-vis his interventions. Moreover, Corbyn struggled to get across the benefits of the disciplinary and educational reforms that he was initiating to address the problem.

(c). In the first two-thirds of his leadership tenure, Corbyn displayed an aversion to the other most effective means of image repair – i.e., *accepting responsibility* and offering apologies.

Not only were the strategies that Corbyn adopted in terms of his crisis communication, in the period between 2015 and 2018, suboptimal, but they ran parallel to the growing intensity of the antisemitism crisis. It could be argued that as the initial wave of allegations unfolded, that calling the Chakrabarti Inquiry did help to buy Corbyn some political time. This ensured that it was not such a dominant issue in the General Election campaign of 2017 (Goes, 2018). The persistence with which the opponents of Corbyn ensured that antisemitism remained an issue after the General Election of 2017, demonstrated not just that the corrective action of the Chakrabarti Inquiry would not be enough, but that his ongoing preference for *denial*, *evading responsibility* and *reducing offensiveness* was misplaced. The intensification of the antisemitism crisis forced Corbyn to alter his approach by late 2018. He did begin to accept some responsibility. He admitted that: 'we were too slow in processing disciplinary cases' and that 'we haven't done enough to foster a deeper understanding of antisemitism among members' (Corbyn, 2018b). He also acknowledged that 'trust between our party and the [Jewish] community [was] at a low ebb' and he committed himself to 'driving antisemitism out of our party for good, and rebuilding that trust' (Corbyn, 2018b).

By relying for too long on the suboptimal strategies of *denial*, *evading responsibility* and *reducing offensiveness*, and then mismanaging his attempts at *corrective action*, this meant that by the time he did move towards *accepting responsibility*, the reputational damage was done. Polling in the lead up to the General Election of 2019 demonstrated that voters thought that Corbyn had (a) denied the allegations, even though this was no longer entirely accurate;

and (b) that he had failed to apologise for the allegations, even though eventually he did (Philo and Berry, 2019b).

On the fifth question it is clear that Corbyn undermined himself further by the incompatibility that existed between the strategies that he relied upon. Using *denial*, as he did, but then gravitating to *corrective action* and eventually *acceptability responsibility* – shows the importance of the combination of strategies that those who are accused of wrong-doing rely upon – see Blaney et al, 2002; Drumheller and Benoit, 2004. How could Corbyn expect to secure image repair if he eventually, but reluctantly and when under pressure, accepted responsibility for the impacts of an accusation that he had repeatedly denied. Moving from one self-defence strategy to another, and strategies that were incompatible with each other, conveyed a contradictory message and undermined his ability to limit the reputational damage upon himself and the Labour Party. This amounts to a failure in crisis communication, and thus image repair, that validates the claim by Goodall that this was a crisis that 'could have been shut down and isolated [but] became bigger' because 'of the ham-fisted handling' of 'the leadership' (Goodall, 2018: 204).

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[i] Johnson argues that legitimate criticism of Israeli policy can 'include criticism of the occupation of the territories, the settlement project, aspects of the treatment of minorities in Israel, and the degree of force Israel uses to restore deterrence against Hamas', as opposed to 'illegitimate discourse, which uses demonising, dehumanising and conspiracist language to bend the meaning of 'Israel' and 'Zionism' and 'Zionists' so far out of shape that each term becomes a fit receptacle for the tropes, images and ideas of classical antisemitism' (Johnson, 2019: 21). Antisemitism 'dressed up' as antizionism comprises: 'a political programme to abolish the Jewish homeland (and no other homeland); a discourse to demonise it as evil and 'Nazi' (and only it); and a movement to make it a global pariah state' (Johnson, 2019: 21).

[ii] The leaked report on the work of the Labour Party's Governance and Legal Unit, who handled the disciplinary cases relating to antisemitism suggested that internal party critics of Corbyn were obstructionist and undermined attempts to deal with antisemitism allegations (Labour Party, 2020).

[iii] The perception of neutrality was undermined by the fact that shortly after delivering the findings of her inquiry she was nominated for a peerage by Corbyn and then her appointment as shadow Attorney General (Kogan, 2019: 345).

[iv] The IHRA definition stated that: 'antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities' (IHRA 2016).