

Dealing with Antisemitism in the North Norfolk Labour Party

Evidence for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) from Martyn Sloman

Introduction and summary

This evidence is presented by a long-standing and active member of the North Norfolk Constituency Labour Party (NNLP). It draws on events that took place in the local party between March and May 2019 - in particular a motion put forward at a members meeting in support of the Party's leadership and national processes. The evidence also draws some lessons on the handling of an investigation into an individual. The main conclusion is that a very real problem of antisemitism has been politicised by supporters of the party's current leader and has thus become a factional issue. The incidents described are symptomatic of a culture that now subsists at local levels in the Labour Party.

The Context

North Norfolk is a rural area, attractive for those seeking retirement: it now has the third largest population of over 65s of any UK Parliamentary Constituency. Changing demographics means that the Labour Party, which held the seat until 1970, is in decline as an electoral force and is dominated by older members.

At the time of the May 2015 General Election, when I acted as Parliamentary Agent and Labour came third, the North Norfolk Labour Party had 175 members. Subsequently there was an influx following the widening franchise of the ballot for a Party leader. In September of that year the total of members, affiliates and registered supporters peaked at over 600.

The overwhelming majority of these new members were attracted by the opportunity to support Jeremy Corbyn; this contributed to a change of leadership at local level and some of the long-standing members withdrew from activism or ceased membership altogether. Despite the three-fold increase in nominal membership, attendance at All Members Meetings (AMM) has at best remained static, with numbers hovering around the high teens and low twenties. To quote from the NNLP Annual Report to members: *'the challenge has been to activate the new membership in campaigning and participation in meetings'*. However the political complexion has changed significantly with the local party driven by a desire to demonstrate hostility to previous party leaders and unequivocal and unwavering support for the present incumbent. The issue outlined below can best be understood as consequence of this change in political direction.

The sequence of events

On March 13th 2019 the NNLP Secretary emailed the notification and agenda for an AMM to be held on the 21st of that month. This contained background to, and text of, a motion that had been discussed and agreed at a meeting of the Executive Committee (EC) and was to be moved by one of their number at the AMM.

The full text of over 300 words circulated to members is attached as Appendix I. There is no ambiguity over its sentiments. The background briefing includes the following passage: *“This CLP wishes to express its pride in the way that Jeremy Corbyn, Jennie Formby and other members of the NEC have acted in establishing a process able to deal fairly with antisemitism complaints”*. The motion itself begins *“This CLP applauds the efforts of the LP leadership under Jeremy Corbyn to weed out and deal with antisemitic behaviour appropriately”*.

Some members, myself included, raised objections and asked the EC to withdraw the motion. However at the March 21st AMM, where a number of those objecting were unable to attend, it was passed by 17 votes in favour to 2 against with no abstentions. The motion was moved on behalf of the EC by one of their members, Jean Thirtle, who was the person who had brought the text to the earlier EC meeting where it had been agreed by that body. The minutes of the March 21st AMM meeting record that a speaker referred to the Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL) website *‘which is highly supportive of Jeremy Corbyn.’*

North Norfolk District Council elections were due on Thursday May 2nd; as is standard practice no NNLN meetings were held in April. On April 21st the Sunday Times carried an article on antisemitism in the Labour Party that stated that Jean Thirtle, a Labour candidate in the forthcoming elections, was the subject of complaints over alleged antisemitism. On the following day an article appeared in the local Eastern Daily Press (EDP), and subsequently in the North Norfolk News. The article was headlined *‘Labour defends council candidate following anti-Israel Facebook posts’* and carried a picture of NNLN Chair Ray Mooney.¹ The full text of the EDP feature is reproduced below:

A constituency Labour party chairman has defended a council candidate amid claims in the national press she is under investigation for anti-Semitism

The Sunday Times reported that Jean Thirtle, of Catfield, who is hoping to represent Hoveton and Tunstead ward on North Norfolk District Council after elections on May 2, had published comments on Facebook that has led to a Labour inquiry as part of an ongoing row into anti-Semitism in the party.

But Ray Mooney, the party's north Norfolk constituency chairman, said he was unaware of any complaints or investigation into Ms Thirtle's comments, which reflected views the 67-year-old still held.

Mr Mooney said: “She's a valued member of the Labour party and her saying that the Israeli government is pursuing policies against minorities is not an anti-Semitic statement. It's a statement of fact against a right-wing, racist government.

“That's no different to saying the Brunei's government persecuting gay people is anti-Muslim.”

Mr Mooney emphasised that such comments were no criticism of the Jewish people.

¹ <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/politics/allegations-of-anti-semitism-jean-thirtle-1-6008101>

He said: "It's like saying that if you criticise the government you are criticising the entire country and that's not the case, and I think it sets quite a dangerous precedent."

The Times quoted Facebook posts by Ms Thirtle, including one in which she described the foundation of Israel as "racist" and complained that "since its founding it has deployed racist policies and conduct towards Palestinians and other minorities."

Mr Mooney said Ms Thirtle stood by those posts, as well as one shared in July last year, which showed Israeli and Nazi flags side by side.

Mr Mooney said: "Those are her views and she's entitled to them."

Ms Thirtle is quoted as saying: "I consider that making comparisons between the Israeli government and the Nazis, while not being anti-Semitic... is cheap and insensitive and contributes nothing to the debate."

Ms Thirtle declined to comment to this newspaper.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission said in March in response to wider complaints about anti-Semitism in the Labour party: "We believe the Labour Party may have unlawfully discriminated against people because of their ethnicity and religious beliefs."

On May 28th the EHRC announced it was to undertake a formal investigation into allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party. An NNLPA AMM was held two days later on May 30th. At that meeting I asked the Chair, Ray Mooney, whether he could clarify the sequence of events that led to the appearance of the EDP article and, specifically, whether he or the Party Secretary had received formal notification of any investigation into Jean Thirtle's activities. I followed up my questions at the meeting in writing. Here I should emphasise that Ray Mooney has been open and helpful to my enquiries throughout.

At the meeting of May 30th he told members that, at the time of his April exchange with the EDP journalist, he had not been received any indication that Jean Thirtle was the subject of any investigation. However he had subsequently been informed that she was indeed the subject of investigation and accordingly had been suspended from the Party. He expanded on this in emails to me, dated June 1st and 3rd.

Through me asking advice from the Secretary Sue, we attempted to contact Region for guidance and there was no reply, presumably because it was a weekend. I therefore took it up on myself to do the following.

Bearing in mind that we, as an EC had asked Jean, amongst others, to stand as we attempted to field Labour candidates for every vacancy. I personally felt that we had placed an elderly disabled comrade in a vulnerable position. I therefore advised her not to speak to the journalist, but to ask for an email of questions, to respond by email in order that there was a written record. I further more advised her to refer all media enquiries to me, as I was mindful that she would possibly find this experience stressful.

It's a matter of record my response to media enquiries.

And

Jean was not suspended when she informed me of the contact from the Sunday Times journalist. She was not suspended until after the article appeared in the Sunday Times. I was informed of her suspension by email from Region and have not been asked for any information, nor have I received any further update as to the progression of the investigation to date.

Some observations

It is not the purpose of this submission to comment on individual cases, but to offer some observations on the current culture operating within the Labour Party and its consequences.

However I cannot claim to be a neutral observer.

The EDP article, appearing in the week before the elections, can only be regarded as damaging; it would be hard to think of a worse headline in the latter stages of a campaign. A generous description of Ray Mooney's press comments, assuming they were recorded accurately, would be that they were clumsy. I, and many others, would find the juxtaposition of Israeli and Nazi flags on a Facebook site abhorrent whatever the context. In fairness to Ray Mooney he was not in full possession of the facts at the time he chose to defend the member's actions.²

However the indications throughout are that the controlling group on the NNLP EC felt it important to show solidarity to each other and close ranks. This raises some questions on the provenance of the original background briefing and motion circulated on March 13th following its acceptance by the EC (Appendix I). It is clearly drawn from another document, which had been brought to the EC by Jean Thirtle following prior circulation amongst a wider group: the background shading of the text is distinctive and unusual. It is a cut and paste from elsewhere – what is normally called a 'model resolution'. The figures included are consistent, but not a precise match, with information reported to have been released by the Labour Party General Secretary to the Parliamentary Labour Party in early February.³

It is important to emphasise that there is no suggestion of a conspiracy, in the sinister sense of the word, here. **What is evident is that the NNLP, willingly or naively, has become a party to an organised campaign designed to portray Jeremy Corbyn and the NEC's handling of the antisemitism crisis in the best possible light.**

² As an aside I cannot agree that standing as a Council candidate in Norfolk places an individual in a position that should be described as 'vulnerable'. Nor should someone of 67 be necessarily seen as 'elderly'. I write as a 72 year-old and Jeremy Corbyn himself is 70!

³ See <https://labourlist.org/2019/02/jennie-formby-provides-numbers-on-labour-antisemitism-cases/> and https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/labour-party-members-expelled-anti-semitism_uk_5c61b3bae4b0eec79b26a23a?guccounter=1 and <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/blog/antisemitism-no-justification-for-singling-out-labour/>

Conclusions and Lessons

The above paragraph goes to the heart of the problem facing the Labour Party in dealing with antisemitism. Individual members of the NNLP Executive used the occasion to close ranks and demonstrate an unflinching loyalty to a Party Leader whose past views and current approach to antisemitism are under question. As a result they failed to adopt the critical approach needed when faced with a resolution that had been introduced as part of an organised campaign from outside.

This mistake was compounded when the member who proposed this resolution was suspended from the Party. The Party Chair then responded to the local press in a way that was maladroit rather than malevolent. The effect of this intervention was not just to reflect badly on the Party at a critical election period; it added to an impression that the Labour Party is prepared to adopt a casual attitude to antisemitic behaviour.

Sadly this incident is symptomatic of a culture that has been allowed to subsist at local level in the Labour Party. The very real problem of antisemitism has been politicised by supporters of the current leader and has thus become a factional issue.

The scope of the EHRC investigation into the Labour Party embraces whether the Party 'responds in a lawful, efficient and effective manner'. The case considered above has highlighted some deficiencies.

First, there is an implication that information (which may or may not be accurate) on the Party's handling on previous cases had been made available to an organised faction who wished to pursue a particular agenda. Secondly, the NNLP Party first became aware of the suspension of the EC member when a journalist contacted the member concerned and another journalist contacted the Chair. The injudicious comments and damaging publicity were the unfortunate consequence and served to exacerbate the problem. Thirdly, it appears that at no point have NNLP been asked for evidence or comments from the Labour Party at national or regional level.

I would ask that the above points be taken into consideration by the EHRC in the course of its investigation.

Martyn Sloman

6th June 2019

Appendix I: Text considered by the NNLP EC at their March Meeting

Background

The evils of racism, anti-semitism and Islamophobia need to be fought and beaten wherever and whenever they appear. Accordingly, this CLP wishes to express its pride in the way that Jeremy Corbyn, Jennie Formby and other members of the NEC have acted in establishing a process able to deal fairly with anti-Semitism complaints, and to resolve them within a reasonable time scale. We offer our whole-hearted support for their efforts.

We note that of 1106 complaints lodged, 40% were not about LP members, and of the remaining 663 cases, 220 were not supported by the evidence. Of the residual 443 cases, 146 received conduct reminder warnings for inadvertently using anti-semitic tropes and 211 were issued with notices of investigation, which have led to 12 expulsions and 6 sanctions. Based on a membership of 540,000 (Nov 2018), these statistics indicate that most complaints were not upheld and very few people (<0.08 % i.e. 1/12th of 1% of the membership), hold anti-semitic views in the Labour Party. The data thus give the lie to the false narrative that the Party is rife with antisemitism and, most egregiously, is institutionally anti-semitic. Rather, the party retains its proud history of championing equality and fighting prejudice.

Motion

This CLP applauds the efforts of the LP leadership under Jeremy Corbyn to weed out and deal with genuine anti-semitic behaviour appropriately. We therefore call on all members of the PLP to give recognition and praise to General Secretary Jennie Formby and members of the NEC for their work, acknowledge the low level of Labour Party anti-Semitism discovered in objective reports and refrain from anecdotal hyperbole in their public pronouncements. We call upon the PLP to distance itself from those who seek to make political capital from what is evidentially an inaccurate characterisation of the LP and our Movement. We urge the PLP to rebut unfounded or exaggerated accusations against our Movement and move forward to focus on delivering the socialist government the nation needs.