

# SHAMI CHAKRABARTI INQUIRY

## BOARD OF DEPUTIES RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

18 JULY 2016

---

### Introduction:

The Board of Deputies of British Jews responded to the release of the Chakrabarti Inquiry with a statement (see Annex below). In advance of the report's consideration by the Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) on 19 July, and in response to Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn's request for a fuller response from the Board of Deputies during his evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on 4 July, we have prepared the following, amplified comments.

### Summary:

We support the Report's recommendations that:

- "Epithets such as 'Paki', 'Zio' and others should have no place in Labour Party discourse going forward."
- People should "use the term 'Zionist' advisedly, carefully and never euphemistically or as part of personal abuse".
- "Critical and abusive reference to any particular person or group based on actual or perceived physical characteristics cannot be tolerated."
- "Racial or religious tropes and stereotypes about any group of people should have no place in our modern Labour Party."
- "Labour members should resist the use of Hitler, Nazi and Holocaust metaphors, distortions and comparisons in debates about Israel-Palestine in particular."
- "Excuse for, denial, approval or minimisation of the Holocaust and attempts to blur responsibility for it have no place in the Labour Party."

However, we believe that the following points need further attention:

- The NEC should urgently consider publication of the Royall Report, as soon as possible, and certainly long before the start of the new academic year. This had earlier been promised in conjunction with the release of the Chakrabarti Report.

- The Report itself fails to explore the history of antisemitism, including antizionist antisemitism, on the left. There has too often been an attitude that, ‘We are on the left, therefore we cannot be racist’, whereas in fact there is, sadly, a longstanding tradition of antisemitism in parts of the left that should be recognised, acknowledged and defeated.
- Support for – or lack of opposition to – terrorism against Jews should have been highlighted as an example of antisemitism, as should have examples of where the denial of the State of Israel’s right to exist and boycotts against Israel cross a line.
- There is a difference between sharing a platform in order to challenge a person’s antisemitic views and sharing a platform in solidarity, and the report should have made this clear.
- The section on training seems to say little on what anti-racist training might look like. Together with other Jewish communal organisations, we would be pleased to support and advise the Labour Party in delivering training to better understand antisemitism and the differences between legitimate criticism of Israel and language that is antisemitic.
- We were surprised and disappointed that the section ‘Other action to ensure Labour is a welcoming environment for members of all Communities’ did not mention Jews at all. In the context of the hostile environment to which Jewish members of Labour, specifically, have been recently subjected, and which was part of the initial impetus for the Inquiry, this seems a serious omission.
- We are somewhat concerned about the recommendation (14) that there be a “moratorium on triggering new investigations into matters of relevant language and conduct arising before publication [of the Report]”. We consider that if earlier cases of unacceptable behaviour or language are uncovered, there should still be recourse for victims.
- Whether fairly or not, for many, the apparent proximity of Shami Chakrabarti to the Leader and the Party brought into question the independence of the Inquiry. This should be considered for future reference.
- The Party Leader and those around him need to go a lot further to demonstrate to the Jewish community that they really understand the problem and will be able to act on it with determination. Some of the incidents surrounding the release of the report further called this into question, including the:
  - Abuse of Jewish MP Ruth Smeeth, which went without challenge;
  - Implied coupling of the State of Israel and the so-called Islamic State in the Leader’s speech;
  - Leader’s rejection of a meeting request and an invitation to the Holocaust Memorial at Yad Vashem from his Israeli Labour counterpart Isaac Herzog.
- We recommend that Shami Chakrabarti releases a supplementary paper (or similar) to amplify, clarify and address these gaps and concerns.

## **The Chakrabarti Inquiry report**

### **1. Findings on guidance on language and behaviour (section 4)**

We would agree with the statement in the Report that there should be “a higher standard of discourse fitting of the United Kingdom’s leading progressive political party.”

The Board of Deputies supports the first five recommendations of the report that:

1. Epithets such as ‘Paki’, ‘Zio’ and others should have no place in Labour Party discourse going forward.
2. Critical and abusive reference to any particular person or group based on actual or perceived physical characteristics cannot be tolerated.
3. Racial or religious tropes and stereotypes about any group of people should have no place in our modern Labour Party.
4. Labour members should resist the use of Hitler, Nazi and Holocaust metaphors, distortions and comparisons in debates about Israel-Palestine in particular.
5. Excuse for, denial, approval or minimisation of the Holocaust and attempts to blur responsibility for it have no place in the Labour Party

In addition, we welcome the fact that the report advises ‘critics of the Israeli State and/or Government should use the term ‘Zionist’ advisedly, carefully and never euphemistically or as part of personal abuse’.

On stereotyping, the Board of Deputies agrees without hesitation that “to suggest, for example, that all or most Jewish people are wealthy or interested in wealth or finance or political or media influence or less likely to be of the left or likely to hold particular or any views on the subject of the Middle East is a classic stereotype”.

We concur with the report’s observation that “I suspect that both [Jewish and Muslim] communities suffer as a result of an occasional allergy in some parts of left thinking to religious motivation and identity, and more generally from an actual or perceived identification with fellow Jews or Muslims elsewhere in the world.”

The report is strong, rightly so, on the use of the Holocaust - and we would entirely agree that “It is always incendiary to compare the actions of Jewish people or institutions anywhere in the world to those of Hitler or the Nazis or to the perpetration of the Holocaust.”

However, the section on ‘Zionism and Zionists’ (page 12) is weaker. It fails to acknowledge the centrality of Israel to most British Jews and the importance of Zionism to the Jewish Community.

*In its submission to the Inquiry, the Board of Deputies asked for “particular clarity around where criticism of Israel or the Israeli government is legitimate political discourse, and where it crosses the line into antisemitism. Examples of the latter include support for – or failure to oppose – terrorism against Jews; celebration, denial, trivialisation or revision of the Holocaust; anti-Jewish conspiracy theories; theological antisemitism; and crude stereotypes about Jewish appearance, money or power. We regard as antisemitic any exceptional treatment of Israel, where Israelis are uniquely subjected, among all the countries in the world, to hostile behaviours such as denial of its right to exist and boycotts”.*

In particular, we were disappointed to see no mention of support for – or lack of opposition to – terrorism against Jews, the denial of the State of Israel’s right to exist and BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) which, in our view, are often antisemitic.

Furthermore, it would have been useful to give a short account of the history of antisemitism, including antisemitic anti-Zionism, on the left. This would have helped to set some of the incidents within a context. Too often, it is assumed that racism is a preserve of the right-wing, which has led to an attitude that, ‘We are on the left, therefore we cannot be racist’, whereas in fact there is a sad tradition of antisemitism in parts of the political left – as well as in parts of the political right – that should equally be recognised, acknowledged and defeated.

The Board of Deputies disagrees with the Report’s observations on sharing a platform with those who express antisemitic views (page 13). The Board of Deputies feels strongly there is a vast difference between sharing a platform in order to challenge a person’s antisemitic views and sharing a platform in order to show solidarity with them. This needs to be made clear.

## 2. Training (section 6)

The section of the report on training does not address the topic of antisemitism at all. This is puzzling given the reasons for the genesis of the report.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews – together with other Jewish communal organisations - would be pleased to support and advise the Labour Party in delivering training to better understand antisemitism and the differences between legitimate criticism of Israel and language that is antisemitic – particularly to those members whose antisemitic comments or actions have caused offence.

### 3. Other action to ensure Labour is a welcoming environment for members of all communities (section 7)

Regrettably and somewhat perversely, Jews and antisemitism are not addressed at all in this section of the Inquiry report.

*In our submission, the Board of Deputies said “We have been concerned about the reaction of some Labour members who (while not descending into antisemitism themselves) have reflected a culture of denial, disbelief, mockery and even censorship against Jews – including Jewish members of the Labour Party – who have expressed concerns about the problem of antisemitism” .*

Given the circumstances in which the need for an inquiry emerged, including many Jewish Labour members feeling concerned about their place in the Party, this is a serious omission and a missed opportunity, which should be addressed.

### 4 Other issues

The Board of Deputies is concerned about the NEC’s failure to publish the Royall report into antisemitism at the Oxford University Labour Club. It must surely be possible for the General Secretary of the Party to publish a fuller version of Baroness Royall’s report, with the names of individuals concerned redacted if necessary. We hope that the NEC will urgently consider publication, as soon as possible, and certainly well in advance of the start of the new academic year.

The launch of the Chakrabarti Report was deeply problematic. At the launch of this report on antisemitism Ruth Smeeth MP found herself subjected to antisemitic abuse. The Leader’s remark, intended or not, comparing Israel and ‘self-styled Islamic states’ was, at the least, unfortunate. There remain outstanding questions about how the guest-list came to be compiled, with some apparently treating the event as a political rally rather than the sober launch of a report on a serious issue.

The Board of Deputies’ initial submission to the Chakrabarti Inquiry offered the following advice about how the party leadership’s attitude to the issue of antisemitism had been perceived in the Jewish community: “Reactions have frequently been slow, faltering, disbelieving and lacking in understanding of the issues” .

The regrettable circumstances surrounding the Report’s launch – and Jeremy Corbyn’s rejection of an invitation from Isaac Herzog, Leader of the Israeli Labour Party, to visit Israel and Yad Vashem – have done little to fully reassure the Jewish community and quite a lot more will be needed going forward if trust is to be rebuilt.

## **Conclusion**

The report contains some strong and useful statements, but there are also considerable areas of weakness as outlined above.

We recommend that Shami Chakrabarti releases a supplementary paper (or similar) to amplify, clarify and address these gaps and concerns.

The Board of Deputies hopes that the implementation of this report will be rigorous and swift and the Labour Party will become again a welcoming space for Jews. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

## **Annex**

### **Board of Deputies press statement (30 June 2016)**

Following the publication of the Chakrabarti report into antisemitism in the Labour Party, the Board of Deputies made the following statement:

*“We agree with Shami Chakrabarti that the Labour Party has experienced ‘unhappy’ recent incidents of antisemitism, although this is a complete understatement of events.*

*We welcome aspects of her report such as her rejection of the use of abusive language including the term ‘Zio’ and also her rejection of Hitler and Holocaust metaphors. However, the report was weak on the demonization of Israel and omitted any mention of party figures who have displayed friendship towards terrorists.*

*In his remarks accompanying the launch of the report, Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn rightly described ‘Zio’ as a vile epithet and asked ‘can we please leave Hitler and Nazi metaphors alone (especially in the context of Israel)?’ but it is deeply regrettable that he went on to establish some sort of equivalence between Israel and terrorist groups such as Isis. This is completely unacceptable.*

*We appreciate the careful way in which Shami Chakrabarti has engaged with our community and that she took on board and addressed some of our concerns with commendable speed.*

*We hope that the implementation of this report will be rigorous and swift and the Labour Party will become again a welcoming space for Jews. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.”*