

Defence of the Israeli state is the real motive for the campaign against Labour 'anti-semitism'

According to Margaret Hodge Corbyn is an “ant-semite and a racist”, even though as late as March she said she didn't think he was. The 'proof' of his 'anti-semitism', and by implication that of the Labour Party, is the refusal to accept “the whole definition” of what anti-semitism is according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Association.

Lie number one. The document in which the definition is included is not universally accepted by Jews and some Jewish organisations. Many Jews consider it to be a means of discrediting legitimate criticism of Israel.

Lie number two. Labour has adopted the definition, all 38 words. In fact, as the title states it is “a working definition” which suggests that it is not the last word on the subject. The document refers to the definition as a “non-legally binding working definition of anti-semitism”. It reads

“Anti-semitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-semitism are directed towards Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, towards Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

The dispute around the IHRA document, which includes this definition, centres on the examples listed. Hodge and others talk as if the examples *are* anti-semitic. In fact the IHRA documents lists 11 examples which “could” be anti-semitic but “taking into account the overall context”. The nub of the dispute centres on those relating to Israel, notably “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g. by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour”.

What these selective anti-racists are doing is labelling as anti-semitic anybody who opposes the racism of the Israeli state. The very idea of an ethno-religious state is implicitly anti-democratic and racist since those people who live in Israel and are not Jews, cannot be equal citizens. As many Israeli Jews have said the practice of the Israeli State has long contradicted the assertions of the Declaration of Independence to equal citizenship. Indeed for the first 16 years of the existence of the State Israeli Arabs lived under military rule. The racist nature of the State has long been reflected by the privileges that Israeli Jews have and the discrimination which Israeli Arabs suffer.

Nationality Law

The IHRA definition is hardly the last word on anti-semitism. Indeed it is described as a 'working definition'. Logically, it would seem to make sense that it can be refined in the light of events. One such event is surely the Nationality Law which has just been passed by the Israeli Knesset¹. According to this addition to the State's Basic Laws, self-determination applies *exclusively* to Jews. As Netanyahu said in celebration.

“This is our country. The state of the Jews. But in recent years there have been some

¹ The bill was passed by 62 to 55 with two abstentions. One member was absent. The Joint List of Arab parties holds 13 seats.

people who have been trying to undermine that, and by doing so, to undermine the foundations of our existence and rights”, he (Netanyahu) said. “Well, today we etched into the rock of law: this is our country, this is our language, this is our national anthem and this is our flag. Long live the state of Israel!”

The term 'our' refers to Jews alone, not to Israeli Arabs. The bill was officially called “Basic Law: Israel as the National State of the Jewish People”. It gives constitution-like force to the notion that Israel is a state of the Jews, from its flag and national anthem to the Hebrew language. It demotes Arabic from an officially recognised language to a “special” status. Many Jews have suggested that this is a form of apartheid, including most recently Daniel Barenboim (See [The racist new law makes me ashamed to be Israeli](#))². You can agree or disagree with the analogy but to suggest that such a point of view is anti-semitic is complete nonsense.

Making annexation legal?

A proposal in the nationality bill to recognise Jews only towns has been 'watered down' according to the most fervent Israeli nationalists. However, it still “views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value and will act to encourage and promote its establishment”. *It other words it will promote the confiscation of Arab land in what the UN and most countries recognise as the occupied territories.* That this was the aim of the legislation, to give legal sanction to annexe the West Bank into Israel, was clear. That's shown by the complaint of the Jewish Home party MK (Member of the Knesset) Bezalel Smotrich who attacked the 'softened wording' alleging that the coalition had “castrated” the Nationality Law and blunted its intended purpose.

“Those who do not know how to defend the fact that the State of Israel is a Jewish State in practice should return the keys and go home. The attempts by Netanyahu and Attorney General Mandelbilt to castrate the Nationality Law and empty it of practical content are one capitulation too much”, said Smotrich.

For Smotrich

“Zionism has always been based on the establishment of Jewish settlements in all parts of the Land of Israel (i.e. including the occupied territories), out of recognition of the fundamental fact that where the plow passes, so do security and sovereignty. The national law was designed to correct the distortion that the Supreme Court created with the help of the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, which turned Zionism into the dead territory of the state and policy.”

For many religious Israelis, of course, all of 'Greater Israel' (including the West Bank) has been given to them by God. They are “the chosen people”. It is impossible to have a rational discussion with people who tell you that God gave them the land.

“An assault against dissent and free speech”

2 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/23/israel-racist-new-law-ashamed-apartheid-daniel-barenboim>

The racist nature of this legislation is widely accepted in Israel and amongst supporters of Israel in the USA. ARZA, The Association of Reform Zionists of America, whose partners include the Israeli Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism, ponders on why was this bill necessary when everybody knows that Israel is a Jewish State.

“In truth this bill is the latest of a series of legislative assaults on Israel's democratic character. In recent months, Israel has passed a “protester ban” which would bar entry to those (including some Jewish community leaders, such as the former CEO of the San Francisco Jewish Federation) who have criticised the government or the settlements, and an NGO law that would forcibly restrain human rights organisations that receive a majority of their funding from overseas. These laws may have appealing aspects for some, but the cumulative effect is an assault against dissent and free speech, the hallmarks of a democratic society.”

Unlike most British Zionist organisations ARZA attempted to mobilise people around the demand to “Stop the Nation-State Bill”.

One of the issues which concerns ARZA and other reform movements, inside and outside Israel is that

“In the meantime, the Chief Rabbinate and Haredi political parties continue to deny fundamental religious freedom to Israel's non-Orthodox Jewish majority and to assault the democratic institutions of the state. For those who worry about the unrestrained power of religious fundamentalisms – and the overwhelming majority of Israelis believe that the Chief Rabbinate has far too much power and drives Jews away from Judaism – there is much to be concerned about. The Nationality Bill, which asserts that the State is Jewish and urges strengthening ties with the Diaspora, does not take up the issue of Jewish pluralism. Is Israel to be an Orthodox Jewish state – or a state for all the Jewish people.”

This is the main motivation although ARZA has opposed the downgrading of Arabic. Yet the key question is not whether or not Israel is a state for all the Jews *but for all its citizens*. Whatever criticisms pro-Israeli organisations like ARZA make of the Israeli state and political parties, so long as they support Israel as a Jewish state then they are failing to challenge domination over the Palestinian Arabs and discrimination against them.

“We won't be a democratic state if this law is implemented”

Following the passing of the Bill retired supreme court justice Eliyahu Matza said it would shift the balance between Israel's Jewish and democratic elements.

“This law was designed to sterilise the term democratic from the definition of the state of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. We're going to be a Jewish state, but we won't be a democratic state if this law is implemented.”

The nationality law does not mention democracy or the principle of equality, in what some Israeli critics called a betrayal of Israel's 1948 declaration of independence, which was said to ensure “complete equality of social and political rights” for “all its inhabitants” no matter their religion, race or sex. In reality this was a dead letter. Yael German, a lawmaker from the centrist Yesh Atid party called the law “a poison pill for democracy”.

Dan Yakir, chief legal council for the Association for Civil Rights in Israel said that while largely only declaratory, the new law “will give rise to arguments that Jews should enjoy privileges and subsidies and rights, because of the special status that this law purports to give to the Jewish people in Israel. In that regard this is a racist law.” He said that the right to equality in Israel had been derived, by interpretation of the Israeli Supreme Court, from the Basic Law on Human Dignity, but that the new law was explicit in elevating the status of Jews.

A former Labour legislature, Shakeeb Shnaan, a member of Israel's small Druze community, whose men serve in the Israeli army, said that “The nationality law is a mark of Cain on the forehead of everyone who vote for it.”

When were we anything else (but second class citizens)?

What do Arab Israeli's think about the Bill? Artists Haitham Charles and Sana Jamalieh designed a mock official state stamp bearing the words “second class citizen” in Hebrew; encircled by the words State of Israel and the national emblem of the menorah and olive branches. The mock up went viral on the Facebook pages of Arab Israelis, who superimposed the image over their profile picture.

Hanin Majadii, and Arabic teacher in Tel Aviv said:

“It's not like we woke up one morning and said 'No, what is this law all about? The reality which we've always experienced is simply taking official form now. Before it merely existed in government policy and in the declaration of Independence. Since the establishment of the State Arabs were always second class citizens by the mere fact that we live in a Jewish nation-state.”

The typical reaction of her friends was “When were we ever anything else?”, or “Who's surprised?” she said.

Attempting to de-legitimise criticism of Israel as a Jewish state

To e return to the Labour Party, the key question which needs addressing is this. It is entirely legitimate for members to hold the political opinion that Israel is a racist State. Hodge and many of those who try to paint Corbyn as anti-semitic are defending the indefensible. The question is not one of 'balance' between the supposed Jewish and democratic elements of the State. As I have written before [Israel cannot be both a Jewish state and a democratic one](http://martinwicks.org/2017/01/06/israel-cannot-be-both-a-jewish-state-and-a-democratic-one)³.

What Hodge and the Jewish Labour movement together with their Tory allies is attempting to do is de-legitimise criticism of Israel *as a Jewish state*. You can criticise aspects of Israeli policy but you are not allowed to question the Jewish nature of the state without being denounced as an anti-semite. In adopting such a position supporters of Israel in the Labour Party and elsewhere are supporting something which they could not conceivably support anywhere else on earth: an ethno religious state.

Israeli 'democracy' allows Arab Israelis to vote but it denies them the democratic right to campaign for full equality for themselves and other minorities under the law. This is reflected by the fact, how ironic is this?, that whilst the Nationality Law was in process, an Israeli Knesset committee refused to allow a proposed bill which aimed for Israel to be 'a

3 <http://martinwicks.org/2017/01/06/israel-cannot-be-both-a-jewish-state-and-a-democratic-one>

state of all its citizens' to be put to the Knesset. Indeed the very idea of all Israelis being equal citizens, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, is effectively barred from the political process. Even Israeli Jews who oppose the Jewish state (and Arabs, of course) are not allowed to stand in elections to the Knesset if they or their political organisation challenge the sacrosanct 'Jewish and democratic' nature of the State.

Supporters of the Israeli state who denounce any questioning of Israel being a 'Jewish state' are opponents of Israeli democracy and those political forces in Israel who fight for democracy and equality; a struggle which necessarily impels them to challenge the Jewish state and for Israel to become 'a state of all its citizens'.

Margaret Hodge says that "By watering down its definition of anti-semitism, the Labour Party has made itself a hostile environment for Jews." This is nonsense. There is very little hostility towards Jews because they are Jews. Where such a thing exists it should be rooted out (See [Anti-semitism, real and counterfeit](#)). What is involved is a political struggle between those who are apologists for the Israeli regime and those who support the struggle of Israeli Jews and Arabs for a democracy which would merit the name.

The question should be put to Hodge, the Labour Friends of Israel and the Jewish Labour Movement, why did you not speak out against the Nationality bill? Will you now speak out against the promotion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories which is part of the new Basic Law?

Martin Wicks
July 24th 2018

Postscript

I have written to the JLM and the LFI asking them if they have made any statements on the Nationality Law. There is nothing to be found on their websites. I will publish any response. The Jewish Leadership Council told the Jewish Chronicle they would not be commenting on the law. Meanwhile the Board of Deputies has made a statement which is reproduced in full below, the entire paragraph. Unlike many in Israel, even in the Knesset, they have not opposed the Law. Their criticism is of "some of the measures", unspecified.

"Whilst we celebrate Israel's Jewish-ness, there is concern that some of the measures in this law are regressive steps. Among Israel's great strengths are its democracy and diversity. Being Jewish is a wonderful thing, but this should not lead to doing down others. All people should be valued and Israel's Arabs and other minority populations should be a treasured part of society. The lesson of Jewish history is that societies are stronger when minorities are affirmed, and they decay when minorities are degraded. We will be writing to Israel's ambassador to express our concern."

No doubt the ambassador will be quaking in his boots.