

Adoption of “the full” IHRA document – prelude to a witch-hunt?

“My fear is, if we similarly enshrine this definition into law, outside groups will try and suppress – rather than answer – political speech that they don't like.”

Kenneth Stern, leading author of the IHRA definition

It is a fact that the IHRA document – the definition of anti-semitism and the ostensible examples – is a contested issue amongst Jews. The document was never intended to be a quasi-judicial definition. None other than its lead author, Kenneth Stern, explained this in his evidence to a US House of Representatives committee in November 2017. He said that the definition was only ever a means of enabling the collection of data on antisemitism. *He expressed concern that this definition was being used as a means of silencing criticism of Israel.* That Stern was saying this was of some significance given the fact that he considers himself to be a Zionist. The discussion was about college campuses but it has a wider significance. This is what he said:

“The definition was not drafted, and was never intended, as a tool to target or chill speech on a college campus. In fact at a conference in 2010 about the impact of the definition, I highlighted this misuse and the damage it could do.”

In 2011 Stern co-wrote an article with Cary Nelson, the president of the American Association of University Professors about how the definition was “being employed in an attempt to restrict academic freedom and punish political speech”.

“The EUMC's “working definition” was recently adopted in the United Kingdom, and applied to campus. An “Israel Apartheid Week” event was cancelled as violating the definition. A Holocaust survivor was required to change the title of a campus talk, and the university mandated it be recorded, after an Israeli diplomat complained that the title violated the definition. Perhaps most egregious, an off-campus group citing the definition called on a university to conduct an inquiry of a professor (who received her PhD from Columbia) for antisemitism, based on an article she had written years before. The university then conducted the inquiry. And while it ultimately found no basis to discipline the professor, the exercise itself was chilling and McCarthy-like.

My fear is, if we similarly enshrine this definition into law, outside groups will try and suppress – rather than answer – political speech that they don't like. The academy, Jewish students, and faculty teaching about Jewish issues, will all suffer.”

Kenneth S. Stern speaking to the US House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary, in a Hearing on Examining Anti-Semitism on College Campuses November 7th 2017

“McCarthy-like” refers to the US Senator Joe McCarthy who was a central figure in the anti-communist witch-hunt which took place in the USA in the late 1940's- 50s. McCarthy led the Un-American Activities Committee which launched a ruthless assault on people who were not communists but who were drawn into the dragnet according to the method of “guilt by association”.

Those who conveniently ignore Stern's opinions and present disagreements with the use of the document as unreasonable are simply conducting a propaganda campaign which in essence is directed at destroying Corbyn and preventing the election of a Labour government.

We can surely expect that the Parliamentary Labour Party will vote to adopt the IHRA document "in full" at their September meeting. That will pit the PLP against the NEC and create something of a constitutional crisis.

Tom Watson who was involved in the previous attempt to force Corbyn out has recently called for the NEC to adopt the IHRA "in full". For the Party Chairman to do so when he is the custodian of NEC decisions is an outrageous breach of democracy. He has no mandate to do so. His role is to support NEC decisions or if he cannot do so then resign. Alas, his behaviour is no surprise for a man involved in the previous coup attempt against Corbyn.

What will happen if the NEC votes to overturn their position and adopt IHRA in full? It will be used as the starting point for a with-hunt against Labour Party members. *It will be used as a benchmark for accusing people of being antisemitic.* We have already seen the spectacle of the Tory Media, the so-called Campaign Against Anti-semitism, Zionist publications, members of Labour Friends of Israel and the Jewish Labour Movement, trawling through social media to find something which somebody may have said years ago, to accuse them. Ironically we have seen prominent cases of Jews accusing other Jews of being antisemitic when their real crime is having a different political opinion over Israel. The joint statement by the three publications said that there is a "need" for the expulsion of "hundreds, if not thousands" of members. The passing of the whole document will signal for them the starting pistol to find as many witches as they can. The search will follow the pattern already set; trawling through social media archives, publications, no matter how many years old, no matter how tendentious the evidence.

Stern is right. The IHRA document is being used to try to discredit legitimate criticism of the Israeli state. This is in fact part of the campaign to defend the Israeli state and to excuse its crimes. The witch-hunt against Corbyn and the Labour Party is part of this campaign to minimise, excuse or deny, Israel's oppression of Arabs both in the occupied territories and Israel. Ultimately, your view on the nature of the Israeli state and its policies, is a question of political opinion. Left wing criticism can go over into antisemitism as I have discussed in [Antisemitism, real and counterfeit](#)¹.

The only way to defeat a witch-hunt is to call it out and challenge it. That requires challenging the political agenda of those organisations which seek to destroy Corbyn and prevent the election of a Labour government. Accepting the entire IHRA document is not a means of "resolving the dispute" but over opening the way to a witch-hunt inside the Labour Party.

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1 <http://martinwicks.org/2018/04/03/anti-semitism-real-and-counterfeit/>