An Age of Incivility

Understanding the new politics

Trevor Phillips and Hannah Stuart

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The New Politics of Incivility

In recent years, there has been a definitive shift in the tone and character of British politics. We have witnessed a significant coarsening of public discourse – and one that poses a real challenge to hitherto-accepted democratic norms. Every week seems to bring another example of this trend – most recently with comments suggesting that the Prime Minister was entering "the killing zone" and would soon be "knife[d]", or the suggestion that she should "bring her own noose" to a meeting of 1922 Committee in parliament.[1]

Of course, in articulating this case there is always the danger of sliding into 'presentism' – of too readily assuming that the situation today is without parallel. Politics have always turned on the cut-and-thrust of debate, conducted in a more-or-less civic manner. And the not-too-distant past has surely seen fraught moments of high political drama and tension – one thinks for example of the mid-1980s and the miners' strike, or the subsequent poll tax riots.

For all that, however, there are justifiable and growing concerns about a new ethos of incivility in public life. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister voiced her fear that the tenor of political debate was 'coarsening' and that it was 'becoming harder to disagree, without also demeaning opposing viewpoints in the process'. She further noted that the online space, in particular, was too often being used for 'intimidation and abuse' – much of it targeted against women and members of BME and LGBT communities – and that this posed a threat to the endurance of a 'genuinely pluralist' public sphere.[2]

The Prime Minister's comments followed on from an earlier report by the Committee for Standards in Public Life, which argued that the extent of intimidation now prevalent in UK politics posed a 'threat to the very nature of representative democracy' in this country. A 'healthy public political culture', it was noted, required much more to be done by everyone involved in public life to combat 'intimidatory behaviour'. And that study highlighted the qualitative shift in the 'scale and intensity' of these problems in recent years, arising particularly from the widespread use of social media.[3]

How to explain this shift? During the first decade of the twenty-first century it became an article of popular wisdom that there was little to choose between the major political parties. The post-Thatcher-Blairite years fed a perception that politicians were little more than an aspirant managerial class, with little taste for serious ideological disagreement. To many, the much vaunted 'centre ground' of British politics comprised an

1. 'Theresa May: "Be careful about language" on Brexit', BBC News Online, 22 October 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45938754.
2. See 'PM speech on standards in public life: 6 February 2018', Prime Minister's Office, 6 February 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-standards-in-public-life-6-february-2018; 'PM speech on public life to mark the centenary of women's suffrage', Prime Minister's Office, 6 February 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-speech-on-public-life-to-mark-the-centenary-of-womens-suffrage.
3. *Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life*, Cm 9543, December 2017.

increasingly vapid globalism that appeared disconnected from the lives of ordinary citizens. Inevitably, such views fed a certain popular contempt for the allegedly careerist political class. This was further reinforced by scandals such as the furor surrounding MPs expenses – which cemented the perception in many people's minds that politicians were variously corrupt, venal and 'all the same'.

The irony is that these ideas gained traction even as the UK political sphere was rocked by a succession of deeply-ideological, political crises, which also served to undermine long-held conventions: the Iraq war in 2003; the financial collapse of 2008; and the Brexit referendum in 2016. Each of these issues cut across traditional party lines – which had the effect of making the attendant debates that much more virulent. Rather than tackling their traditional opponents on the 'other side of the aisle', advocates of a given position also had to contend with the 'enemies' in their own midst. These issues, precisely *because* they could not be fought within conventional political parameters, raised existential questions about what it meant to be 'Labour', or 'Conservative'. The resulting discourse was often internecine in character, directed vehemently against 'traitors' from within one's own political 'tribe' – as much as it was directed outwards.

To see this process in action, one needs only to consider the controversy surrounding the Iraq war in 2002-3. For a section of the Labour left, as well as some on the Conservative right, it was never enough to say that Tony Blair disagreed with their analysis – or even that he was mistaken in supporting the war. Rather, he had to be condemned as an apostate of 'true' Labour values; as a puppet of George W. Bush; as a warmonger and 'B-liar'; as a war criminal motivated only by the basest instincts. The readiness to engage in this shrill politics of condemnation, underpinned a profound coarsening of political debate – and this process has continued, down through the other crises mentioned, to the present day.

Moreover, the rise of Corbynism has injected a new element of inter-party ideological division into the equation – although it might be said that the true fault-line in Westminster politics today runs through the middle of the Labour Party. On one side of that line stands the Conservative Party, their allies in the DUP and the 'moderate' Labour MPs who prefer centre-ground politics; on the other are the Corbynites, the Greens and the SNP. These two broad, informal coalitions are separated by their approach to the political economy of the last three decades. The former group largely accepts the existing terms of trade; the latter argues for a more radical departure. As the last general election showed, there is a renewed sense now of a clear and unambiguous 'choice' being presented to the electorate – and this has served to harden the political battle-lines. Increasingly, it seems, 'bipartisanship' has become an ever more marginal pursuit.

Arguably, this trend in British politics marks a convergence with the situation on the other side of the Atlantic. (And it is striking that in the US there is a renewed interest in the concept of civility in politics.[4]) Scholars of US politics have tracked the erosion there, over the last two decades, of the unwritten democratic norms of mutual toleration and forbearance

4. See, for instance, the new new 'Commission on Civility and Effective Governance', which has been framed as a response to 'the American political system's current trajectory towards ever-greater partisanship, zero-sum governing and tribal gridlock'. See http://www.thepresidency.org/blog/call-action-cspc-launches-commission-civility-and-effective-governance.

– with both major parties becoming more overtly ideological vehicles, rather than broad coalitions of sometimes conflicting interest groups. This has led to the growing conviction that political opponents are not rivals, but enemies to be destroyed. This intellectual shift has been reinforced by changes to the way Congress conducts its business, which mean Democrats and Republicans are far less likely to know each other personally or be personal friends, than in the past.[5]

A similar process is in evidence within the UK – both at the ideological and practical level. It is no longer enough, it would seem, to disagree with one's political opponents; instead, it has become necessary to insist that they do not belong in the same moral universe. This inclination was particularly evident in the wake of the Grenfell Disaster and, more recently, the scandal of the way in which the Windrush generation had been treated. Both those episodes represented serious failings by the system – yet they were weaponised by sections of the left to impute morally repugnant motives to those on the right. Thus, Grenfell was not a tragedy arising from an unforeseen concatenation of events – but rather a reflection of the inherent Tory desire to 'murder' non-white people (see the comments by John McDonnell, below page 25).

Hyperbole of this kind appears deliberately designed to poison the political atmosphere. It works to delegitimise those who hold to different political views – and even, to dehumanise them altogether. Viewed through such a prism, every point of disagreement is transformed into a clash of unreconcilable and absolutely-held worldviews; and this all-but eliminates the space for cross-party cooperation.

Of course, it would be an exaggeration to argue that we have reached that point yet. At present, there is still space for bipartisan endeavour. Even so, as a symptom of the prevailing winds, it was striking that one of the incoming Labour MPs after the 2017 general election wore it as a badge of pride that she had 'no intention of being friends with any Tories'. Today, it is striking how often political disagreement is couched in terms that betray a visceral rejection, running far beyond mere disagreement.

Without question, the effect of these changes in the political context has been reinforced by other socio-cultural changes – not least of which is the rise of public internet usage and social media. The latter, in particular, has had the effect of de-inhibiting the would-be purveyors of hatred and abuse. Where once it required a certain level of motivation and temerity – to heckle someone publicly, or even to write a poison pen letter, buy a stamp and put it in the post – today the 'barriers to entry' are close to zero, in a world of online hatred that require only the click of a button and the tapping of keys. This reality, coupled with the anonymity afforded by social media, has empowered the low-grade and low energy internet rent-a-mob.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life, together with the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, have done useful work in drawing attention to the scale and severity of the challenge faced by elected representatives of all affiliations. The murder of Jo Cox MP in June 2016 again brought home to many the fact that the kind of abuse to which

5. See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future* (London: Viking, 2018).

parliamentarians were subjected online could have 'offline' consequences of the worst kind. Sadly, this is not an isolated example. Former Liberal Democrat MP Lord Jones of Cheltenham was seriously injured by a sword-wielding constituent in 2000 – in an attack that saw the murder of his assistant councillor Andrew Pennington – and the Labour MP Stephen Timms was, in 2010, stabbed by an Islamist extremist.[6]

More broadly, it is sadly true that many women active in public life can today expect to encounter unprecedented levels of vitriol – which often spill over into threats of violence. Amnesty International reported that in the run up to the last general election, the Labour Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott was the victim of a remarkably high share of abusive Twitter messages (she received almost a third of messages directed against women and deemed abusive by Amnesty).[7] It is no less troubling that prominent female 'remainers' such as Anna Soubry and Nicky Morgan similarly bear the brunt of abuse from pro-Brexit extremists; and conversely, extreme remainers have delighted in hurling insults at female Brexiteers like Gisela Stuart and Kate Hoey.

It is clear, too, that politicians are not alone in being targeted by the purveyors of hatred and abuse: since 2008, bankers and 'business' of all kinds have been subject to caricature and demonisation – of the kind that we categorise below. A section of the political left has made plain its hostility to 'finance capitalism', which it holds responsible for many of the ills of the current world. Against this backdrop, calls to direct action against corporations have been accompanied by fierce denunciations of 'bankers' and others associated with high finance.

Again, there are those who would argue that it was ever thus. Yet the fusion of a particular political moment with the latest technological developments, appears to have created something qualitatively new. It is for this reason that Policy Exchange is launching a major new cross-unit 'Civility Hub' to analyse how British politics have changed and with what consequences. The aim is to understand the contours of the new politics – and in particular, to promote a new ethos of civility in public life.

To be clear, this does not mean making speech 'safe' or insisting that the State should seek to expand its role in regulating or restricting free speech. Neither do we seek some new age of censorious moralism – to bring 'Mary Whitehouse' into the twentieth century. As the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP noted in his evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, there has to be space for things that are "inappropriate or distasteful" – "by definition, free speech doesn't mean anything unless some people are going to be offended some of the time".[8]

Moreover, one of the striking things about the contemporary era is the way in which many of the purveyors of incivility themselves exhibit a censorious mentality. They reserve the worst of their invective for those who seek to push the boundaries of 'conventional wisdom'. Opponents are often demonized on the basis of whether they are 'good' or 'bad' people, rather than according to the merits of the polices they advocate; or the content of those policies are lampooned through *reductio ad absurdum*

6. 'MP's aide killed in surgery sword attack', *The Guardian*, 29 January 2000; 'Labour MP Stephen Timms stabbed', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2010.
7. 'Black and Asian women MPs abused more online', Amnesy International UK, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps.
8. Evidence of Michael Gove to the Inquiry of Lord Justcie Leveson, 29 May 2012, available at, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122202944/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Transcript-of-Afternoon-Hearing-29-May-2012.txt . On this same point about the dangers of state intervention and the importance of preserving free speech, see H. Rifkind, 'It's not the state's job to keep us nice online', *The Times*, 16 October 2018.

reasoning. The result is a kind of public omerta (to deploy an oxymoron) – policed by insult and abuse – which has the effect of actually reducing both the quality of debate and the range of policy options that stand before the citizen. In such a context, 'politics' amount to little more than declarations of tribal allegiance, rather than any deliberation of substance.

Against this backdrop, it seems right to suggest that there are – and should be – loosely defined parameters for healthy political debate, and indeed, for public life more generally. To this end, **we believe it is important to identify and 'call out' the more egregious instances of public 'incivility'**. By nature, such incivility is hard to define – there is a degree to which it is 'in the eye of the beholder'. And there is here some resonance to the famous words of the late US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart with regards to the the definition of pornography – "I know it when I see it". But by the term 'incivility', we mean the kind of rhetoric and behavior that runs beyond the merely 'offensive' or ill-mannered. In part two of this report, we identify some of the most prominent manifestations of the incivility that is disfiguring public life – and we have categorized them as follows:

1. Misogyny and homophobia
2. Racism and anti-Muslim prejudice
3. Anti Semitism
4. Gross personal invective
5. Ascribing malign motives to opponents
6. Enemies as Nazis
7. Dehumanisation
8. Accusations of treachery/betrayal
9. Denouncing 'uncle Toms' and 'native informants'
10. Conspiracy theory
11. Hatred of the mainstream press
12. Intimations and/or threats of violence

Doubtless, there are many other forms of abuse/pernicious behaviour one might wish to include within such a list, which is intended to be illustrative, rather than exhaustive.

As we make clear, there is no reason why incivility in public life should be the preserve of one political creed; it crosses partisan lines and takes an array of forms. (It is for this reason that we are delighted to welcome a cross-party group, including MPs and journalists, to discuss this issue). And yet, as the evidence we have been able to gather below suggests, there does appear to be something significant happening on the far left of British politics, which is seeping into – and transforming – the mainstream. Currently it is on this wing of politics that the injunction to hate one's political opponent is most frequently and most nakedly invoked. And it is there that the use of intimidation and abuse to silence differing viewpoints has rise to a scale and intensity unmatched elsewhere.

Whatever its provenance, there can be no doubting that the collective

effect of such incivility is to damage the fabric of public life. For this reason, the act of 'naming and shaming' – and of signaling disapproval – of the perpetrators, is a vital defence mechanism in the effort to safeguard the norms of pluralistic and democratic discourse.

But we recognize too that intimidation and abuse is not always readily identifiable and nor is it confined to the online world. We are therefore issuing a **call for evidence**: we would like to invite anyone active in public life – from the national to the local level – who feels they have been subjected to uncivil, or extreme forms of abuse to contact us. Policy Exchange's Civility Hub will henceforth track and analyze the character of extreme and uncivil modes of politics. We will create the first comprehensive database of such material as it emerges and hope today's report will be the first in a series on this issue – and we aim to produce a regular 'civility' index, identifying particular 'hotspots' of abuse, and the dominant themes that are poisoning British political discourse and public life.

The Contours of Incivility

The increasingly abrasive tone of modern political discourse is much remarked upon – yet there is little appreciation of how widely the problem reaches, nor of the different manifestations of this phenomenon. As noted above, in late 2017, the Committee on Standards in Public Life drew attention to the prevalence of abuse, intimidation and hate crime against those active in the public sphere. In keeping with a desire to promote a new politics of civility, it is vital to identify the scale of the abuse that is out there. In what follows, we offer an overview of the key themes and ideas that are driving the coarsening of British public life and political discourse.

To be clear, this is not meant to be an exhaustive, final compilation of material; rather, we identified material that was illustrative of the prevailing strands of political incivility. A central part of our argument here is that the examples which follow barely scratch the surface of what is going on. Yet it is only by putting one's toe in the sewer that one can begin to appreciate the undercurrent of unpleasantness that is washing through British public life.

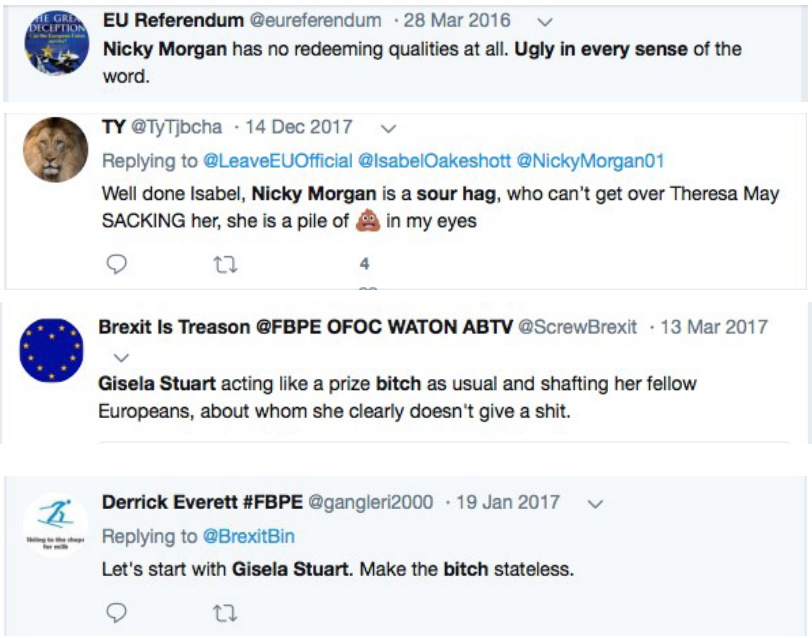
1 Misogyny and Homophobia

Few would question the idea that women who are active in public life are forced to run a gauntlet of abuse and intimidation. Amnesty International last year drew attention to this in the context of the general election, but suffice to say that the problem reaches far and wide beyond this. As the below examples reflect, the first port of call for those who disagree with women is to hurl misogynistic and other modes of anti-female abuse.

In 2015, Yvette Cooper highlighted the 'shocking' levels of abuse that she and other female MPs – particularly Labour centrists – received during political campaigning; Cooper expressed her fear that such treatment would discourage other women from getting involved in politics.[9] As has been widely reported, Diane Abbott is a frequent target for the most crude forms of misogynistic abuse:[10]

9. 'Labour's sexist abuse of its own is "shocking", says Yvette Cooper', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 2015.
10. Tweet by Beau Blue Bothy Art, 17 May 2018, https://twitter.com/BeauBlueBothy/status/997029843714781184; Tweet by Pilgrim Veteran, 6 March 2017, https://twitter.com/Para_glider69/status/838999175027167233; Tweet by Bill Gowing, 25 February 2016, https://twitter.com/BillWHU/status/702993440141938688;

During the 2016 EU referendum, female protagonists on either side of the debate, like Gisela Stuart and Nicky Morgan, were subject to regular misogynistic abuse of the kind noted below:



After the 2017 election, Nusrat Ghani MP gave testimony in Parliament about what she saw as the worsening problem of misogynistic abuse being levellled at women:

> *My concern is that the abuse particularly stops women entering politics. I will give the example of a candidate who stood in Ealing and was unfortunately not elected. Candidates have to declare their addresses when they stand for Parliament. She said that she started becoming nervous during the election campaign when opponents started standing outside her door, spitting in her face and following her. That is the threatening behaviour that she wants to highlight.*[11]

For similar reasons, the Labour leader of Haringey council, Claire Kober, announced her decision to stand down at the 2018 local elections, because of the abuse to which she was subjected over her decision to pursue a house-building scheme in partnership with a private company. Much of that abuse took an overtly misogynistic tone.[12] She later told journalists of one Labour Party meeting where hard left activists sang 'I'll be watching you' – words from *Every Breath You Take* – a song about stalking by The Police.[13]

During those same elections, misogynistic abuse was in evidence on all sides of the political field. In Sunderland, a Conservative candidate, Anthony Mullen was suspended for, *inter alia*, calling Diane Abbott a 'filthy, bulbous pig'.[14] In Wakefield, Labour suspended Richard Taylor, a former mayor and prospective councillor after it was revealed he had called Theresa May a 'foul bitch' and Lucy Allan MP a 'classy bitch'. Far from denying his comments, Taylor underlined them stating 'I hate the Tories with a passion. Always have done, always will do and I hate them even more now than I did before. Simple as that.'[15]

Another much-favoured target for misogynistic abuse among those on

11. Nusrat Ghani, cited in *Hansard Online*, 12 July 2017, Col. 156WH, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-07-12/debates/577970DD-1AEF-4071-8AE0-3E3FC6753C6A/UKElectionsAbuseAndIntimidation.
12. 'Claire Kober interview: "The only thing worse in Labour than sexism is the antisemitism", *The Times*, 3 February 2018.
13. '"I'll be watching you": Outgoing Labour council leader slams "sexist" bullying by Corbynistas who taunted her by singing song about STALKING in party meeting', *The Daily Mail*, 4 February 2018.
14. 'Tory council candidate suspended over string of "disgraceful" tweets', *The Metro*, 26 April 2018.
15. 'EXCL: Labour councillor suspended for calling Theresa May and Esther McVey "foul b*****s", Politics Home, 18 April 2018, https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/labour-party/news/94481/excl-labour-councillor-suspended-calling-theresa.

the left is the BBC journalist Laura Kuenssberg. Among the insults thrown at her by members of the 'I'm backing Jeremy Corbyn for Prime Minister' Facebook page were that: she looked like a 'lizard'; had a 'Tory sneer'; as well as 'sneaky eyes', similar to that of (centrist Labour MPs) Chukka Ummuna and Jess Phillips; and that she was 'ugly inside and out'.[16] All deeply unpleasant. The aforementioned Jess Phillips was amongst those to express concern about the abuse being directed against Kuenssberg by those purporting to be on the left:

The Labour leadership has stated publicly that it has a "a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment" and, in an open letter to the Prime Minister, Jeremy Corbyn called for tougher action to deal with sexual misconduct in Parliament.[17] Yet as the foregoing indicates, there are signs that this ethos has not always been reflected in the behaviour of some of those who are most ardent in their support for Corbyn.

Only a few weeks prior to Corbyn's letter to May, the pro-Corbyn MP for Sheffield Hallam, Jared O'Mara had been forced to resign as a member of the Women and Equalities Select Committee – and was suspended from the party – because of revelations that he had previously made misogynistic (as well as homophobic and racist) comments on social media.[18] There had also been a storm of controversy around Clive Lewis MP who had used the phrase "on your knees bitch" when addressing a Momemtum event in Brighton – comments for which he later apologised.[19]

Women are not alone in being singled out for abuse purely because of who they are. Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities who operate in public life have similarly been exposed to all kinds of insult – none more so than Angela Eagle, who opted to challenge Jeremy Corbyn for the leadership of the Labour Party in 2016. An internal party investigation subsequently found that she had received hundreds of 'abusive, homophobic and frightening' messages from party members – with epithets like 'Angie the Dyke' regularly hurled at her.[20]

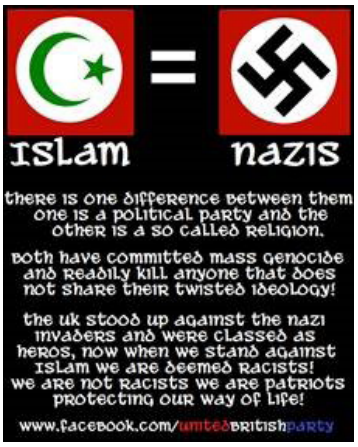
On the right, meanwhile, UKIP was forced to dismiss one of its councillors in Redditch in 2014, when it was revealed that he had insulted, amongst others, gay people by calling them "perverts" and expressing his opposition to "poofs and dykes" being allowed to wed.[21]

16. Tweet thread by 'The Golem', 9 May 2018, https://twitter.com/TheGolem_/status/994241004449525765/photo/1.
17. 'We need zero tolerance of sex harassment – Corbyn letter to May before talks today', Labour List, 6 November 2017, https://labourlist.org/2017/11/we-need-zero-tolerance-of-sexual-harassment-corbyn-letter-to-may-before-talks-today/.
18. 'Jeremy Corbyn faces mounting calls to sack MP after his "sexist and homophobic" comments', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 2017.
19. '"Get on your knees b****": Clive Lewis apologises after "inexcusable" video at Momentum event emerges', *The Independent*, 20 October 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/clive-lewis-get-on-your-knees-video-momentum-labour-mp-event-party-conference-jess-philips-a8011381.html.
20. 'Angela Eagle received hundreds of homophobic messages from Labour members', The Guardian, 19 October 2016; 'Corbyn "not doing enough to tackle homophobic bullying within Labour Party"', Business Reporter, 2 September 2016, https://business-reporter.co.uk/2016/09/02/corbyn-not-enough-tackle-homophobic-bullying-within-labour-party/.
21. 'Dave Small, Newly-Elected Ukip Councillor, Sacked By Party For "Poofs" And "Pakis" Tweets', Huffington Post, 28 May 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/05/28/dave-small-ukip-councillor-sacked-by-party-for-racist-and-homophobic-tweets_n_5405640.html?utm_hp_ref=uk-ukip-racist&guccounter=1.

2 Racism and Anti-Muslim Prejudice

Though racism has largely been driven out of the mainstream political space – certainly no party, or any individual political career, can survive by being openly racist – the rise of social media has provided a new outlet for the expression of blatantly racist sentiments.

Inevitably, far-right circles are a fount of such material – much of which links together anti-immigration messages with overt racism and vicious anti-Muslim prejudice, as in the examples below.[22]



Unfortunately, it is clear that sentiments of this kind have seeped into sections of more mainstream rightist politics. Increasing criticism has been voiced, for example, of UKIP's position on Islam – even from within the party – and its apparent readiness to engage in dog-whistle politics on this issue.[23] On social media, some who identify as UKIP members are open about their views on this issue:[24]

22. Clockwise from top-left: Image from Facebook page of the 'Southern Patriotic Front', November 2016, https://www.facebook.com/ 835196536573308/ photos/ a.925361714223456.1073741829.835196536573308/ 1193286954097596/; Image from Facebook page of the 'Southern Patriotic Front', October 2016, https://www.facebook.com/835196536573308/photos/ a.925361714223456.1073741829.835196536573308/1165401566886135/; and Image from the Facebook page of the 'United British Patriots Party', November 2015, https://www.facebook.com/UnitedBritishParty/photos/ a.811837218929227.1073741828.811804635599152/ 842949885817960/

23. See, for example, the statement by UKIP MEP James Carver, after his resignation as spokesperson at, http://www.jamescarver.org/James_Carver_resigns_as_party_spokesman--post--427.html; and also, the post-resignation article by the party's former general secretary, Jonathan Arnott, at 'I had to quit my top job at Ukip – it's just bland and anti-Muslim', *The Guardian*, 11 June 2017. See too, 'Ukip's nonsense manifesto tries – and fails – to whip up anti-Muslim outrage', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2017.

24. Tweet by Adam Davies, 30 April 2014, https://twitter.com/AdamDavies87/status/461497278474485761; Tweet by Pete Evans, 1 September 2016, https://twitter.com/Far_Right_Watch/status/771637303319994368. On this issue, see also, 'Another Ukip member suspended over offensive comments', *The Times*, 3 May 2014.

Meanwhile, earlier this year Jo Marney, the girlfriend of then UKIP leader Henry Bolton and a fellow UKIP member, was suspended from the party after it was revealed that she had sent multiple racist messages about Meghan Markle:[25]

In April 2018, a Conservative Party councillor in Calderdale was suspended after tweeting an article headlined 'France Slashes Benefits to Muslim Parasites'.[26]

Ahead of the 2018 local elections, four Conservative and one Labour candidates were suspended for various forms of anti-Muslim outburst.[27] In Newcastle, a would-be Conservative councillor, Nick Sundin, was reported to have called the Prophet Muhammad a 'f****** paedophile'[28]; in Dumfries, Labour councillor Jim Dempster told transport officials at a meeting that 'no one would have seen [Scottish Government Transport Minister Humza Yousaf] under his burka'.[29]

Elsewhere, the suspension of another Labour councillor, Davie McLachlan – who was alleged to have told Anas Sarwar that he would not back him in the vote to be Scottish Labour leader because 'Scotland wouldn't vote for a brown Muslim Paki' – offered further evidence that racism is not a problem confined merely to the political right.[30]

Against this broader backdrop, it was obviously to be welcomed that the Conservative Party in particular has sought to reiterate its firm opposition to anti-Muslim abuse or discrimination.[31] Evidently, however, there is no

25. '"Meghan's seed will taint our Royal Family": UKIP chief's glamour model lover, 25, is suspended from the party over racist texts about Prince Harry's wife-to-be', *The Daily Mail*, 13 January 2018.
26. For more on this see 'EXCL Tory councillor suspended after sharing "Muslim parasites" article', Politics Home, 4 April 2018, https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/theresa-may/news/94120/excl-tory-councillor-suspended.
27. 'Roll call of suspended candidates', Guido Fawkes, 3 May 2018, https://order-order.com/2018/05/03/roll-call-of-suspended-candidates/
28. 'Tory candidate suspended over tweets calling prophet Mohammed a "paedophile", Chronicle Live, 27 April 2018, https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/tory-candidate-suspended-over-tweets-14584463.
29. 'Councillor suspended over Islamaphobic slur about Humza Yousaf', BBC News Online, 16 March 2018, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-43418844.
30. 'Labour councillor Davie McLachlan suspended after racism claim by Anas Sarwar', *The Times*, 31 January 2018.
31. Brandon Lewis, 'Our new moves to to stamp out anti-Muslim abuse or discrimination within the Conservative Party', Conservative Home, 25 June 2018, https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2018/06/brandon-lewis-our-new-moves-to-stamp-out-anti-muslim-abuse-or-discrimination-within-the-conservative-party.html.

room for complacency on this issue – and the manner of Boris Johnson's comments about the burqa reignited the debate about the prevalence of anti-Muslim prejudice in public life.[32]

3 Anti-Semitism

In recent months, there has been close scrutiny and debate about the extent to which anti-Semitic ideas are prevalent across sections of the political sphere – in particular, on the left. Crucially, it is worth noting that much anti-Semitism is not captured merely by reference to 'racism'; rather, it employs a broader set of tropes, often including the notion that Jews control/run the world, and the suggestion that there are always hidden motives for their actions.

Mainstream Jewish organisations like the Community Security Trust, which exists to protect the Jewish community, have recommended the working definition of anti-Semitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016. As is now well known, whilst this definition been adopted by the Government of the United Kingdom, there has been a prolonged debate within the Labour Party about whether or not to follow suit. The definition states, *inter alia*, 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.*[33]

Unfortunately, in today's public discourse one does not have to look very far to find casual and callous expressions of anti-Semitism.[34] Concerns have been repeatedly voiced about the prevalence of anti-Semitic material on social media sites like Facebook.[35] At the political level, meanwhile, there has been growing disquiet over the extent to which Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters seem blind to anti-Semitism and have failed to deal with it.[36] This reached a crescendo over the summer – with seemingly daily revelations about Corbyn's own associations with known anti-Semites, and his apparent reluctance, or inability to decisively move beyond the controversy.[37]

For much of the last three years, Corbyn and his allies have dismissed accusations about anti-Semitism as baseless.[38] Those on the Corbynite wing of the party have insisted they are part of a sustained, right-wing/Tory plot to 'smear' the Labour Party leader. In so doing, they seemed oblivious to the extent to which conspiracy-rooted explanations of this kind themselves exhibited key anti-Semitic tropes. More broadly, as one former inside member of the Corbyn team, Harry Fletcher, has reflected, the problem appeared to be a deep-seated 'inability to understand why they're perceived as anti-Semitic'.[39]

Of course, the Left's growing problem with anti-Semitism long pre-dates Corbyn.[40] It is possible to identify a litany of examples of deeply troubling comments from Labour activists and senior members that reveal an acceptance of anti-Semitic ideas. In 2013, for instance, the Labour peer Lord

32. 'Denmark has got it wrong. Yes, the burka is oppressive and ridiculous – but that's still no reason to ban it', *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 August 2018.
33. 'Definitions', The CST, https://cst.org.uk/antisemitism/definitions.
34. 'Scottish Labour councillor suspended over anti-Semitism claims', The Herald, 4 May 2018, http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14470159.Scottish_Labour_councillor_suspended_over_anti_Semitism_claims/.
35. For a recent example, see 'Antisemitic hate posts allowed by Facebook', The Times, 27 July 2018. For a fuller analysis, see the report by the House of Commons, Home Affairs Select Committee, *Antisemitism in the UK: Tenth Report of Session 2016-17*, HC 136, 16 October 2016.
36. For an early example, see the following article by Jonathan Freedland: 'Labour and the left have an antisemitism problem from March 2016', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2016.
37. See, for example, 'Jeremy Corbyn: I did attend wreath ceremony for Munich killers', *The Times*, 14 August 2018; 'Exclusive: Jeremy Corbyn attended a conference with Hamas military leader jailed for terror attacks which left 100 dead', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 August 2018; 'For Islamists, Jeremy Corbyn is a useful idiot', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 2018.
38. For a characteristic dismissal of the above-mentioned Freedland article, see the Vice News documentary, 'Jeremy Corbyn: the Outsider', Youtube, 31 May 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=260&v=94ptAcbfKP0 (from 3.25).
39. 'Life inside the chaotic and "anti-semitic" Team Corbyn', *The Sunday Times*, 23 April 2017; 'Jeremy Corbyn ignored warning of anti-semitism "Achilles heel"', *The Sunday Times*, 29 April 2018.
40. On this issue, see Dave Rich, *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism* (London: Biteback, 2016).

Ahmed was suspended from the party (and then resigned) after he implied that a Jewish conspiracy was behind his conviction for a fatal motorway crash.[41] By early 2016, over a dozen party members were suspended for comments that were deemed anti-Semitic. In Renfrewshire, for example, a local councillor was briefly suspended, then reinstated after it was revealed he had blogged about the influence of the 'Jewish lobby' in America.

A Labour councillor in Nottingham, Ilyas Aziz, was suspended for a time in 2016-17 after it was revealed he had compared Israelis to Nazis, suggested Israel be relocated to America, and retweeted a variant of the 'blood libel' refrain, which stated that Israelis should stop 'drinking Gaza's blood'.[42] The claim that Israel's behavior was analogous to that of the Nazis also led to the brief suspension of Newport Councillor Miqdad al-Nuaimi in 2016.[43] And in Calne, Wiltshire, the Labour Party suspended Councillor Terry Couchman in 2017 for various anti-Semitic comments, which included the epithet 'ZioNazi'.[44]

Many other such examples have been catalogued by the dedicated Twitter accounts, '#LabourAntisemitism' and 'Jew Know'. In addition, there was the high-profile controversy that surrounded Ken Livingstone's repeated insistence that Zionists colluded with Nazism (which led ultimately, to Livingstone's resignation from the Labour Party).[45]

Efforts by the leadership to draw a line under the matter, by asking Shami Chakrabarti to chair an inquiry in the spring of that year proved a failure. The subsequent report, while denying that anti-Semitism was endemic within Labour, acknowledged that there was an 'occasionally toxic atmosphere' and that there was evidence of 'ignorant attitudes'.[46] Moreover, the launch of the Chakrabarti report was the setting for a high-profile confrontation between activist Marc Wadsworth and Ruth Smeeth MP, in which, according to Smeeth, Wadsworth used 'traditional anti-Semitic slurs' to attack her 'for being part of a "media conspiracy"'.[47] (Wadsworth was eventually expelled from Labour for bringing the party into 'disrepute'.[48])

Chakrabarti's subsequent elevation to the House of Lords as a Labour MP fueled the unhappiness of those who felt that her inquiry was insufficient. So too did the fact, that two years on, her recommendations for change had not been fully implemented.[49]

The controversy then re-ignited in early 2018, with the revelation of Corbyn's personal failure to challenge a grotesquely anti-Semitic cartoon that had appeared on a wall in east London.[50]

In addition, the local elections of May 2018, offered a range of examples of almost casual, anti-Semitic references and imagery – and not purely on the left. A Conservative local election candidate for Fen Ditton in Cambridge was suspended after tweeting that he was 'sweating like a Jew in an attic'. Elsewhere, some seven Labour candidates were suspended across the country for accusations of anti-Semitism. Irfan Javed, a would-be councilor in Woodfield, Stevenage, was reported to have complained about 'Jew propaganda' in the media[51]; likewise in Northwood, London, Sameh Habeeb was dropped as a candidate after the revelation of comments in which he pointed to Jewish control of the media (Habeeb was also revealed

41. 'Labour peer Lord Ahmed suspended over claims he blamed imprisonment on "Jewish conspiracy", *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 2013; 'Lord Ahmed apologises for "twisted" Jewish conspiracy outburst', The Times, 29 March 2013.

42. '"'Anti-Semitic' Labour councillor readmitted to party"', Jewish News Online, 3 January 2017, http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/ilyas-aziz-readmitted/.

43. 'Newport councillor Miqdad al-Nuaimi has been suspended from the Labour Party over alleged anti-semitism', South Wales Argus Online, 4 May 2018, http://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/14469892.Newport_councillor_suspended_from_Labour_in_anti-semitism_row/; 'Suspended Newport councillor re-instated', South Wales Argus Online, 18 July 2016, http://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/gwentnews/14625686.Suspended_Newport_councillor_re_instated/.

44. 'Jews concerned over councillors alleged anti-semitic tweets', Gazette & Herald Online, 25 May 2017, http://www.gazetteandherald.co.uk/news/15309766.jews-concerned-over-councillors-alleged-anti-semitic-tweets/. For other references to 'Zio-Nazis', see 'Labour "failing to act on antisemitism"', *The Times*, 24 April 2018.

45. 'Ken Livingstone muddies history to support claims on Hitler and Zionism', *The Guardian*, 30 April 2016; 'Ken Livingstone repeats claim about Nazi-Zionist collaboration', *The Guardian*, 30 March 2017.

46. *The Shami Chakrabarti Inquiry* (June 2016), https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Chakrabarti-Inquiry-Report-30June16.pdf

47. 'Jeremy Corbyn launches antisemitism report amid controversy', *The Guardian*, 30 June 2016.

48. 'Marc Wadsworth expelled from the Labour Party', Labourlist, 27 April 2018, https://labourlist.org/2018/04/marc-wadsworth-expelled-from-the-labour-party/.

49. 'Why Labour continues to struggle with antisemitism', *The Guardian*, 26 March 2018; 'Labour denies it is sitting on key antisemitism measure', *The Guardian*, 29 March 2018.

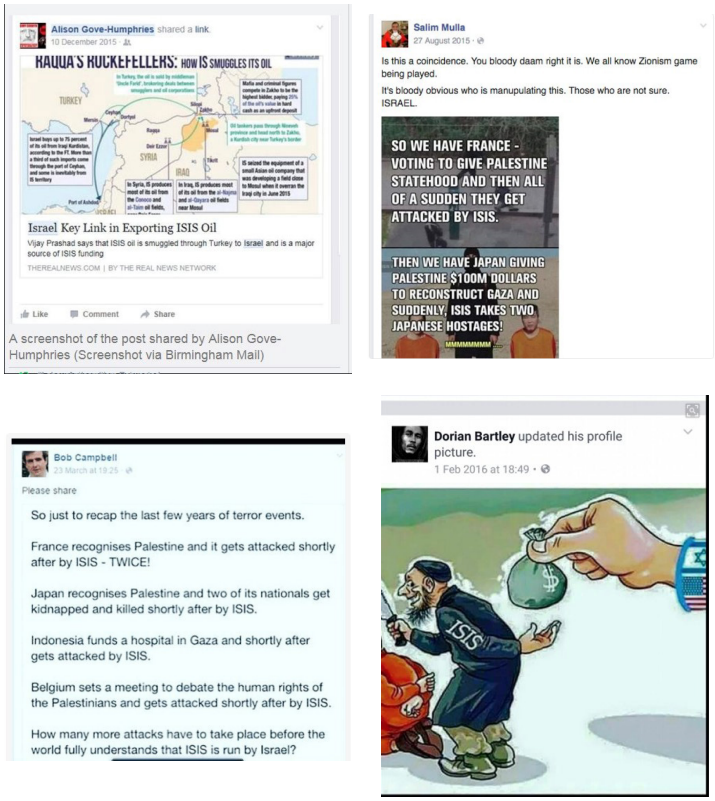
50. H. Stewart, 'Corbyn in antisemitism row after backing artist behind "offensive" mural', The Guardian, 23 March 2018.

51. 'Labour candidate ranted about "Jew propaganda"', Guido Fawkes, 1 May 2018, https://order-order.com/2018/05/01/labour-candidate-ranted-jew-propaganda/

as a founding editor of the *Palestine Telegraph*, which has been accused of publishing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories);[52] and in Peterborough, Alan Bull was suspended for promoting anti-Semitic conspiracies, including that the Holocaust was a 'hoax'.[53]

Today, discussions about anti-Semitism often run into the question of where the line should be drawn between it and legitimate criticism of Israel. In truth, this reputedly blurred terrain is not hard to navigate: any critique of Israel that relies on broader stereotypes/narratives about Jews, or engages in grotesque caricature, or holds the Israeli state to a standard higher than would be exacted for any other state, can justifiably be deemed anti-Semitic.

Regrettably, however, a section of the left in particular now seems blind to this reality. Examples abound of this kind of anti-Semtiic demonization of Israel. Jeremy Corbyn's strategy adviser, Mark Dearn, for example, has implicitly compared Israel with Islamic State (ISIS).[54] Others have suggested that Israel was somehow connected with ISIS:



A screenshot of the post shared by Alison Gove-Humphries (Screenshot via Birmingham Mail)

(Clockwise from top left, social media posts from: Alice Gove-Humphries, former Labour candidate in Birmingham; Salim Mulla, Labour councilor and former mayor of Blackburn; Bob Campbell, a Momentum activist and party member and Dorian Bartley, a Labour Party Diversity officer).[55]

In late July, a Labour councillor from Bognor Regis, Damien Enticott, was first suspended and then resigned from the party, after it was revealed that he had posted material on social media that promoted the 'blood libel', and also suggested that Hitler would have had "a solution" for the problem of Israel.[56]

In parallel, the dispute over whether or not the Labour party would adopt

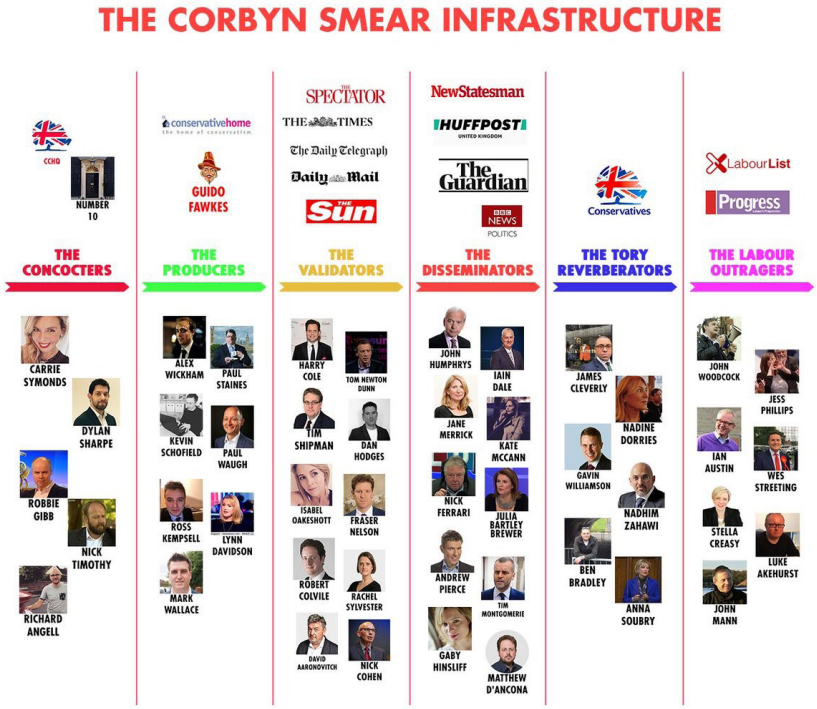
52. 'New headache for Corbyn as Labour picks election candidate who edited newspaper which ran anti-Semitic stories', *The Daily Mail*, 1 April 2018.
53. 'Labour suspend election candidate over alleged antisemitic Facebook posts', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 22 March 2018. For other examples, see 'Five "race hate" dossiers on councillors are handed to Labour in antisemitism row', *The Times*, 3 April 2018.
54. 'Jeremy Corbyn's new "strategy adviser" once compared Israel with ISIS and worked for group demanding boycott of all Israeli goods', *The Daily Mail*, 27 April 2018.
55. On this theme, see also, 'Labour councillor suspended over Israel-ISIS slur', Jewish News Online, 18 October 2015, http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/exclusive-labour-councillor-suspended-over-israel-isis-slur/.
56. 'Bognor Regis councillor resigns in "anti-Semitism" row', BBC News Online, 1 August 2018.

the IHRA defition of anti-Semitism, which rumbled on over the summer, has kept the issue at the forefront of political debate. More than one Labour MP has voiced fierce criticism of those on the left – particularly those connected with Momentum – who are thought to be the source of much anti-Semitic comment.[57] The MP for Ilford South, Mike Gapes for instance, condemned Redbridge Momentum for revealing 'absolutely disgusting anti-Semitism' on the question of the IHRA definition.[58] Wes Streeting was another to critique the tenor of much left-wing commentary on the issue – and he criticised the Party leadership for failing to act decisively. Ian Austin likewise accused Corbyn of 'supporting and defending' extremists and anti-Semites, and said that he was ashamed of the party.[59] Such concerns can scarcely have been alleviated by the subsequent news that Nick Griffin, leader of the far-right British National Party, had praised Corbyn for his criticism of a group of British Zionists.[60]

The most forceful criticism of the Labour front-bench in this period came from Dame Margaret Hodge MP, who called Corbyn himself an anti-Semite and lambasted his leadership of the party.[61] Similarly, the veteran MP Frank Field, on resigning the Labour whip in late August, said that the Corbyn leadership had become a "force for anti-Semitism" (and also highlighted the "culture of intolerance, nastiness and intimidation" in his own local Labour party in Birkenhead).[62] And the former treasurer of Corbyn's own constituency party, Russell Smith-Becker, resigned from the party, declaring that they could no longer remain in an institution 'where antisemites feel comfortable and many Jews feel uncomfortable'.[63]

In spite of all this, pro-Corbyn activists have remained unbowed – and have insisted that accusations of anti-Semitism are nothing more than 'smear' campaign, driven by the 'Tories' and Labour moderates. This notion – which itself reveals a conspiracy-driven mindset (see below) – has generated a long list of enemies, as revealed in the following graphic that circulated on social media:

57. See, for example, the tweet by Ann Turley MP on 5 July 2018.
58. 'MP accuses Redbridge Momentum of "absolutely disgusting anti-Semitism" over tweet', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 15 July 2018.
59. 'Jews warn Jeremy Corbyn has taken Labour to a "dark place"', *The Times*, 30 July 2018.
60. 'Ex-BNP chief Nick Griffin praises Corbyn over slur on "British Zionists" as Labour leader's ally McDonnell claims he was only trying to "secure peace"', *The Daily Mail*, 24 August 2018.
61. 'Margaret Hodge confronts Jeremy Corbyn in anti-semitism row', *The Times*, 18 July 2018.
62. 'Frank Field resigns Labour whip and warns Jeremy Corbyn's leadership is "force for anti-Semitism"', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 August 2018.
63. R. Becker-Smith statement, Facebook, 24 July 2018, https://www.facebook.com/russell.smithbecker/posts/1890667270954747.



In keeping with this ethos too, the outlet Skwawkbox promoted an article that talked of a 'Jewish "war on Corbyn"':

Though it later recanted (and deleted) the post, the piece was in keeping with a broader swathe of sentiment across the pro-Corbyn social media landscape.

4 Gross personal Invective

There are some who would perhaps argue that insult and invective is 'par for the course' for those wishing to enjoy a public profile – especially in politics. And yet, it is striking how easily today this can slide into the most aggressive and crude forms of abuse – of a kind that contributes nothing to debate, other than to debase the language of politics and indeed, public life in general. To give a few examples:[64]

64. 'The People's Assembly Against Austerity', Facebook Page, 4 Nov 2015 https://www.facebook.com/The-PeoplesAssembly/photos/a.571680389566522.1073741833.508289122572316/ 761401857872O5/

Margaret Thatcher remains someone whose very name seems to induce an almost Pavlovian reaction of personalised abuse among sections of the Left – as demonstrated here by Fay Hough, the Labour candidate in Rainham and Wennington Ward, Havering:

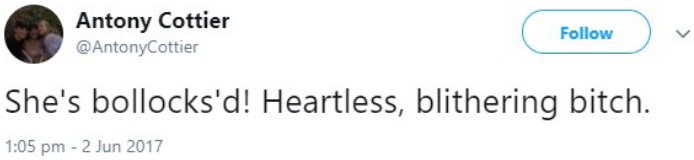
Elsewhere, Simon Darvill, the Labour candidate in Elm Park Ward, Havering, felt compelled to refer to the former Prime Minister in the same way:

At a more generic level, sections of the anti-Brexit left have taken to ridiculing those who voted to leave the European Union as 'gammon-y' – an allusion to the allegedly white, red-faced complexion of the angry middle-aged men who are said to be typical of most Brexiteers. Prominent leftists like the former spokesman for Corbyn, Matt Zarb-Cousin and Aaron Bastani, editor of the online portal Novara Media, are amongst those to

have defended the use of the term – the latter labeling centrist Labour MP Mike Gapes, 'King Gammon of the gammoni'.[65] Of course, at one level such taunts are little more than puerile nonsense; at another, though,they also reflect the desire to stigmatise and belittle those who hold to different political views.

Frequently too, this tendency spills over into declarations of outright hatred for political opponents – as seen here from Antony Cottier, a Labour candidate for the Bebington ward on Wirral Council:

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the same individual felt moved to call the Prime Minister a 'heartless, blithering bitch':



In similar vein in 2017, a speaker at a Momemtum-run conference urged his audience to "make the Left hate again'.[66] Evidently, there are some who need little persuasion. The Labour Party in Liverpool, for example, counts amongst its number someone who declares proudly that he 'fuckin despise[s] tory scum' – and has a particular hatred for Esther McVey (who is a frequent target for many on the left – see below):

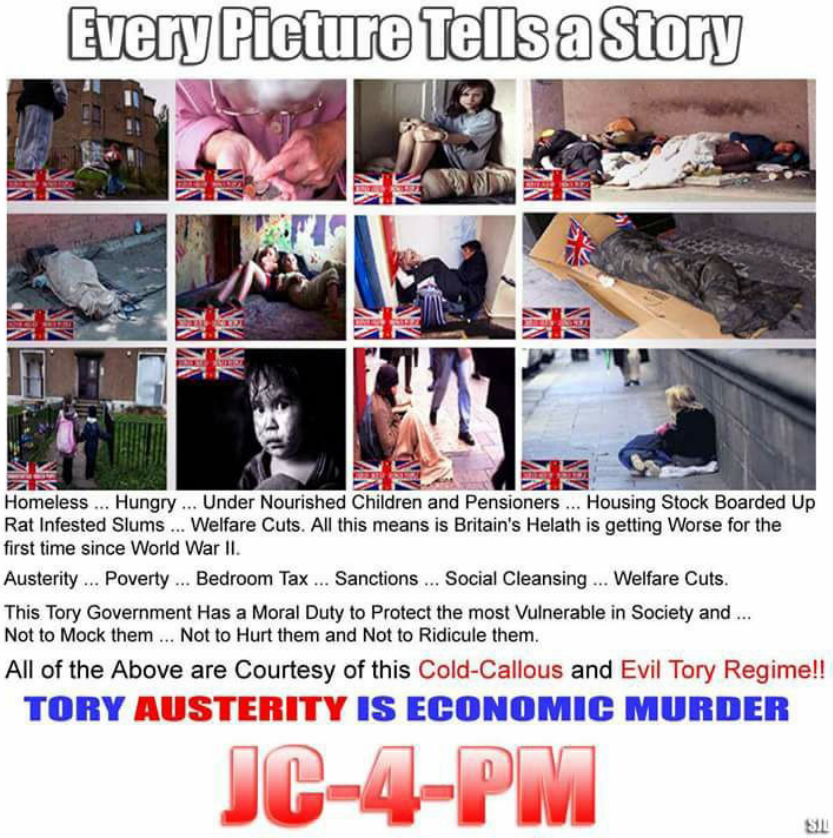
The recent controversies around the question of anti-Semitism (see above), witnessed a fresh explosion of deeply personal, abuse. One of those singled out for attack was Emily Benn, grand-daughter of the late Labour MP Tony Ben, who was, *inter alia*, labeled a "traitor" – both to the party and to the memory of her grandfather:[67]

65. 'Corbynites' insults will only hurt themselves', *The Times*, 14 May 2018.
66. 'Momentum supporters are called on to "make the Left hate again"', *The Telegraph*, 27 November 2017; 'Left aimed hate at Philip May, *The Sunday Times*, 26 November 2017.
67. 'Emily Benn, granddaughter of Tony Benn, urges Jeremy Corbyn to call off trolls', *The Times*, 27 August 2018.

Inevitably, social media is the setting in which much of this invective is articulated. A recent academic study found that between 2015 and 2017, the level of abuse directed at MPs on Twitter had more than doubled.[68] Conservative MP Nadine Dorries has also revealed that parliamentarians were being advised to abandon social media in order to avoid damage to their mental health and well-being.[69]

5 The Ascription of Malign Motives to Opponents

A hallmark of the new politics of incivility is the assumption that the purported views of one's political opponents are not legitimately held. Instead, they stand condemned as being variously corrupt, venal, and even evil. Such an outlook often forms the flipside to a sense of self-righteousness – and the belief that one's own politics are inherently virtuous. A classic example below conveys the message that the Conservatives are fundamentally malign in their politics:[70]



More prominently, there have been repeated, vitriolic claims that the Grenfell fire disaster was a deliberate act of policy on the part of the Conservatives. Significantly, the Labour Party leadership has appeared to endorse this view. The Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell told an audience at Glastonbury that the victims had been 'murdered' by the authorities.[71] He later refined this when speaking to Andrew Marr, borrowing Friedrich Engels' notion of 'social murder' to suggest that Grenfell was the deliberate outcome of government policy.[72]

This was not the first time that McDonnell had engaged in such rhetoric.

68. 'Abusive tweets to MPs "more than double" between elections', BBC News Online, 31 August 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45363720.
69. 'MPs "being advised to quit Twitter" to avoid online abuse', BBC News Online, 3 July 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-44694857.
70. From 'Get the Tories Out', Facebook Page, December 2017, https://www.facebook.com/1108134145935998/photos/a.1109876522428427.1073741829.1108134145935998/1507686272647448/
71. 'McDonnell: Grenfell Victims were "Murdered"', Guido Fawkes, 26 June 2017, https://order-order.com/2017/06/26/mcdonnell-grenfell-victims-were-murdered/.
72. 'McDonnell: Grenfell was "Social Murder"', Guido Fawkes, 16 July 2017, https://order-order.com/2017/07/16/mcdonnell-grenfell-social-murder/.

In 2012, for example, he had labelled Tory MPs 'social criminals' who should be tried for what they had done to the working-class of Britain; he said they should not be able to 'travel anywhere in the country, or show their face anywhere in public, without being challenged, without direct action' – a term he has deployed repeatedly, as discussed below.[73]

The local elections offered numerous examples of politicians deliberately and grossly misrepresenting the motives of their opponents. As reported by the *New Statesman*, a Labour Party leaflet in Batley East stated that the Tories' priorities included 'shitting on us'. Elsewhere, a UKIP pamphlet in Rotherham accused Labour of deliberately looking 'the other way' in the midst of the child grooming scandal. And a Conservative party leaflet in Dudley featured the words: 'What have Labour delivered to this ward: Hepatitis.'[74]

6 Enemies as Nazis

The next category constitutes a particular sub-refrain for those wishing to castigate their political opponents: the likening of them to Nazis; or the suggestion that X policy, or Y policy is analogous to the actions of the Third Reich. At any objective level, such comparisons when drawn in the contemporary UK context are always absurd. Usually, an individual inclined to make an argument of this kind has already lost the debate.[75] And yet, they remain surprisingly commonplace, as the following images demonstrate:[76,77,78]

Caption reads: Fair portrait of Iain Duncan Smith [Work and Pensions Secretary at the time])

73. 'John McDonnell on hounding Tory MPs', Youtube, 18 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2m5GGvsP_E.
74. '"The Tories are shi**ing on us": seven of the most ridiculous local election leaflets', *The New Statesman*, 2 May 2018.
75. 'Invoked the Nazis and you've lost the argument', *The Independent*, 12 October 2012.
76. 'Occupy Manchester', Facebook Page, March 2016, https://www.facebook.com/OccupyMCR/photos/a.380964455252309.112770.380456078636480/1267166066632139/?type=3&theater.
77. Tweet by Ste Matthew Murrau, 4 June 2018, https://twitter.com/SteMattMurray/status/1003640860540637185; Tweet by Sadenia Eddi Reader, 25 May 2018, https://twitter.com/search?q=Tory%20Nazis&src=typd.
78. Tweet by Andy Anderson, 3 June 2018, https://twitter.com/shelf_life64/status/1003296610447708160.

7 Dehumanisation

The most extreme manner in which some seek to delegitimise their opponents is by resorting to overt dehumanisation. This tendency can be witnessed across the political spectrum – but seems especially prevalent among sections of the left for whom the 'Tories' are sub-human and, far from being rivals with whom one might debate, are enemies – or as in the example below, 'vermin' – who should implicitly be eliminated.[79]

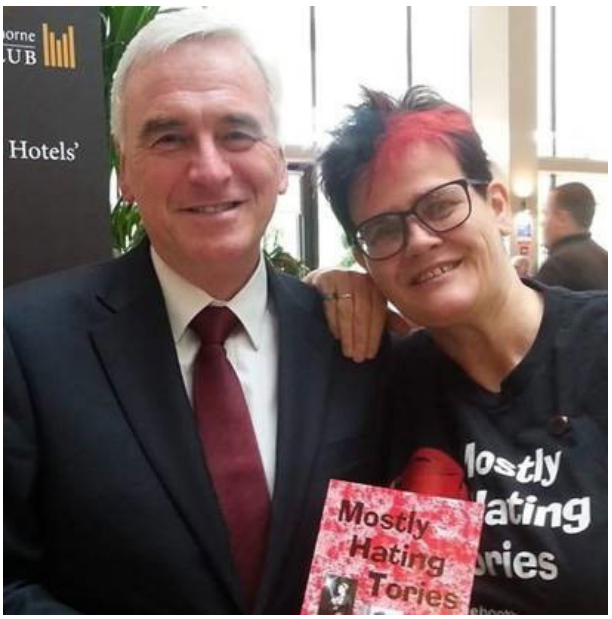
The same epithet, which draws on an infamously ill-tempered address by Aneurin Bevan – for which he was, significantly, rebuked by this party leader and Prime Minister Clement Attlee – has similarly been hurled at Labour moderates by hardline Corbynistas:[80]

79. 'Collective Voice', Facebook Page, March 2018, https://www.facebook.com/collectivevoicecampaign/photos/ a.223629154791768.1073741831.190809698073714/ 348318035656212/
80. Tweet by Socialist Voice, 13 March 2017, https://twitter.com/SocialistVoice/status/841404865440075776.

One might include in this category too, a lesser, more subtle variant of 'dehumanisation', which has been articulated even by those mainstream commentators who have argued that 'decent people' voted 'remain' in the Brexit referendum – analysis that echoes Hillary Clinton's infamous censure of would-be Trump supporters as a 'basket of deplorables'.[81]

The same sentiments were expressed, somewhat more crudely, by the Labour activist Janine Booth who wrote a poem with the words: 'They're backward, stupid, racist, sexist/ They voted Trump, they voted Brexit/ They must be mental, mad or sick/ They're racist and they're thick'. She also added that the typical Brexit voter cast his vote 'with one hand on his dick'.[82]

Booth was also the author of a book, *Mostly Hating Tories*, which appeared to receive the endorsement of John McDonnell:[83]



As an investigation by the University of Sheffield revealed, the 2017 general election saw an outpouring of invective levied against politicians from across the political spectrum:[84]

81. 'Clinton: Half of Trump supporters "basket of deplorables"', BBC News Online, 10 September 2016.
82. 'Janine Booth', Facebook Page, 10 November 2016, https://www.facebook.com/janine.booth1/posts/1316487838392264.
83. 'Janine Booth', Facebook Page, 9 October 2016, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1281826571858391&set=a.1419481058462 49.18885.100000931810502
84. 'This Is What The Twitter Abuse Of Politicians During The Election Really Looked Like', BuzzFeed News, 23 July 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/tomphillips/twitter-abuse-of-mps-during-the-election-doubled-after-the?utm_term=.en4ZGb5JI#.xbz2veN3b.

8 Accusations of treachery/betrayal

One of the striking features of the Brexit debate and post-referendum era has been a heightened tendency on the part of some to accuse political antagonists of being traitors.

The Leave.Eu campaign offered a graphic example of this tendency in the wake of the vote in the House of Commons on whether to enshrine the Brexit leaving date into law:

Again, here, Nicky Morgan is someone regularly singled out as a target for abuse that plays on the idea of betrayal/treachery:[85, 86, 87, 88]

Beyond Brexit, the sharpened political divides that have attended the rise of Corbynism have also seen growing accusation within the left that those not fully behind the Labour leader are traitors – or, in the language of the moment, 'slugs'.[89]

85. Tweet by Brexit Britain, 14 December 2017, https://twitter.com/EUVoteLeave23rd/status/941299284212961281.
86. Tweet by Steve Moore, 28 October 2016, https://twitter.com/mahout13/status/791980315556323328.
87. Tweet by Cornishview, 28 December 2017, https://twitter.com/Cornishview/status/946317597045415936.
88. Tweet by Ian56, 13 May 2018, https://twitter.com/Ian56789/status/995593563810533376.
89. 'Corbynites' insults will only hurt themselves', *The Times*, 14 May 2018.

In some left-wing circles, the suggestion that moderate MPs are 'traitors' spills over into obviously violent imagery (for more of which see below). During the 2017 leadership contest, for example, one image doing the rounds in pro-Corbyn Facebook groups featured the Labour leader holding the severed head of his challenger, Owen Smith; another caricature showed a uniformed Corbyn punching former leader Tony Blair:

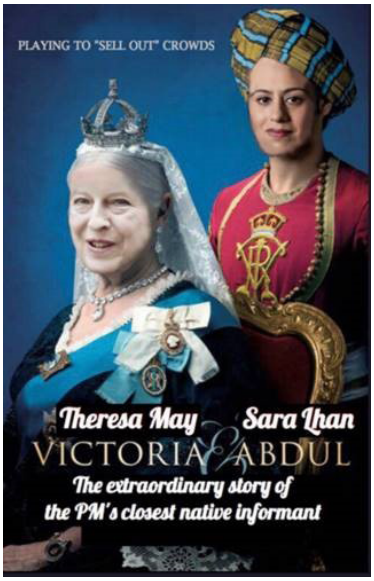
9 The denouncing of 'uncle Toms' and 'native informants'

An important sub-set of the abuse that draws on ideas of betrayal concerns those members of BME communities who are deemed to have 'sold out' on their perceived 'group' loyalty. A vicious line of argument accuses them of being 'Uncle Toms', or (to pervert the language of social science), 'native informants'.

The former term, for example, has been thrown at British Muslims who engage with the state – as the following tweets from the former channel 4 reporter, Assed Baig, show:

Similarly, the phrase 'native informant' is one that has been used repeatedly by hardline groups like CAGE, as the following tweets show:

The appointment of Sara Khan as Counter-Extremism Commissioner brought forth a torrent of abuse along similar lines. One especially graphic variant played on the 2017 film, Victoria and Albert, to draw an analogy with the relationship to Khan and Prime Minister May; as the caption noted, the former was the latter's 'closest native informant'. Among those to retweet the image was Roshan Salih, editor of the Islamist-infused website, 5Pillars, and a journalist for the Iranian-backed Press TV:

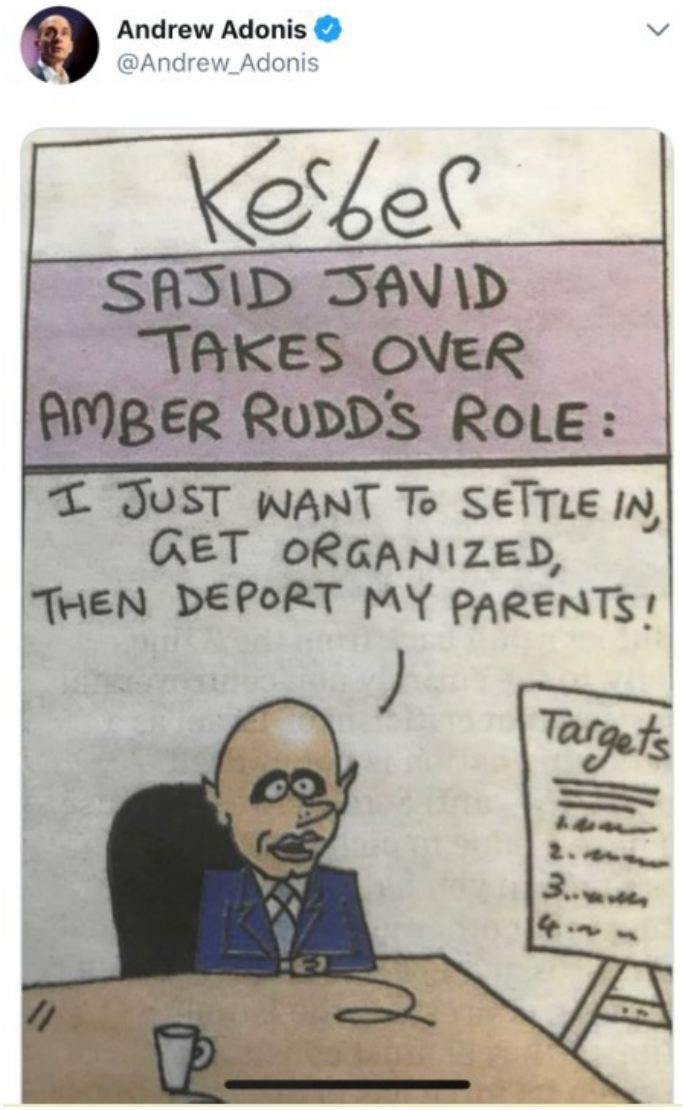


Another frequent target of this kind of abuse is Maajid Nawaz, one of the founders of the anti-extremism think tank Quilliam. On occasion, those abusing Nawaz have even slid into a particular kind of 'Uncle Tom'-inflected dehumanisation, as the following tweet shows:

The 2015 Conservative Party candidate for Upper Bann in Northern Ireland has recounted (and evidenced) a number of slurs of this kind that had been hurled at him during his campaigning:

After his appointment as Home Secretary in April, Sajid Javid was bombarded with messages from Labour activists and supporters, which labeled him variously as a 'coconut' or an 'uncle Tom':

Even Lord Adonis offered a racially-tinged critique of Javid, posting the following cartoon, which he later retracted and apologized for:



Meanwhile, a further variation on this theme led some to question whether Javid should still be considered a Muslim, given that his appointment as Conservative Home Secretary had allegedly revealed him to be 'an aggressive Zionist':

More recently still, Shaun Bailey has revealed how he was subject to a range of abuse deploying epithets like 'uncle Tom', 'coconut' and 'token ethnic' after he was selected as the Conservative candidate for the forthcoming London mayoral election.[90]

10 Conspiracy Theory

In an era in which we have become acquainted with the idea of 'fake news', perhaps the most invidious form of this phenomenon concerns the proliferation of conspiracy theories. These exist for almost any subject one cares to imagine, but are especially pernicious as they relate to issues connected to national security – whether the chemical attack in Salisbury, events in Syria, or various terrorist attacks. In these cases, the theories invariably follow an infantile 'cui bono' [who benefits?] argument, and suggest that the British government/state – or its allies – are behind each incident:[91]

90. 'Tory London mayor contender Shaun Bailey targeted by Labour race hate trolls', *Evening Standard*, 9 October 2018.

91. 'We Demand', Facebook Page, 8 June 2017, https://www.facebook.com/thepeoplespageuk/photos/a.474461772619642.1073741828.474449265954226/ 1456200477779095/

Needless to say, accusations of this kind have a long history. The suggestion that the threat from Islamism was fabricated, or severely exaggerated, in order to legitimate a particular kind of policy has appeared on both the left and right of the political spectrum – though in recent times, it is the former where it predominates. Again, this is likely because key purveyors of such thinking have gone 'mainstream' – and none more so than Jeremy Corbyn. The Labour Leader's responses to both the Salisbury attack and the chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta in Syria caused consternation in many moderate left-wing circles – yet they were entirely in keeping with his worldview, which betrays a deeply-held strain of conspiracisim. In 2003, for example, he wrote an article for the *Morning Star* newspaper, in which he referred to the 'the news manipulation of the past 18 months.' Corbyn went on to cast doubt on whether Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were behind 9/11. A decade earlier, meanwhile, he had argued that the 1991 Gulf War was 'a curtain-raiser for the New World Order: the rich and powerful, white and western will be able to maintain the present economic order with free use of all the weapons they wish for.'[92]

Though not explicit, Corbyn's language reflects a kind of 'dog whistle' conspiracy theorizing, in which 'cui bono' logic and aspersions against the bona fides of western governments are deployed to draw the reader into making certain inferences about 'the truth' of what is going on.

Similarly warped speculation was in evidence in the wake of the Jo Cox murder in 2016, when some implied that the authorities had conspired in the attack in order to de-legitimise those favouring Brexit and thus swing the result of the EU referendum.

11 Hatred of the Mainstream Press

An important sub-set of the broader inclination towards 'conspiracy theorizing', is the growing contempt for the mainstream media – and especially the press. This runs beyond the criticism that might legitimately be leveled at particular stories, or even individual newspapers. It is instead broadened to become a critique of the very foundations of the UK's free press – of course, held to be anything but free or fair.

Again, those most active in the 'new politics' embodied by groups like Momentum and the wider pro-Corbyn movement have become especially vocal advocates of this idea. Negative press coverage of the Labour Leader and his team are thus held to be the result of a nefarious plot, driven by the biased media.

In early 2017, for example, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell warned of a 'soft coup' attempt that was allegedly underway within the party, being orchestrated by centrists and the 'Murdoch media empire'.[93] More recently, Corbyn himself has claimed that Labour faces 'greater hostility from the mainstream media than we've probably ever had before'.[94] And in late August, he outlined plans for changes to the way the media operated, in the event that the Labour Party took office.[95]

Often, criticism of what is labeled simply the 'MSM' [mainstream media] demonstrates other traits mentioned above – notably anti-Semitism and

92. 'Jeremy Corbyn: 9/11 was "manipulated"', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 September 2015.

93. 'McDonnell: "Soft Coup Underway", Murdoch and Moderates behind the Plot', Guido Fawkes, 27 February 2017, https://order-order.com/2017/02/27/mcdonnell-soft-coup-underway-murdoch-moderates-behind-plot/.

94. 'Labour facing greater media hostility than "ever before", says Jeremy Corbyn', *The Independent*, 21 August 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-facing-greater-media-hostility-than-ever-says-jeremy-corbyn-a8500491.html.

95. 'Full Text of Jeremy Corbyn's 2018 Alternative MacTaggart Lecture', Labour Party UK, 23 August 2018, https://labour.org.uk/press/full-text-jeremy-corbyns-2018-alternative-mactaggart-lecture/.

a penchant for conspiracy theorizing. One Labour activist in the North-West, Sian Bloor, has claimed that Jeremy Corbyn faces the 'full force of the Rothschild Zionist agenda drawing down on him!'

Less dramatically, Carole Beth, a Labour candidate in Gooshays Ward, Havering, during the local elections, shared a Facebook post during Labour's on-going anti-Semitism crisis condemning 'ugly attacks' on Jeremy Corbyn by 'sleepers' and the 'despised' MSM:

12 Intimations and/or threats of violence

At the furthest end of the spectrum of incivility are those messages/use of language that seem calculated to foster a more violent atmosphere. Again, this is not confined to the left but there are elements there that seem reckless in their deployment of certain terms, as in the examples below:[96]

The Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, is again someone who has repeatedly made statements that fall into this category – from his 2015 statement that he had a recurring dream of 'garroting' Danny Alexander,[97] to his infamous repetition of calls for the 'lyching' of Esther McVey (who he called a 'stain on humanity').[98] McDonnell has repeatedly refused to apologise for the comments.[99] And his intransigence on this point has earnt him the rebuke of some colleagues on the left, like Jess Phillips, who recognize the offensiveness of such words:

> *I think it's utterly despicable… I cannot imagine why he refuses to apologise. He made so many jokes in the past that he wanted to pass off as being jokes, he should definitely apologise…it is not clever or big to say that she is a bitch or that she should be lynched.We cannot stand on platforms and say we don't like it when people do this to politicians and then go and do it ourselves. It's totally and utterly unacceptable…*[100]

McDonnell has a broader track record of using language that comes very close to endorsing violence, while being plausibly deniable. In so doing, he might be said to be engaging in a kind of dog whistle form of radical politics – that exudes (to borrow a rather apposite phrasem given McDonnell's past associations), the 'whiff of cordite', whilst avoiding outright incitement.

In 2010, for example, McDonnell told a rally that, when contemplating potential cuts in the public sector, 'sometimes you feel like physical force' – and that he felt like giving Conservative and Liberal Democrat Ministers 'a good slapping'. He then went on to call the crowd to 'resist' cuts 'in

96. 'Get the Tories Out', Facebook Page, November 2017, https://www.facebook.com/1108134145935998/photos/a.1109876522428427.1073741829.1108134145935998 /1489830177766391/

97. 'John McDonnell: "A Kinder Politics"', Youtube, 30 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nf3iHMuIOwA.

98. 'McDonnell defends calling McVey "Stain on Humanity"', Guido Fawkes, 25 September 2016, https://order-order.com/2016/09/25/mcdonnell-defends-calling-mcvey-stain-humanity/.

99. 'McDonnell defends calling Tory MP "stain of inhumanity"', *The Guardian*, 25 September 2016.

100. 'Jess Phillips has condemned John McDonnell's "utterly despicable" comments about former Tory minister Esther McVey as she all-but branded the Shadow Chancellor a misogynist', Politics Home, 26 September 2016, https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/labour-party/news/79332/jess-phillips-condemns-john-mcdonnell-over-.

every form possible' including 'direct action'.[101] The latter, as noted above, has been something of a mantra for McDonnell. On another occasion, he explained that what he meant by this term was what used to be called 'insurrection' – the effort to bring down the government 'by whatever means' were available; and he further stated that 'parliamentary democracy doesn't work for us'.[102]

And in keeping with this sentiment, the following year McDonnell expressed his 'solidarity' with Ed Woollard – the man who had been convicted of violent disorder for throwing a fire extinguisher at police from the roof of Millbank Tower.[103]

In 2012, for instance, he said that those people involved in 'kicking the shit out of Millbank', at a violent riot two years earlier, showed 'the best of our movement'.[104] He has also repeatedly invoked the merits of undefined 'direct action' for taking on the system.[105]

Others on the left have indulged in even more explicit forms of violent rhetoric. The following striking image was taken from a blog edited jointly by Michael Meacher and Jon Lansman, entitled, 'Labour should go for Osborne's jugular**'.**[106]

Famously, of course, the former Chancellor himself has not been immune to distasteful rhetorical excess, as evidenced by his reported comment that he would not rest until Theresa May was 'chopped up in bags in my freezer'.[107] Osborne, it should be said, quickly realised that such language was inappropriate and apologised. So too did Pat Robertson, an aide to Labour Party Chairman Ian Lavery who last month posted on Facebook that Theresa May "would look better with a noose around her neck"; Robertson has since apologised "unreservedly" for his "highly inappropriate and offensive comment".[108] Unfortunately, however, such *mea culpae* are only too rare.

Again, after the 2017 general election, parliament heard testimony from several MPs about the abuse that was being meted out:

101. 'John McDonnell on slapping MPs', Youtube, 18 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAbo7Qz6Qik.

102. 'John McDonnell calling for insurrection', Youtube, 5 May 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za5GYbfRmWo. On this issue of 'direct action' equating to 'insurrection' see also, 'Jeremy Corbyn's top team encouraged street riots', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 2015.

103. 'John McDonnell - solidarity with Ed Woollard!', Youtube, 18 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TdPl_oHvno.

104. 'John McDonnell says mob violence is the best', Youtube, 18 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEuKBxdyy-Q.

105. 'John McDonnell on slapping MPs', Youtube, 18 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAbo7Qz6Qik; 'John McDonnell on hounding Tory MPs', Youtube, 18 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2m5GGvsP_E; 'Jeremy Corbyn's top team encouraged street riots', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 2015.

106. Michael Meacher, 'Labour should go for Osborne's jugular', Left Futures, 2 April 2011. http://www.leftfutures.org/2011/04/labour-should-go-for-osborne%E2%80%99s-jugular/.

107. 'George Osborne criticised for gruesome remarks against Theresa May', *The Guardian*, 13 September 2017.

108. 'Aide to Labour MP Ian Lavery sorry for PM hanging joke', *The Times*, 24 May 2018.

- **Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole):** I have had death threats for a number of years – I now have panic buttons and a restraining order against somebody. What is different about what happened at this election – in which I was subjected to anti-Semitic abuse, my staff were spat at and my boards and property were attacked – is that the abuse has been politically motivated. The elephant in the room is that it has been motivated by the language of some of our political leaders, when they accuse people of one political side of murder, and when they dehumanise them… There is something more sinister to this.[109]
- **Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire):** Retailers and hoteliers have felt that they cannot support a candidate publicly or make a donation to the party or candidate of their choice, because they are worried that they might be attacked on online review sites or, even worse, in person. There are elderly voters who will not put up a sign in their windows. There are volunteers who worry about handing out leaflets and having abuse hurled at them. There are colleagues whose sexuality or religion has resulted in them being spat at – not once, but regularly.[110]
- **David Jones (Clwyd West):** I have stood in six general elections and I can say that, frankly, this was by a long chalk the most unpleasant one in which I have ever participated. I have no doubt at all that much of the behaviour that [Simon Hart] outlined was co-ordinated, because the patterns of behaviour that I witnessed in my constituency have been repeated across the country and have been reported to me by a number of colleagues. One issue that I want to raise… is that of social media. Frankly, if ever there were a misnomer, 'social media' is it; it is deeply antisocial media.[111]

Almost inevitably, as has been described above, the local elections provided numerous other examples of serious abuse and threats being issued towards candidates. In one of the most striking incidents, ward hustings were suspended in Kensington and Chelsea, after a member of the audience threatened the local Conservative candidates and then deliberately took a seat next to the pregnant wife of one of them.[112] Moreover, the local Labour Party then issued several statements suggesting that the real story was the refusal of the Conservatives to engage with questions about Grenfell.

At the same time, large numbers of MPs and electoral candidates have been targeted by threats of violence. To give just a couple of examples: in May 2017, a message was left on the Facebook page of the Labour candidate in Hyndburn, Graham Jones, which read, 'You all make me spew my guts. I just wanna stick a knife in your chest. So go on your way you parasite.'[113] Jess Phillips MP has also revealed the scale of the violent abuse to which she is routinely subjected, with daily threats and intimations of possible attacks. On one occasion, she noted, she had received some 600 rape threats in a single night.[114] More recently still, vandals attacked the family home of Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg , leaving graffiti that

109. Andrew Percy, cited in *Hansard Online*, 12 July 2017, Col. 155WH, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-07-12/debates/577970DD-1AEF-4071-8AE0-3E3FC6753C6A/UKElectionsAbuse-AndIntimidation.

110. Simon Hart, cited in *Hansard Online*, 12 July 2017, Col. 153WH, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-07-12/debates/577970DD-1AEF-4071-8AE0-3E3FC6753C6A/UKElectionsAbuse-AndIntimidation.

111. David Jones, cited in *Hansard Online*, 12 July 2017, Col. 161WH, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-07-12/debates/577970DD-1AEF-4071-8AE0-3E3FC6753C6A/UKElectionsAbuse-AndIntimidation.

112. Information from witness. For one journalist's account of this episode see Twitter Thread by Kathryn Snowdon, 26 April 2018, https://twitter.com/Kathryn_Snowdon/status/989593671069847552; and 'Grenfell Council Hustings Disrupted After Man Storms Stage To Confront Tory Candidates', Huffington Post, 26 April 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rbkc-hustings-stalled-grenfell-relative_uk_5ae24498e4b02baed1b86d9c.

113. 'Police investigating online "stab" threats made to Graham Jones', Rossendale Free Press Online, 24 May 2017, https://www.rossendalefreepress.co.uk/news/police-investigating-online-stab-threats-13086911.

114. 'MP Jess Phillips in web plea "after 600 rape threats"', BBC News Online, 11 June 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-44438468.

included violent threats and abuse.[115]

Given the horrific murder of Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spen in June 2016, such threats can scarcely be dismissed – particularly given the court-room admission of guilt by a member of National Action that he was planning to murder Rosie Cooper, MP for West Lancashire.[116]

Ever since the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in 2016, those Labour MPs deemed insufficiently loyal to the party leadership have also been on the receiving end of various threats of violence and intimidation. One whip was told by a caller that if she did not support Corbyn, then the person would 'come down to the office and kick the f*** out of you'.[117] Inevitably, such rhetoric also invokes notions of betrayal – a tendency exacerbated by the apparent readiness of Corbynites to categorise party members according to their perceieved fidelity to the leader.[118]

Beyond this, violent language is not directed solely at the political class. Other members of the perceived elite, or 'establishment' are often the target of similar rhetoric and imagery – and none more so than those connected with banking and the other institutions of 'finance capital'. Ever since the financial crisis of 2008, 'bankers' have been a convenient target of opprobrium and in sections of the left there is an overlap with a broader hostility to business and capitalism in general. This is potentially very damaging to the prosperity and well-being of the British economy. Of course, criticism of financial institutions is entirely legitimate – not least in the context of what led to the 2008 crash – but there is a danger that, if left unchecked, the UK could become an ever more 'hostile environment' (to borrow a phrase), for business and entrepreneurship. The kind of graphic illustrated below has remained at the fringes of the mainstream left – but the worry must be that they reflect a more general antipathy for business, which is bound up with a fundamental rejection of capitalism (and calls for its 'overthrow'):

Journalists are another group of people who are regularly targeted for abuse that runs up to and beyond threats of violence. As already mentioned, Laura Kuensberg has been the focus of much vitriol from those on the left – so much so that she was given personal protection during the latter stages of the 2017 general election.[119] Elsewhere, Andrew Neil reported that he received death threats from far-right supporters of the English Defence

115. 'Left-wing thugs vandalise Tory MP Jacob Rees-Mogg's family home by spray-painting vile slogans and leaving a sex toy and condoms', *The Sun*, 5 August 2018.

116. 'Jack Renshaw admits planning to murder MP Rosie Cooper', BBC News Online, 12 June 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44452529.

117. 'Revealed: Labour MPs go to police over death threats after refusal to back Jeremy Corbyn', *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 June 2016.

118. 'Leaked list ranks Labour MPs by "hostility" to Corbyn', Labour List, 23 March 2016, https://labourlist.org/2016/03/leaked-list-ranks-labour-mps-by-hostility-to-corbyn/; 'Jeremy Corbyn's team issues list of MPs who it claims undermined leader', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2016.

119. 'BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg "given bodyguard" following online threats', *The Independent*, 14 July 2017.

League (EDL) after he had interviewed Tommy Robinson:

More broadly, of course, it is clear that the various forms of abuse highlighted in this report are accompanied by an undercurrent of intimidation and threat. Direct intimations of violence are merely the most explicit articulation of the deeper currents of incivility that are disfiguring British public life in the contemporary era.

Conclusions

George Osborne would doubtless state that comments like those about the Prime Minister cited above were made entirely in jest. And of course, no one seriously imagines the former Chancellor rushing round to Number 10 with a carving knife – however, they are in their own way symptomatic of the current political ethos. They are indicative of the 'race to the bottom' in rhetorical terms and the normalization of a politics of incivility, of a kind that is damaging to a tolerant and pluralistic discourse.

And yet, as noted above, one thing that does separate Osborne's remarks from many of the other examples catalogued above, is the fact that he quickly recanted and apologised for his words. He recognized that he had crossed a boundary of acceptability and acted accordingly. The same can be said of Lord Adonis, who as described, offered an apology to Savid Javid for re-tweeting an offensive cartoon about him, which referenced Javid's family background after his appointment to the Home Office. Adonis – like Osborne – accepted that he had gone too far and recanted.

Sadly, such examples of reflection and disavowal are only too few and far between. Witness, for example, the dominant Momentum response to the anti-Semitism scandal, which held that the whole controversy was a 'smear' confected by Blairites and/or the right-wing media to undermine the Labour Party leadership. It was striking too that in the signature disciplinary case of Marc Wadsworth, two prominent pro-Corbyn MPs, Chris Williamson and Clive Lewis, gave character references for him.[120]

More generally, it seems clear that the rise of Corbynism – for all the talk of a 'kinder, gentler politics' – has shifted the needle of 'civility' within the left. Of course, as the above demonstrates, it is possible to identify examples of 'incivility' from across the political spectrum. No-one is seeking to deny that there are those on the right who engage in many of the failings identified here – be it misogyny, racism, a readiness to peddle conspiracy theories, or the hurling of abuse and personal invective. But these issues increasingly appear endemic within sections of the left, where they are observable on a scale, and with a prominence unmatched on the right.

Furthermore, as suggested by the prominence of John McDonnell in the examples identified above, there is a sense in which the Labour Party leadership is to some degree complicit, or has – at a minimum – failed to adopt a strong line against all forms of abuse. Voices like those of Jess Phillips – who has spoken out firmly against abuse – too frequently appear to be swimming against a tide that is tolerant of intolerance.

Momentum, in particular, seems to be provide a home to many who view politics in the most polarising and shrill terms. Activists within that

120.'Corbyn's office denies it advised Labour activist day before expulsion', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2018.

movement have been repeatedly accused of engaging in behavior that comes close, or crosses the line into, intimidation and abuse.[121] By some accounts, this even extends to other Momentum activists who differ in approach and outlook.[122]

By contrast, the mainstream Conservative party has set its face firmly against such behaviour – and made a point of requiring local election candidates to sign up to a 'respect pledge' earlier this year.[123] As has been identified, however, there are still those on the right who appear to think it appropriate to engage in the most obnoxious forms of abuse and unpleasant rhetoric.

Taken as a whole, our compendium suggests that we have witnessed a marked coarsening of public debate during recent times. It is vital, for the sake of democracy, that we seek to reverse course and promote a new politics of civility as an antidote to the worst excesses of the current political age. A belief in the virtues of such civility, and a commitment to toleration – and respect for – people from different political traditions or on the other side of the debate was core to the worldview of many of our greatest parliamentarians, such as Clement Attlee.[124]

In this context, too, the insights of John Stuart Mill retain an abiding relevance. Mill, rightly remembered as an apostle of free speech, nevertheless recognised that free speech brought certain duties as well as rights; that one had to be conscious of the potential for harm (and seek to avoid this). In particular, he noted the danger of playing to "the mob" (a signal phrase that today immediately evokes the workings of social media); and it is clear that Mill's reflections "on liberty" rested on the presumption of a general civility within society. To his mind, a "real morality" of public discussion would be founded on the virtues of civility, honour and accuracy. Critically, he believed such virtues could not be policed by law, but equally that it was vital they be encouraged through the self-regulating mechanisms of public debate – and that everyone had a duty to challenge those who fell in breach of their "duty to others" to behave with civility (for more on this, see appendix 1).

To be clear, we are not nostalgic for some kind of 'golden age' of decency, when politics were unerringly polite. Such an era never existed. Neither is this a censorious plea for anodyne or sanitized debate. It is not about making public discourse 'safe'. But it is about trying to make sure that it is civil and operates according to some basic, broad – yet essential – rules of engagement. On this issue, as with so much else in contemporary public life, it is clear that there is no ready-made consensus about what is acceptable. It is with this in mind that we hope to promote a vigorous debate around the issues of civility, with a view to informing a new set of 'norms' for public discourse in the contemporary age.

121. *Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life*, Cm 9543, December 2017; 'Labour chief whip complains to Corbyn and Momentum about abuse of MPs', Spectator Coffee House, 13 July 2016, https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/07/labour-chief-whip-complains-corbyn-momentum-threats-abuse-mps/.

122. See the account by Momentum activist, Laura Catriona Murray, available at, 'A new kind of politics challenged by an old disease', 21C Manifesto, 5 December 2016, https://21centurymanifesto.wordpress.com/2016/12/05/a-new-kind-of-politics-challenged-by-an-old-disease/.

123. 'New "respect" pledge for Tory candidates', BBC News Online, 14 January 2018, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-42680375.

124. J. Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee* (London: Riverrun, 2017), passim.

Call for Evidence

A crucial first step in this process is to identify and understand the range of behaviours that cross the line of acceptability. As outlined in the above report, much of this takes place online, via social media. But we are acutely conscious of the fact that this is not its sole manifestation or outlet. The politics of incivility take many forms and it is for this reason, that we are today issuing a call for evidence: we would like to invite anyone who has experienced intimidation, abuse or extremism in public life, to contact Policy Exchange – to share their experiences, and help inform our new work stream, which is being led by our Civility Hub. To get in touch with us, please email: callforevidence@policyexchange.org.uk

Appendix 1

The essence of Mill: protecting free speech

One of the central aims of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) was to make a robust case against government interference in free speech. At the same time, Mill acknowledged there was always a tension between liberty and authority and that unlimited free speech was not always possible.

1 Playing to the mob

Mill's willingness to consider limitations on free speech depended on what is commonly known as the harm principle. An individual human's actions should only be limited by the state or community if they are in danger of causing harm to others. In certain circumstances, he believed, the harm principle should be applied to free speech. As he put it in Chapter III, "even opinions lose their immunity, when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act." One thinks of incitement to violence, on spreading terrorist propaganda, as the most obvious example here.

Specifically, Mill drew a distinction between putting down controversial opinions (even untruths) on paper and playing to the mob with false or baiting information. He used the example of the unpopularity of corn dealers, who controlled the price of bread. "An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard." In the latter case, restrictions may be imposed: "Acts of whatever kind, which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavorable sentiments, and, when needful, by the active interference of mankind."

Chapter IV goes back to the question of what types of actions should be deemed acceptable in a civilised society. Again, Mill wants to allow for as great a latitude as possible. But it is right to question acts that are injurious to others on moral ground. He also discusses the type of behaviour that fall foul of civility:

"Cruelty of disposition; malice and ill-nature; that most anti-social and odious of all passions, envy; dissimulation and insincerity, irascibility on insufficient cause, and resentment disproportioned to the provocation; the love of domineering over others; the desire to engross more than one's

share of advantages (the pleonexia of the Greeks); the pride which derives gratification from the abasement of others; the egotism which thinks self and its concerns more important than everything else, and decides all doubtful questions in his own favor;--these are moral vices, and constitute a bad and odious moral character."

These cannot be policed by law, but it is right that they should be challenged when they constitute "a breach of duty to others".

2 The morality of public discussion

Returning to the specific issue of free speech, Mill ends Chapter II with a rejection of the argument that all expression of opinion should be "temperate" and within certain bounds of "fair discussion". Actually, on this Mill warns against too many restrictions, noting that people often object to arguments that undermine their own unchallenged conceptions of truth. This, he believed, was a recipe for established wisdom never to be challenged – and for the purveyors of it to remain in control. And yet he does conclude by suggesting at a self-regulating mechanism in public debate, saying that we should let those who argue intemperately fall by themselves, by according more honour to ideas and views that are expressed with civility, honesty and accuracy. This he describes as "the real morality" of public discussion:

Before quitting the subject of freedom of opinion, **it is fit to take notice of those who say, that the free expression of all opinions should be permitted, on condition that the manner be temperate, and do not pass the bounds of fair discussion.** Much might be said on the impossibility of fixing where these supposed bounds are to be placed; for if the test be offence to those whose opinion is attacked, I think experience testifies that this offence is given whenever the attack is telling and powerful, and that every opponent who pushes them hard, and whom they find it difficult to answer, appears to them, if he shows any strong feeling on the subject, an intemperate opponent. But this, though an important consideration in a practical point of view, merges in a more fundamental objection. **Undoubtedly the manner of asserting an opinion, even though it be a true one, may be very objectionable, and may justly incur severe censure.** But the principal offences of the kind are such as it is mostly impossible, unless by accidental self-betrayal, to bring home to conviction. The gravest of them is, to argue sophistically, to suppress facts or arguments, to misstate the elements of the case, or misrepresent the opposite opinion. But all this, even to the most aggravated degree, is so continually done in perfect good faith, by persons who are not considered, and in many other respects may not deserve to be considered, ignorant or incompetent, that it is rarely possible on adequate grounds conscientiously to stamp the misrepresentation as morally culpable; and still less could law presume to interfere with this kind of controversial misconduct. **With regard to what is commonly meant by intemperate discussion, namely, invective, sarcasm, personality, and the like, the denunciation of these weapons would deserve more sympathy if it were ever proposed to**

interdict them equally to both sides; but it is only desired to restrain the employment of them against the prevailing opinion: against the unprevailing they may not only be used without general disapproval, but will be likely to obtain for him who uses them the praise of honest zeal and righteous indignation. Yet whatever mischief arises from their use, is greatest when they are employed against the comparatively defenceless; and whatever unfair advantage can be derived by any opinion from this mode of asserting it, accrues almost exclusively to received opinions. The worst offence of this kind which can be committed by a polemic, is to stigmatize those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men. To calumny of this sort, those who hold any unpopular opinion are peculiarly exposed, because they are in general few and uninfluential, and nobody but themselves feels much interest in seeing justice done them; but this weapon is, from the nature of the case, denied to those who attack a prevailing opinion: they can neither use it with safety to themselves, nor if they could, would it do anything but recoil on their own cause. In general, opinions contrary to those commonly received can only obtain a hearing by studied moderation of language, and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence, from which they hardly ever deviate even in a slight degree without losing ground: while unmeasured vituperation employed on the side of the prevailing opinion, really does deter people from professing contrary opinions, and from listening to those who profess them. For the interest, therefore, of truth and justice, it is far more important to restrain this employment of vituperative language than the other; and, for example, if it were necessary to choose, there would be much more need to discourage offensive attacks on infidelity, than on religion. It is, however, obvious that law and authority have no business with restraining either, while opinion ought, in every instance, to determine its verdict by the circumstances of the individual case; condemning every one, on whichever side of the argument he places himself, in whose mode of advocacy either want of candor, or malignity, bigotry or intolerance of feeling manifest themselves, but not inferring these vices from the side which a person takes, though it be the contrary side of the question to our own; and **giving merited honor to every one, whatever opinion he may hold, who has calmness to see and honesty to state what his opponents and their opinions really are, exaggerating nothing to their discredit, keeping nothing back which tells, or can be supposed to tell, in their favor. This is the real morality of public discussion; and if often violated, I am happy to think that there are many controversialists who to a great extent observe it, and a still greater number who conscientiously strive towards it.**

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