

ANTISEMITISM POLICY TRUST

ANTISEMITISM AND THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

1. INTRODUCTION

HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY ANTISEMITISM

Nearly all political parties have at some point in their existence faced, in some form, allegations of racism, and specifically, antisemitism. The Conservative Party is not immune from this.

Since its establishment in 1834, accusations of antisemitism have been levelled at the Conservative Party. Be it through the treatment of Disraeli¹ (though he himself was not considered beyond reproach)², opposition to the Jews Relief Act³ or the behaviour of Cabinet Member Sir William Joynson-Hicks⁴ antisemitism was not rare. The Conservative Party's wartime leaders' beliefs have also rightly been called into question, including those of Churchill⁵ and Chamberlain.⁶ Antisemitism has repeatedly been found post-war, for example in the treatment of Jewish MPs like Keith Joseph⁷, through Macmillan's diaries⁸, and later Alan Clark MPs'.⁹

Even in recent decades, antisemitism has been openly espoused. Macmillan famously said of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet that it was more "old Estonian than old Etonian".¹⁰ Numerous Jewish cabinet members have reportedly been victims of antisemitic abuse, as was Michael Howard (himself of Romanian Jewish descent) when leader of the party.¹¹

In the last decade or more, and again over the past few years, the Conservative Party together with some of its representatives, has found itself facing further serious allegations.

2. INCIDENTS INVOLVING CONSERVATIVE PARTY REPRESENTATIVES

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

In 2011, former MP Aiden Burley was sacked from his Ministerial role after he was reported to have organised, attended and bought an SS Uniform for his friends' Nazi themed 'stag-do' in France.¹² The Conservative Party commissioned a report into Burley's behaviour and in 2014, following the conclusion of the legal investigation, Lord

1 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/150-years-ago-the-uks-first-and-only-jewish-leader-changed-politics-forever/>
2 Disraeli: The Novel Politician (Jewish Lives) Hardcover, 2016, David Cesarani
3 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/21-22/49/contents/enacted>
4 https://www.jstor.org/stable/260670?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents
5 <https://www.amazon.com/Churchill-Jews-1900-1948-Michael-Cohen/dp/0714684503>
6 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/does-britains-focus-on-the-kindertransport-hide-a-guilty-conscience/>
7 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/meet-the-little-known-jewish-man-behind-britains-thatcherist-revolution/>
8 Ferdinand Mount, 'Too Obviously Cleverer' (08/09/11) on London Review of Books Vol. 33 No. 17
9 Alan Clark with Ion Trewin (ed.), Alan Clark: A Life in his Own Words (Phoenix, 2011)
10 <https://www.totalpolitics.com/articles/culture/fear-and-loathing-westminster>
11 <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/160689>
12 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/tory-mp-aidan-burley-offensive-and-stupid-over-nazi-stag-do-1.52122>

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Gold stated that Burley had acted in a “stupid and offensive way” but that “he was not a racist or antisemitic”.¹³¹⁴ After the report was released, the party issued a statement declaring that Burley had “a lot to offer in public life”.¹⁵ Burley stepped down from parliament and did not contest the 2015 General Election.

In June 2013, Patrick Mercer MP was filmed by BBC Panorama calling an Israeli soldier a “bloody Jew”.¹⁶ Whilst Mercer issued an apology, he later resigned from the Party following the allegations and wide condemnation. Mercer stepped down ahead of a report published by the Commons standard committee that recommended his suspension from parliament for six months, in part due to his use of racially offensive language.¹⁷¹⁸

In August 2013, it emerged that Jacob-Rees Mogg MP had been the guest of honour at an annual dinner organised by the far-right organisation Traditional Britain Group in May, earlier that year. Following criticism, Mogg distanced himself from the group and stated, “I have never been a member or supporter”.¹⁹

In September 2013, former Prime Minister David Cameron found himself embroiled in a debate over the use of the “Y- Word” during football chants. This followed a statement published by the Football Association, backed by Jewish Communal organisations, “restating its belief that the term “Y***” should not be used in any context at a football ground and warning that its use could amount to a criminal offence that would leave fans at risk of being banned and prosecuted”.²⁰ Cameron argued that Tottenham Hotspur fans should not be punished for use of this word because its fans are not motivated by hate.²¹

During a House of Commons debate on Palestinian Statehood in October 2014, Andrew Bridgen MP suggested “the political system of the world’s superpower and our great ally the United States is very susceptible to well-funded powerful lobbying groups and the power of the Jewish lobby in America”.²² When Bridgen was contacted by the media, following condemnation by communal organisations he confirmed that he stood by his statement.²³²⁴

In April 2016, Conservative MP Richard Fuller said of Sir Philip Green and the sale of BHS: “If the sale was done on the understanding that it was avoiding responsibility for those pension losses, then the £1 received was the equivalent to 30 pieces of silver in his betrayal of the employees and pensioners at BHS.” It was suggested by some that the use of the phrase ‘30 pieces of silver’, a reference to the price Judas received for betraying Jesus, was infelicitous at best when employed in reference to a Jewish businessman.²⁵

13 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/21/tory-mp-aidan-burley-nazi-stag-party-france-offensive-not-antisemitic>

14 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/inquiry-finds-mp-aidan-burleys-nazi-theme-party-offensive-but-not-anti-semitic/>

15 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/21/tory-mp-aidan-burley-nazi-stag-party-france-offensive-not-antisemitic>

16 <https://www.jpost.com/International/British-MP-apologizes-for-bloody-Jew-comment-316331>

17 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmstandards/1225/1225.pdf>

18 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/01/patrick-mercer-tory-mp-worst-ever-breaches-rules>

19 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jacob-rees-mogg-s-after-dinner-speech-to-group-calling-on-doreen-lawrence-to-go-home-8752995.html>

20 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/17/david-cameron-yids-chants-spurs>

21 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/tottenham-hotspur/10315105/David-Cameron-embroiled-in-race-row-over-Tottenham-Hotspur-Yid-chant.html>

22 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm141013/debtext/141013-0002.htm>

23 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/bridgen-israel-jewish-lobby-palestine/>

24 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/british-mp-defends-jewish-lobby-comment/>

25 <https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/green-bhs-and-the-ethics-of-business-1.56330>

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COUNCILLORS AND COUNCIL CANDIDATES

In January 2015, a Conservative County Councillor for Bishop's Stortford West Division unreservedly apologised for comparing the number of open kosher shops in Paris, to the number of open shops in Gaza in the wake of the HyperCacher attack which killed four Jewish people. Colin Woodward had replied to a question on Twitter about whether kosher shops might be open following the attack, suggesting more would be open than shops in general, in Gaza.²⁶

In April 2015, a Conservative Candidate for Derby City Council was suspended after she posted an antisemitic Facebook message claiming that she would never support “the Jew” Ed Miliband. In an online exchange over social media, she wrote, “never ever will I drop that low and support the Al Yahud” [Arabic for Jew]. A holding statement was issued over the weekend when the incident was reported, that “her comment was offensive and wrong. She has removed it and apologised”.²⁷ By the Monday morning, she had been suspended from the party.

In April 2016, the Deputy Chairman of the Bradford Conservative Association, was suspended after making inappropriate comments about Jews and women at the launch of a local election campaign. Mr Zaman urged his community to vote for local candidate Sajid Akhtar “so that the Jews and Christians know that we are one Biradari”.²⁸ He was later reinstated after the party’s disciplinary body decided that his comments were not antisemitic, though unhelpfully open to interpretation.

In April 2017, it was reported that a Conservative Council candidate for Hall Green in Birmingham had been forced to resign from the party, following tweets posted on his social media accounts in 2013 and 2014 referencing “foreign Jewish agents” paid by the “Jewish lobby”. A Conservative spokesperson said that the candidate was no longer a member of the party and his campaign material was removed from the Birmingham Conservative’s website.²⁹

In April 2018, George Stoakley, Conservative Council candidate for Fen Ditton and Fulbourn in Cambridgeshire, was suspended pending investigation after five-year-old antisemitic and homophobic posts were found on social media including one that he was “sweating like a Jew in an attic”.^{30 31}

In the same period Sunderland Tory Council candidate, Anthony Mullen, was suspended for a number of offensive Tweets including one stating that he “can honestly say that this morning was the first time I’ve had to scrub off a Hitler tash with a toothbrush after a night out”.³² Whilst he was suspended pending investigation, his party membership was later reinstated in May “almost immediately after he won his seat”.³³ “A Conservative Party statement said Mullen’s tweets were sent between four and seven years previously, and while they “may not have

26 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/tory-councillor-probably-stores-open-paris-gaza/>

27 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tory-candidate-apologises-after-saying-she-could-never-support-the-jew-ed-miliband-10206104.html>

28 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/senior-conservative-suspended-amid-antisemitism-speech-allegations-1.63600>

29 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/conservative-council-candidate-resigns-from-party-over-jewish-agent-tweet-1.436012>

30 <https://news.sky.com/story/george-stoakley-suspended-as-tory-council-candidate-for-anti-semitic-and-homophobic-posts-11347498>

31 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/tories-suspend-candidate-sweating-like-a-jew-in-an-attic-tweet/>

32 <https://www.sunderlandecho.com/news/politics/sunderland-tory-election-candidate-suspended-by-conservatives-after-row-over-vile-and-abysmal-tweets-1-9133298>

33 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/tory-suspended-over-tweet-calling-12482852>

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been to everyone's taste", there was "never any intention to offend or cause hurt." Mr Mullen added, "I wish to state that I did not at any time intend to cause offence to anyone".³⁴

In May 2018, Councillor Stephen Goldsack was expelled from the Conservative Party for having links to the far-right party the BNP as a former activist.³⁵ Mr Goldsack was previously photographed holding up the BNP manifesto and was listed in 2011 as the party's "Scottish security adviser".³⁶ A Conservative party spokesman said that "Cllr Goldsack's membership of the Scottish Conservative party has been rescinded, an action we took immediately after learning of this past affiliation".³⁷

In March 2019, Stratford on Avon Councillor, Jacqui Harris, was suspended from the party after she promoted "the claim Mossad agents are posing as Labour members to commit acts of antisemitism as part of a smear campaign".³⁸

3. ASSOCIATION WITH GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS ACCUSED OF ANTISEMITISM

On a number of occasions in the recent past, the Conservative Party has been accused of links to, or having held meetings with, those alleged to hold, or be enablers of antisemitic views.

A great deal of the focus of has related to the Conservatives grouping in the European Parliament. In May 2009, David Cameron delivered on a previous commitment for the Conservative Party MEPs to leave the European People's Party – European Democrats Group (EPP-ED), a centrist grouping.³⁹ The new group they joined was the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The ECR chair, Michal Kaminski of the Law and Justice party in Poland, was the focus of much of the criticism. This related to his opposition to a Polish Presidential apology in 2001, for a pogrom (murder of hundreds of Jews) that occurred 60 years earlier in the town Kaminski represented as an MP. Kaminski's own links were also called into question, including to an antisemitic radio station, Radio Maryja. Kaminski repeatedly and forcefully denied being, or having been, antisemitic. Concerns were also raised about another leading ECR activist, Dr. Roberts Zile, centring on his party's alleged role in commemorative events for Latvian Waffen SS units. The matter came to a head around the UK party conference season before the 2010 General Election where Conservative and Labour party attacked one another over their respective European links. The whole 'Kaminski affair' meant "Jewish communities in Britain, Poland and Latvia were left in near impossible positions by the controversy", having to judge people's comments in a vastly complex European narrative and context, according to the Community Security Trust (CST) which covered the issue in detail in its 2009 Antisemitic Discourse report.⁴⁰

Controversy about the conduct of Conservative MEP's was reignited in late 2018 when they failed to support sanctions against Hungary's far-right government. The Hungarian Government, and its leader Viktor Orban, have

34 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/tory-suspended-over-tweet-calling-12482852>

35 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-44223449>

36 <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16243484.tory-councillor-expelled-after-past-as-bnp-activist-revealed/>

37 <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16243484.tory-councillor-expelled-after-past-as-bnp-activist-revealed/>

38 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/tory-councillor-suspended-for-suggesting-mossad-behind-labour-row/>

39 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/may/05/david-cameron-european-elections-epp>

40 <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/6/Antisemitic-Discourse-Report-2009.1425051919.pdf> (pp48-49)

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repeatedly been accused of antisemitism, islamophobia, attacks on judicial and media independence, and abhorrent treatment of refugees and minorities.

The Jewish Chronicle condemned both the action and failure of leading Conservative figures to speak out.⁴¹ Downing Street said that it had not been consulted on the vote, but the Board of Deputies of British Jews referenced its disappointment and concern, and did so again weeks later when ties to the Orban government were defended by a Brexit Minister.⁴²⁴³

There have been several controversies relating to Conservative student groups. In 2011, it was alleged that members of the Conservative Association at Oxford University were engaging in antisemitism at meetings. Four senior members announced their resignation after allegedly singing a Nazi-themed song.⁴⁴ In 2014, the Conservative Society At University College London (UCL) was asked by union officials to apologise after allegations a ‘toxic’ atmosphere had been created. Members had alleged witnessing antisemitic bullying and jokes about Jews’ noses and ‘Jews owning everything’.⁴⁵ In 2018, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives youth wing was accused of antisemitism for using the phrase “cultural marxism” in a social media post that was later deleted.⁴⁶ The same phrase appeared again in booklets at a fringe meeting held at the 2018 Conservative Party Conference.⁴⁷ The same year, at a Plymouth University Conservative Party event, students were pictured seemingly making white supremacist hand gestures and wearing clothes with, amongst other symbols, a Jewish Star of David and the word Jude (German for Jew). Reports suggested the Students’ Union subsequently suspended the society and Conservative Central Office launched an investigation stating any party members involved would be suspended.⁴⁸ The previous year, the anti-racism charity Hope Not Hate revealed that Conservative activists were amongst those involved in the ‘Young Right Society’ a Facebook group populated with Holocaust jokes and antisemitic conspiracy theories.⁴⁹

In November 2013, MPs called for the newly appointed Chair of the Government’s Housing Commission, Sir Roger Scruton, to be sacked over accusations of peddling antisemitic conspiracy theories.⁵⁰ He had claimed “Many of the Budapest intelligentsia are Jewish, and form part of the extensive networks around the Soros empire”.⁵¹⁵² Conservative Ministers defended Scruton, claiming his views had been misrepresented.⁵³

In 2017, the Conservative Party moved to dissociate itself from a prominent pro-Brexit campaigner who referenced the Spanish Inquisition on social media, in reply to a Swedish Far-right blogger. Dr Felix Auel wrote: “When will today’s Christian Europe say “Enough is Enough”, just like the Christian Spaniards did at the end of the Middle

41 <https://www.thejc.com/comment/leaders/never-an-excuse-inspirational-jc-leader-september-21-1.470026>

42 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/conservatives-face-renewed-criticism-over-failure-to-condemn-orb%C3%A1n-1.470442>

43 <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/news/98216/jewish-leader-condemns-conservatives-backing>

44 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8870909/Oxford-Tories-nights-of-port-and-Nazi-songs.html>

45 <https://thetab.com/uk/london/2014/09/30/tox-uc1-tories-forced-to-apologise-for-racist-behaviour-13770>

46 https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/local/fife/697474/tory-youth-wing-chairman-caught-up-in-new-anti-semitism-row/?utm_source=twitter

47 https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/7x3eaq/the-deeply-worrying-far-right-booklets-distributed-at-tory-conference

48 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/outrage-tory-uni-society-picture-13350145>

49 <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2017/11/23/exposed-breitbart-writers-vile-racist-group/>

50 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46128371>

51 <https://www.roger-scruton.com/articles/276-the-need-for-nations>

52 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/nov/06/sack-roger-scruton-over-soros-comments-demand-labour-mps>

53 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46128371>

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Ages?” The Spanish Inquisition constituted a period of murder, and forced conversion for Jews. A spokesman for the party said: “Felix Aibel’s opinions are entirely his own and are in no way representative of the views of the Welsh Conservatives. We cannot condone the use of this kind of language”⁵⁴.

In early 2018 Nick Timothy, a former Downing Street advisor to Prime Minister Theresa May, wrote a column for the Daily Telegraph newspaper about George Soros, which was given the title “Man who ‘broke the Bank of England’ backing secret plot to thwart Brexit”. It was suggested that the headline was unfair given the funding arrangement was not secret. Furthermore, as a number of journalists and others pointed out, Soros had been the focus for antisemitic conspiracy theories used by Polish, Hungarian and Turkish agitators, which the paper repeated without commentary.⁵⁵ Some suggested it was Timothy himself who had played into the conspiracies, something rejected by him and numerous supportive parliamentarians and others.⁵⁶

In December 2018, a number of Conservative MPs lent social media support to ‘Turning Point UK’.⁵⁷ The organisation, which took its inspiration from an American group, was founded and led by George Farmer, whose father is a Conservative Party Peer, Lord Farmer. Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Steve Baker MP and Sir Bernard Jenkin MP all signalled support for the group, prompting James Cleverly MP, a party vice-chair to clarify that Turning Point UK is not the official student arm of the party.⁵⁸ Farmer’s fiancé Candice Owens, who has a role in Turning Point USA and spoke at the UK launch, has been repeatedly criticised for remarks she has made which it has been alleged signalled support for Hitler and White Supremacists, allegations she has categorically and repeatedly denied⁵⁹ The anti-racism organisation Hope Not Hate has raised numerous concerns about Turning Point UK including links with conspiracy theorists.

3. OTHER PARTIES

Of course, incidents of antisemitism are not limited to the Conservative Party. The Labour Party has been accused of institutional antisemitism⁶⁰ and the Liberal Democrats, for example, have had to address allegations of antisemitism too.⁶¹

4. MOVING FORWARD

The Trust has always maintained that full-throated opposition to and condemnation of antisemitism by any party is important and welcome. However, partisan accusations are unhelpful compared to educative efforts, and the establishment of red lines for acceptable debate in our civil discourse.⁶² There can be no complacency in tackling

54 <https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/welsh-tory-brexit-entirely-his-own-views-12751483>

55 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2018/02/nick-timothy-telegraph-george-soros-anti-semitic>

56 <https://twitter.com/halfon4harlowmp/status/961533037853986821?lang=en>

57 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/feb/04/tory-mps-back-rightwing-youth-group-turning-point-uk>

58 <https://twitter.com/JamesCleverly/status/1094254318616805377>

59 <https://www.complex.com/life/2019/02/far-right-candace-owens-backlash-hitler-comments>

60 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/02/17/michael-dugher-quit-labour-amid-concerns-institutional-anti/>

61 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/apr/26/lib-dems-criticised-over-reselection-of-ex-mp-censured-for-antisemitism>

62 <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2017/10/danny-stone-conservatives-are-right-to-fight-antisemitism-but-beware-making-it-a-political-football.html>

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antisemitism and so each political party is encouraged to take every practicable step it has. The Conservative Party, as Government, has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. It would be a welcome move for the party itself to adopt the definition in its own structures. Constant education and a culture of opposition to antisemitism are important and any educative efforts by the party for its members will always be welcome.