

Why Australia's Jews also hope that it's not time for Jeremy Corbyn

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM November 29, 2019



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

According to Ephraim Mirvis, the Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, "the overwhelming majority of British Jews" are "gripped by anxiety" at the possibility of a Labour victory.

To Australians who remember the Whitlam years, those fears will be all too familiar. As Sam Lipski wrote at the time, Gough Whitlam's policies, and his attitude to the Jewish community, created "a spreading sense of collective and personal insecurity among many Australian Jews" who, "for the first time", saw their loyalty "questioned in ways which potentially threaten their acceptance in Australian society".

Seemingly obsessed with what he called "the crude blackmail" exercised by "Jewish pressures", Whitlam told V P Suslov, a senior official in the

Soviet foreign ministry, that he looked forward to the time when "the gradual increase in the size of the Arab population in Australia" would "balance" those pressures away.

The dismissal of the Labor government in November 1975 only raised Whitlam's obsessions to uncontrollable heights.

Desperately scouring for funds with which to wage the election that followed the dismissal, Whitlam told the government of Saddam Hussein, from whom he was seeking a \$1m contribution, the "Jewish pressures" against the "democratic forces" in Australia were "enormous" and could be rebuffed only with Iraq's aid.

Research by the University of Sydney's Suzanne Rutland shows Whitlam was willing to do whatever was needed to clinch the deal, promising the Iraqis that Labor, were it re-elected, would provide the regime with "special information" about the United States' relations with its allies in the Middle East.

But, despite everything, Whitlam was no Jeremy Corbyn. And, even more importantly, he was far from being representative of his party as a whole, with the ALP drastically changing course under Bob Hawke.

In contrast, as Mirvis put it: "A new poison — sanctioned from the top — has taken root in (Britain's) Labour Party." Declaring Labour's claim it is doing everything it can to stamp out the anti-Semitism a "mendacious fiction", Mirvis concluded that in next month's election, "the very soul of our nation is at stake".

That Corbyn's response would only have deepened the Chief Rabbi's concerns should be obvious. Interviewed on Wednesday by the BBC's Andrew Neil, Corbyn was asked four times whether he would like to apologise for the widely reported flaws in the party's handling of anti-Semitism.

Each time, he refused. Meanwhile, his closest allies hurled a torrent of abuse at Mirvis, accusing him of everything from bigotry to homophobia.

Unfortunately, Britain's Labour Party is not alone. As Peter Kurti demonstrates in a paper released earlier this month by the Centre for Independent Studies, anti-Semitic attitudes, which were once the exception, are rapidly becoming the norm in the "progressive" left worldwide.

To some extent that reflects the realities of political competition. According to a Pew Research Centre survey, more than 90 per cent of Muslims in Muslim-majority countries have an unfavourable view of Jews, with large numbers believing they are to blame for worsening relations between Muslims and the West.

As migrants from those countries constitute a rapidly growing share of left-leaning electorates in the advanced democracies, their prejudices have contaminated the outlook of politicians scrambling for Muslim votes.

But the Muslim share of Western electorates is scarcely large enough to account for much of the rise in anti-Semitism on the left.

Nor can it be explained by envy, hardship or insecurity, all of which underpinned the working-class anti-Semitism of the 1930s.

On the contrary, studies suggest the new anti-Semites are young, well-educated and reasonably well-off.

They are, of course, a heterogeneous group. However, what they have in common is the demonisation of Israel. That what unites them is an enemy is hardly unusual. Mass movements have never needed to share a god; what they have always needed is to share a devil.

In this case, the devil is a state in the Middle East that, like every other

state, has no shortage of flaws. In reality, however, the Israel they abhor is not the country as it is, with all its virtues and vices; it is a construct into which they pour resentments that readily generalise into a new form of the age-old hatred of Jews.

And, much as occurred with the old anti-Semitism, what makes the new form so dangerous is that its target can act as a focal point for hatreds of many different kinds.

For some, Israel's assertive modernity is the ultimate symbol of the West, which they detest with the passion only self-loathers can mobilise.

But alongside that anti-Semitism of the Third Worldists, there is, particularly in Europe, also a growing anti-Semitism of the comfortable elites. As French sociologist Danny Trom has found, what they loath is not Israel's modernity but its commitment to values they would rather bury.

In an age of appeasement it rejects fashionable pieties, instead returning blow with blow. At a time when the "nowheres" are triumphant and the nation is denigrated as a straitjacket, it harbours a fierce patriotism. And in a world of disposable selfhood, where you are whoever you want to be, it remains stubbornly attached to an identity gained by birth and forged by faith.

It is, for all those reasons, the perfect object for the hatred of Third Worldists and cosmopolitans alike. Add to that mix the bacilli, which were never quite extinguished, of the old anti-Semitic tropes — conspiracy theory, national betrayal, secret global power — and the result is a brew as potent as it is toxic.

None of that implies a Corbyn government would unleash a new holocaust, though one should never forget Hannah Arendt's grim admonition that "it is in the very nature of things human that once a

specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been”.

What is certain, however, is that a Corbyn government, ditching the tradition of tolerance Australia so proudly inherited, would shut down all cultural exchanges with Israel, isolating and crippling Britain's Jewish schools; it would turn a blind eye to the venom pouring out of Islamic fundamentalists, fuelling the attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions that have become ever more widespread; and it would stand idly by as Iran and its clients prepared a war of extermination that could see the destruction of Israel and its people. It would, in those ways and many others, leave Britain and the world a darker, poorer, more dangerous place.

Britain's Jews, like those of Europe as a whole, are therefore right to feel anxious. And if history proves anything it is that, when they feel anxious, so should we.