

## Corbyn and Anti-Semitism

### - Prof Gus John answers Archbishop Welby

#### Of Stained-Glass Houses and Stones

***On 26 November 2019, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, backed the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis in his condemnation of Jeremy Corbyn's handling of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, stating that Mirvis' criticism of Corbyn and the Labour Party should 'alert us to the deep sense of insecurity and fear felt by many British Jews'. In response, Professor Gus John, independent consultant and a lay member of the Archbishops' Council's Committee on Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns (CMEAC)\*wrote:***

So, the jury has returned its verdict. Jeremy Corbyn has failed the fitness to practice test. His fitness to lead the nation has been tested in his handling of complaints of anti-Semitism within the Labour Party and he has failed that test. What is more, under his watch the Labour Party is suffering the 'shame' of being investigated by the government's anti-discrimination watchdog, the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

This is all most intriguing. Let's take a moment to dissect it. Corbyn is considered unfit to lead a government because with him at the helm his party has failed to deal swiftly and decisively with the anti-Semitic conduct of a minute proportion of its members. This has caused hurt among the Jewish population and alienated Jewish supporters of Labour. So, Corbyn is presumed to be guilty of 'joint enterprise', because although he himself is a committed anti-racist and against anti-Jewish racism, by implication he has colluded with those who are not by failing to act decisively against them. As such, his is taken to be a failure of leadership in that he did not ensure that appropriate mechanisms existed within the Labour Party to deal with complaints of anti-Semitism in a timely fashion. But, the absence of such mechanisms and processes is an organisational and institutional issue. The matters being complained against and being investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission are ones which are to do mainly with the conduct of individuals, whether they are rank and file members of the Labour Party or people holding official positions in the party.

Why this distinction? It seems to me that what is missing in this whole hysterical discourse which sounds increasingly like populism on speed, is that discrimination against any group or population in society who are rendered outsiders and not quite considered integral to the body politic typically manifests in at least four observable ways: structural, cultural, institutional and personal. In this case, the actions of individuals in the Labour Party and what those actions indicate about their attitudes to the Jewish community are considered to be indicative of an embedded culture of anti-Semitism within Labour, a culture

presumably endorsed and sustained by Jeremy Corbyn, if only by his failure to deal with the people responsible for perpetuating it in a timely fashion.

So, the Chief Rabbi proclaims with all the authority that goes with his position that Jeremy Corbyn is not fit to lead a government of a country in which Jews that have been so let down by him have to continue not only to live but to be full citizens. The actions of people within the Labour Party whom he has failed to deal with have caused the entire Jewish community to have cause to look over their shoulders as they go about their daily business and the responsibility for that must be laid at Corbyn's feet. The sense I make of that is that combating racism and anti-Semitism will not be safe in Corbyn's hands, so on 12 December, people should think carefully about what they do in the ballot box and let their conscience lead them, because if he has failed to do his duty by the Jewish community and to get that right, he surely cannot be trusted to get anything else right. The media on the other hand reacts to the Chief Rabbi as if he were the Pope, speaking for all British Jews as the Pope would for all Roman Catholics. Secular Jews and those who do not hold with the views of Jews for Labour are considered not to matter.

It seems to me that the Chief Rabbi and those powerful figures like the Archbishop of Canterbury who have weighed in behind him are being more than a little sectarian and establishing a hierarchy of oppression if they seriously expect the entire nation to judge Corbyn and his capacity to run the country for the good of all its citizens on the basis of their assessment of his performance in dealing with anti-Semitism.

This is all happening at a time when, despite the government and the media focusing on Brexit as the only show in town, people's lives are being lost and their fundamental rights being trampled upon as a direct consequence of the government's hostile environment. At a time when citizens of the African and Asian diaspora have to be constantly 'looking over their shoulder' for fear of being ambushed by border force apparatchiks, or by right wing vigilantes who appoint themselves as defenders of our country and its borders. At a time when employers, landlords, schools/colleges/universities, doctors surgeries, A & E departments and other health providers are being appointed without their say so as immigration officers and extensions of the UK's border force under the Immigration Act 2016; when people who as young black men were harassed and criminalised by the police 40 years ago under the 'Sus' law are being told now that they are undocumented and they must leave the UK because they have a criminal record and have therefore forfeited their right to remain; when undocumented workers who having been denied benefits are having whatever earnings they derive from casual work confiscated as 'proceeds of crime'; children being excluded from school for not having the proper uniform because they are being fed from food banks and their parents/carers cannot afford to buy the clothes and shoes that would make them compliant with the school's uniform policy. One could go on.

I am not aware of the Chief Rabbi or/and the Archbishop of Canterbury alerting the nation to the quality of leadership that perpetrates and sustains such human rights violations. I have been an external examiner for colleges and universities for the last forty years. I have lived in the UK since 1964. I am to attend an examining board next week where a student will be defending her PhD thesis and I have been given strict instructions to make sure and

bring my passport to prove I have the right to work, or else I won't be able to present my external examiner's report.

This is the state at structural level doing to sections of the population what the Chief Rabbi is accusing the leader of the Labour Party of being nonchalant about with respect to his party's treatment of Jews. If the number of deaths in custody that the African community has suffered for half a century without a single police officer being found guilty of murder or manslaughter had occurred within the Jewish community, by now the entire nation would have been brought to a standstill. Given our interlocking histories on the axis of race, ethnicity and class in post-colonial Britain, no one group in the society has a monopoly on oppression, or on hurt.

And what gives the Archbishop of Canterbury the right to endorse the Chief Rabbi's scaremongering about Corbyn and adopt such a lofty moral position in defence of the Jewish population? I have often had cause to wonder how it is that Justin Welby was made Archbishop of Canterbury, rather than John Sentamu. Sentamu consecrated Welby as Bishop of Durham in York Minster in October 2011. By November 2012, just one year after becoming a Bishop, it was announced that Justin Welby was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, though it was widely expected – in some circles at least - that Sentamu would get that post. Sentamu was a highly respected black senior cleric and had been a Bishop since 1996 and Archbishop of York since 2005, six years before he consecrated Welby a Bishop. It may well be that the appointments committee prayed and fasted and sought divine revelation before making their choice, so let me not gainsay the workings of the Holy Spirit! Be that as it may, if Anglicans in the UK from the African and Asian diaspora were to judge Justin Welby as the leader of the established church by the same criteria he appears to be employing in his assessment of Jeremy Corbyn, he too would fail the fitness to lead test. There are numerous reasons why Anglican clergy, laity and employees within the Anglican Church who are so-called black and ethnic minority don't call out the Archbishop of Canterbury on racism in the church and its leadership, in the same way that he sees fit to join the orchestrated condemnation of Jeremy Corbyn. Maybe, just maybe, he has now given them permission to do so. Those who occupy houses clad with stained glass should perhaps be a trifle more careful when they join others in throwing stones.

Professor Gus John  
26 November 2019

**\* Professor John resigned from CMEAC on 29 November 2019. Copy of his resignation letter is pasted here:**

29 November 2019

Dr Elizabeth Henry  
National Adviser Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns  
Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns  
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Dear Elizabeth

### **Taking A Stand - CMEAC Membership**

It disturbed me to read and hear media reports earlier this week of Archbishop Justin Welby's support for the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, in his condemnation of the Labour Party's and Jeremy Corbyn's record on dealing with anti-Semitism in Labour ranks.

As a lay member of the Committee on Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns (CMEAC) in my capacity as voluntary consultant, I am fully aware of the work that CMEAC has done these last three decades to identify the myriad ways in which the Anglican Church and its structures and processes have failed to tackle racism in the Church in all its structural, cultural, institutional and personal manifestations. Indeed, while there has undoubtedly been progress on a number of fronts, the Church's record on combating racism is no less woeful now that it was thirty years ago. Black and global majority people in the Church, whether as clergy, laity or employees are still experiencing discrimination and exclusion, benign and sugar-coated or otherwise, at every level of organisation in the Church and yet, their active presence in communion with the Church is responsible for its survival and buoyancy in many communities. Typically, people suffer great distress, in silence, or just leave whether as employees or church members, with dire consequences for their health and wellbeing in many cases, while the Church's failure to confront the hegemony of whiteness and the way black and global majority people experience the institution continues apace.

The Chief Rabbi is effectively telling the nation that combating racism and anti-Semitism will not be safe in Jeremy Corbyn's hands, so on 12 December, people should think carefully about what they do in the ballot box and let their conscience lead them, because if Corbyn has failed to do his duty by the Jewish community and to get that right, he surely cannot be trusted to get anything else right. The media on the other hand reacts to the Chief Rabbi as if he were the Pope, speaking for all British Jews as the Pope would for all Roman Catholics. Secular Jews and those who do not hold with the views of Jews for Labour are considered not to matter. For his part, Justin Welby weighs in behind the Chief Rabbi and preaches to Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: 'Voicing words that commit to a stand against anti-Semitism requires a corresponding effort in visible action'. He went on to say that political parties 'must make it an absolute priority to offer positive reassurance' to the Jewish community.

We are going into an election with the Immigration Act of 2016 still in place and with black and Asian elders impacted by the government's 'hostile environment' still dying, in unlawful detention, or waiting for compensation for being wrongly targeted by the government; with people who as young black men were harassed and criminalised by the police 40 years ago under the 'Sus' law being told now that they must leave the UK because they have a criminal record and have therefore forfeited their right to remain. What 'positive reassurance' is the Archbishop of Canterbury insisting that political parties give the many

thousands rendered vulnerable by the government's 'hostile' environment? No one section of the population of this nation has a monopoly on oppression, pain and hurt.

It seems to me that the Chief Rabbi and those powerful figures like the Archbishop of Canterbury who have weighed in behind him are being more than a little sectarian and establishing a hierarchy of oppression if they seriously expect the entire nation to judge Corbyn and his capacity to run the country for the good of all its citizens on the basis of their assessment of his performance in dealing with anti-Semitism. Brexit and anti-Semitism do not define the reality, life and death reality in far too many cases, of all groups, faiths or ethnic nationalities in the population.

So, back to CMEAC. I have given of my time voluntarily and selflessly over the last few years to help the Anglican Church address perennial issues to do with racial and social justice. A major impediment to CMEAC's capacity to effect change is an insistence at leadership levels within the Church on business as usual and on pouring the balm of Gilead on people's pain and suffering on account of racism, rather than embracing responsibility for rooting it out from deep within the encrusted culture and structures of the Church. Speaking for myself, therefore, as one associated with seeking to focus the Church on combating racism these last 55 years, I consider it a most egregious form of hubris for the Archbishop of Canterbury to endorse the Chief Rabbi's condemnation of Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party.

Maybe some kind soul might counsel Justin Welby that those who occupy houses clad with stained glass should perhaps be a trifle more careful when they join others in throwing stones.

I have enjoyed working with CMEAC and have made genuine friends among you, but as a matter of principle, I cannot continue to work with the Anglican Church, especially on a committee advising the Archbishop's Council, after the Archbishop of Canterbury's disgraceful endorsement of the Chief Rabbi's unjust condemnation of Jeremy Corbyn and the entire Labour Party. I therefore resign from CMEAC with immediate effect.

All good wishes in your continuing struggle against racism and for equity and social justice.

Respectfully yours,

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