

# ANTISEMITISM POLICY TRUST

## ANTISEMITISM AND THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT PARTY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nearly all political parties have at some point in their existence faced, in some form, allegations of racism, and specifically, antisemitism. The Liberal Democrat Party is not immune from this. Incidents relating to Lib Dem candidates and officials have been reported in the press.

### 2. INCIDENTS INVOLVING LIBERAL DEMOCRAT REPRESENTATIVES

A number of cases of alleged and proven antisemitism in the Liberal Democrat party relate to members of the parliamentary party

#### MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

In 2016<sup>1</sup> former Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament and present House of Lords peer, Baroness Jenny Tonge, was suspended over allegations of antisemitism and, as a result, resigned from the party to sit as an Independent. Concerns about Tonge's actions have included her: blaming "the Israeli government for the hatred behind the mass shooting in Pittsburgh that claimed the lives of 11 people"<sup>2</sup>; posting a cartoon comparing the Israeli treatment of Palestinians to the Holocaust<sup>3</sup>; and comments she made that "the pro-Israeli lobby has got its grips on the western world, its financial grips. I think they've probably got a grip on our party"<sup>4</sup>. In 2008, Tonge claimed that "the Jewish lobby in the US ... make all political parties obey the will of Israel"<sup>5</sup> and in 2010 whilst commended the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) for a "fantastic response to the Haitian earthquake" she suggested that to prevent allegations of organ harvesting, the IDF and the Israeli Medical Association should "establish an independent inquiry immediately to clear the names of the team in Haiti"<sup>6</sup>. Over the years, Tonge has been condemned by other Peers and Ministers<sup>7</sup> members of other parties<sup>8</sup> and Jewish Communal organisations.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> Though, in 2010 Lord Wallace of Saltaire, then leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, defended Baroness Tonge's comments about Haiti and Israel as an "over-emotional approach".<sup>12</sup> In her defence, Wallace stated that "Israel should be held to a higher standard of behaviour than other countries: "We don't judge Saudi Arabia by the same standards as Israel because Israel was

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/27/jenny-tonge-quits-lib-dems-after-suspension-for-alleged-antisemitic-comments>

2 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/baroness-tonge-antisemitism-pittsburgh-shooting-lib-dems-peer-house-of-lords-a8605341.html>

3 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/tonge-sorry-for-antisemitic-cartoon-posted-on-facebook-a3531526.html>

4 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5366870.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5366870.stm)

5 <http://hurryupharry.org/2008/07/25/what-baroness-tonge-said/>

6 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/tonge-investigate-idf-stealing-organs-in-haiti-1.13971>

7 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/peers-round-on-jenny-tonge-as-lord-winston-says-grandchildren-need-guards/>

8 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/tonge-sorry-for-antisemitic-cartoon-posted-on-facebook-a3531526.html>

9 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5366870.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5366870.stm)

10 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/topic/jenny-tonge/>

11 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/baroness-tonge-shares-article-about-jewish-power/>

12 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/lib-dem-lords-deputy-leader-causes-board-walkout-1.15058>

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built upon higher standards”<sup>13</sup>.

Concerns were repeatedly raised about the comments of former Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament David Ward, who served as MP for Bradford East from 2010- 2015. In advance of Holocaust Memorial Day in 2013, Ward stated “having visited Auschwitz twice — once with my family and once with local schools — I am saddened that the Jews, who suffered unbelievable levels of persecution during the Holocaust, could within a few years of liberation from the death camps be inflicting atrocities on Palestinians in the new State of Israel and continue to do so on a daily basis in the West Bank and Gaza.... In a later statement he added: “It appears that the suffering by the Jews has not transformed their views on how others should be treated”<sup>14</sup>. Ward was condemned by Jewish organisations and others including Holocaust survivors for his comments, which placed blame on Jews rather than Israel’s Government for its policies.<sup>15</sup> Whilst elected, Ward also tweeted a number of tweets about Israel’s right to exist including one reading “at long last the Zionists are losing the battle - how long can the apartheid State of Israel last?”<sup>16</sup>. As a result, Alistair Carmichael wrote to Ward in 2013 notifying him that he was to have the whip removed for three months.<sup>17</sup> “After being readmitted to the party, Mr Ward said he would “probably” fire a rocket into Israel if he lived in the Palestinian territory of Gaza”<sup>18</sup>. In 2017, Tim Farron expelled Ward, who was a councillor, from the party citing his record on antisemitism, and preventing Ward from being selected as a candidate.<sup>19</sup> In an interview following the decision, Ward told the BBC that “supporters of Israel are using this as a tactic. It’s an attempt to stop supporters of the Palestinians getting into Parliament”<sup>20</sup>.

In 2014, Wera Hobhouse MP tweeted “#gaza seems to remind terribly of Nazi ghettos in which Jews were trapped during Holocaust. For what reason do we remember Holocaust?”<sup>21</sup>. In 2015, she also tweeted “‘Israel cynically using memory of the Holocaust’. ‘Never again this suffering to anybody not just Jews’ #bbcthebigquestion”<sup>22</sup>. These tweets are particularly offensive to Jewish people, particularising and weaponising the shared Jewish communal experience and memory of genocide which led to the creation of a national Jewish homeland, in part as some form of admonition for an imagined collective responsibility for Israel’s governmental policies. This is Holocaust equivocation.

In 2011, Liberal Democrat Peer Lord Phillips of Sudbury was recorded saying that: “The world we are now moving into has been turned upside down. The Jews aren’t lacking in intelligence, they may be deeply prejudiced, many of them, but they are going to be saying the same sort of thing as you on the panel are saying [about the Middle East after the Arab uprisings].”<sup>23</sup> In 2012, he spoke in a debate in the House of Lords in which following comments outlining his

13 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/lib-dem-lords-deputy-leader-causes-board-walkout-1.15058>

14 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/liberal-democrat-mp-david-ward-in-row-over-holocaust-remarks-g9bhnkrwffw>

15 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/david-ward-1.436925>

16 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/liberal-democrats-suspend-whip-from-david-ward-1.47009>

17 <https://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-07-18/whip-israel-tweet-neither-proportionate-nor-precise/>

18 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/796951/general-election-2017-Tim-Farron-sacks-candidate-David-Ward-Liberal-Democrat-anti-Semitism>

19 <https://news.sky.com/story/lib-dems-drop-anti-semitic-candidate-david-ward-10851772>

20 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39723144>

21 [https://twitter.com/Wera\\_Hobhouse/status/496042207506612224](https://twitter.com/Wera_Hobhouse/status/496042207506612224)

22 [https://twitter.com/Wera\\_Hobhouse/status/559298825375203329](https://twitter.com/Wera_Hobhouse/status/559298825375203329)

23 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/jews-many-are-just-prejudiced-1.21441>

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support and affection for British Jews and for Israel, he said: “The tragedy is that a great country and a great people have so demeaned themselves and behaved in a manner that is not just contrary to international law but contrary to simple morality and decency that I genuinely believe that they are now on a suicide path.”<sup>24</sup>

In 2006, former MEP Chris Davies resigned as leader of the Liberal Democratic party in the European Parliament after having responded to an email of complaint sent to him by denouncing<sup>25,26</sup> “the influence of the Jewish lobby that seems to have far too great a say over the political decision-making process in many countries”.<sup>27</sup> It was reported that Davies apologised for the language used in his emails.<sup>28</sup>

In September 2016, former Conservative MP, Matthew Gordon Banks, who had joined the Liberal Democrats in 2009 was suspended for tweeting, “what fascinates me is that Farron’s leadership campaign was organised and funded by London Jews.” Later tweeting, “I tried to work with them. Very difficult” and when challenged over his remarks: “I don’t care. It is not good for Farron to be funded and supported by one religious group”.<sup>29</sup> Mr Banks later re-joined the Conservative Party.

## LIBERAL DEMOCRAT CANDIDATES

In 2019 it was reported<sup>30</sup> that the Liberal Democrats had suspended local council candidate Abjol Miah for sharing an antisemitic video on social media five years prior<sup>31,32</sup>. Whilst Miah apologised for sharing the content, the party announced that Mr Miah’s “party membership has been revoked, pending an investigation by the Regional Party... following news that the Liberal Democrat candidate for Shadwell had shared content in 2014 that contained antisemitic sentiment”.<sup>33</sup> Mr Miah stated in his apology that “the video in no way represents my views or those of the Liberal Democrats. I have worked closely with members of Tower Hamlets’ Jewish community, built trust and understanding and learned about the discrimination which they continue to face. I am very upset that my earlier error might damage that trust and would like to assure the community that I stand with them in solidarity against antisemitism and discrimination of all forms”.<sup>34</sup>

In 2017, Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate, Ashuk Ahmed MBE was suspended for posting a series of antisemitic Facebook messages comparing the Israeli Prime Minister to Hitler, claiming that “Zionists control half the world” and others suggesting political parties were controlled by ‘Zionist paymasters’.<sup>35</sup>

24 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldhansrd/text/121203-0002.htm#12120343000211>

25 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/may/05/liberalmepresignsafterinvi>

26 <https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/British-Jews-praise-Liberal-action-against-racist-member>

27 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/opinion-anti-semitism-has-its-roots-deeply-planted-in-the-left/>

28 <https://euobserver.com/political/21519>

29 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/lib-dems-suspend-former-tory-mp-over-antisemitic-rant-1.53458>

30 <https://order-order.com/2019/02/07/lib-dems-quietly-ditch-anti-semitic-candidate/>

31 <https://www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/shadwell-candidate-abjol-miah-suspended-by-the-liberal-democrats-1-5882615>

32 <https://order-order.com/2019/02/04/lib-dem-candidate-tower-hamlets-fan-kkks-david-duke/>

33 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/liberal-democrats-suspend-council-campaign-after-candidate-found-to-have-shared-antisemitic-video-1.479671>

34 *ibid*

35 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4443446/Lib-Dems-forced-suspend-anti-Semitic-candidate.html>

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Jane Brophy, the Liberal Democrat Mayoral candidate for Manchester, said Orthodox Jewish UK Independence Party rival Shneur Odze should choose between his faith or running for office, due to his religious practice of not shaking hands with the opposite sex<sup>36</sup>. Odze had previously been accosted by an abusive crowd and told to ‘go home’ by protesters holding signs reading ‘strength in diversity’.<sup>37</sup> He was later embroiled in controversy himself, surrounding remarks he had made about burning texts.<sup>38</sup>

In 2015, Liberal Democrat candidate, Peter Hirst, declined to support the ‘Jewish manifesto’ initiative of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, stating that: “How you treat the Palestinian people prevents me from signing up [to] this otherwise welcome manifesto”. The Board of Deputies Chief Executive Gillian Merron said: “Regardless of Dr Hirst’s views on the situation in the Middle East, his willingness to hold British Jews responsible for a complex conflict and to subsequently refuse to back the community on issues such as antisemitism, religious freedoms and promoting tolerance, as outlined in the Board’s Jewish Manifesto, is deeply disturbing.”<sup>39</sup>

Labour MP Alex Sobel and former MP, the late Gerald Kaufman have both criticised their Liberal Democrat opponents for using antisemitism in their campaigning.<sup>4041</sup>

## ASSOCIATED GROUPS

The Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine group apologised, in 2014, for having repeatedly linked via Facebook to articles on a notorious American antisemitic hate website, The Ugly Truth.<sup>42</sup>

36 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/strictly-orthodox-ukip-candidate-should-not-run-for-office-say-critics-1.433519>

37 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/763977/Ukip-Stoke-left-wing-protesters-go-home-Jewish-man-Shneur-Odze>

38 <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-ukip-candidate-apology-for-burning-missionary-bible/>

39 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/ukip-candidate-sends-abusive-tweets-to-jewish-politicians-1.66473>

40 [https://twitter.com/kevin\\_larkin/status/1121819510640644096](https://twitter.com/kevin_larkin/status/1121819510640644096)

41 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/lib-dem-used-racist-tactics-says-kaufman-1.15831>

42 <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/117741/lib-dems-palestine-group-says-sorry-over-links-holocaust-denial-website>