

Contemporary Antisemitism in the Political Discourse in Britain

We need to address the casual acceptance of some of the old [antisemitic] tropes. I feel strongly about this because Judaism is a fundamental part of the British identity. If we were to see, as France has seen, Jews starting to leave the country, we would be diminished—we wouldn't be Britain anymore. It's not the old cliché about Jews being the 'canary in the coal mine,' it's about what makes Britain tick—and without Jewish people, Britain would not tick properly (Zieve, 2018).

—Lord Eric Pickles²⁸

During the last decade, and for the first time since the Holocaust and the end of World War II, antisemitism has become a central issue in the political and public discourse in Britain. It is one of the most controversial issues witnessed in Britain's political arena in recent years. The parliamentary elections in 2019 exposed the severity of the problem, although members of Parliament, particularly Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of the Labour Party, made antisemitic statements before the 2019 elections. The gravity of the accusations of antisemitism and the many scandals that emerged from the Labour Party from 2015 to 2020 led to the dismal outcome in which many of Britain's Jews abandoned the party after having been its most loyal supporters for decades; for them, the Labour Party had been their political home (Mueller, 2019). According to Gillian Merron, the head of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and former minister on behalf of the Labour Party, "anti-Semitism in Britain is already not a hidden problem but one that visible and on center stage. Surprisingly, it is at the heart of our politics" (Eichner, 2019).

The rise in the degree of antisemitism in Britain did not occur in a vacuum. The phenomenon is part of the growing upward trend in hate crimes against minorities in Britain, particularly given the “refugee crisis” and the arrival of refugees to the UK since 2015 and given the result of the referendum on whether the UK should leave the EU—known as Brexit—in the summer of 2016 (Community Security Trust [CST], 2019).

During the years 2015–2016, more than one million immigrants arrived in Europe in the hope of gaining asylum. This wave of immigration posed a major challenge for the EU, primarily in terms of how to handle the immigration and the “distribution of the burden” among the member countries, which then included Britain. During these years, a political debate in Britain ensued between the supporters of a euro-sceptic “nation state” and those of globalism and a supranational system (the EU) (Rosner and Kantor, 2018, p. 7). Fear of immigration to Britain was seen as the motivating factor in support of Brexit (Nahari, 2016), with 51.9% of the voters supporting the UK’s exit from the EU compared to 48.1% who opposed it. The emotional and highly charged discourse on Brexit contributed to Jew-hatred and racism against other minorities throughout the UK (Rosner and Kantor, 2018).

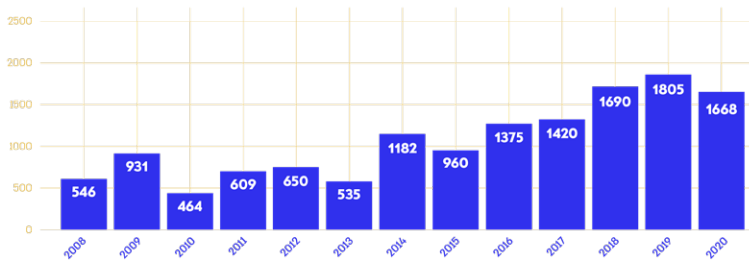
Background

The Jewish community in Britain numbers close to 300,000 people and constitutes the fifth-largest Jewish community in the world; in Europe, it is second in size only to France (World Jewish Congress, n.d.e). The Jews in Britain currently constitute 0.44% of the total British population and are concentrated primarily in and around the large cities, such as London and Manchester. It is a diverse community in terms of religious and cultural affiliation, as well as socioeconomic status. Jews are prominent in public life and are well represented in the government, the economic system, civil society organizations, the legal system, and the defense sector. In terms of religious-cultural affiliation, about 26% define themselves as traditional, 24% as secular, 18% as progressive, 12% as Orthodox, and 4% as ultra-Orthodox (World Jewish Congress, n.d.e).

The CST, the security organization of British Jewry, monitors antisemitic incidents. In 2019 it reported 1,805 antisemitic incidents, the highest number since the monitoring began in 1984 (see Figure 16). This is the fourth year in a row in which the number of antisemitic incidents rose (CST, 2019). In

2020 the number of antisemitic incidents dropped slightly, to 1,668 incidents, still a relatively high number considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdowns that have occurred since March of the same year. The CST also recorded 180 antisemitic incidents relating specifically to political parties in the UK, 175 of which were associated with the Labour Party (CST, 2020).

Figure 16. Overview of Antisemitic Incidents in Britain 2008–2020



Note. From CST, *Antisemitic Incidents Report 2020*.

A survey carried out by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in Britain in 2019 of a sample of the general population found that 11% of the respondents agreed with 6 or more antisemitic stereotypes about Jews (see Figure 17) (ADL, 2019). A public opinion poll about classic antisemitic stereotypes, conducted by the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA), based on a representative sample of the adult population in Britain, found that 20% of the population thought it was “definitely true” or “probably true” that “British Jewish people chase money more than other British people.” 14% believed that “having a connection to Israel makes Jewish people less loyal to Britain than other British people,” and 10% believed that “Jewish people talk about the Holocaust just to further their political agenda.” Similar surveys over the last five years reveal that the public opinion toward Jews has not significantly changed since then and that the referendum on Brexit did not significantly affect the public opinion toward the Jewish minority in Britain (CAA, 2019).

Figure 17. ADL Poll on Antisemitism in Britain

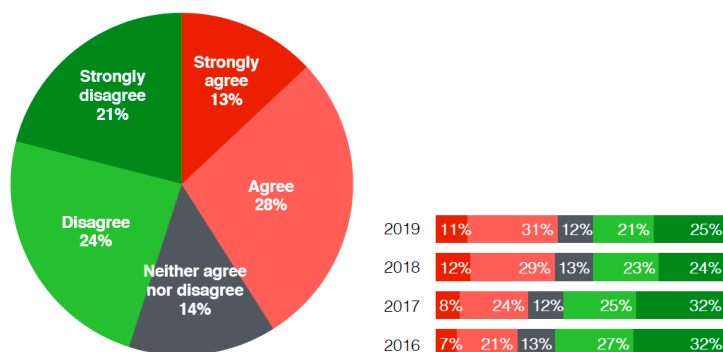


Note. From ADL, *ADL Global 100: An Index of Anti-Semitism, United Kingdom, 2019*.

Surveys carried out in recent years among British Jews reveal a deep-seated fear of antisemitism in the political system. In 2020, 41% of the respondents stated that they had considered leaving Britain during the last two years due to antisemitism (see Figure 18). Of those, 85% gave antisemitism in Britain's political parties as the main reason for why they had considered leaving Britain (see Figure 19) (CAA, 2020).

Figure 18. Percentage of Jews who Consider Leaving Britain due to Antisemitism

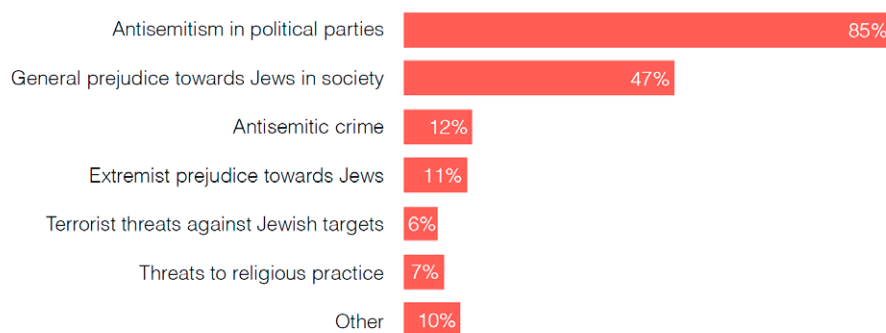
Question: "In the past two years I have considered leaving Britain due to antisemitism."



Note. From CAA, *Antisemitism Barometer 2020*.

Figure 19. Reasons Why Jews in Britain Consider Leaving

Question: "What are your main reasons for considering leaving the UK? Please select up to two options."



Note. From CAA, *Antisemitism Barometer 2020*.

British Efforts to Address Antisemitism

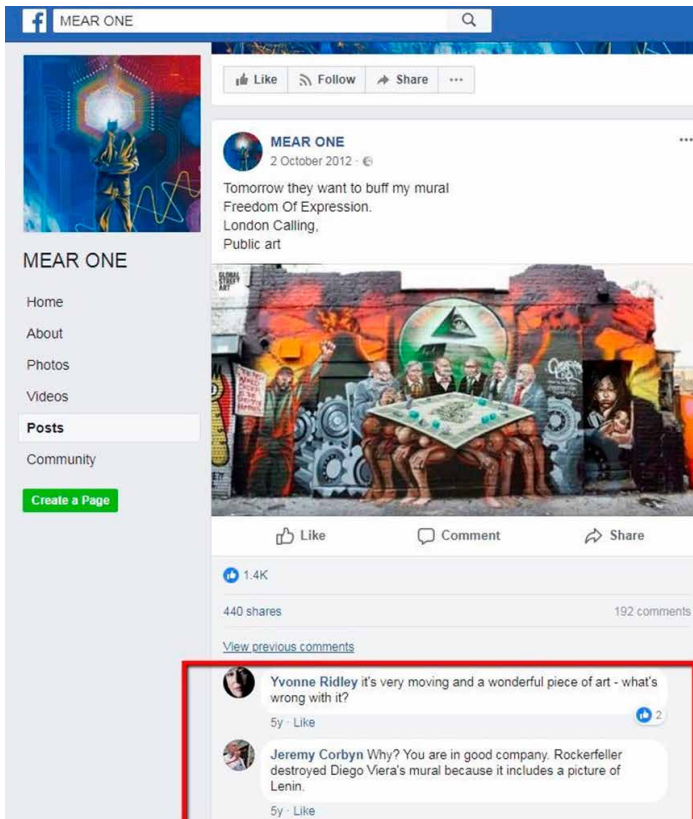
In December 2016, the British government officially adopted the definition of antisemitism formulated by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). The government also appointed Lord John Mann as an independent advisor in the struggle against antisemitism. Since 2016,

the Home Office has gathered information from the legal authorities on hate crimes (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019). As previously mentioned, the CST is the main nongovernmental organization in Britain whose goal is to fight the phenomenon of antisemitism in Britain. It provides advice, training, and security services to Jewish organizations and institutions in the UK and also shares information with the legal authorities on hate crimes in general and antisemitic incidents in particular. Another important organization is the Board of Deputies of British Jews; it is the main body representing the community and also serves as the British branch of the World Jewish Congress. In January 2020, the Board of Deputies presented a document concerning antisemitism in the Labour Party, entitled “Ten Pledges to End the Antisemitism Crisis.” The document partly called for a rapid assessment of antisemitism in the party; the full adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism as its standard for evaluating antisemitism in the party; a prohibition on allowing individuals who have made antisemitic remarks to return to the party; and the adoption of educational programs to combat racism (Board of Deputies of British Jews, 2020).

Another organization addressing antisemitism is the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA), which was founded in the summer of 2014 by British Jewish activists following a rise in antisemitic incidents in Britain during Israel’s military campaign of Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip. Operating in cooperation with the legal authorities in the UK, the CAA reports on antisemitic incidents in British politics and elsewhere, engages in legal battles related to antisemitism, and publishes public opinion surveys on antisemitic views among the general public and the sense of security among Jews in Britain.

Antisemitism Among the Left and the Crisis in the Labour Party

According to David Rich, head of policy at CST, antisemitism in Britain has become a national political issue for the first time in decades, especially following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in 2015. According to Rich, Corbyn represents a radical left-wing of the party, which views Israel as a racist apartheid state and Zionism as a colonialist movement that is part of Western imperialism (see Figure 20). In addition to these views, which Corbyn shares, party members who support Corbyn have subscribed to conspiracy theories—such as the involvement of the

Figure 20. Corbyn's Defense of Antisemitic Mural

Note. From JTA, After six years, Corbyn now regrets defending “antisemitic” London mural, *Haaretz*, March 26, 2018.

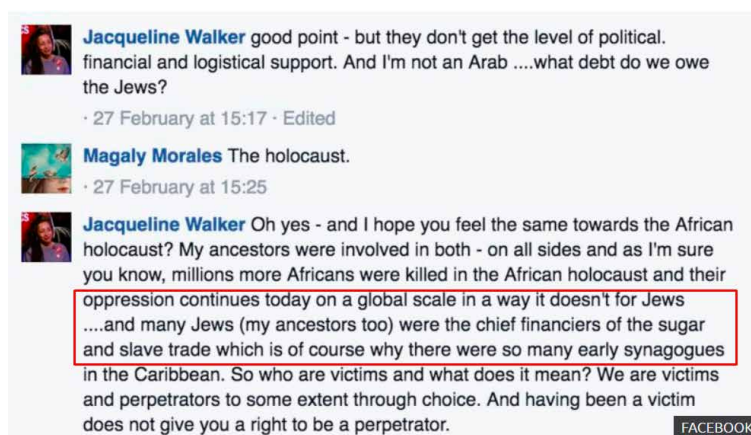
Rothschilds in British politics and Israel’s involvement in the Islamic State terror organization (see Figure 21 and Figure 22)—all overtly antisemitic as they relate to Israel (Rich, 2018). Until Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, antisemitism had not been considered a political issue in Britain. Even the phenomena of antisemitic incidents and the publishing of antisemitic cartoons in the media did not appear to be widespread throughout Britain and its politics, as combating antisemitism generally won support across party lines. A study that examined the correlation between antisemitic attitudes and British voting patterns found that agreement with antisemitic statements and stereotypes among Labour voters had peaked between 2016 and 2018 and then fell drastically in 2020 (Allington, 2020).

Figure 21. Labour Party Member “Likes” Article Relating Israel to ISIS



Note. From Hurry Up Harry (Blog), Meet David Watson of Walhamstom Labour, April 27, 2016.

Figure 22. Antisemitic Comments by Labour Party Activist



Note. From BBC, Labour suspends activist over alleged anti-semitic comments, May 5, 2016.

This situation has changed in recent years, however, with the rise of Corbyn. From then on, antisemitism became a party issue, serving as a tool for the Conservative Party to use against Labour, and as the central claim made against Corbyn by his opponents in the Labour Party. In February 2016, for example, Alex Chalmers, the head of the Labour Club at Oxford University, resigned in protest against the club's support for "Israeli Apartheid Week," which included protest activities against Israel. Chalmers claimed that the club members had expressed anti-Zionist and antisemitic views, in addition to displaying a denigrating attitude toward the Jewish students. After the publication of Chalmers' accusations, others began voicing similar complaints about antisemitic statements made by party members and its leaders (Rich, 2018). For example, in 2014, Naz Shah, before being elected to Parliament, had shared a post on Facebook that suggested "transferring Israel to the US" (Milligan, 2016). As a result, she was suspended from the Labour Party for three months, after which she apologized for her statements and met with leaders of the Jewish community in Britain (Rich, 2018). Salim Mulla, the former mayor of Blackburn, also claimed that Israel was responsible for the Islamic State terror attacks in Paris in 2015 and the massacre at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in the US in 2012. Mulla was banned from the Labour Party in 2016 (Adar, 2016). As a result of these and other incidents, Jewish members of the Labour Party, as well as journalists and public figures, accused Corbyn, the party's leader, of creating an unprecedented, "convenient atmosphere" for antisemitism (Kirchik, 2019).

Figure 23. Facebook Posts by Labour Party Member Naz Shah

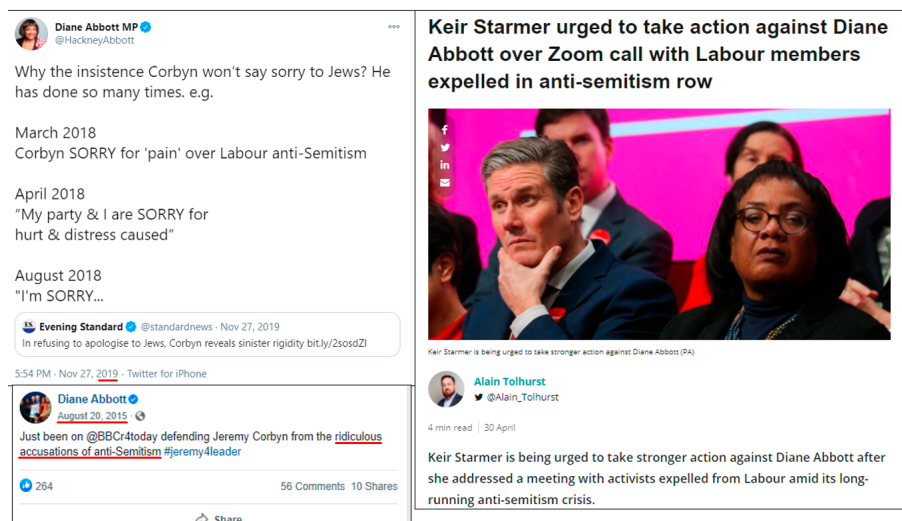


Note. From UK Parliament, Antisemitism in the UK: Political discourse and leadership, October 14, 2016.

A Labour Party report from 2016 on the issue of antisemitism within its ranks claimed that although it was not a widespread problem, some party members had made significant antisemitic statements (Scott, 2020). In 2018, additional criticism was voiced by the party's members when the party adopted a definition of antisemitism that differed from that of the IHRA. This definition did not include the criteria that the IHRA had defined as antisemitism, which included accusing Jews as being more loyal to Israel than to their own nations; the claim that the very existence of the State of Israel constitutes an expression of racism; the comparison between Israel's policy and that of the Nazis; and the application of higher standards to Israel than to other countries (BBC, 2018a; Butterworth, 2018). Given the widespread criticism of the problematic definition of antisemitism as adopted by the Labour Party, in September 2018, the party agreed to adopt the IHRA definition (BBC, 2018b).

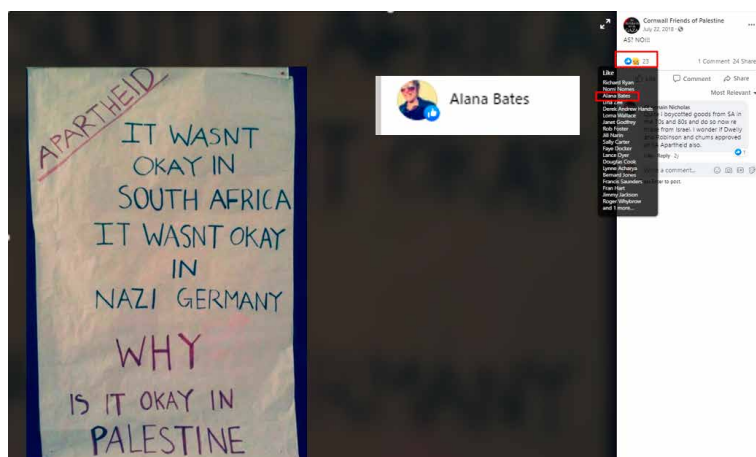
During the election campaign of 2019, the issue of antisemitism in the Labour Party gained even more prominence. Due to crisis of confidence in Corbyn's leadership and in his being able to combat antisemitism, a number of members who served the party resigned while many Jewish voters abandoned the party (McAuley & Eglash, 2019). In the elections themselves, Labour suffered one of its worst defeats in history. Following the elections, Keir Starmer, Corbyn's replacement as party leader, declared that he would openly combat antisemitism within the party and one of his first steps after being elected in April 2020 was to declare how he would do this (Mason, 2020). In this context, Starmer dismissed Rebecca Long-Bailey from her position as shadow Minister of Education in June 2020, after she had shared on social media an interview stating that Israel had taught the American policemen the violent tactics that they used (Walker, Stewart, & Carrell, 2020). Following her removal, Long-Bailey wrote in an article in the *Guardian* that she assumed full responsibility for her comments and claimed that they were erroneous allegations against Israel (Long-Bailey, 2020). Despite the change in atmosphere in the Labour Party under Starmer's new leadership, some British politicians from the left still deny that the Labour Party had a problem of antisemitism (see Figure 24), and they continue to make statements that violate the principles of the IHRA definition of antisemitism (see Figure 25).

Figure 24. Labour Party Politician Denies Problem of Antisemitism



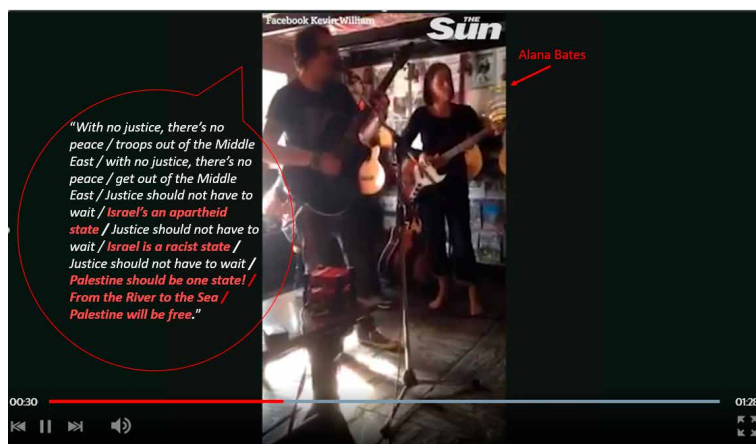
Note. From Diane Abbott (Labour MP), Just been on @BBCr4today defending Jeremy Corbyn, Facebook, August 20, 2015; Diane Abbott, Why the insistence Corbyn won't say sorry to Jews? Twitter, November 27, 2019; Alain Tolhurst, Keir Starmer urged to take action against Diane Abbott over Zoom call with Labour members expelled in anti-Semitism row, PoliticsHome, April 30, 2020. Graphics by INSS.

Figure 25. Antisemitic Post Linking Israel and Apartheid Liked by Labour Party MK



Note. From Facebook, July 17, 2018, showing post liked by Alana Bates (Labour MK). Graphics by INSS

Figure 26. Labour Party MK's Song Calling Israel an Apartheid State



Note. Labour Party MP Alana Bates plays bass in a radical left rock group called the "Tribunes." In 2018 the band released the song "From the River to the Sea" to the music-streaming platform Spotify. See Mathilde Frot, "Labour candidate says her song, from the River to the Sea, isn't antisemitic," *Jewish News*, November 11, 2019; Photo from Matt Coyle, "Red alert: New Labour anti-Semitism row as candidate's band sing about, 'racist,' Israel with lyric used by Hamas," *The Sun*, November 11, 2019. Graphics by INSS.

Figure 27. Labour Party Candidate Making Antisemitic Tweets



Note. From Rosa Doherty, "Labour candidate apologises for saying Zionists 'will not willingly assimilate with Palestinians,'" *The JC*, November 15, 2019. Graphics by INSS

At the end of October 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), an independent and apolitical British organization, published a sharply critical report of the handling of antisemitism in the Labour Party during Corbyn's leadership. Moreover, it stated that Jewish activists in the party who had complained about the phenomenon were harassed by other party activists. The report concluded that while the party had improved its handling of complaints of antisemitism in the previous months, its analysis "points to a culture within the Party which, at best, did not do enough to prevent Antisemitism and, at worst, could be seen to accept it" (EHRC, 2020).

After publishing the report, the Labour Party briefly suspended Corbyn's membership. Labour later published plans for dealing with antisemitism in the party, which gained the support of the EHRC. The plan included the creation of an independent body that would examine complaints of discrimination in the party; the creation of an advisory body of Jewish members that would assist in the development of educational material about antisemitism; stricter guidelines on the social media; and greater assessment of past declarations by potential party candidates (BBC, 2020b).

Antisemitism Among the Right

The extreme populist right-wing parties has also played a role in fanning the hatred of Jews in Britain. As part of the charged public and political debate over Brexit, the populist right-wing movements in Britain, whose leaders have a rich past of antisemitic statements,²⁹ tended to use antisemitic jargon and stereotypes to promote their sociopolitical agenda, which was firmly opposed to Britain's staying in the EU. The virulently antisemitic statements made against George Soros, the Jewish Hungarian philanthropist,³⁰ is a prime example; he has been accused of "trying to bring in immigrants to corrupt a predominantly Christian nation" (Tamkin, 2020).

Nigel Farage, leader of the Brexit party, is one of the most prominent politicians on the extreme populist right-wing in Britain who has often made use of this new rhetoric. Founded at the end of 2018, the Brexit party sought to promote Britain's departure from the EU. Although the party did not manage to win a seat in the general elections in December 2019, it did hold 29 seats in the European Parliament up until the exit of Britain in January 2020. Over the years, Farage has promoted antisemitic conspiracies, such as accusing Soros of being the "biggest danger to [the]

western world” (Walker, 2019) and accusing “globalists” of funding the protest demonstrations against Brexit (Walker, 2020).

The accusations against Soros as the source of financing behind the campaign to remain in the EU were not limited to Farage’s party. In a speech to Parliament in 2019, Jacob Rees-Mogg, a member of Parliament from the Conservative Party, accused Soros as having financed the campaign to keep Britain in the EU (see Figure 28), despite not having any factual basis for the claim (Welch, 2019).

Figure 28. Conservative MP Accuses Soros as Financing Anti-Brexit Campaign



David Lammy [@DavidLammy], George Soros “funder in chief,” Twitter, October 3, 2019.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the antisemitic discourse within the right in Britain is not limited to the context of Brexit, an issue that dominated the political–public discourse and the media coverage over the past few years. For example, criticism was recently levelled at Crispin Blunt, a Conservative Party member of Parliament, for his comments in a campaign against circumcision and kosher slaughter at an official gathering of the Conservative Party, conspicuously held on the eve of the Jewish new year,

Rosh Hashana. Blunt accused the chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Britain specifically and the Jewish community in general of “demanding special status,” given the subsidies that had been allocated to the CST following the sharp rise in antisemitic incidents in Britain. He claimed that he simply wanted to “save the taxpayer money” and also stated that Britain should strive for a situation in which the Jews do not require special protection because everyone should feel safe and secure (Harpin, 2019).