Twitter Thread by Daniel Finn

Daniel Finn
@DanFinn95

This Rachel Shabi article is the first proper attempt, I believe, to articulate in detail a certain line ("Corbyn shouldn't have been suspended, but his statement on the EHRC report was still wrong"). So it's worth looking at properly. 1/

The British Labour Party's Anti-Semitism Problem

For their opponents, the Labour Party's self-inflicted wound over anti-Semitism is the gift that keeps on giving.

By Rachel Shabi

DECEMBER 10, 2020

Shabi takes the EHRC and its report entirely at face value: a "sobering verdict", no less. This is not the first time she's done this: she also uncritically endorsed the claims made in the BBC's Panorama documentary in July 2019. 2/

> Much of the information contained in this documentary, a painful and depressing watch, is already known. But the power of the programme was in the telling of the story, by former staffers overwhelmed by the scale of the problem and political interference, alongside Jewish Labour members agonisingly recounting their experiences of antisemitism in the party. What was new - and shockingly sad - was the revelation by some former Labour staffers of the emotional distress caused by handling this issue in this climate and the impact it had on their mental health.

She then scolded the Labour leadership for stating that the central claims made in that documentary were demonstrably untrue and indeed the opposite of the truth, something that has become even more obvious since. 3/

> Meanwhile, the response from the Labour party, framing the issue so heavily in factional terms, is demonstrative of the deeper problem all along: that it has become engulfed in a political fight, an attack line in this battle rather than a serious issue in and of itself. Hopefully the Panorama show, with its spotlight on Jewish experiences of antisemitism within Labour, will serve to highlight the nature of the issue - a culture inside the party that has made it an unwelcoming place for Jewish people for whom it was previously a natural home.

As Richard Sanders & Peter Oborne pointed out, the findings of the EHRC report itself on Labour's disciplinary process tacitly contradict the Panorama documentary. It's logically impossible to endorse both. 4/

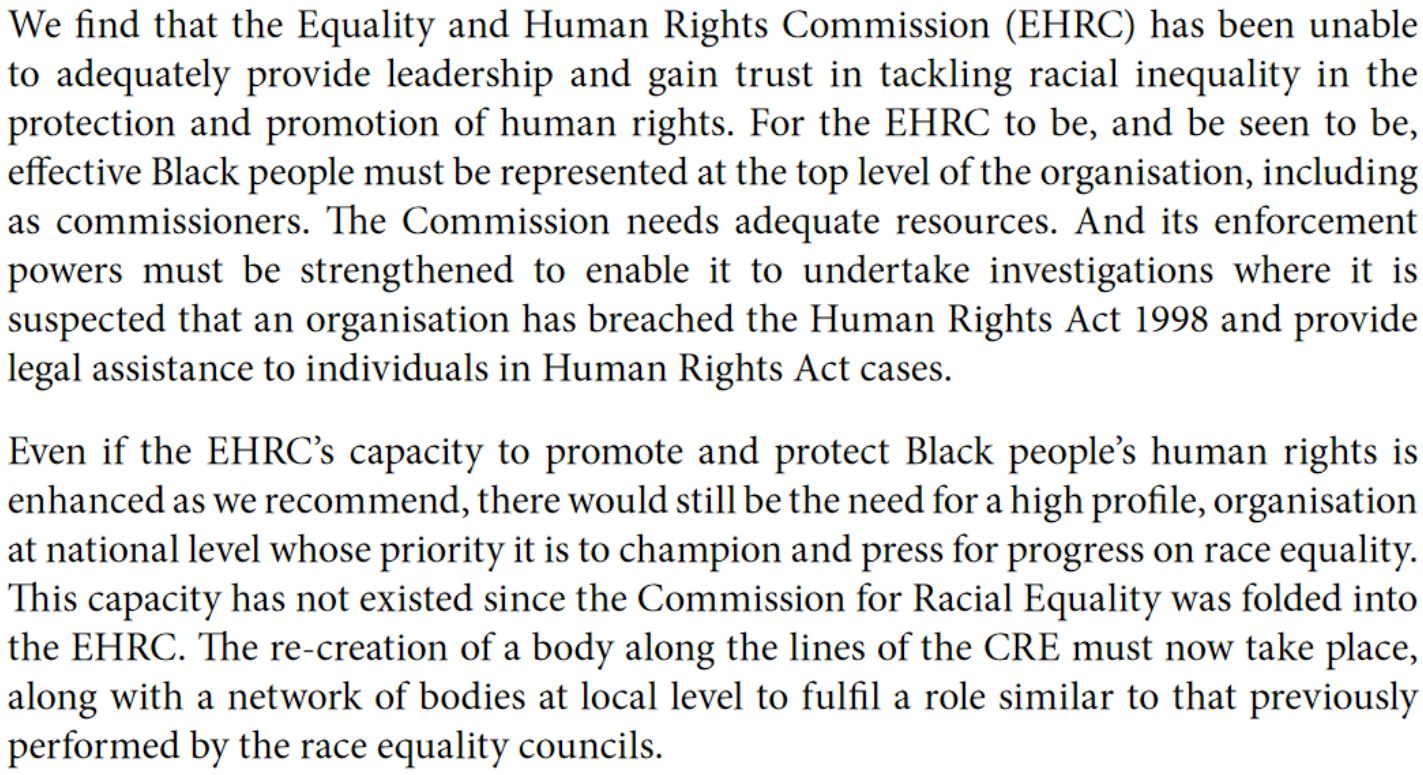
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> This is vital. Matthews, McNicol and a number of other employees from Labour Party HQ at this time were the leading "whistleblowers" in Panorama's enormously influential *Is Labour Anti-Semitic?* programme in July 2019. When the Corbyn leadership pushed back against their claims, Matthews and others took them to court. Earlier this year, Starmer apologised to them and settled out of court, paying them large sums of money.
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> Yet the EHRC report appears to be accepting the leaked report's version of events prior to the spring of 2018 and rejecting theirs – while nevertheless holding Corbyn responsible for their inaction. Matthews has always fiercely rejected the leaked report's allegations. He and other staff claimed that their work was hampered by continual interference from the leader's office.
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> The EHRC report also alleges unwarranted interference by Corbyn's team. It says this happened in 23 of the 70 cases it studied. But in many of the examples it cites it is clear the leader's office was interfering, not to prevent investigations for antisemitism, but to speed them up.

Instead of pointing out this discrepancy, Shabi simply moves on, seemingly with no reflection, to uncritically endorse the EHRC, ignoring the evidence of its crude partiality. 5/

https://t.co/XHSFrgu5iX

She does note the EHRC's refusal to investigate Tory racism at the end of the article, but attaches no weight to this, or to the damning criticisms of the EHRC by a Westminster committee, or to many other pieces of evidence that undermine its credibility. 6/



We find that the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has been unable to adequately provide leadership and gain trust in tackling racial inequality in the protection and promotion of human rights. For the EHRC to be, and be seen to be, effective Black people must be represented at the top level of the organisation, including as commissioners. The Commission needs adequate resources. And its enforcement powers must be strengthened to enable it to undertake investigations where it is suspected that an organisation has breached the Human Rights Act 1998 and provide legal assistance to individuals in Human Rights Act cases.

Even if the EHRC's capacity to promote and protect Black people's human rights is enhanced as we recommend, there would still be the need for a high profile, organisation at national level whose priority it is to champion and press for progress on race equality. This capacity has not existed since the Commission for Racial Equality was folded into the EHRC. The re-creation of a body along the lines of the CRE must now take place, along with a network of bodies at local level to fulfil a role similar to that previously performed by the race equality councils.

Many of the EHRC's conclusions are eminently disputable: its claim to have identified "unlawful harassment", for example, is based on a tortuous chain of logic that would be very unlikely to hold up in court. 7/

Even so, the EHRC report clearly doesn't come anywhere close to substantiating the dominant media narrative about "Labour antisemitism", which is what Corbyn was really challenging with his statement. Shabi reproaches him for doing so. 8/

She falls back on a now-familiar evasive formula, railing against "those leftists who dismissed the entire problem as a smear campaign", as if there are many people who believe there wasn't a single case of antisemitism in the Labour Party. 9/

So when Corbyn, on the very day of the release of the EHRC report, commented that the issue had been overstated for political reasons, what does that say to the victims of anti-Semitism? And what about those leftists who dismissed the entire problem as a smear campaign? Wouldn't Corbyn's statement fuel such denialism and direct abuse yet again to those who dared to mention it? When it comes to racism, language has a toxic agency, regardless of intention, which is something that Corbyn should have considered. But he didn't. This is why his statement was not just ill-advised or badly timed. It was wrong.

It was the media narrative around "Labour antisemitism" that was a smear, or rather a compendium of smears, major and minor, empirical and conceptual. The Panorama programme that Shabi uncritically endorsed was the flagship of this effort, but there were countless others. 10/

Shabi does refer to one example of "gross exaggeration", Simon Heffer's "reopen Auschwitz" comment. But Heffer just took the standard media narrative one step further. All of the most important claims of that narrative were grossly exaggerated or simply false. 11/

However, when Corbyn pointed out that Labour's anti-Semitism problem had been overstated, he was telling the truth. Surely anyone can recognize right-wing newspaper columnist Simon Heffer's claim that Corbyn was "a man who wants to reopen Auschwitz" as a gross exaggeration. When, during last year's election, the UK's chief rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, said Corbyn was "unfit for high office" and the "poison" of anti- Semitism had been sanctioned from the top, the Jewish Labour peer Alf Dubs said that the rabbi had "gone a bit far." It should not be controversial to point this out.

There was no dramatic upsurge in antisemitism under Corbyn's leadership; antisemitism was not endemic in Labour; Corbyn did not encourage it or protect the guilty parties; Labour was not a "cold house for Jews" (still less an "existential threat to Jewish life in Britain"). 12/

Shabi archly dismisses "the numbers game", as if it makes no difference whether there were 50 or 50,000 virulent antisemites in the Labour Party. In effect, this means dismissing the idea of any empirical controls for the media narrative. It's a surrender to irrationality. 13/

This is frankly asinine: Ilhan Omar was bullied into apologizing for a reference to AIPAC's lobbying power that wasn't remotely "offensive". 14/

https://t.co/2QksXfUePu

It is, in this context, telling that examples of leftist politicians dealing effectively with anti-Semitism are not part of this conversation: Both Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar and UK Labour MP Naz Shah have demonstrated that it is possible to drop offensive terminology in criticisms of Israeli aggressions without diluting or altering their principles.

Omar is still facing disingenuous, bad-faith attacks from the US political counterparts of the groups that denounced Corbyn. 15/

https://t.co/ZAwNDeFEXe

The AJC, keen to accuse Omar of antisemitism on the most implausible grounds, was just as keen to avoid levelling that charge at Trump, even when he said that American Jews should vote for him because they were all rich and greedy. 16/



The main difference between the US and British cases is that Ilhan Omar stopped apologizing for things that didn't merit an apology (or never happened in the first place), and for the most part the US left rallied combatively behind her. 17/

Corbyn's statement was right in every respect, and frankly it ill behoves people who thought that Iain McNicol & Sam Matthews were trustworthy sources to wag their finger at him while triangulating between truth and fiction. 18/

The main effect of this article, if taken at face value, will be to discourage people on the British left from stating the facts, and to encourage people on the US left to follow an approach of appeasing bad-faith actors that has already proved disastrous in Britain. 19/

The idea that the EHRC report & the processes surrounding it can be a "positive step" for anti-racism in Britain is for the birds. The "Labour antisemitism" media narrative has functioned to protect & strengthen racism in British politics, as was always likely to be the case. 20/

> Jewish people did not ask for prejudice against them to be given precedence or addressed at the expense of others. Pitting minorities against one another is toxic, yet unsurprising behavior in a country that ran its empire on the basis of divide and rule. But the progressive response is surely to leverage the gains of one group to press for progress for others. The EHRC describes its recommendations as “a foundation to assist all politicians and political leaders in adhering to equality law.” Labour is legally bound to implement them, but nothing prevents the party from using similar processes and principles to tackle other forms of racism in its ranks. The EHRC report has shown that anti-Semitism can be addressed in the context of racism and equality law. Rather than get lost in the weeds of betrayal narratives, the left should see this as a positive step and then build on it.