

## **“What’s All This Antisemitism I Keep Hearing About??”**

by Bennett Arron



I grew up in Port Talbot, and although my family was the only Jewish family there, I never, ever encountered any antisemitism. School friends were much more interested in learning about my religion than being antagonistic towards it.

When I became a comedian, the fact that I was the only Jewish and Welsh comedian on the circuit was met with laughter (in a good way) and not contempt.

Over the years I have made many friends in the comedy world. Although we may have disagreed over things – mainly about who took the last drink from the fridge in the Dressing Room or which comedians do or do not deserve to be on 'Live at the Apollo' – we never really argued about politics or religion. Until recently.

It was subtle at first, little comments and asides, but over the past few months it has become progressively, or regressively, worse.

Of course, much of it is my own doing. You see I have, publicly, been airing my concerns about the horrific rise of antisemitism around the world and how it became more prevalent in the UK when Jeremy Corbyn became leader. So, I have therefore clearly opened myself up for the abuse I have received. Being called a “Filthy Tory” (never voted for them) or “Zio scum” (never really talked about Israel) or “Typical Jew” (perhaps) by comedian friends whom I have known for over 20 years is what I deserve for questioning anything. I have been sent vile personal

messages on social media and been ‘blocked’ by people. But, as I said, it’s my own fault. Had I kept quiet about it as some other Jewish comedians have, then perhaps this wouldn’t have happened. After all, keeping quiet in the past hasn’t had bad consequences, right?

I was recently asked in an interview if I thought Jeremy Corbyn was actually antisemitic. I explained that I didn’t think he was but only he knows the answer. However, I do believe he didn’t do enough to curb the rise of antisemitism in the party.

Like many Jewish lifelong Labour voters, I felt lost. Whilst I agreed with many of the policies in the Labour manifesto, I could not bring myself to vote for a party that hadn’t done enough to quell the rise of Jew hatred. And the fact that the support has become so tribalistic is concerning. It’s almost like a devoted football fan; “Yes my team might have made a couple of mistakes and scored some own goals, but I will always support them and think that all supporters of other teams are scum”.

When did this happen? And when did football-style chanting become a thing in politics? When did the whole Politician Fanbase start? I have no memory of people in the 80s wearing a “I Heart Neil Kinnock T-Shirt” or singing “Oh... Micha...el Fo...ot”.

Then there’s the ‘whataboutery’ when I get asked “Well what about Islamophobia in the Tory party?!” As if two wrongs will suddenly make everything right. Islamophobia should be dealt with as much as antisemitism and any other form of racism or bigotry. Acknowledging antisemitism does not mean you are ignoring everything else!

At a recent gig in London I asked if any of the audience members were Welsh. A few put their up their hands and we chatted about Wales (it was funny – you had to be there). I then asked if any audience members were Jewish. No hands were raised. After the gig, three separate people quietly approached me and told me that they were Jewish but did not want to admit to it in a public space. This is where we are now. One of these people actually told me that they recently had to leave their home in the South West - where they had lived their whole life - as they were petrified by the rise of antisemitism in the area.

But, when I speak about any of this on social media, I am told that it’s all lies and smears or, as has happened on several occasions, I have friends sending me private messages or texts with: “What’s All This Antisemitism I Keep Hearing About?? Can you send me some proof? Thanks xx”

We are living in troubling times. Racism of all kinds is on the increase and it has to be stopped. And I feel, as a comedian who literally and figuratively has a platform, I need to do my bit to stop it.

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