



INTERVIEW

Trauma and Its Impact on Politics: Finding a Way to Dialogue on Anti-Semitism

Gavin Robinson and Richard House

With indiscriminate charges and smears around anti-semitism having dominated the recent British political landscape, including in Britain's recent General Election, magazine editor Richard House asked therapist Gavin Robinson to help shed some psychological light on the rarely spoken-about traumatic roots underpinning anti-semitism – which insights might help in fashioning an effective response to such charges and the opportunistic weaponising of the issue in political discourse.

Richard House [RH]: Gavin, your work and training as a therapist have led you to consider the impact of repressed and unresolved trauma on the political system. Though it's a difficult area to get into in a relatively brief interview, there's the issue of anti-semitism, for example. As a backdrop to our discussion, a few days ago when I was campaigning on Stroud high street, a Jewish man who claimed he'd always voted Labour launched an extraordinary tirade against me, shouting that we were Jew-haters and he'd never vote Labour again. I was quite taken aback by this, and the amount of distress fuelling this onslaught was palpable – he clearly meant what he was saying (shouting).

In a recent letter to the *Morning Star* newspaper ('Understanding of trauma essential', 21 October), you raised some little-discussed questions which, if they're anything like right, urgently need unpacking. Can you say something about your statement that 'We desperately need to understand the nature of trauma in the world' and, perhaps, the relevance of such an understanding to illuminating the anti-semitism issue within Britain's Labour Party and the way the party has been attacked on this issue.

Gavin Robinson [GR]: I believe such an understanding is desperately important, as we appear to be at a point where the right wing in politics is making gains, and the last time this was predominant was in the period between the two world wars – and we know where that led. Further, the climate emergency poses the greatest threat to all human beings, especially the most vulnerable.

I believe that we live in a traumatised world, where our 'threat' system is affecting the way we behave and live as individuals and as a whole. We are affected by our fight, flight, freeze and flail reactions, and in some people

who have been through experiences like the Holocaust, this can be triggered by the most minute experience, which can activate our threat system. Some experiences can also be on a very unconscious level.

Experiences which are unsaid and unspoken, such as the almost unspeakable events like the Second World War, and of Pol Pot in Cambodia, of the slave trade, of sexuality and in the realm of politics, right or left, mean that the consequences continue.

I do wonder whether the unspoken aspects of the post-Holocaust generations’ experiences are being triggered, especially as many in the Jeremy Corbyn¹ movement support the rights of the Palestinians – which I do – as well as the rights of the Jewish people; and this means that it is not easy for safe conversations to take place on these issues. A look, a word, a movement, indeed more or less anything, can trigger this feeling of a lack of safety. Being safe is one of our most important needs as human beings. I’m not at all surprised that you had this difficult experience with this man.

RH: Being a former psychotherapist myself who has worked with trauma and the unconscious, I completely accept this re-traumatisation process that you describe, Gavin, and people’s defences against it. It does raise complex questions, however, especially around responsibility. Perhaps I could list some key questions that arise for me.

First, to what extent do you think those playing the anti-semitism card and weaponising it within the Labour Party have done so with full awareness of the traumatic dynamics you describe? Secondly, in situations where it is unconscious (with massive defences mobilised against making the traumata conscious and so able to be thought about), what on earth can we do about this at the level of politics – for example, in conversation with my outraged man on the street? And thirdly, can you suggest how, given these difficult trauma-driven dynamics, the Labour Party might have responded more effectively to what has been such a divisive and distressing issue for people on all sides?

GR: I can’t possibly know how much they are actually behaving this way with any intent. If

anyone is doing so, then this is a very dangerous game, as it actually increases the lack of safety for Jews and for others like the Palestinians also, as it stirs the trauma and makes it worse. It might well be an effective short-term ploy – and short-termism and expediency are sadly the nature of politics, of course.

For the second part of the question, when meeting someone who behaves like the man you describe, then trying to behave in a way which helps that person to feel safe is the best way. Apologising for any harm caused might help, as hopefully we do not want to harm anyone. By saying we apologise for any harm caused means that we are only apologising for the harm.

For the third part, I wonder whether the Labour Party could have explicitly acknowledged the trauma in the world when deemed to be appropriate, so that there is a context to what’s going on. And to have meaningful conversations with those involved, whether they are Jewish or from another background such as a Palestinian one.

This is not easy, however, as the UK Houses of Parliament are known to have a bullying culture, and there are many instances of this being displayed there a lot of the time. When Jeremy Corbyn first became Labour leader he said he hoped for a kinder politics. I think that this is very difficult in such a harsh atmosphere.

As psycho-historian Nick Duffell, who has looked deeply into this culture, says in a recent *Morning Star* interview,² many of our leaders are raised from quite an early age in boarding schools away from loving families, where essentially they have to sink or swim. Add such as the ‘Bullingdon Club’³ mentality into the mix, and we can have quite a toxic culture.

As Janice Gump has written,⁴

the closer one is to the centre of the power and resources, the more the views of those in those privileged positions are considered self-evident and valid – whereas the views of others always need to be argued and justified. Those who mix in these circles learn the ‘self-evident’ views, while those in less

advantageous backgrounds often see things differently.

Many disadvantaged people, however, might ally themselves with the more powerful and more resourced, which may give them a feeling of security, as some do by supporting a successful football team even though they don’t come from the area the club represents. In the longer run, however, they’re likely to find they’re being deceived.

No-one hopefully wants another Holocaust of any kind, so in general there needs to be much greater care taken by everyone.

RH: I think you’re saying that where there is (significant?) trauma present, Gavin, then direct confrontation is not only not appropriate, but is likely to be counterproductive. This is a critical question in relation to anti-semitism, as there are a significant number of Labour Party supporters and opponents who do seem to have bought the absurd line about anti-semitism being ‘rampant’ within the party. I realise it’s very tricky to address an issue like anti-semitism in such a short piece – but hopefully we might at least open up some alternative ways of thinking about what’s happened with anti-semitism in the Labour Party, and perhaps more widely (the incidence of anti-semitism is known to be on the rise across Europe, for example). What would you say to someone on the doorstep who’s raising concerns about anti-semitism? – and would your response vary, depending on whether they were Jewish or not?

GR: Yes, this is the tricky part – especially in the context of recent arguments about ‘fake news’, we were right to expect an inevitable right-wing media onslaught against Jeremy Corbyn on the anti-semitism issue in the 2019 British election campaign. Certainly, responding to a diatribe (fake news) about anti-semitism with a series of facts about why they’re wrong won’t help in the slightest, if we are in the field of trauma-driven material.

The ways in which trauma affects all of our lives cannot be over-emphasised. Trauma is being re-enacted all the time in all of us. So the effects of the Holocaust are being triggered, as are the effects

of living in Palestine with all of the deprivations there. The situation could hardly be more toxic. Add to this the need for some to get power, as part of their trauma, e.g. as boarding school survivors, then the mix is even more complex. The problem, therefore, is learning how to find the right words to make a clear point to identify when there is, in effect, smearing⁵ going on to confuse the issues further. And when a valid point is being made. We cannot underestimate how the effects of fake news and so on confuse and silence more meaningful dialogue, as the issues are taken out of context.

Following my earlier contentions, it follows that political canvasser-activists would need to find a way to be clear and to the point and yet also genuinely open minded, in order to minimise the risk of triggering someone into a trauma-driven engagement. We need to be able to genuinely listen and receive the other – even when we profoundly disagree with them.

Many will hold these misguided views about the Labour Party sincerely; and if we can find the place where we can both accept that this is the view they have – accepting their difference; that we hear their anguish on this issue, and their holding of these views is painful for us hear – and yet we respectfully disagree with their analysis. Perhaps this quality of engagement is the best hope of being able to open up a space for a mutually respectful dialogue.

Being as open as possible is far from easy – e.g. saying ‘I hope that *I’m* not at all anti-semitic – I really don’t want to be...’, so as to allow a response, and not close the conversation down. And if necessary to add something like, ‘What happened in the Holocaust was beyond words’ (or whatever is thought to be an appropriate kind of response). The ‘beyond words’ aspect easily becomes a vacuum, which the political forces who are against Jeremy Corbyn fill with hate. So wordlessness needs to be filled with words of comfort, not words of hate, and we *can* be proactive in that. The unconscious needs to become more conscious.

If someone was Jewish themselves, then my response would be as sensitive to the individual as I was able to manage in the moment.

Notes

- 1 Jeremy Corbyn MP was the leader of Britain’s Labour Party when this interview was conducted.
- 2 See Nick Duffell and Richard House, Why public school f***s you up — and how the nation pays. *Morning Star*, 25 September, pp. 8–9; available at <https://tinyurl.com/yy5g9j8b> (accessed 31 January 2020).
- 3 The Bullingdon Club is a private dining club for Oxford University students, noted for its wealthy members, grand banquets, boisterous rituals, and mischievous behaviour, including vandalism of restaurants and students' rooms. See <https://tinyurl.com/qdd3z92>.
- 4 Quoted from Janice Gump, The endurance of slavery’s traumas and ‘truths’, in S. Grand & J. Salberg (Eds.), *Trans-generational Trauma and the Other* (pp. 102–19). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016.
- 5 See, for example, Sharyl Attkisson, *The Smear: How Shady Political Operatives and Fake News Control what You See, what You Think, and How You Vote*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

About the contributors

Gavin Robinson is a therapist who is concerned about the effects of trauma on the environment, and lives in London. **Richard House** is a Corbynista activist and writer in Stroud, who also edits this magazine.