



the annual
Pete Newbon Award
for the greatest contribution to the
public understanding of antisemitism



Why we honour Pete Newbon



Pete Newbon was a lovely man, a fighter against antisemitism and an academic.

He died by suicide, on 15 January 2022.

The London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism honours his memory with this award.

The terms of the award, and how to nominate somebody, are laid out here: [Newbon Award Details](#).

This document sets out what Pete did to contribute to the public understanding of antisemitism and why the London Centre has decided to honour him in this way.

Who Pete was and why we honour him

Any suicide has multiple, complex and unknowable causes. This document does not speak to the cause of Pete's death.

It does state the truth about Pete's work against antisemitism and about some of the events that related to it, in the period before his death.

To understand the way Pete was bullied and to understand the libels that were told about him, before and after his death, it is necessary to remember something about how the antisemitism of the Corbyn movement worked. It is also necessary to understand that it is possible for Jewish people to embrace antisemitic ideas and emotions, and it is necessary to understand that such Jewish antisemitism played a key role in Labour antisemitism.

What Antisemitism was like in the Labour Party under Corbyn

Memory will inevitably fade about what it was like to oppose antisemitism between 2015 and 2019, when Corbyn was Leader of the Opposition. Pete's experience as a campaigner illustrates some of the things that were typical about that period of the fight. It was tough for many Jews, and for non-Jewish opponents of antisemitism, at that time. It is characteristic of the period that the people who carried and defended the antisemitism were unaware that they were doing so. Their outrage at the allegation of antisemitism was not confected, it was real. Their own sense of moral cleanliness fed the ferocity of their response. The Corbynites believed they were the good guys and, according to their simplistic reasoning, that meant that those who spoke out against antisemitism were not only wrong, but also bad. Most of those who spoke out were Jews and most Jews were supportive of those who spoke out.

Antisemitism believes itself to be the victim of the Jews. With Labour antisemitism, it was the [*Livingstone Formulation*](#) that operationalised this reversal.

The standard response to somebody who raised the issue of antisemitism was to snap back with the counter-accusation that they were really trying to label criticism of Israel as antisemitic in an effort to de-legitimise such criticism. A better response would have been to pause, to think and to listen seriously to the accusation; and then to discuss it and debate it, and look at the evidence. Corbyn often re-stated his opposition to antisemitism in general terms but he was never able or willing to describe specifically what it was that he was accused of. He never stopped long enough to understand what was being said about him, so his responses never responded to what was said, but to a straw man of his own invention.

The *Livingstone Formulation* protected antisemitism against a respectful, rational and democratic dialogue. Instead of engaging in such discussion, it rhetorically expelled the person who raised the issue of antisemitism from the community of respect and reasoned debate. It did so by alleging bad faith. It said: 'We know what you're really up to'. And so it alleged 'Zionist' conspiracy. And it created a culture in which it was believed that anybody who raised the issue of antisemitism was a political enemy who was pretending to be a loyal member of the Labour Party. Any attempt to raise the issue of antisemitism was met with a sneering, knowing counter-accusation of weaponizing antisemitism, faking it or using it to 'smear' the leader. The *Livingstone Formulation* immediately escalated any discussion of antisemitism into an issue of essential identity.

In its October 2020 report on Labour antisemitism, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) saw in the evidence submitted to it that this was happening routinely in the party. This standard counter-accusation of bad faith, made mainly against Jews, was the typical mode of antisemitic exclusion. In its report, EHRC singled this out as 'unlawful harassment of Jews':

Labour Party agents denied antisemitism in the Party and made comments dismissing complaints as 'smears' and 'fake'. This conduct may target Jewish members as deliberately making up antisemitism complaints to undermine the Labour Party, and ignores legitimate and genuine complaints of antisemitism in the Party.¹

It is necessary to remember how this all worked in order to understand how Pete was made into a symbolic villain by, and for, so many ostensibly good people.

Jews who defended the antisemitism of the Corbyn faction were significant

It seems counter-intuitive to claim that there are Jews who embrace and defend antisemitic politics but in fact, what any individual believes and does is never strictly related to aspects of their identity. There are women who oppose feminism, there are African Americans who support Trump and there are Jews who made it their business to whitewash the Corbynites. Antisemitism is an objective social phenomenon, independent of the inner emotional life of any specific individual. If non Jews can be swept up in antisemitism, and especially if it is an antisemitism that is angrily denied, then why shouldn't some Jews be swept up in it too? There is a payoff in not believing the antisemitism you see around you: the payoff is that you don't have to live in a world in which antisemitism is irrational and threatening – when you'd rather live in a world where the antisemitism is invented, and where, to the extent that it is real, it is a rational response to the bad behaviour of (right wing, so bad) Jews. Antizionist Jews often parade their Jewish identities instrumentally, in the hope of giving what they say about Israel and about antisemitism greater authority.

There was a huge consensus amongst Jews in Britain that there was a specific and significant problem of antisemitism in the Labour Party that was related to the politics of Corbyn's leadership. This consensus was clear, in the Jewish press; in the institutions of the Jewish community such as the *Union of Jewish Students*, the *Board of Deputies*, the *Community Security Trust*, the *Chief Rabbi's Office*, the four main synagogue movements and in the *Jewish Labour Movement*. It was clear in the writing of Jewish journalists and of Jewish academics; in the films Jews made, in the social media accounts through which Jews expressed themselves, in the novels they wrote and in the conversations they had.

But there was a tiny minority of Jews who supported Corbyn and who insisted that the allegations of antisemitism were made in bad faith by Zionists. The word 'Zionist' in this context, used in this way, means liar, racist and supporter of apartheid. This use of the word does not respect a Jewish person's right to define their own Zionism or their

¹ EHRC. 2020. "Investigation into Antisemitism in the Labour Party," Investigation into Antisemitism in the Labour Party | Equality and Human Rights Commission
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/investigation-antisemitism-labour-party>
[accessed 14 February 2023]

personal and perhaps complex or ambivalent relationship to Israel; it does not allow people designated as 'Zionists' to define or to articulate their own politics. It defines them from outside, in a hostile, homogenous, simplistic and caricatured way.

Antizionist Jews set up an organisation called *Jewish Voice for Labour* (JVL), whose central purpose was to portray claims of antisemitism as being deliberately fabricated for disgraceful political ends by the mainstream Jewish community. They insisted that attachment to Israel is not related to Jewish identity. They understood Jews who said there was an antisemitism problem as Zionist, and as right wing, and so as disloyal to the genuine left. If they positioned themselves on the left, then, the antizionists defined them as illegitimate entryists to the left. It was a priority for JVL to portray the Jewish community as being split, so that everything should be seen as a fair debate between two legitimate streams of opinion: them (the left) and the Zionists (the right).

Every charge seems reversible

People who oppose antisemitism have to deal with a lot of bullying, anger and lies from people who feel threatened by their opposition to antisemitism. There is often a lot of projection, too.

Trying to make arguments about antisemitism in and around the Corbyn Labour Party was beset by daily humiliations. 'This is antisemitic' would be responded to with 'no, you're antisemitic!' or 'no, you're a paid asset of a totalitarian state', or 'no, you're just splitting Jews into good and bad Jews'. The effect was to make most people into frightened bystanders. The potential cost for anybody looking on, of being drawn into the discussion, was too high. Bystanders felt absolved from having to be involved because it was all made to look like a crazy and dirty fight between crazy, dirty, Jews. They were all as bad as each other. Don't touch the third rail. Antisemitism, and Jews, and opposing antisemitism, were made to seem ridiculous.

"Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies," Sartre wrote. "They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play. They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. If you press them too closely, they will abruptly fall silent, loftily indicating by some phrase that the time for argument is past."

There was evidence

The symmetry was fictional. If sometimes the structure of arguments and counter-arguments seemed similar, the content was not similar. Some things that people said were true; some were not true. They were not all equal.

The antisemitism of the Corbyn faction was proven beyond doubt in the [submissions](#) to the [Chakrabarti](#) Inquiry, in John Ware's [Panorama](#), in [Dave Rich's books](#), in Alan Johnson's Fathom [report](#), in the documentation produced by the [Jewish Labour Movement](#), [Labour Against Antisemitism](#) and [Campaign Against Antisemitism](#); in the [Community Security Trust](#) reports; in the journalism of [Gabriel Pogrund](#); in the *Equalities and Human Rights Commission* [report](#); daily on the [Jewish Chronicle](#) and [Jewish News](#) websites; in the testimony of the Labour staff [whistle-blowers](#); in the [Tweets](#) and [Facebook](#) posts of hundreds of people who made it their business to confront the antisemitism; in the quantitative data of [Daniel Allington](#) and the *Institute for Jewish Policy Research*; in the experience of hundreds of Labour activists, both still in and forced out of the Party; in the antisemitic responses to well-known figures who spoke out, like [Rachel Riley](#) and Tracy-Ann Oberman; in Judith Ornstein's [Whitewashed](#) and [Forced Out](#) projects; in the stories of heroic Labour MPs, [Ian Austin](#), [John Mann](#), Mike Gapes; and particularly the women Labour MPs who endured a particular antisemitism laced with sexually violent threat, [Luciana Berger](#), [Ruth Smeeth](#), [Margaret Hodge](#), [Joan Ryan](#), [Louise Ellman](#) and [Anna Turley](#).

Pete Newbon's work against antisemitism

A lot of the work of challenging the claims and the arguments of the Corbyn faction happened on social media, in particular on Twitter and on Facebook. Pete did this work with wit, talent, tenacity, courage and with great intelligence.

Social media is said by some to be not real life. The antisemitism is said to be not real, but a conspiracy to silence criticism of Israel. The relationships between people who fight alongside each other, who sometimes know each other mainly online, are devalued. The bullying and the lies are not taken seriously. People think if you don't like being wounded, then you should leave the battlefield. But we knew the importance of taking on antisemitism in the public sphere, in the national conversation; in social spaces rich with people who may be influenced by antisemitism or by the normalisation of antisemitic ways of thinking. Each of Pete's tweets and his posts was seen by thousands of people; that included politicians, opinion formers, journalists, academics, activists, students to specify a few. And the struggle transcended borders, it was global; if lies stuck in British public life then they would spread elsewhere, and vice versa.

Pete fought hard and he would not give up. In the end, tragically, perhaps he could not give up. Letting antisemitism run free, unchallenged, arrogant and self-important, making its common sense into more people's common sense, was not an option for him.

Michael Rosen publicly accuses Pete of antisemitic abuse

Michael Rosen is a celebrated children's author, broadcaster and professor. He is a widely admired figure in British public life. He is a loyal and vocal supporter of Jeremy Corbyn and his politics. Rosen is Jewish and he has frequently mobilised his own Jewish identity in a way that appears to give his defence of Corbyn against allegations of antisemitism great authority.

By May 2021 it was no longer genuinely controversial that there had been a culture of political antisemitism in the Labour Party during the Corbyn years, or that this had manifested itself also in a culture of antisemitic bullying against Jews. Corbyn had lost his second General Election and had resigned. The Labour Party had admitted that it had an antisemitism problem and had apologised for it. The *Equalities and Human Rights Commission* had reported that Labour under Corbyn had 'unlawfully harassed Jews' and a regime of 'special measures' had been agreed between it and the party to address the situation. Corbyn himself, having responded to the EHRC report by repeating the rhetoric that was explicitly said in the report itself to constitute unlawful harassment of Jews, had lost the Labour whip.

A satirical image had been circulating for some time on social media that dramatised the accusation against Corbyn, and, some argue, against Rosen too, of pushing antisemitic ideas. The image was based on a photograph of Corbyn reading to children. The title of the book in the image had been changed into 'The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion', which is an antisemitic book. So the satirical image was telling us: 'Corbyn teaches antisemitism to children'.

There was a caption, putting words into Corbyn's mouth. It said:

"Oh no! A J-... er, I mean a ZIONIST! A nasty, horrible Zionist! We can't go over him, we can't go under him, we'll have to make an effigy..."

The 'effigy' was a reference to Corbyn's appearance at a pro-Palestinian protest on the day the image was put together (18th May). At the protest, a giant blow-up effigy of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan, Al Nahyan of the UAE, was carried by the crowd and stood prominently next to the stage from which Corbyn made his speech. The effigy had red eyes, devil horns, an exaggerated hooked nose, a twisted mouth and claws, and was reminiscent of a medieval antisemitic caricature. The 'jewification' of bin Zayed has been a common trope within certain Arabic political circles since the UAE normalised relations with Israel in 2020. Despite standing directly next to the effigy, Corbyn did not mention it or distance himself from it during his speech.

The words are recognisably a parody of a folk story that had been popularised by Michael Rosen, 'We're going on a bear hunt'.

Pete Newbon was one of hundreds of people to retweet the image. He had not created it.

Michael Rosen did not like the image when he saw it. 'The point', he explained in a tweet, was:

2 people are attacked in the "joke": Corbyn the alleged antisemite reading the alleged antisemite Rosen's book which is presented *as if* it's the Protocols.

Rosen did not like the image because he interpreted it as accusing him and Corbyn of antisemitism.

So he snapped back against Pete with a counter-allegation of antisemitism. You say I'm antisemitic? No, **you're** antisemitic. He accused Pete, the fighter against antisemitism, of antisemitism:

This is a 'joke' from a lecturer at Northumbria University. He is a lecturer in the humanities. He thinks superimposing the 'Protocols' over a copy of 'Bear Hunt' and tweeting it, is funny. He has now withdrawn from twitter. ... Pete is here on Facebook. I think he thinks he can be opposed to antisemitism by being antisemitic.

'I think he thinks'.

Many of Michael Rosen's followers trust him. They do not all know, or understand, his politics or what he has done to support Corbyn, and to shield him from scrutiny about antisemitism. Their kids like the folk tales that he has re-published. They like him on Radio Four.

By the time Rosen posted the above on Facebook, Pete had indeed already been bullied off twitter by a pile-on of thousands of people repeating the allegation that he had made an antisemitic attack against Rosen. Now Rosen was trying to bring it to the attention of his following on Facebook, and also to Pete's employers, Northumbria University.

Rosen had tweeted, tagging Pete's university, that Pete had made the image and that this was a loathsome and antisemitic thing to do. The university itself tweeted back to reassure the mob that it was taking its concern seriously, saying that it was investigating the complaints raised against Pete as a matter of urgency.

Rosen repeated the allegation of antisemitism against Pete, tagging the Daily Mirror, who had published the original image of Corbyn.

The following day Jeremy Corbyn himself joined the pile-on, expressing outrage that he should be said to have done anything analogous to pushing antisemitic conspiracy fantasy.

In July 2021, Pete Newbon's solicitors wrote a 'letter before action' to Michael Rosen threatening to sue him for defamation. Later in the year Pete initiated legal action against Rosen and lodged his 'particulars of claim' in the High Court.

Pete had never said or done anything antisemitic and the image that he retweeted was not antisemitic. It is clear that Pete was likely to win that court case.

But Pete died before it came to court, and the case therefore stalled immediately, and went no further.

Pete Newbon was an asset to his university. He was a first class writer, researcher and lecturer. The University of Northumbria ought to have been proud of Pete's insight, his judgement, and his courage. But the University of Northumbria in fact came to the conclusion that Pete's work online harmed its reputation. He was hauled in front of a disciplinary tribunal and scolded for it, not once but three times.

In his defence at the third disciplinary tribunal, the one that related to the Rosen pile-on, Pete had said the following:

I am afraid that I cannot agree with either the substance or the conclusions of the report – which, after taking legal counsel – I find to be both factually and argumentatively flawed. I am also disappointed to note that arguments that I raised in the Investigatory Hearing – that was minuted – and which speak directly to some of the problems with the report, are not mentioned at all.

The five salient points I wish to make in my statement are as follows:

1. My tweet was not antisemitic, and therefore I cannot be held responsible for complaints made against me that I was antisemitic.
2. I consider the bulk of the complaints against me to constitute an act of antisemitic mob bullying, motivated by cynical political purposes to make me a scapegoat.
3. Under legal advice, I find the use of the term 'ad hominem' to be ill-judged and misconceived in the report.
4. I refute the allegation that by challenging antisemitism in this country, and on the Left especially – as I have been active in doing for the past six years – that I have brought the university into disrepute.
5. It is fundamentally important for universities to uphold the free speech of their academic employees, and not to bend before vexatious external pressures.

The university has acknowledged that... my tweet was in no way antisemitic. The overwhelming majority of complaints that the university received were that I had acted in an antisemitic way. Such a claim is libellous defamation, and I reserve my legal rights to pursue damages in this matter. If my tweet was not antisemitic, then these complaints lack substance. I cannot be responsible for

unsubstantiated – and often vexatious – complaints that have been made against me.

The vast majority of complaints were made at the instigation of the children's author, Michael Rosen, who has a Twitter following of hundreds of thousands. This was exacerbated when the Tweet was shared by the Right Honourable Jeremy Bernard Corbyn MP, with a following of some two million. The university has found that my tweet was not antisemitic. By making the claim that my tweet was in any way 'antisemitic' – on Twitter, on Facebook, and in the pages of The Guardian newspaper – Mr Rosen has publicly defamed me, and this is now a matter of litigation.....

In my role as Senior Lecturer in literature at Northumbria University, I have – for the past five years – lectured on the Jewish Czech author Franz Kafka. In his most celebrated novel – *The Trial* – Kafka depicts the figure of Joseph K, who, throughout the text, discovers himself to be standing trial for a crime – the nature of which is never divulged to him – and for which he is ultimately executed. The findings of the report are Kafka-esque: I am not being held responsible for being an antisemite, who publishes antisemitic material. I am, instead, being held responsible for the fact that others have complained of me as an antisemite.

...

I am a Jew. I am a Jewish member of your staff. As a member of an historically persecuted ethno-religious minority, I – like any female, or BAME, or LGBTQ+, or disabled person – must have the right to call out the oppression that I face.

If it isn't OK to criticise and mock Jeremy Corbyn for antisemitism – then what is it permitted for Jews to say?

...

I think it would be a terrible mistake, and a sign of university censoriousness and fear of the mob, to sanction a Jewish academic and campaigner against antisemitism, over a tweet that the university acknowledge was not antisemitic – over charges of ad hominem that are simply not ad hominem – and for the charge of bringing the university into disrepute when all I have ever tried to do is to protect my people and my community from those who hate us, and would seek to do us harm.

Pete had not been allowed legal representation and he did not want union representation because the UCU itself had a 17-year history of institutional antisemitism. Both Pete's employers and his union would have been singing from the same hymn sheet.

Pete submitted a document that had been written by Matthew Bolton, David Hirsh and David Seymour, each of us authors of scholarly books about antisemitism. In laborious

detail, the document explains, from every angle, why the allegation made against Pete's retweet, that it was antisemitic, had no substance to it. After the document was submitted to it, the university said it was not accusing Pete of antisemitism.

The university's 'verdict' was as follows:

I uphold the allegations against you and find all of them proven... I have decided to issue you with a Final Written Warning which will remain on your personal record for a period of 12 months... Should the University have cause to discuss any other aspects of your conduct between now and the expiry of the warning you could be subject to further disciplinary action which may result in termination of your employment.

What were the allegations that had been 'proven'?

- Actions constituting a serious breach of the University's Code of Conduct
- Not acting in the best interests of the University
- Actions that have harmed the University's reputation and had a significant and adverse impact on the smooth running of its operations

Pete's work online against antisemitism was extraordinarily good. He was funny. He knew how to write a Tweet. In 240 characters he could puncture an antisemitic claim; he could show it up to everyone. That was why he was hated. That was why he was hated so much.

The London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism is announcing that it will present an annual award, in Pete Newbon's memory, to recognise the person who has contributed most to the public understanding of antisemitism.

Pete Newbon was an academic who fought hard and courageously against antisemitism, in keeping with our Centre's values and key aim, to 'challenge the intellectual underpinnings of antisemitism in public life'.

We honour the memory of Pete Newbon, who fought alongside us and who endured significant humiliation and bullying for doing so.

For my obituary for Pete, [follow this link](#).

Follow these links for some tributes to Pete in the [Jewish Chronicle](#) and in [Jewish News](#), and [here](#) also. And from his friends and colleagues at [Labour Against Antisemitism](#), LAAS, of which he was a director.

David Hirsh

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Academic Director and CEO of LCSCA

7 May 2023