

# This is about you too, Mrs Cohen

Miliband, the Mail and antisemitism, some points arising

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Antisemitism, it has often been said, is a light sleeper. Sometimes, though, and in certain places and circumstances, it slumbers for quite a long time, and is not immediately or widely recognisable when it wakes up. For whilst dormant it was taking on new tones and colourings, was acquiring a new repertoire of signals and cues, new nods and winks, it was fashioning new dog whistles. Those who give voice to it when it wakes after a longish sleep may not be consciously aware of what they are doing, or of the effect their words, references and imagery have on others.

It is now widely recognised that the Daily Mail's [recent attack on the Miliband family](#) was an outbreak of anti-Jewish racism. '[Mrs Cohen](#),' comments a headline, 'the Mail is talking about you, too.' 'What does it mean,' asks another, '[to call a Jewish person "un-British"](#)?' 'Antisemitism doesn't always come doing a Hitler salute,' observes a third, commenting that '[hatred of Jews is often more coded than explicit](#)', and that the Daily Mail's attack 'pressed all the same old buttons'. Ed Miliband, says a fourth headline, interpreting the Mail's message, is '[a Jew not quite English enough](#)'.

[The headteacher of an eminent public school](#) says 'If the Mail speaks for Britain, it is not a Britain I want to be part of.' Referring to the paper's original article about Ralph Miliband he remarks 'it sets a very bad example to young people to belittle someone who is dead. I think it is nasty, it lacks taste and decency, and I worry about antisemitism. Everything that I value and try to get across to young people here, this seems to cut across. It is antithetical to everything I try to teach our pupils. The constant trashing of people for the sake of selling newspapers is demeaning and destructive of trust.'

[A Church of England bishop](#) criticises the Mail for being a dangerous influence to public life. 'Its article about the Miliband family was not just a matter of taste, but a matter of the corruption of civic life and the public discourse ... The Mail knows exactly what it is doing. I believe it is both corrupt and dangerous.' [A senior rabbi](#) asks: 'What is really going on at the *Daily Mail*? ... Their attack on Ralph Miliband is so preposterous that there must be a hidden motive behind it. But what? ... Why is the *Mail* claiming he was so evil?'

The rabbi continues by conjecturing that the attack was based on antisemitism, but then adds 'that is a charge that would be horrendous if true. Moreover, Ralph Miliband was an atheist, so it would have to be antisemitism on racial

grounds rather than religious ones. That would put the Mail in the same category as Hitler, who defined a Jew as anyone with one Jewish grandparent - nothing to do with faith and purely according to their birth. I am sure - at least I hope I am sure - that the paper would never wish to be associated in the same sentence as Hitler.'

The Mail itself, unsurprisingly, has found these accusations and allegations deplorable. It has been pointed out in response that the Mail has not limited itself to deploying the trope of a rootless, cosmopolitan, unpatriotic Jew, someone who is not one of 'us'. Also it has called on the centuries-old (indeed, millennia-old) imagery of an angry Old Testament god, so unlike the forgiving, loving, civilising god of Christianity. Defending its right to criticise the son of Ralph Miliband, [the Mail says](#): 'We do not maintain, like the jealous God of Deuteronomy, that the iniquity of the fathers should be visited on the sons. But when a son with prime ministerial ambitions swallows his father's teachings, as the younger Miliband appears to have done, the case is different. How can Ralph Miliband's vision be declared out of bounds for public discussion — particularly since he spent his entire life attempting to convert the impressionable young to his poisonous creed?' With its evocation and rejection of 'the jealous God of Deuteronomy' the Mail damns itself out of its own mouth.

Well, what is the Labour leadership to do? So far, Mr Miliband and his aides have declined to accuse the Mail in public of being antisemitic. Instead, they have concentrated simply on portraying him as [a dutiful son keen to defend his father's reputation](#) as a patriot. They have not spoken robustly against antisemitism, racism and xenophobia. Nor have they even asserted, in a high-profile way, that to be a socialist is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of or to apologise for. Leaders of the government, for their part, appear to have been relieved and even delighted that Mr Miliband's objections to the Mail article have gone no further than standing up for his father. Enthusiastically agreeing that everyone has the right to defend their family's reputation, politicians of all parties have been able to avoid the much more important issues that have arisen in this affair relating to xenophobia, racism and One Nation, and to procedural values underpinning deliberation and debate in a good society.

Politicians should be talking, yes, about xenophobia and racism, and about the sleepiness and wakefulness of the form of racism known as antisemitism. Also, more widely, they should be talking at this time, as at all times, about the values and aspirations in the Equality Act 2010. And they should be talking about, and themselves observing, protocols and conventions of civil debate.

The Daily Mail's character assassination, says a headline over [a thoughtful brief article by Will Hutton](#), was 'a political act, for it damages democracy'. Democracy, Hutton points out, 'cannot function without adherence to protocols of debate and exchange. The presumption is that it is via the free exchange of ideas, propositions and hypotheses about the world that our representatives will

deliberate, legislate and govern. The more exchange and deliberation, the better the decision. That in turn presumes a readiness to hear what others say, to accept evidence and logic, and to modify a position if it becomes clear it is untenable. Democracy thus depends on a degree of mutual respect; a willingness to argue as hard as possible but to accept that although there will be ruthless cut and thrust your opposing interlocutors also want the best – for the economy, society and country. Sometimes they may even be right. When this democratic culture collapses, as it has in the US, the result is deaf debate and deadlocked government.'

The Mail claims to be in favour of deliberative democracy and to genuinely love Britain, and combines these claims with the allegation that the values of the Miliband family are wholly different. 'If he [Ed Miliband] crushes the freedom of the Press, no doubt his father will be proud of him from beyond the grave, where he lies 12 yards from the remains of Karl Marx,' says the Mail. 'But he will have driven a hammer and sickle through the heart of the nation so many of us genuinely love.'

As in its reference to 'the jealous God of Deuteronomy', the Mail's intemperate and ugly imagery again damns the paper out of its own mouth. But faced with such intemperance, own goals and self-inflicted ugliness, politicians and their close advisers must resist the temptation to stay smugly silent. For the sake of democracy itself, as also of course for other good reasons, they must not let sleeping racisms lie.