

The truly worrying message from the mess that Labour ha..

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Readers of this blog will be familiar with me criticising the Labour Party these days. It does, however, feel almost unfair to pick on it over the complete mess it has made of selecting and then supporting a candidate in the Rochdale by-election.

Azhar Ali could have criticised the actions of the Israeli government in Gaza on many grounds. Why on earth he had to do so on the basis of a conspiracy theory is hard to work out. Labour's reaction, leaving it without an endorsed candidate in a parliamentary by-election, was ultimately inevitable but deeply damaging. However, the superficial blow is not nearly as damaging as the deeper message inherent in this failure.

Labour has had an undoubted problem with anti-Semitism. So, too, for the record, have other political parties. I do not think that this sentiment, or racism more broadly, or prejudice of other sorts, is something from which any political party is free. Nor is any political party free of people who will make errors of judgement. As a matter of fact, they happen. So, what is the particular problem for Starmer at this moment?

There are three. Firstly, he made anti-Semitism a major, if not the most important, issue in his divisions with Corbyn. I personally doubt that Jeremy Corbyn is anti-Semitic. Having said so, I also think he was far too naive about the issue and the actions of some within Labour who were, and he could and should have done more about it. To paraphrase James Baldwin, this left many not believing what he said because they saw what he did.

But, as is now going to be painfully clear, the same might also be true of Starmer. Maybe he, too, has done too little about what he defines as anti-Semitism. That makes his argument with Corbyn on this issue look particularly naive. As important as this issue was, it was an error of judgment by Starmer to promote it in the way that he did.

Starmer's second mistake has been to promote Zionism and to then imply that to be anti-Zionist is to be anti-Semitic. This is a quite straightforward category error. There are a very large number of Jews, including a considerable number living in Israel, who

think that Zionism is anti-Semitic. For Starmer to adopt a position that is so deeply contested, even within the Jewish community, makes no sense. It was bound to lead to political difficulty. It has. It was a considerable error of judgement on his part, whatever his personal beliefs might be.

Zionism cannot be the policy of a British political party seeking power in this country, even if opposition to anti-Semitism can and should be. The situation in Israel, particularly with regard to the rights of Palestinians, is far too complex for such a bold position to be adopted, especially when so many people are convinced that some form of two-state solution is the only eventual answer to the problems faced in that area.

Third, and this is my key point, is that in far too many issues, Starmer is proving himself to be naïvely dogmatic when being so really does not serve his purpose. You can be naïvely dogmatic in student politics. Large numbers of people who never seek political office are also naïvely dogmatic on a whole range of issues. But, leadership of a major political party, let alone leadership of a country, requires that a person have firmly based principles and that they then use these principles to navigate their way through areas where there are clear differences of opinion. That process will always require compromise.

Starmer's position on Corbyn allowed for no compromise. It was naive as a result. It is now likely to backfire on him.

Endorsement of the Zionist approach, to which Starmer says he is dedicated, also allows for no compromise. That position is similarly naive.

We see the same naivety in Labour's economic policy, where a dedication to the wholly inappropriate use of fiscal rules is both naive and dangerous.

The same naive approach to policy will, no doubt, be seen in other areas when and if Starmer's Labour ever decides what it is actually about.

The common theme is a dangerous one. Labour is grasping for certainty in a world that demands leaders able to embrace the unknown, ambiguity, uncertainty, diversity, and straightforward difference. Starmer is seemingly unable to demonstrate that he has the intellectual capacity to do that now when he is in Opposition. How, then, will he cope with the demands of being prime minister? It appears to me that he does not have the skills to make the decisions that holding that office will demand of him.

Complex decision-making requires the ability to comprehend the possibility that two apparently competing facts can not just be held by those of integrity but might also have significant elements of truth inherent in them both. The task of the true leader is to reconcile these positions. So far, Starmer has not shown any ability in this area.

Without this intellectual agility, Starmer is a worrying potential choice for prime

minister. Today's mess in Rochdale is just an indication of that fact.

This moment will, however, pass. Starmer's weaknesses will, however, remain apparent in all that he does. The worry is that he will be incapable of change so that he might provide the leadership that this country requires. That's the truly worrying message of today's mess.