JEWS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
A CONTEMPORARY NOTE

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The purpose of this note is to draw attention to certain features of the London mayoral election of 4 May 2008 and the United Kingdom parliamentary election of 6 May 2010 and their outcomes insofar as these relate to and reflect upon the UK’s Jewish population.

Jews — however defined — comprise less than one per cent of the population of the UK and of its electorate. However this minute population is heavily concentrated in the Greater London and Greater Manchester conurbations. Indeed, well over half of the UK’s Jews are to be found in Greater London. These distinctive residential concentrations mean that Jewish voters have, historically, been able to exert an influence disproportionate to their mere number.

Historically, Jewish voters in the UK have demonstrated a propensity to behave along sectarian or ethnic lines given the political circumstances. The votes of Jewish electors played a pivotal role in the epic struggle of Lionel de Rothschild (1847–58) to enter the House of Commons as a professing Jew, because the constituency for which he repeatedly stood — the City of London — contained several hundred Jewish businessmen who qualified for the mid-19th century property-related franchise. The parliamentary career of the Yiddish-speaking banker Samuel Montagu was built on his relationship with his Jewish electors in that most Jewish of constituencies, Whitechapel (in London’s ‘East End’), for which he sat as Liberal MP 1885–1900. The near-defeat of the Labour candidate at the Whitechapel by-election of November-December 1930 was a significant factor in the decision of Ramsay Macdonald’s minority Labour government to ditch its anti-Zionist policy in Palestine. The Jewish vote was pivotal to the 1945 victory of Britain’s last Communist MP, Phil Piratin, in Mile End (adjacent to Whitechapel), and it was equally pivotal to the defeat of Maurice Orbach (a self-proclaimed Labour Zionist who, however, had conspicuously failed to support Israel during the Suez crisis) at East Willesden in 1959. In February
1974 his Jewish electors saved the gentle Zionist John Gorst from defeat at Hendon North, in the heart of ‘Jewish’ north-west London. Four years later, on the other side of London, the Jews gave the Conservative candidate a resounding victory at a dramatic by-election at Ilford North, where Sir Keith Joseph had openly — and most successfully — campaigned for his Jewish brethren to support Thatcherite economic and immigration policies. The East Willesden, Hendon North and Ilford North results reflect the fact that, although British Jews have never — certainly since Emancipation — voted as a monolithic block, they have demonstrated an ample capacity to behave in a distinctive way, most notably (though not only) on the issues of Zionism and Israel, by rewarding candidates whom local Jewish electorates perceive as friendly, and by punishing those perceived as unfriendly, even when this has meant voting against socio-economic, regional or national expectations. This is well illustrated through an examination of the contest for the London mayoral election of May 2008, when the incumbent maverick Labour demagogue Ken Livingstone (who had held the office ever since its establishment eight years previously) was challenged — successfully as it turned out — by the maverick Conservative candidate Boris Johnson. I have dealt elsewhere with Livingstone’s numerous anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli indiscretions, both as leader of the Labour-controlled Greater London Council in the 1980s and much more recently as London mayor. What part did the Jews of London play in ousting him from City Hall in 2008? The circumstantial evidence is compelling, and points to a vindication of the claim made by his (Jewish) deputy, Nicky Gavron, that a Jewish backlash made a significant contribution to his loss of office. The office of Mayor of London is elected under the Supplementary Vote electoral system, whereby voters express first and second preference votes only, irrespective of the total number of candidates standing for election. In terms of first-preference votes, Livingstone actually did better in 2008 than in 2004 — as a proportion of the total of first-preferences, he polled 36.4 per cent in 2008 as against 35.7 per cent four years previously. So the core ‘Livingstone’ vote held up remarkably well. But holding onto core voters was never going to be enough to win in an election in 2008 radically different from the contest of 2004. Voter turnout in the London mayoral election had been rising ever since the first poll in 2000. Then just over one third of registered voters bothered to vote. In 2008 this proportion increased to 45 per cent. In some areas of Greater London turnout was even higher — almost 50 per cent in Bexley & Bromley, 49 per cent in Croydon & Sutton, and in West Central London, 48 per cent in Barnet & Camden, 46 per cent in Havering & Redbridge. And whilst there are not that many Jewish voters in Bromley or Croydon, there are a great many in Barnet, Redbridge and West Central (Westminster and Chelsea).

Livingstone needed to attract most of these extra votes. He failed to do so. The Conservative share of first-preference votes rose from 28.2

70
JEWS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

per cent to 42.5 per cent — a full six percentage points ahead of the Labour first-preference total. Boris Johnson then delivered the coup-de-grace by attracting almost 258,000 second-preferences, whereas in 2004 the Tory candidate had polled only 222,000 second-preferences. To eject Livingstone from City Hall, Boris Johnson needed to find extra votes, and many of these were potential Jewish Tory votes — if only they could be enticed into the polling booths. The 2008 London mayoral contest was in fact decided by around 150,000 electors who might otherwise have stayed at home but who were ‘got out’ by a ferociously efficient election machine — dubbed by the media ‘Boris’s Barmy Army.’

In Barnet (north-west London), where the ‘Barmy Army’ was out in force, Livingstone did not bother to put in one media appearance during the entire campaign. Both in Barnet and in adjacent Brent, and in Jewish Redbridge (north-east London), the message was tailored to play on Jewish fears of what Livingstone might do if given another four-year term. Large numbers of Jewish voters do seem to have gone out of their way to vote for Johnson; in so doing they helped eject Livingstone from City Hall.

Unfortunately, no discrete survey of Jewish voters was carried out either in connection with the 2008 London mayoral contest or at the time of the parliamentary election two years later. In January and February 2010, under the auspices of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, a telephone survey of a sample of 1,000 self-identifying UK-based Jewish adults was carried out with the object of ascertaining — inter alia their ‘general political leaning.’ It is not my purpose to enter here into a detailed discussion of this survey, the results of which can be accessed at the IJPR website. The key political findings of the survey may however be summarised as follows:

• Within the sample, sympathy for the Conservative and Labour parties was evenly split (at 30% and 31% respectively), but 15% declared themselves to be undecided, whilst another 11% favoured the Liberal-Democrats.

• Jews with a ‘Secular’ outlook preferred Labour; those with a ‘Religious’ outlook preferred the Conservatives.

• Respondents belonging to orthodox synagogues were more likely than members of non-orthodox synagogues to support the Conservatives.

In some respects these findings echo those of earlier researchers — for example the likelihood of a link between political leaning and synagogue affiliation — but it must be remembered that the IJPR survey did not ask respondents which party they actually intended to vote for in the forthcoming general election (which was, even then, widely expected to be held on 6 May, the date already fixed for local elections in England.

As the date of the general election approached, the broad consensus of national opinion polls suggested that the outcome would be — as it
GEOFFREY ALDERMAN

was — a ‘hung’ parliament, with no party having an overall majority. In this atmosphere there was much talk of ‘tactical voting,’ especially by Labour activists intent on preventing the formation of a Conservative government even if this meant voting Liberal-Democrat (rather than Labour) in a marginal constituency. In the event, the total Lib-Dem vote increased (from 5.9 millions in 2005 to 6.8 millions), as did the Lib-Dem share of the vote (from 22.1% to 23.0%). But because this increase was so evenly spread across the constituencies, the number of Lib-Dem MPs returned to Westminster actually fell, from 62 to 57. Elsewhere, Labour/Conservative marginal seats were fiercely contested, and in some of these it is likely that Jewish voters, casting their votes along ethnic lines, had a distinctive role to play in the outcomes of the contests.

In 2001 the United Kingdom’s decennial census contained a voluntary question designed to elicit the religious affiliations of respondents. Based on these returns the Office for National Statistics was able to compile lists of parliamentary constituencies ranked by declared religious affiliation. The following table is taken from this compilation:

Table 1
UK Parliamentary Constituencies by Highest Jewish Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finchley &amp; Golders Green</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hendon</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hertsmere</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrow East</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilford North</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hackney North &amp; Stoke Newington</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bury South</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampstead &amp; Kilburn</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chipping Barnet</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds North East</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although some constituencies underwent boundary revisions following the 2005 general election, these are judged to affect neither the ranking order nor the rounded percentages. Of the constituencies in which Jews accounted for at least ten per cent of the population seven were Labour held prior to the May 2010 contest. One of these — the heavily Jewish Finchley & Golders Green seat — was so highly marginal that it was bound to be lost to the Conservatives — as it was — irrespective of any special Jewish factor. But in the adjacent Hendon seat, which could have fallen to the Tories on a conventional swing of about 3.8 per cent, there was a purposeful battle for the Jewish vote. Andrew Dismore, who had held the seat for Labour since 1997, had impeccable Zionist credentials (he would not otherwise have become MP for Hendon) but his constituency standing had been undermined by the Labour’s government’s failure
JEWS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
to amend the ‘universal jurisdiction’ law, which currently permits private
citizens in the UK to apply for the arrest of prominent Israeli politicians
who set foot on British soil, and by the Labour government’s condemna-
tion of Israel over the alleged use of fake British passports in the Dubai
assassination of a senior Hamas terrorist earlier in the year. It is therefore
entirely plausible that the defection from Labour of a few dozen Jewish
voters handed the seat to Dismore’s Conservative challenger, Matthew
Oford (also a non-Jewish Zionist) by a mere 106-vote margin.

We might also note two other results. In East Renfrewshire (Glasgow)
the incumbent Jim Murphy, a leading member of Labour Friends of
Israel, came under sustained Muslim attack but managed to retain his
seat with a much increased share of the vote. In Bury South (the most
heavily Jewish of the Manchester constituencies) the incumbent Jewish
Labour MP, Ivan Lewis, Foreign Minister in the Labour government,
fought off a challenge from the Jewish Conservative candidate, Michelle
Wiseman (chief executive of Manchester Jewish Community Care) but
suffered a slump of over 10% in his share of the vote; the swing here
was over 8% from Labour to Conservative, compared with the Labour-
to-Conservative national swing of 5%, and anecdotal evidence suggests
that, as in Hendon, Jewish voters punished Labour for its perceived
negativity towards Israel, irrespective of the personal popularity of the
candidate with Jewish voters.

During the election campaign there was a concerted effort by the
Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC) to mobilise Muslim voters
against candidates — especially MPs — who were perceived as being
‘anti-Muslim,’ perhaps by having supported British military action in
Iraq and Afghanistan or by having evinced Zionist sympathies. I have
elsewhere considered in some detail the likely impact of the MPAC cam-
paign, but it is worth repeating here that in my view MPAC claims to
have single-handedly unseated three Labour MPs (in the Bradford East,
Watford and Hendon constituencies) are wild exaggerations. Moreover
the Labour defeats at Watford and Hendon brought into Parliament
Tory MPs who are firm and open Zionists. It is possible that MPAC
efforts had some bearing on the outcome at Bradford East. MPAC ran
a vicious campaign against the Muslim Labour MP Khalid Mahmood
in the Birmingham, Perry Barr constituency, but notwithstanding these
efforts Mr. Mahmood increased his majority from 7,948 to 11,908, and
his share of the total vote from 47 per cent to over 50 per cent. At Ilford
North Muslim activists (not necessarily associated with MPAC) cam-
paigned against the incumbent Jewish (and Zionist) Conservative MP
Lee Scott: despite this his total vote increased by almost 3,000 and his
share of the vote by some two per cent.

In all, some 23 self-identifying Jews were returned as MPs in 2010,
compared with 21 in 2005. Self-identifying Jews thus comprise just under
four per cent of the House of Commons. The 2010 Jewish cohort at
Westminster now consists of two Lib-Dems, nine Labour MPs and twelve Conservatives, the latter including John Bercow, the first Jewish Speaker of the Commons. There are currently no Jewish members of the Cabinet but Oliver Letwin (Conservative), who played a key part in the negotiations that led to the successful formation of the present coalition government, attends Cabinet meetings and Grant Shapps (Conservative), Jonathan Djanogly (Conservative) and Lynne Featherstone (Lib-Dem) all hold ministerial appointments. Mrs Featherstone is one of only four Jewish women MPs, the remaining three being in the Labour party.

NOTES
1 David Graham, The Political Leanings of British Jews (Institute for Jewish Policy Research, London, 2010), 2. Using the IJPR’s figure of ‘approximately 300,000’ Jews in Great Britain, the Jewish proportions both of the UK population and of its registered electorate compute to around 0.5 per cent.
3 Ibid. 44–45.
4 Ibid. 112–14.
5 Ibid. 117–18, 133.
6 Ibid. 145, 148–9.
10 Political Leanings, 1. The survey addressed many issues, of which ‘political leaning’ was only one.
12 Alderman, The Jewish Community, 206.
13 Though this reduced total was still sufficient for the party to hold the balance of power, resulting, after some days of negotiation, in the formation of a Conservative –LibDem coalition government.
16 Additionally, one Jewish peer, Lord (David) Freud, also holds ministerial office.

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