



# CORBYN & BREXIT TAUGHT ME TO BE VIGILANT

As JR launches its initiative to support emerging journalists (see p11 and p62), leading political columnist **Rafael Behr** explores how the recent upheavals in British life have forced him to reassess his identity

**“W**here are you from?” My Russian landlady’s question caught me off guard because she knew, or I thought she knew, that I had just arrived from England. I reminded her of this fact. “Clearly you’re not English,” she replied. “Look at you, dark and curly-haired. What are you really? Where is your family from?” I explained: England, via South Africa, but before that Lithuania ... Jewish ... “Aha! So why did you say you were English?” Her name was Lidia Sergeevna, and once the mystery of my national credentials was resolved, we got on fine. She was never hostile, just a little disappointed, as if she had asked for a Coke and the waiter had brought Pepsi. She didn’t mind a Jewish lodger, but she had ordered an English one. I was a student at the time, the mid-1990s, when Russia was trying and failing to become a democracy. Walking back

from university one day I came across a demonstration by the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity party. Its main policy was purging the motherland of ethnic impurity. I picked up a copy of the party newspaper and read how Boris Yeltsin was a secret Jew (real name: Baruch Yeltser) and that his government was plotting to defraud Russia of its mineral wealth and enslave its people. When I got home, I put the paper in the bin. The next day I found Lidia had fished it out and was reading it at the kitchen table. “That stuff is crazy, isn’t it?” I said. “Crazy, yes.” She sounded unsure. “Maybe. But there is also a lot that does make sense.” “But you don’t want to get rid of all the Jews, do you?” “Jews are no good,” she said firmly, before adding an emollient afterthought. “Don’t take offence. I don’t mean you, of course.”

A pause. “You’re one of the good ones.” I got used to those kind of exchanges during the years I spent in Russia, first studying the language, then using it as a journalist. Most people I met would establish the fact of my Jewishness within minutes of getting acquainted. Few accused me of plotting world domination, but many thought the notion of a global ‘Zionist’ network running the media and pulling the political strings in countries that claimed to be democracies was plausible. I had not previously thought of myself as a Jewish journalist, as distinct from a journalist who happened to be Jewish. There were interlocking components to my identity – the usual tangle of history, culture and geography that defines most second-generation immigrants’

Above: Protestors in Parliament Sq following Labour’s decision to take action against Margaret Hodge MP for calling Jeremy Corbyn an antisemite, 2018; Right: Pro-Brexit supporters in Parliament Sq, March 2019

relationship with the country they call home. I didn’t feel any compulsion to pick at the seams where the strands joined. I was grateful that British politics didn’t force the issue.

Until it did. The change came quite suddenly, on two fronts. In September 2015, Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party; nine months later, Britain voted to leave the European Union.

The Corbyn effect began before his victory was declared. The MP for Islington North had a back catalogue of comradeship with apologists for terrorism, Holocaust deniers and antisemitic conspiracy theorists. To suggest in print that those associations diminished his credentials as a potential prime minister invited torrents of abuse online, much of it drenched in familiar paranoid fixations on Jewish media power and ‘Zionist’ political puppetry.

This has always been a neuralgic obsession on the crank left, usually expressed as a pseudo-Marxist fixation on Israel as the wickedest imperialist state on Earth and extrapolation from that to suspicion of all Jewish influence in public affairs. The Corbyn movement was a conveyor for the transmission of that toxin into the mainstream of the party I had usually voted for – and could no longer endorse.



Brexit animated a more subtle, but no less profound, feeling of alienation. I was a Remainer because I thought leaving the EU would be a monumental act of economic and strategic self-sabotage, but also because I wanted Britain to stay part of a European project that was founded in the aftermath of World War II to promote peace and stability by way of cross-border integration.

## “Criticism of Corbyn invited torrents of abuse online”

I worried that a campaign conceived in hostility to that project would tend towards nationalism and xenophobia. That anxiety was vindicated by pro-

Brexit posters depicting dark-skinned foreigners massing at the border. It was confirmed when pro-Europeans were cast as traitors, saboteurs and enemies of the people. In Theresa May’s first major speech on Brexit as prime minister, she observed that people who considered themselves to be citizens of the world

were “citizens of nowhere”. It was an insinuation of disloyalty; a signal that Remainers were disqualifying themselves from belonging to a post-Brexit nation.

My aversion to that rhetoric was visceral. It stirred antibodies present in my blood from a cultural inoculation against nationalism that was intrinsically Jewish. To be vigilant against that kind of politics – to recoil at the merest whiff of it because of where it once led – was a lesson I learned so young I can hardly recall a time before I knew it.

British politics is calmer now, but the insidious traces of that time linger and so does the effect on me. Something submerged was propelled to the surface. Something in the inflection of my voice started to sound more Jewish – at least to me. I hear it clearer now, and more confident, every time someone asks “Where are you from?”. ■

Rafael Behr is a Guardian columnist and leader writer. He was formerly a correspondent in the Baltic region and Russia and is the author of *Politics: A Survivor’s Guide – How to Stay Engaged without Getting Enraged*, Atlantic Books, 2023, £15. Rafael is one of the speakers in JR’s Emerging Journalists Programme, which runs from 1 Nov to 6 Dec, and features weekly masterclasses followed by talks with journalists from The Times, BBC, Haaretz and many more. Applications close on 18 Oct. See below, p62 and [jewishrenaissance.org.uk/emerging-journalists](http://jewishrenaissance.org.uk/emerging-journalists).