



Jews in British politics

The Jewish Community in British Politics by Geoffrey Alderman

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societies believed, and in fact made a choice, knowing the economic circumstances they were leaving and the prospects that lay ahead. While Dr Bristow has tried to make quantitative assessments of the Jewish involvement in commercial vice at this period, the evidence is still so fragmentary that one can only say that, while the charges of the anti-Semites were grotesque exaggerations, Jewish involvement – at certain places and periods – while still not dominant, and even smaller perhaps than that of one or two other groups such as the French – was still more than conventional Jewish historiography has led us to believe.

V. D. LIPMAN

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The Jewish Community in British Politics. Geoffrey Alderman, Oxford University Press. 1983. £17.50.

The author of this entertainingly written book belies the title by claiming in his preface to be concerned with only one aspect of politics: the 'relationship between the political system and those voters who were or are Jewish'. Nevertheless, he boldly states that: 'In writing this book I have deliberately set out to expose some of the most sensitive areas of Jewish life in Britain'.

Unfortunately he succeeds in neither task. In the first he is severely handicapped by the lack of useful historical and scientific data and in the second he allows his autobiographical experiences, which he details rather generously, to influence his analysis of what little evidence there is.

The book can be divided into two parts. The first documents the political attachments of British Jews from the pre-emancipation period to 1950. Despite his early claim of concern with votes and voters, the emphasis here is on Jewish politicians, and in particular on elected Members of Parliament. Little new is added to our knowledge of Anglo-Jewish history since the sources are essentially secondary, though it may nevertheless be useful to have this material neatly packaged. Yet the problem of judgment arises here too. The 'Jewish vote' is claimed to 'have indeed arrived' when in relation to Rothschild elections Bentinck declared himself against the Tories continuing to fight Jewish emancipation because of the 'pronunciation of public opinion'. This was not a politician afraid of the 'Jewish vote' but one coming face to face with public opinion, and its clear rejection of bigotry and discrimination.

'Majority Jewish support' for the various political parties is traced through

the 19th century, and the blatant conservatism of the Adlers is usefully stressed. However, it is with voters rather than with occupants of high office that political tendencies are difficult to prove. There is no valid evidence for the statements about the percentage shares of the poll among Jews in the era of secret ballots. Nor can spurious correlations count as evidence, such as when the 4 per cent swing in northwest Manchester, in the general election of 1910, is traced to Jewish electors who, it is admitted, composed less than 8 per cent of the electorate. An idea of the statistical precision used is that such an area is deemed to be one of those with 'large Jewish populations'.

Small issues and minor incidents loom large in this analysis, as does the frantic search for hard facts. As evidence of the 1930s Jewish movement away from the Tories and towards Labour, the lack-lustre performance of a Jewish Conservative candidate in the Glasgow Gorbals, who had 'no impact on his correligionists' who of course accounted for a whole 7 per cent of the electorate, is cited. This commonly admitted Labour ascendancy among Jews in 1945 is bolstered by a list of constituencies which is more appropriate to the 1960s. The two Wembley seats and the two Ilford ones had negligible numbers of Jews at that time, and certainly only a small proportion of those of two or three decades later.

The problems increase in the latter part of the book, which is mainly concerned with Alderman's own research on constituencies with 'large' Jewish electorates. Even 'the evidence' for the author's statement that a Jewish vote is a 'political reality' in the 1970s and often 'crucial' is not as clear-cut as he claims, if we are to accept the commonly applied meanings of such terms.

Again, there is a failure to draw a clear distinction between different aspects of the political process in a democratic society: between candidate selection, constituency activity, pressure-group politics and lobbying, not all of which have a direct relationship with votes cast or with the electorate. On the basis of Alderman's own polls we are given evidence of 'rewards' to Tory 'Zionist' MPs in the February 1974 elections and the 'heavy pressure from Jewish voters' which loyal Conservatives such as Mrs Thatcher in Finchley underwent. But what does this mean in electoral terms? Mrs Thatcher suffered a swing against her of 3.2 per cent, compared with an average swing to Labour in Greater London of 2.2 per cent. On the other hand, to use that very unfortunate phrase coined by Alderman, that 'prisoner of Jewish voters', John Gorst at Hendon North, suffered only a 1.1 per cent adverse swing. We can calculate, therefore, the reward or penalty involved in acting in line with the sympathies of Jewish voters in regard to the arms embargo of 1973. It was worth 1 per cent of the vote. Hardly a crucial factor in the average party agent's calculations.

A weakness which cannot easily be overlooked is the over-reliance of the

main thesis, which concerns a significant ethnic voting differential, on the unique constituency of Hendon North. In such a district, where the demography of the Jewish population is rather vague, sampling this unknown population is problematic and the level of error must be wider than average. On the other hand, the work of the Research Unit of the Board of Deputies of British Jews has provided a good base for a sampling frame in both Hackney North and Ilford North constituencies. It is not without some significance, therefore, that the ethnic differential in these last two seats is much narrower than in the Hendon samples.

In Ilford and Hackney, where we know the social-class profile of the Jews and the fact that they are seven and three times more likely, respectively, to be self-employed than the general population of the areas, and that moreover their proportion of manual workers, the traditional Labour supporters, is below average, we find that the Jewish Labour vote exhibits an ethnic differential of less than 3 per cent over three elections in Ilford and only 2.6 per cent in Hackney. Both of these figures lie within the margin of statistical error where a sample of 130 Jews is compared with the actual result among 55,000 voters.

Given such sampling problems one can only congratulate Alderman on the consistency of his polling and his success in obtaining a coherent time-series in Hendon and Ilford. Yet one can still question the validity of some of his conclusions. Apparently, lack of resources prevented him following Hendon North through to the 1979 election, at which date he turned his attention to Hackney North. Obviously this reflects his growing concern with the topic of the National Front and the Jews. This overemphasis, with 5 of 172 pages devoted to an undoubtedly controversial and newsworthy subject, however, does detract from the objectivity of the exercise and the balance of the book. Given his sample size the presence of two Jewish NF voters in his Hackney poll of 130 cannot be reproducible. One can only really include this result in his comment in a footnote on the Communist vote 'it does mean they are numerically insignificant'. This is especially true if one remembers that NF votes are included in his Ilford polls under 'other' and on two occasions no Jewish support for the Front was found there. This rejection of the NF is consistent with recent findings among Jews in Leeds. The basis of this much-discussed Jewish support for the NF thus moves out of the realm of electoral behaviour and focuses on the party memberships of a handful of very marginal Jews.

It is surely invalid given our present imperfect knowledge of the processes involved to suggest that even this very minimal support for the NF is an index of a swing to the right among Jewish voters. It is doubtful that there really is a progression through a left-right spectrum through the Conservatives to the

Front. A closer relationship with the Liberal protest vote, or even previous Labour connections is probably a more accurate provenance for most supporters of the radical right.

Nevertheless, nobody would seriously dispute Alderman's argument that a Jewish swing towards the Conservatives has occurred. The changing socio-economic profile of Anglo-Jewry clearly predicts such a finding given the class bias of national politics. It is the link between the swing to the right and the Israel-Zionist vote which is not convincingly established.

The fact that in Britain the State of Israel has not been the particular favourite of either party since 1948 is significant. Why should a crucial 'Zionist vote' composed of Jewish electors suddenly emerge in the 1970s when the Zionist Federation was at an obviously low ebb and lacked the funds and leadership it had possessed in the halcyon days of Brodetzky? In the inter-war years, when a Zionist vote would have made sense as a form of effective pressure on the mandatory power in Palestine, no such vote emerged. The Zionists were even chary of using such a threat in Whitechapel because of a realistic appraisal of its effectiveness. The point which emerges is that no 'vote' exists. What is being examined is really a more effective and more open form of pressure group activity. For a number of strategic reasons after 1948, Zionist pressure groups increasingly moved the focus of their activities away from Whitehall, Pall Mall clubs and party headquarters, towards the constituency level. It was an indication of the realization that in the absence of any differentiation between the Middle East policies of the major parties either in their manifestos or when in power, only the individual candidate or backbencher was really open to influence or pressure.

Alderman's attitude towards the 'Jewish establishment' shows a serious inconsistency. On one level they are naive, on another effective, at one moment 'self-styled' and obviously undemocratic communal leaders, yet on other occasions they are the articulators of a powerful body of voters. We return to the same question of judgmental balance. When faced by the election of Tory and Orthodox leader, Joe Lobenstein, to Hackney Council in 1978, Alderman equates the fact that his vote was two hundred ahead of the other members of the Conservative ticket to his 'Jewish swing to the right'. It could just as validly be presented as a personal vote drawn from non-Tory electors.

It is unfortunate that Alderman has attempted to write a book of record on the Jewish vote, because the general paucity of data makes the accusation of selective, or even unsupported, use of evidence so easy. Certainly it must undermine its standing among those used to the exacting procedures of historical method.

BARRY A. KOSMIN