

BBC debate on whether Jews are an ethnic minority group sparks outrage

By Cnaan Liphshiz_ March 2, 2021



A general view of the Broadcasting House at BBC headquarters in Central London in 2017. (Vuk Valcic/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

(JTA) — The BBC has been accused of bias in its coverage of Israel for decades. Now the public broadcaster is taking flak from British Jews for coverage much closer to home.

What's causing their biggest dispute in years?

It's the broadcast of a debate over whether Jews should be considered an ethnic minority — a panel discussion featuring four non-Jewish panelists and a Jewish commenter as a guest.

Monday's discussion touched raw nerves in the organized community, where many Jews feel marginalized by allegedly hostile media treatment and the rise of anti-Semitism both from the far right and at the heart of the Labour Party.

The broadcast was prompted by comments made last month by Labour lawmaker Angela Rayner, who congratulated a Scottish lawmaker of Pakistani descent as “the first-ever ethnic minority leader of a political party anywhere in the U.K.”

Some Jews protested on social media, noting that Jews had led parties, from Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in the 19th century to former Labour leader Ed Miliband starting in 2010.

Whether or not to designate Jews as members of an ethnic group — a debate among Jews themselves — has political and cultural implications. Many Jews and others consider Jews an ethnic entity cemented by culture, tradition and genetics. The late former chief rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, famously argued, by contrast, that Jewishness is not an ethnicity but a “bricolage of multiple ethnicities.”

Others, including many anti-Zionists, refuse to recognize Judaism’s peoplehood dimension altogether, saying Jews should be regarded strictly as members of a religion. The definition of “ethnic” has implications under laws preventing discrimination, as well as in the court of public opinion.

The BBC controversy echoes a debate in the United States over whether most Jews should be considered white and thus privileged, members of a vulnerable and protected minority, both or neither.

On Monday, the United Kingdom’s largest news organization sought to address some of these issues during the television program “Politics Live!” Far from settling the question, however, the discourse further angered Jewish community leaders and members at a time when many of them are reeling from rising anti-Semitism.

“Imagine if I was Black and four white people were asked to judge if I was a member of an ethnic minority. It would be as offensive,” Benjamin Cohen, the Jewish guest, tweeted. Cohen is the 38-year-old CEO of an online newspaper for the LGBT community.

The show’s host, Jo Coburn, who is Jewish, asked the four non-Jewish panelists — two lawmakers, a think tank leader and a newspaper columnist — whether Jews did indeed constitute an ethnic minority. The lawmakers were noncommittal, with one of them, Labour’s Stewart Wood, saying some of his Jewish friends aren’t sure themselves of the answer. Cohen and the think tanker said Jews do indeed form their own ethnic minority.

Coburn suggested that Rayner's comments may reflect that many Jews in Britain have succeeded in reaching high political office and therefore "don't need to be seen as a group needing recognition in the same way as others."

That ruffled Cohen's feathers.

"We face anti-Semitism and racism very clearly," Cohen told Coburn. "We've just seen that with the many years of racism and anti-Semitism within the Labour Party, so it suggests that Jews don't face racism and therefore we've reached such a high office that we're not an ethnic minority. It's frankly ridiculous. Frankly the notion of this debate is ridiculous."

It wasn't the first debate in the U.K. about whether Jews are an ethnic minority and whether they benefit from so-called white privilege.

A similar debate arose in 2018 after a politician of Pakistani descent was again hailed as the first member of an ethnic minority to be named Home secretary — an office previously attained by two Jews.

"Part of the complication is that we are seen primarily as a religion rather than a race or ethnicity," Abi Symons wrote in an op-ed in *The Jewish Chronicle* at the time. "But another part of this is the perception of our privilege."

Jews, she wrote, "pass as white if that's your skin tone and therefore on physical first impressions carry the privileges associated with appearing to be part of the powerful majority."



BBC journalist Jo Coburn, seen standing outside Parliament in London, suggested during the debate that Jews have succeeded in reaching high political office and therefore “don’t need to be seen as a group needing recognition in the same way as others.” (Jeff Overs/BBC News & Current Affairs via Getty Images)

Jewish observers were primed to distrust Rayner, a supporter of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who backed a boycott of Israel and whose critics say allowed anti-Semitism to flourish within Labour’s ranks. Rayner also praised Norman Finkelstein’s controversial book “The Holocaust Industry,” which accused Jews of exploiting the genocide for personal and political gain. Rayner called it “seminal.”

The Board of Deputies of British Jews said in a statement Monday that it was “disappointed by the lack of sensitivity shown by the BBC.”

The umbrella group added: “Jews, regardless of whether they are at all religious or not, are subjected to antisemitism every day — and have been subjected to mass murder, in living memory, on the basis of their ethnicity. Our community should expect solidarity and support, not questions about whether we deserve any.”

More than 1,000 people have signed a petition titled “BBC: Apologise now for suggesting Jews might not ‘count’ as an ethnic minority.”

BBC’s immediate response was to double down.

“According to the Government — not Politics Live! — Jews aren’t an ethnic group in the UK. So, if you believe they should be, please tell Government as it’s their policy,” BBC’s editor of live political programs, Rob Burley, tweeted in response to the critics.

Burley cited a government document that lists, for census purposes, several ethnic groups, but not Jews. However, the document does not say Jews are not an ethnic minority. It also features five categories classified as “other” and a disclaimer saying that the list does not represent “how all people identify,” encouraging residents to write in their own ethnicity on official government documents.

The United Kingdom’s Home Office did not reply in time for this article to a query on whether Jews are an ethnic group.

The BBC program, wrote Stephen Pollard, editor of The Jewish Chronicle, “provoked genuine rage from across the spectrum of Judaism,” and the corporation’s unbending reaction to criticism only made it worse.

Some have written about how the program “reflects the false notion that Jews are ‘white’ and so cannot be a proper ethnic minority — and thus antisemitism is not proper racism,” Pollard said. “I’m sure that’s right. But there is something else at work here — an arrogant ignorance that brooks no contradiction and refuses to bend.”