

Britain: Liberal Democrats sack MP for “understanding” the roots of Palestinian terrorism

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With lightning speed, Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrat leader sacked Jenny Tonge, the party’s spokesperson for children’s affairs, for daring to express her sympathy with the Palestinians and stating that she understood that suicide bombers acted out of a sense of desperation and hopelessness.

A former party spokesperson for International Development, Tonge was addressing a meeting in Westminster organised by the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign.

Tonge quite explicitly prefaced her remarks with the caveat that she condemned all forms of violence and terrorism.

She said, “I do not forgive the suicide bombers,” but continued, “I am also aware why people there become suicide bombers. It is out of despair.”

“Many, many people criticise,” she added. “Many, many people say it is just another form of terrorism, but I can understand and I am a fairly emotional person and I am a mother and a grandmother. I think that if I had to live in that situation and I say this advisedly, I might just consider becoming one myself. And that is a terrible thing to say.”

Tonge reiterated that her remarks did not mean that she supported terrorist violence, only that she understood that suicide bombers acted out of political hopelessness. “I was just trying to say how, having seen the violence and humiliation and the provocation that the Palestinian people live under every day and have done since their land was occupied by Israel, I could understand where [the suicide bombers] were coming from,” she explained.

The comedian Jeremy Hardy told the *Guardian*, “There were a number of Jewish people in the audience at the time and none of them baulked at what she said when they heard it in context; in fact there was loud applause at the end of her speech.”

Other speakers condemned Israeli actions against the Palestinians. Gerald Kaufman, who had once been the Labour shadow foreign secretary, attacked Israel’s security wall as an abomination and called for economic sanctions against Israel.

Tonge’s remarks, however, angered the Zionist establishment in Britain, Israel and internationally who went after her immediately. Louise Ellman, head of the Labour Friends of Israel committee, said, “She [Tonge] is giving the green light to terrorism at a time when we should be all urging peaceful negotiation to end the tragic conflict in the Middle East.”

A spokesman for the Israeli embassy in London expressed outrage and claimed that Tonge’s comments could “add to the atmosphere of incitement and hatred within Palestinian and Muslim societies.... For Dr Tonge, who is a physician and a spokeswoman on children, to justify such murderous acts is deeply immoral,” he added.

On the part of the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon the attack on Tonge is part of a sustained political offensive seeking to portray Europe as a hotbed of anti-Semitism in order to rubbish any criticism of its bloody and escalating repression of the Palestinians.

In this aim the Zionist lobby was successful. Tonge’s words were ripped out of context and her speech was widely reported as implying her support for terrorism. The tabloid press had a field day. But it was not just the tabloids.

Gavin Esler, the anchorman on *Newsnight*, the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme, virtually shrieked at Tonge for suggesting that she understood where suicide bombers were coming from and accused her of supporting terrorism.

Within hours, Kennedy announced that Tonge’s remarks were “not compatible with Liberal Democrat policies and principles. There can be no justification under any circumstances, for taking innocent lives through terrorism.”

Her instant dismissal met with the approval of Lord Janner, a Labour vice-chair of the British-Israeli parliamentary group, who said, “Her support for terrorist suicide bombers is appalling and unworthy of any member of parliament.”

Tonge’s sacking is not simply a knee-jerk effort to appease the Zionist lobby, however. It underscores the fact that official political discussion in Britain today is shaped by what is good for the US/British “war on terror”.

In the first place sympathy for the Palestinians’ plight cuts across the interests of the US’s chief ally in the region, Israel. But there are broader questions. Kennedy is insisting that terrorist actions cannot be understood in terms of its social and political roots, i.e., as a product of oppression and suffering combined with the absence of any movement articulating a progressive basis on which this can be opposed through a political struggle against the imperialist powers. Instead it must simply be condemned as “evil” and “inexcusable”, for to do otherwise would raise issues that would throw into question the justifications being employed to

legitimise the predatory efforts of the US and its British ally to establish hegemony over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.

It beggars belief that in the 21st century, to try to understand a social phenomenon, however repugnant it may be, implies support. One immediately is forced to ask: To what else will the doctrine of the unknowable be applied?

Implicit in this stand is that the only way to deal with terrorism is through militarism and suppression.

Moreover, Tonge's treatment was meant as a warning to others. If someone has the temerity to point out what even many Zionists would accept to be true—that Israel's actions towards the Palestinians are and have been for decades inhuman—then the full weight of the political establishment will come down on them like a ton of bricks.

This disgusting spectacle provides a revealing insight into the debased nature of what passes for political discussion in Britain today. Tonge was forced to repeat over and over again that her remarks did not imply support for terrorism instead of addressing the substance of the rally: opposition to Israel's policy aimed at driving the Palestinians from their land. Instead of her remarks prompting an intelligent and rational discussion on the social and political roots of terrorism, on whether British support for Israeli policies has helped create the poverty and misery fuelling it, and a questioning of the efficacy of the US/British war on terror that is breeding further terrorist acts, the BBC and most of the media jumped in to close all discussion down.

That even the more serious elements in the media today promote such a philistine and cowardly line says a great deal about the state of contemporary culture. Indeed, the BBC has played a crucial role in an ideological assault aimed at preventing any attempt to understand the objective source of terrorism, which is bound up with three factors.

Firstly with nearly a century of intrigue by successive imperialist powers, particularly Britain, to divide and exploit the working class in one of the most strategically important regions in the world. Secondly with the dreadful social conditions to which millions and millions of people are condemned. And thirdly with the decline over a protracted period of a class conscious, socialist movement committed to an international struggle against imperialism and its national agents.

It is the absence of a political programme for the working class and peasantry to resolve the impasse that has created the political paralysis and vacuum that Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Al Qaeda and similar groups have sought to fill—substituting the reactionary and self-defeating methods of terrorism aimed at securing concessions from imperialism for the region's bourgeoisie rather than the economic and political liberation of the oppressed masses.

The Palestinian Solidarity Campaign's general secretary, Betty Hunter, said, "We are appalled that the media has chosen yet again to oblige the state of Israel by ignoring the whole point of our lobby, which was to highlight Israel's ethnic cleansing and war crimes of which the apartheid wall is the most horrific example."

Kennedy admitted that Israel had mounted an extensive campaign and he had faced pressure to sack Tonge. He tried to justify his action by claiming that her statements did not represent

the party's official position. But the Lib Dems at least nominally claim to uphold the principle of self-determination and the Palestinians' right to a viable homeland and to oppose the illegal Zionist settlements.

Menzies Campbell, the Lib Dem Shadow Foreign Secretary has repeatedly insisted that the Israeli government's settler policy has jeopardised the prospect of a viable Palestinian state and condemned Sharon as a peace wrecker.

"As a first step, Israel should freeze the settlements. In return we are entitled to ask neighbouring Arab countries to refuse to support organisations which are opposed to a [peace] settlement, and which use the bomb and the bullet to derail any efforts to achieve one", he has stated in Parliament.

The Lib Dems often pose as a liberal and more left alternative to New Labour. Tonge herself has liberal views on a number of international and social issues. As international development spokesperson, she even opposed her party's support for US military action against Afghanistan, famously telling the Liberal Democrat conference in 2001 that the Americans should "bomb them with aid."

Just last June Tonge compared the treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza to the Nazis' segregation of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. She said, "You are almost getting a situation like the Warsaw ghetto—people can't get in or out. They can't work, they can't sell anything. There is this gradual squeeze."

The party has until now always tolerated her outspoken views. But now the issue of terrorism has become so central to the predatory drive of the US and British elite to control the Middle East's oil supplies that latitude can no longer be granted. Determined to dispel any notion that he heads a radical party, over the last few months Kennedy has changed his front bench.

While the Lib Dems had once sought to distance themselves from Bush and Blair's war on Iraq, and even won a by-election at Brent East—a Labour stronghold and left Labour Ken Livingstone's former seat, on the strength of this—Tonge's sacking signals a realignment of forces behind the US war on terror.

It underscores the complete prostration of the Liberal Democrats as a party and much of what was once considered to be the liberal intelligentsia before US militarism and the end of even a pretence of political independence for any section of the British ruling class.



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