



TOMIWA OWOLADE | COMMENT

# For one who knows the pain of racism, Diane Abbott shows such ignorance

Tomiwa Owolade

Monday April 24 2023, 12.01am, The Times

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Diane Abbott has suffered appalling racism, but in this case, has shown a remarkable lack of judgement

**I**t is easy to dismiss swiftly a newspaper column — through a tweet, a private message, a Facebook comment. Something visceral is triggered in us, and we want to scratch that itch. But writing a letter in response to one takes time and effort: it is not a thoughtless exercise.

In response to my recent column for [The Observer](#), in which I argued that racism in the UK needs also to account for racism against Jewish people, Traveller communities and Irish people, the Labour MP Diane Abbott wrote a public letter, published in yesterday's paper, that criticised my argument.

Abbott wrote that these groups “undoubtedly experience prejudice. This is similar to racism and the two words are often used as if they are interchangeable.”

[According to the MP](#), prejudice and racism are not the same thing. In her view racism is about prejudice and power. Any group can be victims of prejudice: racism only applies to groups of people who lack social, economic and political power.

But this kind of reasoning is odd. How do Traveller communities have any sort of power when they have the worst educational outcomes of all ethnic minority groups in the country? And doesn't the power and privilege framework risk playing into one of the key tropes of antisemitism: that Jews have too much power?

Abbott has a narrow conception of what constitutes racism. In her letter, she added that “in pre-civil rights America, Irish people, Jewish people and Travellers were not required to sit at the back of the bus. In apartheid South Africa, these groups were allowed to vote.” It is striking that in a piece that is specifically about Britain, she brings up the examples of America and apartheid South Africa.

In any case, she is plainly wrong even on her own terms. Jewish and Irish people have most certainly been discriminated against in America: in the early 20th century, for example, many Ivy League universities placed quotas that restricted the number of Jewish students they could take in.

Many of the people who despise black people on racial grounds also despise Jewish people. The Martinican theorist Frantz Fanon was once told by one of his teachers at his lycée: “When you hear someone insulting the Jews, pay attention: he is talking about you.” This is why Fanon, a black man, was sensitive about

antisemitism: “Antisemitism cuts me to the quick. They are denying me the right to be a man. I cannot dissociate myself from the fate reserved for my brother.” In the infamous Mississippi Burning murders in 1964, three civil rights activists visiting Philadelphia, Mississippi, were shot and buried by the Ku Klux Klan and the local police force. One of them, James Chaney, was a black American. Two of them were Jewish: Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner.

And one of the greatest acts of racial hatred in the past century — the Holocaust — is also sidelined by Abbott, as she claims Jewish people and Traveller communities can’t be victims of racism.

After all the controversies of the Jeremy Corbyn years, when Labour became the second political party after the BNP to be investigated for racism by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, it is astonishing that a Labour MP and key Corbyn ally would write in a public letter that Jews cannot be victims of racism.

In a tweet, Abbott tried desperately to retract her letter: “I wish to wholly and unreservedly withdraw my remarks and dissociate myself from them.” She claimed the errors of the letter arose because of “an initial draft being sent”. But it is too late. She has had the whip suspended. And rightly so.

Abbott understandably feels strongly about racism. She has been [the victim of appalling racism herself](#), and I have no personal animus or ill-will towards her.

Yet her response to my column showed a remarkable lack of judgment. And she doesn’t have the excuse of a throwaway tweet or Facebook comment: this was a public letter.

The only positive to be gleaned from this sad story is how quickly the Labour Party has acted and how universal the criticism of Abbott has been for her comments.

*This is an edited version of a column that first appeared in the New Statesman.*

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- G Elliott**

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Unfortunately her problem lies in the fact that she believes people are only racist towards black people.

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- Hilary Manser**

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And that all black people are therefore victims

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- kjeld hougard**

24 APRIL, 2023

...

I agree. As the logician Kurt Gödel said, after thinking about the meaning of words: "I cannot imagine how people can communicate". "Racism" is a dangerous word, which makes communication between thinking people about the different attitudes of different races/ethnic/social groups/gender/nationaliti...

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**S**

**S Lawson**

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The apology regarding the wrong 'draft' once she saw which way the wind was blowing was just as intellectually insulting. She knew exactly what she was writing and didn't even have the self respect to stick by it.

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**J**

**Jim Thomson**

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"I wish to disassociate myself from these remarks", erm sorry, you made them so that simply isn't possible.

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**Hilary Manser**

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Showed very poor political knowledge as well.

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**D**

**Dave Javu**

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Corbyn and Abbot are low grade, delusional, arrogant, bigots who believe their crusade for Social equilibrium transcends all standards of competence and decency. The only good thing about this is that it gives Starmer a golden gift to exorcise them from the Party.

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**Christian Gale**

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Shes a one trick pony. Based her entire grifting career on victimhood.

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**Mr Gary Gray**

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I do wish people would post what they really think.  
Absolutely agree.

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**Janice Lindsay**

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Society seems to be regressing. Instead of becoming more inclusive, it is becoming more exclusive. It seems that various sectors are vying with each other to claim " bragging rights" on which has suffered more or has been subject to more discrimination. This is happening to all aspects of our lives...

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**P Fahey**

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The race to the bottom of the victimhood pile.

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**D Bryant**

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I couldn't agree more...

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**D****David Brittain**

24 APRIL, 2023

She's just appallingly incompetent. Why she still keeps getting voted in is a complete mystery

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24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to David Brittain

Much the same as Corbyn's constituency - put a bean-bag with a Labour rosette on and it will be voted in. Much the same as some Conservative safe seats - but with a Tory rosette on.

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24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to David Brittain

I once asked the same question about an appalling mp in my area, a councillor said, 'in this area they would vote for a dead donkey, so long as it was wearing a Labour rosette'.

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24 APRIL, 2023

Either Ms Abbott meant what she wrote, which was a silly thing to do, or she didn't mean it, in which case it was also a silly thing to do.

Not good however you look at it.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(38\)](#) · [Share](#)[↪ Show 3 more replies](#)**R****R HART**

24 APRIL, 2023

Her maths were muddled. Her grasp of history is muddled. Abbott is muddled. Full stop.

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**Clare Taylor**

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Well done you. And your point being?

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**Ken Brennan**

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Is that you India?

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**A Tysoe**

24 APRIL, 2023

Wearing mismatched shoes on the campaign trail is pretty muddled too.

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**Therese Prieur**

24 APRIL, 2023

On the plus side, she shows racism, xenophobia are not limited to Caucasians.

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**Sue Cormack**

24 APRIL, 2023

As a teacher of English to non-English speakers I know this only too well. Racism exists between all kinds of races it not just as simple as it may seem to some.

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**Sue Gibbs**

24 APRIL, 2023

So true. My daughter, attacked in London, has experienced racism, and she's white.



(Edited)

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**M Michael Patterson** ...  
24 APRIL, 2023

Diane Abbott seems to believe that some victims of racism are more equal than others.

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**I Isla Matthews** ...  
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Bravo!

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**T Terry Mackie** ...  
24 APRIL, 2023

Initial draft...I misspoke....this tired old woman is unfit for political office.

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**T Terry Mackie** ...  
24 APRIL, 2023

I read The Guardian as well. You should try it. She comes out badly in their report.

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**R R Dunning** ...  
24 APRIL, 2023

Those who write for the Guardian have a broad spectrum of views, as do those who write for The Times

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**Greg Wain**

24 APRIL, 2023

Not so much a liar, but becoming increasingly befuddled. Time to stay at home  
Dawn busily watering your plants plants, hopefully not mistakenly picking up the  
wrong watering can full of weed killer.

*(Edited)*

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**Suzy Baskin**

24 APRIL, 2023

She's not Jewish. The name is cooked up, and she showed incredible ignorance, and  
lack of sensitivity. Sometimes she's good at shakeups, but not that good.

Maybe you haven't kept up with the rising and dangerous antisemitism in the US,  
and Kanye West's deplorable anti-semitic behaviour, which has l...

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**Clare Taylor**

24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to Suzy Baskin

I clearly remember her claiming Jewish heritage (as well as white and various  
others) in a piece she wrote some 20-odd years ago about why she rejected the term  
'African American'.

As for "rising and dangerous antisemitism in the US", can't say it is something that  
has crossed my path.

Kanye West, t...

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J

**Jeanette Colville**

24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to Suzy Baskin

***"...rising and dangerous antisemitism in the US..."*** - at age 85, and having been fully aware of the shocking hatred toward Jews in the US from an early age, I've never noticed that this systemic loathing and blatant hatred ever changed in order to become ***"rising"*** again, and exactly the same for the...

**See more** *(Edited)*

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M

**Marc Vital**

24 APRIL, 2023

Whoopi Goldberg is not Jewish. She 'chose' the name.

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**DNixon**

24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to Marc Vital

She was born Caryn Johnson.

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**M Bruce**

24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to Marc Vital

Why did she choose Goldberg?

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