

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

Share









Save





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

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 <u>The Observer</u>, 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.

Related articles

POLITICS

Corbyn ally sparks new Labour row over racism

INTERVIEW

Antisemitism on the streets and why I worry about my children, by Israel's ambassador to Britain

March 05 2023, 12.00pm

Dipesh Gadher, Home Affairs Correspondent

WHAT I'VE LEARNT

David Baddiel: 'Antisemitism has become normalised'

November 18 2022, 12.00am

Elisabeth Perlman

Comments (1.3K)

Comments are subject to our community standards and participation guidelines policy, which can be viewed <u>here</u>. By joining the conversation you are accepting our community rules and terms. Update your commenting notification settings <u>here</u>. Our policy is for readers to use their real names when commenting, find out more <u>here</u>.

Ranjan Balakumaran







Add to the conversation...

Sort by Recommended ~



G Elliott

24 APRIL, 2023

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

Reply → ☆ Recommend (987) → Share



Hilary Manser

24 APRIL, 2023

And that all black people are therefore victims

Reply → ☆ Recommend (599) → Share

→ 5 replies



kjeld hougaard

24 APRIL, 2023

•••

I agree. As the logician Kurt Gödel said, after thinking about the meaning of words: "I cannot imagen 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...

See more

Reply ☆ Recommend (210) · Share

♣ 4 replies

Show 17 more replies



24 APRIL, 2023

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.

Reply → ☆ Recommend (858) → Share

Jim Thomson

24 APRIL, 2023

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

Reply → ☆ Recommend (470) → Share

→ 5 replies

 (\mathbf{H}) **Hilary Manser**

24 APRIL, 2023

Showed very poor political knowledge as well.

Reply · ☆ Recommend (145) · Share

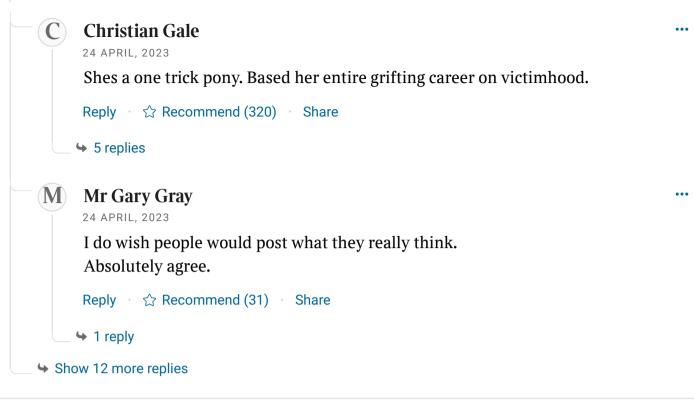
4 replies

♦ Show 10 more replies

Dave Javu

24 APRIL, 2023

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.



Janice Lindsay
24 APRIL, 2023

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...

See more (Edited)

Reply ☆ Recommend (509) · Share

P Fahey
24 APRIL, 2023

The race to the bottom of the victimhood pile.

Reply ☆ Recommend (138) · Share

3 replies

D Bryant
24 APRIL, 2023

I couldn't agree more...

Show 8 more replies





David Brittain

24 APRIL, 2023

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



D Franklin

24 APRIL, 2023

Replying to David Brittain

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

Reply ☆ Recommend (32) · Share

→ 4 replies



John Stirzaker

Replying to David Brittain

24 APRIL, 2023

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'.

◆ 2 replies

◆ Show 7 more replies



David Burch

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.

◆ Show 3 more replies



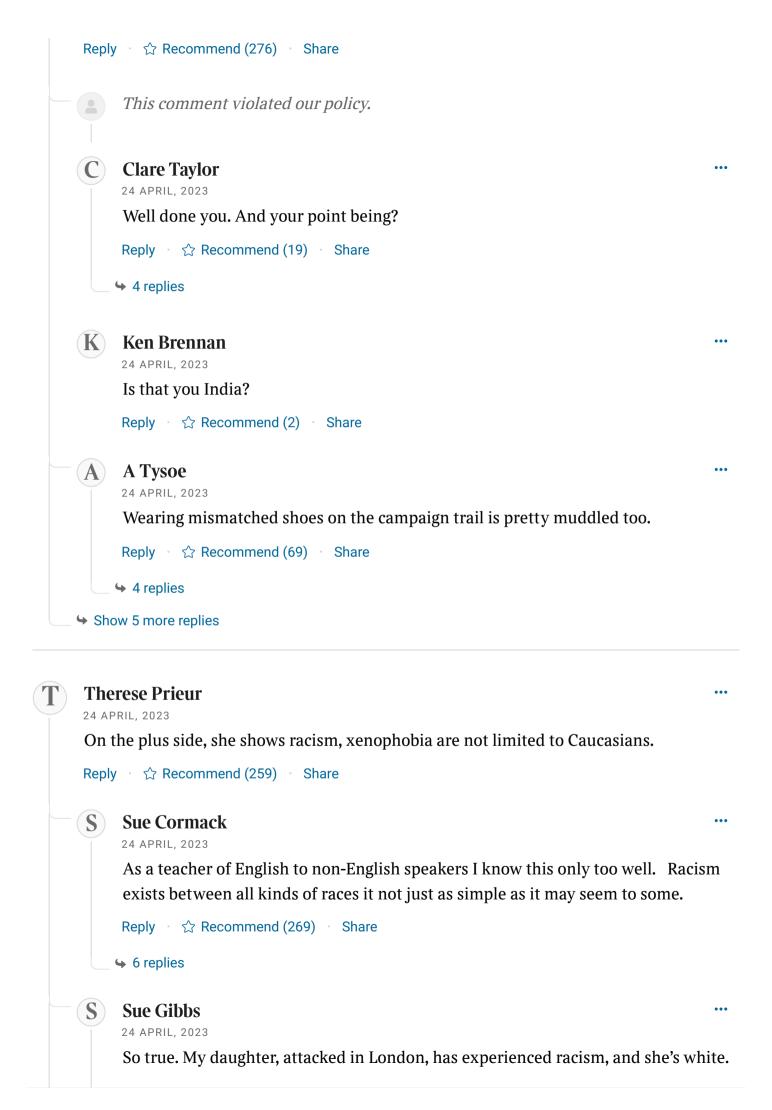
R HART

24 APRIL, 2023

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

•••

•••



```
(Edited)
Reply ☆ Recommend (47) Share

1 reply
Show 2 more replies
```



Michael Patterson

24 APRIL, 2023

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

Reply → ☆ Recommend (206) → Share



Isla Matthews

24 APRIL, 2023

Bravo!

Reply → ☆ Recommended (0) → Share



Terry Mackie

24 APRIL, 2023

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

Reply → ☆ Recommend (138) → Share



This comment violated our policy.



Terry Mackie

24 APRIL, 2023

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

Reply → ☆ Recommend (35) → Share

◆ 1 reply



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

Reply → ☆ Recommend (21) → Share

→ 3 replies

♦ Show 3 more replies



This comment violated our policy.



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)

Reply ☆ Recommend (6) Share

◆ 1 reply

♦ Show 3 more replies



This comment violated our policy.



This comment violated our policy.



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...

See more

Reply → ☆ Recommend (88) → Share



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'.

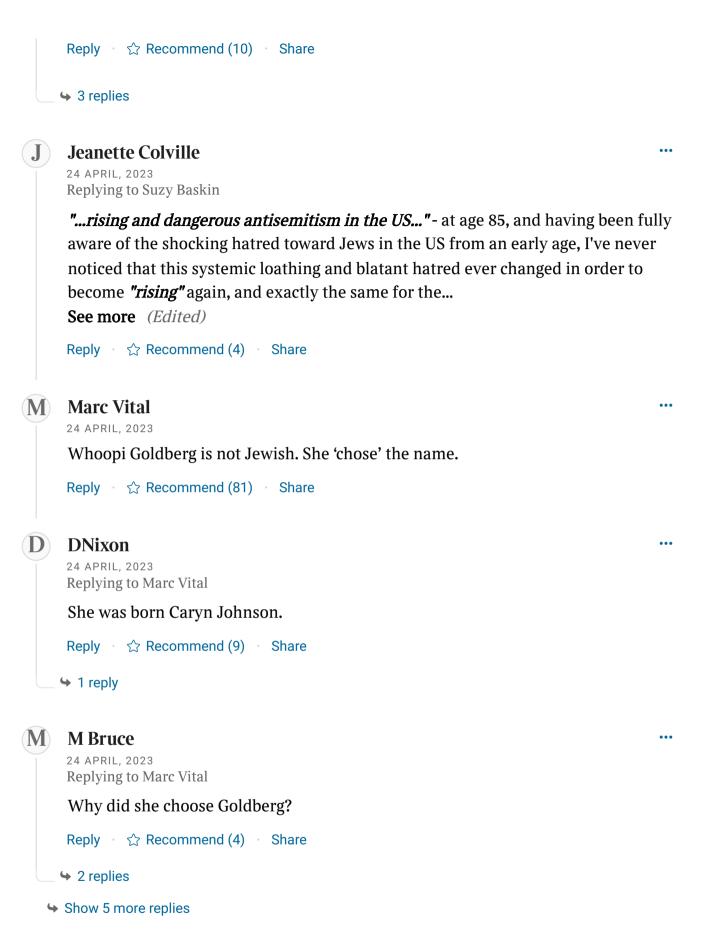
As for "rising and dangerous antisemitism in the US", can't say it is something that has crossed my path.

Kanye West, t...

See more

•••

•••



View more comments

Get in touch

THE OTIMES

1	1	i	BS	U	N	A	1	Y	1	M		١

About us Contact us Help The Times Editorial Complaints The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints Place an announcement Classified advertising Display advertising The Times corrections The Sunday Times corrections Careers More from The Times and The Sunday Times The Times e-paper **Times Currency Services Times Print Gallery** Times Crossword Club Times+ Times Expert Traveller

Best Places to Live **Times Appointments**

Schools Guide

Times Money Mentor

Sportswomen of the Year Awards

© Times Media Limited 2023.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

Licensing Privacy & cookie policy

Cookie settings Site map

Topics Authors

Commissioning terms Terms and conditions

