

Ladies and Gentlemen, today I want to talk about the opinions of Diane Abbott, who is, or was, Britain's first black Labour MP. In the papers at the weekend, she wrote an article in which she expressed the idea that the racism experienced by black people in the UK cannot be compared with, or is on a different scale than, the prejudice (as she called it) experienced by Jewish people in the UK, or Irish travellers, or other ethnic minority groups.

In other words, she was establishing a hierarchy of racism, where 'my racism is worse than your racism', and where she was almost minimising the significance of antisemitism, which is very much a sore point for the Labour party in the UK at the moment.

In fact, she actually likened the prejudice, as she called it - not 'racism' - experienced by Jewish people and Travellers with the same sort of thing experienced by people who have red hair.

To counter her argument that the "prejudice" experienced by Irish, Jewish and Traveller people is not a patch on the "racism" suffered by black people, I cannot improve on the letter from someone whose family left a city in Poland where more than 99% of Jews were exterminated for their race and whose experiences of British antisemitism includes having Nazi insignia brandished in their face. As the anonymous writer says: "To compare those experiences to the struggles of redheads is incomprehensible."

The other theme of her argument is about the white privilege enjoyed by, say, Irish people, which flies in the face of a long history in which ethnic groups are sometimes deemed to be white and other times not. As Kenan Malik notes in *Not So Black and White*, Irish immigrants to 19th-century America were described as "niggers turned inside out", while in England the social reformer Charles Kingsley labelled them "white chimpanzees".

There is much to criticise here, and yet some of Abbott's most ferocious critics are very low on shame. Not so long ago, the Sun ran a column by Katie Hopkins comparing migrants to "cockroaches"; naturally enough, this week it ran an editorial decrying racism. It was joined by former MP John Mann, who once published a pamphlet giving advice on how to "remove any gypsies and travellers". Also spotted this week, fretting no doubt sincerely about antisemitism, was Boris Johnson, who is possibly modern journalism's best-remunerated user of racist language.

Compare the blond Etonian to Britain's first black woman MP, and you see how racist and sexist 21st-century Britain remains. No matter how great the sin, how brazen the deceit, how lethally complacent the politician, he gets to come back again and again, and fills his pockets while doing so. Abbott can't even enjoy an M&S mojito on the tube without it becoming a major scandal. She has faced racial bullying – including from within her own party – that would have broken others. Little of that is remembered, and none of it helps. Given the right class, ethnicity and compartment, some people can get away with a million "mistakes"; others aren't allowed to make one.

That is the context for so much race politics: a "gotcha" culture where an unpopular person's misbehaviour or genuine error counts for more than actual policy, and an approach to race that prizes diversity over equality, and representation over

transformation. This is aided and abetted by some within the ethnic minorities themselves who pursue what David Feldman, the director of Birkbeck Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, calls “competitive racisms”. A couple of years ago, the Muslim Council of Britain published a report looking at how it could emulate the takeup of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism by coming up with its own hard and fast definition of Islamophobia. A couple of weeks ago, neocon thinktank the Henry Jackson Society published the “first national study into the discrimination facing Hindu youth in the UK”, what it naturally calls Hinduphobia.

Not only does this make legalistic what should be political battles but it also, as Feldman says, “turns racialised minorities against each other, with each group thinking it can make gains on its own”. In other words, anti-racist politics ends up resembling the strategies and practices of the racist societies it seeks to change.