

**In *The Thick of It*: “High politics” and the Holocaust in millennial Britain**

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### ABSTRACT:

Over the past twenty years, State-sponsored activities around the Holocaust have reached unprecedented levels in Britain. Beginning with the creation of Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) at the turn of the millennium, successive governments have followed a policy trajectory that has brought forth a slew of new initiatives and projects related to the Holocaust and its memory. Most recently, this has included the creation of a new national memorial and learning centre, to be housed adjacent to the Palace of Westminster. With cross-party support and the pledge of £50,000,000 of public funds, this *lieu de memoire* is due to open in January 2020.

Conceiving of these activities as exercises in “high” Holocaust politics, this article examines the various memory-projects of recent decades, to argue they reveal much about millennial Britain and its Holocaust culture. It is contended the nature of these and other initiatives means high Holocaust politics must be subject to continued scrutiny and interrogation.

Keywords: Holocaust politics; Holocaust memory; Holocaust education; Britain; political history; memory studies.

## **In *The Thick of It*: “High politics” and the Holocaust in millennial Britain**

Politicians no longer act like real versions of themselves. Instead, they come over as replicants of an idealised, fictional version of what they think they should be. They perform politics, rather than practise policy. They act as if they’re good company, someone we’d have a beer with, funny, not too clever, definitely full of common sense. They hire people to make them so [...] Some top creative minds were employed to do those things for them. We’re left watching an entertainment rather than participating in affairs of state.

In June 2016, the Scottish writer, director, and television producer, Armando Iannucci, delivered this blistering critique of contemporary politics on the pages of the *New Statesman*. Looking at the presidential campaign in the United States and the lead-up to the EU referendum in the United Kingdom, Iannucci observed how policies were emerging as if ‘from nowhere’, contributing to a climate where ‘fiction is winning out because fact is no longer making sense.’<sup>1</sup>

Iannucci’s remarks followed calls for him to revive his acclaimed BBC television show *The Thick of It*. Transmitted between 2005-2012, *The Thick of It* was a trenchant work of political satire exposing ‘the unscrupulous backstage machinations of the British political system’.<sup>2</sup> It was a piercing depiction of a world where ‘politicians have to run to stand still’, where ‘policy development let alone implementation hardly exist’, and where ‘policy is something ministers come up with in the back of a speeding car.’<sup>3</sup> In a damning indictment of our

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<sup>1</sup> Armando Iannucci, ‘From Trump to Boris, I wouldn’t write *The Thick of It* now – politics already feels fictional enough’, *New Statesman*, 11 June, 2016, available on the *New Statesman* website at [www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/06/trump-boris-i-wouldn-t-write-thick-it-now-politics-already-feels-fictional](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/06/trump-boris-i-wouldn-t-write-thick-it-now-politics-already-feels-fictional) (viewed 11 January 2018).

<sup>2</sup> James Walters, *The Thick of It* (London: Palgrave/BFI 2016), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Fielding, *A State of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury 2014), 259-260.

political culture Iannucci concluded there was now no space for *The Thick of It* in a ‘political landscape so alien and awful that it’s hard to match the waves of cynicism it transmits on its own’.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I reflect on the relationship between the political milieu drawn by Iannucci and Holocaust politics in Britain. I consider how millennial Holocaust politics was and continues to be impacted by its broader context; how it has fed into this setting; and the implications this has for current and future memory-work. My contention is when we scrutinise Holocaust politics since the early 2000s, we soon recognise aspects of the world of *The Thick of It* staring back at us. Furthermore, if Iannucci is correct and our current politics are now beyond parody or satire, then we must recognise the consequences this has for the future of Holocaust consciousness in this country.

### **“High” Holocaust politics**

By way of conceptual scaffold, a few words on what I am taking Holocaust politics to mean. In the broadest sense, we can talk with John K. Roth of the ‘three dimensions of human activity: believing, governing and manoeuvring.’ ‘Depending on the substance and style of these three dimensions,’ writes Roth, ‘politics is more or less contentious or congenial, more or less cutthroat or constructive.’<sup>5</sup>

Roth offers a valuable insight: Holocaust politics flows not just from the form(s) these activities take, but their appearance, tone, and tenor as well. As a framework, Roth thus defines Holocaust politics as

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<sup>4</sup> Iannucci, ‘From Trump’.

<sup>5</sup> John K. Roth, *Holocaust Politics* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press 2001), 4.

the ways – often conflicting – in which the Holocaust informs and affects human belief, organization and strategy...and in which human belief, organization, and strategy inform and affect the status and understanding of the Holocaust.

There is much merit to this definition. By locating Holocaust politics in the historical events and our human condition, Roth captures how persuasive and ‘unavoidable’ they can be.<sup>6</sup> Yet though Roth’s framing can be taken as an overarching schema, it is too broad for this essay. At root, my concern is with political history – or, more particularly, “high politics”.

A ‘phrase...more complex than is sometimes suggested,’<sup>7</sup> the term comes with a number of associations and connotations. Many originate from the work of Maurice Cowling and the criticisms levied against his political histories.<sup>8</sup> For Cowling, ‘the concept of high politics was a methodological principle’;<sup>9</sup> one which led him to ‘concentrate on the high politics of the politicians who mattered’ on the basis ‘it is necessary to understand what the ruling groups were doing before more general questions can be answered.’ From here one soon confronts the reality that high politics is actually far less about substance, ideology, or even policy; rather it is ‘primarily a matter of rhetoric and manoeuvre.’<sup>10</sup>

Although rehabilitated in recent years, Cowling and others bracketed into the so-called “Peterhouse School” of political history have traditionally been subject to much rebuke.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>7</sup> David M. Craig, ““High Politics” and the “New Political History””, *The Historical Journal*, 53:2, 2010, 453-475 (459).

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Williamson, ‘Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History’ in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green & Richard Whiting (eds), *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism* (London: I.B. Tauris 2010), 108-152 (109).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism: Politics and Doctrine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1986), 154.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-1924: The Beginnings of Modern British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1971), 3-4.

Much of this is has been justified. For, fundamentally, Cowling ‘focused exclusively on the governing elite and...disregarded interests and ideas.’<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, though Cowling may have sought to ‘demythologise democracy’,<sup>12</sup> his was a stratagem that gave scant regard to the insights brought by social and cultural history.

As a methodological principle “high politics” comes with multiple health warnings, yet this need not render the concept wholly useless. Indeed, our contemporary politics not only give good cause for cynicism and mistrust – its practitioners actively seek to inculcate such suspicions. Furthermore, if used with caution and in concert with other tools, the spirit of high politics can force us to look beyond structures, processes and frameworks to consider the human agency that lies within and behind these.

There is a growing need to do so. The emergence of the Holocaust as a central Western concern has spawned numerous narrative accounts and explanatory paradigms in the last two decades. This literature has brought valuable insights, yet much (if not all) of it has contributed to a situation where our Holocaust cultures are, to borrow from Douglas Porpora, progressively ‘*de-agentified*.’ With emphasis placed on abstract concepts of transnationality or transculturalism, and the influence of supranational organisations, causal agency for the trends and trajectories of Holocaust memory and education are shorn of intentionality and

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<sup>11</sup> R.A.W. Rhodes, ‘Executive Governance: An Interpretive Analysis’ in Nick Turnbull (ed) *Interpreting Governance: High Politics, and Public Policy: Essays Commemorating Interpreting British Governance* (London: Routledge, 2016): 79-98 (83).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Addison, ‘Destiny, history and providence: The religion of Winston Churchill’ in Michael Bentley (ed), *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 236-250 (236).

overtly ‘non-human’.<sup>13</sup> What is inevitably lost is any sense of what Porpora calls ‘purposive action’.<sup>14</sup>

A concept of “high” Holocaust politics offers one way of correcting some of our presumptions about how things happen in contemporary Holocaust culture. Were we wholly true to Cowling, we would closely examine the beliefs and practices of certain key individuals from the last two decades – and, there is good reason to do so. Many of the recent government interventions bear tell-tale marks of personal influence from those occupying the high offices of State. For now, however, such a rigorous and detailed investigation remains a future project. Because of the parameters of this essay, its aims and scope are far more modest; focused instead on charting the deeds and discourse, the policy initiatives and rhetorical frames, of consecutive administrations.

### **New Labour & Holocaust politics**

High Holocaust politics, as anyone familiar with the historiography of Britain and the Holocaust will know, is no recent phenomenon. Political considerations were at the very forefront of how Britain approached, apprehended, and came to respond to the persecution of central European Jewry in the 1930s, the transition to murder in the 1940s, and matters related to displaced persons, justice, and punishment which confronted the British in the immediate years after 1945. In subsequent decades the Holocaust was not an issue of high politics, but cultural engagements with the genocide of the Jews were still impacted by the shifting political contexts of post-war Britain.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas V. Porpora, *Reconstructing Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015), 130, 132.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 137.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994).

What changed in the latter quarter of the twentieth century was “the Holocaust” – as history, but increasingly more so as memory – acquired greater salience for the British establishment. How this occurred has been recounted elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> A tale largely of change by degrees rather than absolutes, it was one also characterised by equal measures of paradox, incoherence, and irregularity. Illustrative were the first two major instances of government action of the late twentieth century: the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Garden in Hyde Park in 1983, and the statutory requirement schools teach the Holocaust in the National Curriculum after 1991. Both instances had symbolism and practical effect, even though this varied and was more by accident than design.

The turn of the millennium did not, therefore, mark the dawn of high Holocaust politics. It did herald substantive change. For a start, there was a considerable upsurge in governmental involvement in memory-work and educational initiatives in a relatively short period of time. Equally there was normative change in the textuality of Holocaust politics. Much of this occurred on the watch of the Labour government during its thirteen years in power, with the die cast even before its electoral success in May 1997. By that point, internal discussions over legislating against Holocaust denial had been ongoing for some time, while one of the party’s first acts on assuming government was to begin planning for the landmark London Conference on Nazi Gold held seven months later.

1998 saw heightened international activity, with Britain becoming a founding member of what is now called the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Representatives from the United Kingdom equally played leading roles at the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, held in November, where, notably, the British delegation boldly proposed the creation of remembrance days. According to the metanarrative around Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD), the concept originates with the

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<sup>16</sup> Andy Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain* (New York: Routledge 2014).



former Labour MP Andrew Dismore, who, in an epiphanic fashion, had the idea whilst visiting Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) in early 1999.<sup>17</sup>

As origin myths go this ticks the relevant boxes, but it does not stack up with reality. Dismore did indeed play a part in the process, presenting the Holocaust Remembrance Day Bill in late June and acting as a point man maintaining momentum. Yet it would be foolish to believe this occurred independent from the policy work undertaken in the Foreign and Home Offices in the months before Dismore assumed the stage. That these two very different accounts co-exist at all says a great deal. Where the historical reality speaks to how Labour's high Holocaust politics were tied to and informed by foreign policy considerations, the mythological narrative motions towards politics at home.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence of how these spheres overlapped came with the government's repeated employment of the Holocaust as a framing device to legitimise military intervention in Kosovo in spring 1999. This was, in many ways, becoming standard practice: as Andrew Hindmoor notes, New Labour consistently sought 'to "define and construct" political debate by framing particular issues and events in particular ways.'<sup>19</sup> Labour's Holocaust politics was not just inseparable from its policy agendas then, but also from its approach to governance and functioning as a party in power.

We observe this in the truncated consultation process on the government's Holocaust remembrance day proposal of October 1999. Here, a mere six weeks were allowed for responses, since the government had already resolved to 'announce its decision in January

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew Dismore, 'Holocaust needs its own day', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2000.

<sup>18</sup> See Hansard, 30 June 1999, Cols. 362-364; 'Interview: Andrew Dismore', *Jewish Chronicle*, 21 May 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Hindmoor, *New Labour at the Centre: Constructing Political Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), 147-148.

[2000]’ and begin ‘planning for the first Holocaust Remembrance Day in the UK in 2001.’<sup>20</sup> Where the consultation process appeared contrived, the announcement of HMD’s creation in 2000 was steeped in heavy stage management.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the controversy that broke around the exclusion of the Armenian genocide from HMD, was equally illuminating on the way high Holocaust politics was being conducted at this time. As Kara Critchell argues, the official explanation that to include Armenia would be to have ““too much history”” and dilute ““the message”” of HMD, ‘reveals the start of an institutional trend with regards to how the Holocaust was thought about in the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.’<sup>22</sup>

The critical mass of Holocaust-related measures undertaken in Labour’s first parliament represented a radical departure from the previous fifty years. With it came particular approaches to policy formulation, and a specific discourse centred on popularisation of the so-called “lessons” of the Holocaust. Regarding the former, we might consider the borrowed aphorism employed by Tony Blair’s former Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, that ‘policymaking, like producing sausages, is not something that should be carried out in public.’<sup>23</sup> Such an outlook corresponded with New Labour’s penchant for “sofa government”; an approach that at once gestured to informal ideas of governance and, paradoxically, ‘authoritarian tendencies’ towards centralised control and decision-making.<sup>24</sup> But this

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Straw, ‘Foreword’ to *Government Proposal for a Holocaust Remembrance Day* (London: HMSO 1999), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Kara Critchell, ‘Remembering and Forgetting: the Holocaust in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain’, *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, 10, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (London: Vintage 2011), 197.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Kettell, *Dirty Politics? New Labour, British Democracy and the Invasion of Iraq* (London & New York: Zed Books 2006), 22.

‘control-freakism’<sup>25</sup> was inexorably bound up with a corporate understanding of brand and media management, which, famously, translated into obsessions with style and spin. It was also a distinctive feature of New Labour as a ‘hegemonic enterprise’;<sup>26</sup> one with an expressed ‘desire for hegemony, to absorb most opposition and crush the residue.’<sup>27</sup>

This, then, was the context where Labour’s Holocaust politics was formulated and enacted. Reconstructing the precise course of each policy initiative is beyond this paper but, by way of generality, we see all of the above features and qualities vividly demonstrated in the Holocaust-related initiatives pursued by Labour during its first term in office. How far, then, did this correlate with Iannucci’s picture of early 21<sup>st</sup> century politics?

By the time *The Thick of It* was first transmitted in 2005, New Labour and the dogmatic creed of Blairism were tattered and tarnished brands. Weathered by a natural fatigue of eight years in government, and marked by a growing ‘turn against multiculturalism’,<sup>28</sup> both were soaked in blood spilt in the name of the “War on Terror”. Consequently, as Mark Levene notes, the contrast between Labour’s “‘ritualized’-cum sanitized image of the Holocaust’ and its policy agendas left it wide open to charges of hypocrisy.<sup>29</sup>

This was very much the world Iannucci had sought to expose. From the level of planning, coordination and centralised control – both of form and content – Labour’s Holocaust policies were clearly not formulated on a whim, in the back of a speeding car. Still, the cant of Labour’s high Holocaust politics was so diametrically opposed to other areas of

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour*, Revised Edition (London: Penguin 2001), xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Judi Atkins, *Justifying New Labour Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), 91.

<sup>27</sup> Rawnsley, *Servants of the People*, xiv.

<sup>28</sup> Romain Garbaye & Pauline Schnapper, ‘Introduction’ in Romain Garbaye & Pauline Schnapper (eds) *The Politics of Ethnic Diversity in the British Isles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 1-21 (8).

<sup>29</sup> Mark Levene, ‘Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day: A Case of Post-Cold War Wish-Fulfilment, or Brazen Hypocrisy?’ *Human Rights Review*, 7:3, 2006, 26-59 (30).

government policy, with so little apparent care or concern for the substantive difference that the similarities with the themes of Iannucci's creation are striking.

### **The Holocaust and the Coalition**

Labour's first term provided a template for what followed. During its second and third terms its high Holocaust politics were remarkably consistent, given how consistently they were undermined by the government's actions at home and abroad. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition which took office in May 2010 may have 'heralded a new form of politics',<sup>30</sup> but it also saw strong continuities with its predecessor. Nowhere was this more clearly evidenced than in high Holocaust politics.

As early as 9 June the new Foreign Secretary, William Hague, announced the creation of a United Kingdom Envoy for Post-Holocaust Issues. Noting Britain's long-standing commitment 'to promoting Holocaust education, remembrance and research, both at home and abroad', Hague recorded the particular contribution of Foreign and Commonwealth Office civil servants. 'This has worked well to date,' he said, 'but I am concerned the UK is not taking the leading role it should in these international discussions.' Accordingly, the new Envoy would 'drive a more coherent and strategic approach to our work' and 'add a new impetus.'<sup>31</sup>

That Hague believed such a post was needed 'to support those working to right past wrongs and remain at the forefront of international discussions, to make sure that the lessons of this terrible period in our history are never forgotten' was revealing.<sup>32</sup> Fundamentally it suggested

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<sup>30</sup> Phillip Norton, 'The Con-Lib Agenda for the "New Politics" and Constitutional Reform', in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds) *The Cameron-Clegg Government: Coalition Politics in an Age of Austerity*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2011), 153-167 (153).

<sup>31</sup> Hansard, Written Statements, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Volume 511, 9 June 2010.

<sup>32</sup> William Hague, cited, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 'Press Release', 9 June 2010.

Britain's place in the sphere of international Holocaust politics had declined under Labour's stewardship. Were this true, however, then it sharply contradicted other Holocaust politics pursued by Labour.

The arguments that Labour became consumed 'by the politics of war and security' and halfway through its third term had 'clearly lost its grip on the political agenda'<sup>33</sup> are persuasive. And, to be sure, the economic crises of 2008-10 compounded matters further. Yet none of these developments prevented Labour from mustering the will and the means to substantially expand its funding for the HET's *Lessons from Auschwitz* project, to co-fund the establishment of what is now the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, to continue its financial support of HMD, or to create a new "British Heroes of the Holocaust" award.

Labour's late Holocaust politics is thus a chequered and muddled picture. Still, just as its travails did not appear to hamper Labour's policymaking, so the challenging contexts confronting the Coalition were no obstacle to its agendas. The Envoy was a significant innovation given the rarity of 'sudden or unexpected foreign policy ruptures' in British politics,<sup>34</sup> and its establishment at a time of cost-cutting and austerity politics. The initiative thus had much semiotic potency, though it equally had practical import too; providing Britain with an international figurehead, and those working in the fields of education, remembrance and research a political representative.

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<sup>33</sup> Gerry Hassan, 'Introduction: After Blair, after socialism and the search for a new story' in Gerry Hassan (ed) *After Blair: Politics After the New Labour Decade* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited 2007), 7-25 (8); Hugh Bochel & Martin Powell, 'The transformation of the welfare state? The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and social policy' in Hugh Bochel & Martin Powell (eds) *The Coalition Government and Social Policy: Restructuring the Welfare State* (Bristol: Policy Press 2016), 1-26 (3).

<sup>34</sup> Oliver Daddow & Pauline Schnapper, 'Liberal intervention in the foreign policy thinking of Tony Blair and David Cameron', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:2, 2013, 330-349 (330-331).

Like New Labour in its early years, from the outset the Coalition's high Holocaust politics had strong foreign policy dimensions. This was reinforced in September 2013 with an address given by the Prime Minister David Cameron to a gathered audience at the HET's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner. Focused on the themes of 'keeping the memory alive', 'preserving the memory' and 'learning the lessons of the Holocaust', Cameron used the speech to announce a Holocaust Commission to 'investigate whether further measures should be taken to ensure Britain has a permanent and fitting memorial and educational resource for generations to come.'<sup>35</sup>

For moral justification Cameron pointed to the dwindling numbers of survivors, giving combatting antisemitism and extremism as a domestic rationale. Equal – if not more – weight was placed on juxtaposing the Commission against events then taking place in Syria; or, rather, Cameron's failure to secure parliamentary support for military intervention in its ongoing civil war. In tying that policy failure to the themes of the Commission, Cameron implored it be read as his commitment to 'never stand by' from any international event that someone might somehow relate to the Holocaust.

It was a very personal speech, delivered with Cameron's usual sheen. It was also a highly politicised address. Whilst lauding the work of the HET for example, Cameron described it as 'a vital part of the "Big Society"'<sup>36</sup> before moving to announce additional funding for the organisation. Then, there was the "soft" launching of the Commission in the context of this particular event, with its particular audience. Finally, there was the lengthy sojourn into Middle East politics, delivered at a time when Cameron was facing renewed accusations of

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<sup>35</sup> David Cameron, '25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Holocaust Educational Trust: Prime Minister's Speech', 16 September 2013.

<sup>36</sup> This line was ad-libbed, and not part of the official transcript. See *ibid.*

being an “essay crisis” statesman.<sup>37</sup> Without further research we cannot gauge how far this was politicking or expressions of genuine sincerity. In terms of techniques and appropriation, though, the speech was straight out of the New Labour playbook.

When formally launched (for a second time) in January 2014, the genesis of the Commission remained frustratingly elusive. Given the Coalition embraced a return to cabinet government, it is possible the Commission was an expression of collective will, having emerged out of communal discussion. That said, Matthew D’Acona tell us ‘the *tableau vivant* of the new Government was undoubtedly the Rose Garden press conference’ but ‘the reality was much noisier, more exploratory and back-of-an-envelope.’<sup>38</sup>

And then there Cameron. With a reputation for flip-flopping on policy, Andrew Marr has written how ‘it was always hard to discern quite what David Cameron believed’<sup>39</sup> while the Prime Minister’s background in public relations was often used by critics in accusations of prioritising style over substance. Nevertheless, from the launch in September 2013 through to his exit from office in June 2016, the Commission always appeared a highly personal project for Cameron, suggesting he had a strong hand throughout.

What was apparent from the Terms of Reference issued to the Commission in early 2014 was a lack of awareness of how rich and varied Holocaust-related activity actually was in the United Kingdom, and the advances made by scholars over the previous generation. The framing of the Holocaust as ‘unique in man’s inhumanity to man’ and of standing ‘alone as the darkest hour of human history’<sup>40</sup> were highly partisan, seemingly unaware of the nature of genocide as historical phenomenon. Interestingly, elements of this discursive frame were

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<sup>37</sup> Anthony Seldon & Peter Snowdon, *Cameron at 10: The Verdict* (London: William Collins 2016): 347.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew D’Acona, *In It Together: The Inside Story of the Coalition Government* (London: Penguin Books 2014): 48.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (London: Pan Books 2017): 639.

<sup>40</sup> The Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission, Terms of Reference.

previously employed in the Coalition's unsuccessful attempt at revising the National Curriculum, where the Holocaust was re-tuned as a 'unique evil.' Though that portrayal was attributable to the influence of the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, its sentiment evidently resonated with others in Whitehall.<sup>41</sup>

The Commission's final report of January 2015, with its flagship recommendations of a new national memorial and learning centre, was enthusiastically accepted by Cameron and given cross-party support. With £50,000,000 of public funds committed to the project at a time of austerity politics, it was – in every sense – a monumental commitment. Moreover, questions remained as to just how necessary these particular outcomes were, and whether these were necessarily the most effective means.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, the project bore striking resemblance to New Labour's creation of HMD: well-intentioned, perhaps; ostensibly hard to object to, no doubt; but, at root, a grandstand initiative no less – one simultaneously functioning as policy statement and a discursive recasting of Holocaust politics.

On this, two elements were particularly noteworthy. First, a missionary zeal imbued the Commission's precepts, its report, and the framing of its successor organisation the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation (UKHMF). From inception key figures described the Commission as having a 'sacred task', taking cues from Cameron's resolve to 'do our

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<sup>41</sup> Andy Pearce, 'The Holocaust in the National Curriculum after 25 years', *Holocaust Studies*, 23:3 (2017): 231-262 (250-251).

<sup>42</sup> Ella Braidwood, 'Leading Jewish academics speak out', *The Architect's Journal*, 28 March 2017, available on *The Architect's Journal website*, [www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/leading-jewish-academics-speak-out-against-flawed-holocaust-memorial/10018607.article?blocktitle=News&contentID=16149](http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/leading-jewish-academics-speak-out-against-flawed-holocaust-memorial/10018607.article?blocktitle=News&contentID=16149) (viewed 11 January 2018).



duty’ to survivors.<sup>43</sup> This sentiment then saw prospective designers of the memorial site instructed about the need for ‘honouring the victims and the survivors of the Holocaust.’<sup>44</sup>

As a matter of principle that was in no way disagreeable, and wholly in keeping with the nature of memorialisation. But the emphasis placed on obligatory remembrance, of ‘act[ing] now to honour our duty to them’,<sup>45</sup> ignored what Avishai Margalit calls ‘the distinction between ethics and morality’ and its relation to ‘two types of human relations: thick and thin ones.’<sup>46</sup>

Prescribing remembrance, in the sense of framing it as a duty and obligation, was aligned to a prescription of meaning – most clearly articulated through the centrality accorded to “learning the lessons” of the Holocaust by Cameron and the Commission, and the UKHMF’s stipulation that ‘a special focus on learning lessons’ be a “benchmark” of the Memorial.<sup>47</sup> Such rhetoric was not new. What was distinctive though, was the recommendation Holocaust education writ large was to now explicitly ‘deliver’ these “lessons”.<sup>48</sup>

The second, related point of distinction – of the Commission and the UKHMF specifically, but the Coalition’s Holocaust politics more generally – was a new-found prominence given to Britain. Unlike the dominant approaches of the previous generation, there were conscious attempts to highlight the relationship between the Holocaust and Britain. In theory, this had potential and promise: holding out the prospect of a belated reckoning with the many strands

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<sup>43</sup> David Cameron, ‘Holocaust Commission Speech’, 28 January 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Bazalgette, ‘Foreword’ to *United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial International Design Competition: Expressions of Interest* (London: HMSO/Malcolm Reading Consultants 2016): 5.

<sup>45</sup> Cabinet Office, *Britain’s Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report* (London: HMSO 2015): 5.

<sup>46</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2002): 7.

<sup>47</sup> UKHMF, *National Memorial and Learning Centre: Search for a Central London Site* (London: HMSO 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Cabinet Office, *Britain’s Promise to Remember*, 14.

of a complex nexus, and so helping to debunk and counter myths, mythologies and misconceptions prevalent in Britain.

The reality was somewhat different. Within the Commission's report the caliginous aspects of Britain and the Holocaust were not wholly ignored, so much as partially illuminated – and then, seemingly, so as to provide a sharper contrast to the positive light emanating from the stories of the *Kindertransport* and liberation. The incommensurable history of the Channel Islands for example was a 'revealing' absence, whilst the report consciously employed an apologist "'balance sheet" approach' to the historical record.<sup>49</sup> In the process, Tom Lawson argues, it was clear just 'how out of step contemporary Holocaust memory can be from contemporary historiography.'<sup>50</sup>

In January 2016 Cameron announced the memorial and learning centre would be sited in Victoria Tower Gardens, adjacent to the Palace of Westminster, adding further particularity to the emergent British dimension of Coalition Holocaust politics. The memorial would, he stated, 'stand beside Parliament as a permanent statement of our values as a nation';<sup>51</sup> a sentiment then enshrined in the briefing documents provided to teams entering the design competition. Thus, the 'design values' required the memorial and learning centre to highlight 'the importance and relevance of the Holocaust to the United Kingdom's history', to 'affirm the United Kingdom's commitment to stand up against prejudice and hatred', and 'be a

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<sup>49</sup> Tony Kushner, 'The Holocaust in the British Imagination: The official mind and beyond, 1945 to the present', *Holocaust Studies*, 23:3, 2017, 364-384 (378); Idem., 'Britain, the United States and the Holocaust: In Search of a Historiography', in Dan Stone (ed) *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 253-275 (260).

<sup>50</sup> Tom Lawson, 'Britain's promise to forget: Some historiographical reflections on *What do Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust?*' *Holocaust Studies*, 23:3, 2017, 345-363 (351).

<sup>51</sup> David Cameron, cited, 'Press release: PM: Holocaust memorial will stand beside Parliament as permanent statement of our British values', 27 January 2016.

logical and harmonious addition to the existing memorials in the Gardens, all of which can be viewed as a physical representation of the United Kingdom's conscience and values.'<sup>52</sup>

These were noble and bold aspirations, convincing to the ear and reassuring to the soul. Yet they were far more complicated than they were being made to appear. In the context of millennial politics, "British values" had grown in currency exponentially – particularly in relation to attempts to define "Britishness" in the wake of accelerating devolution and the expansion of the European Union. Perhaps the greatest catalysts however were the fall-out from the Anglo-American "War on Terror" and escalating Islamophobia.

Appeals to British values in the face of these occurrences began under New Labour but acquired sharper edges under the Coalition government, with Cameron and others introducing Christianity to the equation and expressing their belief that schools had a responsibility to inculcate "Britishness". Meanwhile, as the country moved towards the General Election of 2015 and EU Referendum a year later, the politicisation of immigration issues and growing ethnic tensions made appeals to British values all the more loaded and acute. Servicing Holocaust memory and education in the pursuit of promoting British values could not therefore be a neutral or value-free. Furthermore, it required – even, depended on – a selective reading of history, stripped of inconvenient truths.

## **Summary**

Holocaust politics in millennial Britain hasn't just been inexorably entwined with domestic and foreign affairs. It has assumed an integral position in these policy realms. As much as it would be churlish and improper to suggest all forms of "believing", "governing" and "manoeuvring" have occurred without sincerity, so it would be naïve to believe political

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<sup>52</sup> UKHMF, 'Brief', UK Holocaust Memorial International Design Competition, available via the UKHMF microsite <http://competitions.malcolmreading.co.uk/holocaustmemorial/> (viewed 11 January 2018).

activity around the Holocaust has been free from or incubated against agendas, duplicity, or ulterior motives.

In millennial Britain, “the Holocaust” has acquired power and potentialities. New fronts have duly opened up in high Holocaust politics, heightening its performative dynamics, its symbolic currency, and its discursive potency. How far this means politicians now “perform” Holocaust politics rather than practice policy, cannot be answered definitively; not least because some political actions can and do have positive effects. Clearly though this is not always the case. That we have evidence of the Holocaust being used in questionable ways or subject to political machinations is reason enough to remain highly vigilant.

There is, of course, a moral and ethical imperative to this; but there are political ones too. Put simply, in a “post-truth”, resurgently nationalist and populist age where parochial approaches to the past are fast becoming commonplace, we cannot afford for the ills identified by Iannucci to extend into the sphere of Holocaust politics. For when fictions about the Holocaust begin to “win out” because Holocaust facts “no longer make sense”, we will witness something more catastrophic than we would care to imagine.