

Ilford Election 1978

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M E M O

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FROM ALFRED SHERMAN

CONFIDENTIAL

ILFORD RE-VISITED

You may recall the "Ilford Affair", when Keith visited the Ilford by-election and spoke as a Jew to Jewish electors qua Jews urging them to reject the Socialist appeal to them to side with immigration against their English fellow-citizens. At the time he came under heavy attack not only from the Socialists and establishment but also from some "professional Jews" on our own side.

I had been involved, and had great difficulty at the time in holding the line.

Now, the initiative has been completely vindicated from an unexpected quarter. A Jewish academic, not of our way of thinking, shows that Keith's intervention won us the by-election. I enclose the relevant parts of his book. I feel vindicated.

The Jewish Community in British Politics

Geoffrey Alderman

Clarendon Press · Oxford
1983

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Five days previously Sir Keith Joseph, then a senior member of the Conservative Shadow Cabinet, had come to Ilford North to deliver a remarkable speech:

There is a limit to the number of people from different cultures that this country can digest. We ignore this at our peril, everyone's peril. Therefore I say that the electors of Ilford North, including the Jews—who are just like everyone else, as the saying goes, only more so—have good reason for supporting Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party on immigration.⁹⁰

This attempt to enlist the support of the constituency's 6,000 or so Jewish voters⁹¹ was applauded by the Conservative party, especially by Jewish Conservatives⁹², but condemned by many others within Anglo-Jewry, from the President of the Board of Deputies downwards, on two counts: firstly, that, since all British Jews are, or are descended from, immigrants, it was

unethical—even immoral, for a Jew to support immigration control, or at least tighter immigration control; and secondly, that Sir Keith was trying to activate the Jewish vote, perhaps even to create a Jewish vote, in the Conservative interest.⁹³ 'To appeal to Jewish electors to vote, as Jews, for the vague Conservative proposals for stricter immigration control, as Sir Keith has incautiously done,' the *Jewish Chronicle* warned, 'goes against the whole tradition of independent Jewish citizenship in Britain.'⁹⁴

But in fact, for better or worse, Mrs Thatcher had correctly judged the mood of the country and Sir Keith had correctly judged the mood of the Jewish electors of Ilford. A poll conducted by Independent Television News at Ilford North showed that almost half of those voters who switched from Labour to Conservative were influenced by the immigration question.⁹⁵ During the 1970s Jewish voters had become increasingly alarmed at the spectacle of a renewed growth of racist and Nazi parties in Britain, feeding on the prejudice of the host population towards New Commonwealth immigrants. Mrs Thatcher's policy on this question seemed to offer the best hope of containing both the immigrants and the National Front; Sir Keith's speech had indeed touched a raw nerve.⁹⁶ Yet the response was the one he had hoped for. The Conservatives won back Ilford North on a swing of 6.9 per cent, but among Jewish voters there the swing to the Conservatives was a massive 11.2 per cent.⁹⁷

Controversy over the rectitude of Sir Keith's intervention still continues within the Jewish community. Curiously, however, in spite of all the newspaper comment, within and beyond Anglo-Jewry, which his speech provoked, its historical significance was universally ignored by the pundits. It was the first time, in over fifty years, that a leading Conservative politician, more or less officially, had appealed to Jewish voters to support the party on a major policy issue and had secured a positive response.