

Is Britain's media biased against the left?

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Coverage of Jeremy Corbyn echoes the experience of the British left in the 1980s.



Jeremy Corbyn in 1984 (BBC archive footage, fair use).

It is difficult to be a pacifist and love terrorists, but then logic and accuracy are not required in media attacks on Jeremy Corbyn. While some political leaders can simply re-order their front bench to improve competence or coherence, for Corbyn the motive is said to be 'revenge'. Some commentators, from the *Guardian* to the *Telegraph* saw the New Year reshuffle as effective in establishing his authority, but the BBC which shouldn't be taking sides, dismissed it as, "a political pantomime", which, "has again exposed his team's lack of know-how in just getting things done", with "days of concern and chaos" (BBC *Radio 4 News*, 6th January 2016). The concern has very largely been with the BBC and the right-wing media, but as Martin Kettle in the *Guardian* notes, Corbyn has actually stabilised his position, "His project... is about control of the Labour party and by that yardstick... this has been a good week" (6th January 2016).

But the problem is not just with him, the concern also extends to those he leads, described in the *Telegraph* as his "Praetorian guard", running a "political protection racket" in which "those MPs who do not toe the Corbynite line" will "end up in the river wearing concrete boots" (9th October 2015). In such accounts, the right-wing of the Party are described as "moderate", while their opponents are referred to as "hard core" and "hard left". In this context, "hard" is suggestive of danger, plots, and threats, as in "the Corbyn hard-core plotting to de-select Labour Moderates" (*Telegraph*, 8th November 2015). And in the *Daily Mail* as, "hate mobs and death threats, a chilling dispatch on the shady Hard Left network, hell-bent on driving out Labour's moderates" (5th December 2015).

Behind this, is the concern of much of the media and the right of the party that local members might pick candidate for elections, on the basis that they represent the majority views of the party. The very idea of this is regarded as deeply subversive (as long as the views are left-wing). This argument has a long history. In the 1970s and 80s we examined very large samples of news about industry, the economy, and depictions of political life — looking for example at over 100 TV news bulletins on conflicts between the left and right wings of the Labour party. At the

Labour conference in 1979, a call was made for a change in the Party's organisation: essentially for a shift in power from the Parliamentary Labour Party to the National Conference and to constituency parties. Then as now there were many in the party who believed in the principle that policy should reflect democratic decisions made by its members. But the TV news and much of the media saw such changes as part of the dangerous machinations of the left. The MP Frank Allaun for example is asked by a BBC journalist, "Can you deny that the object of these reforms is to ensure greater left-wing control of the party?"

To which the MP replies:

"I certainly do. I say the object of these reforms is to make the party more democratic, so that the parliamentary leaders respond to the decisions of the rank and file' (BBC 2, *1 O'Clock News*, 1st October 1979)."

The struggle in the party was bitter, and then as now there were accusations of both right and left engaging in undemocratic behaviour. But in all the news we analysed, there was a constant pattern in which trouble and turmoil were seen as originating from the left. For example, on BBC 2 *Newsnight*, we heard, "And Labour's far left gave another stir to the party's troubled waters last night." The powers of darkness were assembling and we were being warned. From the same bulletin, we had: "Within the lower reaches of the party tonight... there is a darker mood" (BBC 2, *Newsnight*, 20th October 1980).

In such coverage, "left-wing moves" "trouble" and "domination" go together quite effortlessly. In our studies of industrial coverage, we had shown how workers made 'demands' while management made "pleas", the same formula carried across to arguments within the Labour party between for example the national executive and members of the Parliamentary Party, as in "the left-wing dominated national executive had rejected pleas..." (BBC 1, *9 O'Clock News*, 29th October 1980). The word 'domination' takes on a very specific meaning in such a context. It was not used to mean anything so simple as having a majority. In the whole of the period, we analysed, only groups identified as left-wing were referred to as dominating. Thus we have, "the left-wing dominated constituency parties" (BBC 1, *Nationwide*, 20th October 1980), but "heckling from the right-wing majority" (ITN, 28th October 1980).

In such a context, it is quite natural for a Labour leader such as Micheal Foot, to be asked by a journalist, "Are you the sort of man who can be pushed about by the left...?" (ITN, *10 O'Clock News*, 30th October 1980).

At this time, the most prominent figure on the left was of course Tony Benn. One part of this media offensive was a quite relentless attack upon him as being quirky, and an outsider, somehow beyond the pale of the normal politics. A BBC *Panorama* programme, for example, featured a journalist reporting an unsourced conversation between Benn and colleagues, in which Benn had said that he feared Britain becoming a police state. The camera closes in on the face of the journalist as he repeats what was said in response: "Tony you are going nuts" (BBC 1, *Panorama*, 22nd June 1981).

This media presentation of left-wing people as somehow unacceptable in contemporary politics is again quite routine, thus we have had Red Robbo (Derick Robinson), Red Ken (Livingstone), and even Red Ed (Miliband). The criticism of the last of these was often on issues such as how he ate a bacon sandwich and that he was generally a bit geeky. Arguments about the validity of different positions on for example the economy, are sparse by comparison. Tony Benn was a danger when he stood for deputy leadership of the party in 1981. He was defeated in this and once the danger had passed, he could be redefined as a national treasure — essentially a good-hearted chap but a bit 'un-realistic'. The same fate perhaps awaits Jeremy Corbyn if the forces of the right are successful in deposing him. But at present he must be defined as a danger, irrespective of the validity of the arguments or the paradox of being a pacifist who likes terrorists.

A close examination of contemporary coverage illustrates this. Corbyn actually made it clear early in his leadership that he is not a pacifist. It would take journalists a few moments to find this statement from *Channel 4 News* where he was asked the question directly and gave this response, 'I am not totally a pacifist, but I see war and the threats of war as an absolute last resort' (30th October 2015). But the perception of pacifism and the potential dangers that

this represents to public life continues to be presented and reinforced. Look for example at this 'serious' moment from the programme *Have I Got News for You* on BBC 1. One of the panellists, Jacob Rees Mogg makes this statement in relation to the alleged pacifism and a shoot to kill policy:

"He is a principled pacifist and he has expressed these views and said the police shouldn't necessarily shoot to kill terrorists — I rather admire his courage in saying something which is so deeply unpopular."

The host, Victoria Coren Mitchell, then says, 'that's a very generous thing to say', and the audience applauds. This reinforces the 'correctness' of the account of what Corbyn is supposed to believe. What [Corbyn](#) actually said was:

"I'm not happy with a "shoot-to-kill" policy in general — I think that is quite dangerous, and I think can often be counterproductive' (16th November 2015).

The key issue here is that at no point have Corbyn or Labour party suggested that the operational rules for policing should be changed. These are clear that where human life is threatened then lethal force may be used. But introducing a vague phrase such as 'shoot-to-kill' suggesting police might go beyond this, does raise questions about who is going to be shot and if they really are terrorists. The case of Jean Charles de Menezes and his killing by police without the chance to identify himself, comes very obviously to mind.

The version of what Corbyn is supposed to have said is further confused in the same programme through a further intervention by the regular panellist Ian Hislop, who comments, "He retracted it in less than a day later, which is strongly principled in the sense of not being" (HIGNFY, 20th November 2015). This point is made without reference to what was actually said and the 'retraction' hangs as an allegation, again with no evidence. The fact that HIGNFY is a comedy programme in some ways makes it more powerful since it can normalise assumptions about how politicians are to be seen without having to justify them. It could begin for example, (as it once did) by showing a picture of a man pulling a bag over his head and add a commentary that the person had heard that Ed Miliband might become Prime Minister. It can therefore create an atmosphere of negativity without being required to give reasons. A key function of media is the mass production of ignorance — the substitution of analysis and detailed argument for vague unsubstantiated assertions. These take on the life of their own and become embedded in routine journalism.

Look for example at this commentary from the *Guardian* on the by-election in Oldham West and Royston, in which they report what are supposed to be Corbyn's views on the killing of Mohammed Emwazi in a US airstrike. We can see from this the power of the spin put onto Corbyn's words and how it passes into history and into public consciousness. At the time of the by-election the *Guardian* report Corbyn as apparently believing that it was "wrong to kill" him. But the [Guardian](#) had actually reported at the time of Emwazi 's death that Corbyn had issued a "relatively hawkish" statement saying that 'Emwazi had been held to account for his callous and brutal crimes' (13th November 2015).

In the same by-election coverage, the questions which Corbyn's stance raised about shooting first and asking if it is the right person afterwards becomes 'should not have 'shoot-to-kill' for known terrorists'. The [Guardian](#) reports the spin as if it is what was actually said and then public responses to the supposed version:

"Canvassers reported voters slamming doors in their faces, angry after Corbyn suggested the US military was wrong to kill Isis terrorist Mohammed Emwazi (he should have faced trial, [said Corbyn](#)) and then, three days after the Paris attacks, saying UK police should not have a 'shoot-to-kill' policy for known terrorists." (4 December 2015)

The principles to which Corbyn was pointing, are very significant and it is travesty to suggest that he is merely a pacifist who has more concern for terrorists than public safety. The rule of law is important, as is the need to establish guilt and innocence, and most obviously to make sure that the right person is identified before opening fire. A media including the BBC, which is committed even minimally to 'balance', might be asked why Cameron was not questioned relentlessly about what he meant by 'shoot-to-kill'. Was he suggesting a change in police operational procedure? Would that mean that more innocent people might be shot? But the spinning of the accounts and partial reporting for political preference has become routine in much journalism. To counter it, there is a strong need for rapid rebuttal of false claims and to make statements which are absolutely clear without ambiguity.

But there is a further issue which politicians of the left must confront. This is that much of what they say will initially sound strange in mainstream media and public discussion, because they are speaking in a context in which what is legitimate and acceptable has moved substantially to the right. The free market and what it does to social life has become normalised. In our interviews with young people for example, we have found that they expect their work conditions to be degraded, they assume that casualized labour and job insecurity are in the nature of working life. There is a need to promote core alternative values in mainstream media such as the BBC, and to outline realistic political alternatives. This requires giving new answers to questions, such as how can the 6th richest country in the world not provide for the safety and security of all its citizens? [Our work](#) has shown the very narrow range of perspectives which the BBC features on the economy and how it focuses on the views of city and financial interests.

The 'imperative' of austerity has been discussed without providing even the most basic information about how much wealth there is in the economy as a whole. How is it possible for example, for a Conservative government to focus attention on £12 billion of cuts in welfare when such an amount is trivial in comparison to the £4.5 trillion in personal wealth owned by the richest 10% of the population? It is not enough merely to counter false stories and partial accounts. The gap in public life and political debate must be filled with an informed critical analysis which questions what has been made normal for us by much of our media.

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