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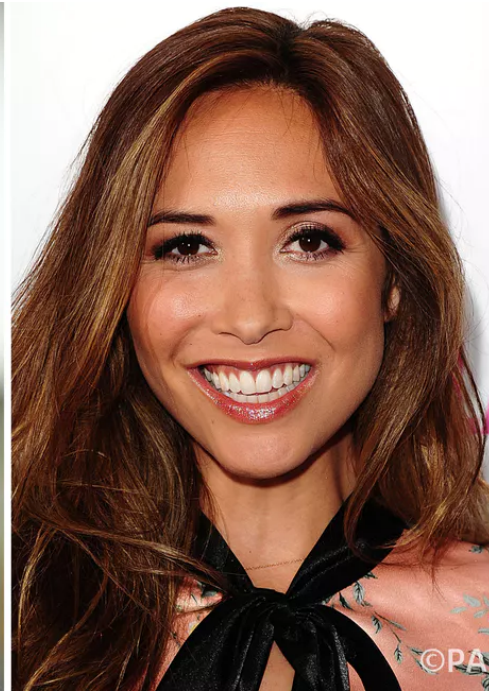


Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Mili no mates – mocking Labour leaders is what tabloids do best

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When Mili met Myleene. PA Wire

Another very bad week for Ed Miliband, which has ended with resignation of the shadow attorney-general, Emily Thornbury, over her “sneering” tweet during the Rochester and Strood by election, got off to a shaky start on Monday when, while appearing on ITV’s the Agenda he debated Labour’s mansion tax with pop singer Myleene Klass.

The following day the Mail described the Labour leader as looking “lost and bewildered” as Klass took Miliband “to task” leaving him “humiliated”. The Daily Telegraph reported that Klass had “wiped the floor with him” and the Huffington Post described the debate as “painful”.

All manna from heaven for David Cameron who at Prime Minister's Question Time gleefully announced:

This was the week when Myleene Klass wiped the floor with you on TV and this is the week when a poll in Scotland showed more people believe in the Loch Ness monster than in your leadership. The only problem for the Labour Party is you actually exist.

But if you watch the exchange between Klass and Miliband you will see that it was hardly contentious at all. An exchange of views certainly, but nothing to merit the ridicule, scorn and general air of disdain that seems to cascade down upon Miliband from most sections of the press – whether he is eating a bacon sandwich, giving money to the poor or attempting to articulate Labour party policies.

It has become increasingly apparent – and this has occurred to those staunchly affiliated to the Labour Party, such as the *New Statesman* and the *Mirror* newspapers – that Miliband's stock is irreversibly low.

That Miliband finds himself the enemy of the *Daily Mail* and the Murdoch press is hardly a surprise. It was only last year that the *Mail* ran its infamous “Man who hated Britain” story about Ed's father Ralph – and don't forget that in the early days of the phone-hacking scandal it was Miliband, in an interview with the *Observer*, who spoke out against Murdoch's influence. He said:

I think it's unhealthy because that amount of power in one person's hands has clearly led to abuses of power within his organisation. If you want to minimise the abuses of power then that kind of concentration of power is frankly quite dangerous.

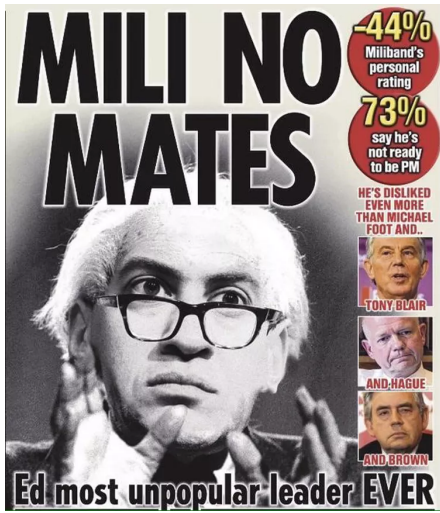
Brave words, when no other leader had been so bold, which saw Miliband's approval ratings rise. But from that moment on any sort of positive relationship between the Murdoch press and Miliband vanished.

So now we are here – months and years of personal attacks and the steady drip, drip of criticism. “Mili no mates”, ran the *Sun*'s page two story on November 13. Britain doesn't want him said the editorial and, furthermore: “His own party doesn't either.”

To emphasise the point, next to an announcement stating that “Ed is the most unpopular leader EVER” was a picture of Miliband in a Michael Foot wig. Michael Foot being, in the *Sun*'s view of course, the ideological father of the current Labour leader: the two of them united ineptitude and equally as unelectable.

Shot in the Foot

Twice ever thus and there has been much written about the “monsterring” of Labour leaders by the press. Roy Greenslade in his excellent *Guardian* media blog recently made the point that every leader with the notable exception of Tony Blair has suffered at the hands of the Tory press. He singles out Gordon Brown, Neil Kinnock and the aforementioned Foot as being particularly harshly treated.



It is the vilification of Foot that sticks in my mind. Mercilessly lampooned for his decision to wear a donkey jacket to the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day (when he wore nothing of the sort – it was, in fact, a smart coat chosen by his wife Jill) this most principled of leaders was completely unsuited to running an election campaign against the sophisticated Thatcher media machine and a particularly feral Kelvin Mackenzie-edited Sun newspaper, which asked, incredulously: “Do you seriously want this old man to run Britain?”

Lights out for Labour

Not a big fan of Miliband: The Sun. Author provided

For many, it was the constant attacks on Neil Kinnock from 1983 up until the election defeat of 1992 which seriously undermined his credibility as a potential PM. James Thomas in his book “Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics” refers to Roy Hattersley’s contention that the tabloids “destroyed” Kinnock’s hopes of being prime minister and ensured an “extraordinary warped public perception of him”.

Perhaps there are parallels between Miliband and Kinnock when we consider the refusal of the Sun, in particular, to take Kinnock seriously. In the run up to the 1992 election the Sun asked a psychic to contact dead celebrities and ask them who they would vote for. Under the headline: “WHY I’M BACKING KINNOCK, BY STALIN” the readers learned that Uncle Joe was joined by comrades Mao and Trotsky.



How The Sun 'won it'. Author provided

When John Major won the election of 1992 and Mackenzie proclaimed it was: “the Sun wot won it” few outside of academia saw fit to disagree.

‘Very powerful people’

That Tony Blair escaped the treatment afforded to his predecessors and successors is in large part due to the fact that he was willing to court the editors and press barons. As he told the Leveson enquiry, he met Murdoch in the Hayman islands in 1995 with the intention of winning the News International titles away from the Tories.

I would not have been going all the way round the world if it had not been a deliberate, strategic decision that I was going to try to persuade them.

For Blair the whole point was cultivating a relationship with, in his words: “very powerful people who had a big impact on the political system”.

For good or ill, Miliband has seemingly alienated forever “the very powerful” people – and it would appear now he is losing the support of the Labour press as well. His perceived failures have become the currency of the news about him. In the age of social media and instantly available opinion, tweets about Myleene Klass “wiping the floor” with Miliband become the headlines of the next day as journalists, once again, wilfully conflate twitter public opinion with the real thing – missing the indicators that most voters are behind the substance of the mansion tax.

The BBC has not escaped criticism in this respect. A recent edition of *Newswatch* was devoted to many viewers’ disquiet concerning the BBC’s willingness to follow newspaper agendas on Miliband. One viewer complained:

I must protest at the avalanche of hostile coverage about Ed Miliband, based as it is on nothing more than rumour, speculation and unattributed rumour ... Your programmes are with great relish mimicking the Tory press by running extended features on the subject of ‘Is Ed up to it?’.

In response, Sue English, the BBC’s head of political programmes, defended the Corporation’s coverage vigorously and refuted the notion that the BBC dwelt too much on the “bacon sandwich” episodes. The fact that the issue was debated at all, though, indicates – if nothing else – that there is a body of opinion which sees the coverage of Miliband as too personal and trivialised.

Is anyone listening?

Measuring whether or not negative coverage has an effect on voter behaviour is a notoriously difficult undertaking and in the past perhaps all parties have conveniently hidden behind the prejudices of the press as a reason for their unpopularity. But the polls tell their own story – as Peter Kellner of YouGov has pointed out, according to the latest figures just 18% of the public think Miliband is up to the job of

prime minister; 64% do not. As of this November, among people who voted Labour in 2010 only 34% think he is PM material – a huge drop from his 51% rating just one month earlier.

And this latest “Klass war” won’t have helped matters one iota for Ed Miliband or Labour.

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