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In a spin: why Seumas Milne is the wrong spokesman for Jeremy Corbyn

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New era of straight talking for Labour. And that's what worries the party's MPs. UK Media Watch, CC BY-SA

When it was announced that Seumas Milne, the Guardian columnist and associate editor, had been appointed as Labour's executive director of communications and strategy, sections of the press were vitriolic in their condemnation.

In the Sun, characteristically unembarrassed by any Andy Coulson associations, an unnamed Labour source said:

Corbyn's 'straight talking, honest politics' turns out to be apologising for genocide, wishing the Soviet Union hadn't lost the Cold War and backing terrorists who planted roadside bombs to kill British soldiers. It is an appointment that is morally unacceptable.

In the **Daily Mail**, meanwhile, Tom McTague wrote of the “fury” in the Parliamentary Labour Party and of the fact that Milne was a “journalist who has defended acts of terrorism and praised attacks on British troops”. In the **Telegraph**, former Labour MP Tom Harris was given space to write that with Milne’s appointment Corbyn had “stuck two fingers up” at Labour’s core electorate.

Not only that, Milne was “contemptuous of traditional working-class attitudes”. Voters would, readers were told, “recoil at Milne’s view that the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby ‘was not terrorism in the normal sense’”.

What neither McTague or Harris do, of course, is acknowledge that **the article in which Milne wrote of Rigby not being a victim of terrorism “in the normal sense” began with these words:** “The videoed butchery of Fusilier Lee Rigby outside Woolwich barracks last May was a horrific act and his killers’ murder conviction a foregone conclusion.”

In both the Mail and Telegraph, Milne’s smiling profile is placed alongside or underneath the familiar photograph of Lee Rigby in his ceremonial uniform. Dignity and dishonour, patriotism and perfidy. The pattern of repeatedly portraying Corbyn and those closely associated with him as enemies of democracy and commonsense values continues daily. These authors are deliberately smearing Milne by omitting key sentences – they are inviting the readers of their columns to believe that Milne is an apologist for terrorism who cares not one jot for British lives.

And not just in the right wing press.

Et tu Indy?

On Wednesday, the **Independent’s online edition** chose to reproduce an article from **medium.com** by writer and prospective Labour candidate Kate Godfrey, in which she called Milne a “Fascist apologist”.

In the article Godfrey affects a position of inconsolable rage. To Godfrey, Milne is a man who “never heard an opinion that he didn’t filter; a truth that he didn’t dismiss as an orthodoxy, or a story of pain on which he didn’t have superior information”. She dismisses Milne’s journalism and paints him as a Putin advocate who denies the use of chemical weapons in Syria. She seems to think that her proximity to the violence of conflict ensures objectivity and clarity. Milne is an armchair foreign correspondent and it’s Godfrey who has seen “a bit bloody more than Mr Winchester-and-Balliol Milne”.



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Of course, it is common in these days of instant online opinion for individuals to be vilified simply for espousing different viewpoints. One would expect The Independent, though, to at least check that the links provided by Godfrey to support her argument do just that and not contradict it – as pointed out in a rather more dispassionate analysis and dissection provided by Greg Dash and Richard Hutton.

Self-inflicted catastrophe

All this notwithstanding, Milne is clearly a controversial man with views many find objectionable and, for some in the Parliamentary Labour Party, his hiring is the latest in series of self-inflicted catastrophes which detracts from the job of opposition. John Woodcock tweeted that:



And perhaps Simon Danczuk had it right when he told the Sun: “This is a totally bizarre appointment of a man more likely to become the story rather than control our party’s message.”

That’s the rub – even before he has begun in earnest, Milne has become the story and if these were normal political times, then his position would already be untenable. In 2003 Alastair Campbell resigned against the background of the Iraq war and coverage from hostile press which was privileging reporting his behaviour over the policies of the Blair government.

Campbell knew as soon as this happened that it was time for him to go and the PM agreed. It took fully six years for this to come to pass, and yet here is Milne barely hours into his new role seeing his integrity shredded and the ability to do the job questioned by some of the MPs he’s been hired to represent.

Two left feet

So the pertinent question here is whether he can effectively operate as communications director in the face of such outright and widespread hostility. As far as the press is concerned, let’s remember that Milne is the enemy who works for a boss committed to media reform.

During the leadership contest Corbyn said: “A society in which 70% of UK newspaper circulation is controlled by three wealthy families is clearly unfair and undemocratic. The work being done by the Media Reform Coalition and others is vital in pushing for media plurality which this country is so desperately in need of.” In this sense the frustrations of Labour “moderates” can be understood.

If the opinions of Adam Barnett of Left Foot Forward are widespread among other journalists then Labour has an insurmountable problem. In a recent article Barnett wrote that Milne was an apologist for the perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo massacre.

Hacks might have hated Lynton Crosby and Alistair Campbell, wrote Barnett, but at least they could rely on them to be solid on the right of journalists not to be shot in their workplace. The same, he said, cannot be said for Campbell's successor.

If Milne's appointment heralds a new era of "spin-free" Labour politics, then I can only imagine he and Jeremy Corbyn – not to mention the Labour Party as a whole – will have to get used to being hung out to dry

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