

A reader asks the WSWS to comment on the sacking of England football coach Glen Hoddle

19 February 1999

Sir/Madam,

I think the recent media frenzy to sack England football manager Glen Hoddle is worth comment in your excellent site.

As Patrick Barclay of the *Observer* put it, the coalition of press with Members of Parliament (up to Blair himself) to influence an independent body in this way should be a worry to all our citizens.

For me it showed the power of a vindictive press to appropriate the cause of the disabled for its own ends and opportunistic politicians to "identify" themselves with said cause.

Unwittingly the strength of the disabled lobby will have grown from such exposure and if Hoddle seeks solace for his unwise words and subsequent hounding he can find it therein.

Thank-you,

KM

Dear KM,

Thank you for your e-mail and comments. The forced resignation of Glen Hoddle, the England football manager, does raise a number of important issues.

Hoddle was pushed out of his manager's job after a week of media "outrage" over his January 30 interview in the *Times*, suggesting that disabled people were being made to pay for the sins of previous lives.

He was quoted as saying, "You and I have been physically given two hands and two legs and half-decent brains. Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime. I have nothing to hide about that. It is not only people with disabilities. What you sow, you have to reap."

Throughout much of the ensuing media furore, Hoddle claimed that his remarks had been

misinterpreted and said he was considering legal action. But following the intervention of several Labour ministers, and finally Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Football Association decided that Hoddle's position was untenable and his contract was terminated on February 3.

Hoddle's religious views--which are something of a "pick and mix" from various faiths--were well known. He had expounded them on numerous occasions, and regularly sent his players off for sessions with his faith healer and mentor, Eileen Drewery. Indeed, Hoddle's views were a factor in his being chosen to replace Terry Venables as England manager two and a half years ago, following allegations that the latter was involved in shady financial ventures. Hoddle was the "clean pair of hands" so needed to restore English football's reputation.

So what changed? As is usual with such campaigns, an air of rank hypocrisy surrounded the entire affair. The newspaper supposedly leading the charge on behalf of Britain's disabled, the *Sun*, had been forced to issue an apology only a few months ago after it had airbrushed a disabled person from a front-page photograph so it would not adversely affect sales. In Parliament the government, which last year had faced angry protests at the cutting of invalidity benefit, also postured as the champion of the disabled. Labour MPs called for Hoddle's resignation and were backed up by Blair on a breakfast TV chat show. This was just one week before Labour's new measures on welfare reform were published. With his government poised to introduce some of the most draconian legislation against the disabled ever seen, Blair no doubt regarded the issue as a useful diversion.

More fundamentally, the Hoddle affair was motivated

by two inter-related considerations--money and jingoism. Football is a multibillion-pound industry. The continued failure of the England football team may provide some wistful football chants, but it is bad for business--especially for sponsorship and promotional deals. The Football Association's supposed independence is a fraud. Its interests are completely tied in with those of its corporate backers, hence its "reluctant" decision to accept Hoddle's resignation.

England's dire performance is equally bad for playing the "patriot game". Blair came to power promising a "New Britain", a "cool Britannia". Events have proven that this is simply a repackaging of British nationalism. But how do you unify a nation that is so deeply divided along social and class lines? In Britain, sport--particularly football--has historically played a role in this, alongside other "national symbols" such as the monarch, parliament, etc. The latter are increasingly discredited and the English football team has proven itself to be no substitute.

Hoddle's poor results as a football manager could no longer be financially or politically tolerated. For the press and government, his remarks provided a convenient pretext. But here is the most disturbing aspect of the entire affair. To achieve these ends, an atmosphere of extreme religious intolerance was created. MPs denounced Hoddle's views for not being scientific and rational, as if any religion is. By holding Hoddle's specific religious beliefs out for ridicule, they intimated that only the Christian faith held a monopoly on religion in Britain.

For all these reasons you are correct to warn that the collusion between press and government in this way should "be a worry to all our citizens". Events in Washington DC have shown the serious implications of this for democratic rights.

Julie Hyland, for the WSWs



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