

The BBC and the police attack on Jody McIntyre

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In its coverage of the December 9 student protest in London, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to the brutal treatment meted out by riot police to Jody McIntyre, a 20-year-old freelance journalist. He was one of the many protesters, including school children, who were subjected to violent attacks by the police.

McIntyre, who requires the use of a wheelchair due to cerebral palsy, was assaulted twice in view of enraged witnesses. On the first occasion he was hit with a baton and dragged out of his wheelchair. Some 45 minutes later, he was again pulled out of his wheelchair and dragged across the road by an officer who is believed to have been involved in the first assault. The second attack was recorded and uploaded to YouTube, where several versions have been viewed more than 200,000 times. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUHzSQgayXY&feature=related>)

Many viewers were rightly horrified at the police attack on a young disabled man who was engaged in a peaceful protest. There have been demands for an investigation of the incident and the prosecution of the police involved.

But the travesty did not end there. After the video footage of the assault was made available, the BBC's Ben Brown interviewed McIntyre on December 13 on the channel's 8 o'clock news bulletin. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXNJ3MZ-AUo>)

In an interview that verged on the surreal, Brown presented the attack as a legitimate police response to a provocation by McIntyre. Brown asked, "There was a suggestion you were rolling towards the police in your wheelchair. Is that true?"

When McIntyre stated that nothing could justify the actions of the police, Brown again repeated the question. McIntyre explained that he is unable to use

his wheelchair himself and that his 16-year-old brother was helping him. He added, "It was quite obvious from the footage that I was 100 percent not a threat to anyone."

Brown followed up by describing McIntyre as a self-professed "radical" and "revolutionary", as if this were grounds for a police assault.

McIntyre said, "I would say it's very important not to see this as an isolated incident. This is the police's role at demonstrations, to incite and provoke violence. They have done it in the past and they are continuing to do it now. I am not the real victim here. The real victims are the students like Alfie Meadows, who was in hospital within an inch of his life after a policeman struck him on the head with a truncheon and he needed emergency brain surgery. Now, imagine if it had been Prince Charles or [his wife] Camilla, or a police officer who had been within an inch of their lives."

Brown continued regardless, questioning McIntyre if he had thrown missiles at the police that day or whether he shouted "anything provocative" or threw "anything that would have induced the police to do that to you". McIntyre replied, "Do you think I could have in any way posed a physical threat from the seat of my wheelchair to an army of police officers armed with weapons? This whole line of argument is absolutely ludicrous because you're blaming the victims of violence for that violence."

Brown's attempt to portray the victim of an unprovoked police assault as someone who was essentially "asking for it" by participating in the protest raises important questions.

The media has been in lock-step with the government in condemning the nationwide protests by students, lecturers and school children against the assault on further education. The BBC has been in the forefront of

this campaign, taking every opportunity to praise police operations and vilify those demonstrating.

Brown himself has plenty of form in this regard. Since joining BBC News in 1988, he has worked as a correspondent in several countries, including Zimbabwe, Israel, Kosovo (during the break-up of Yugoslavia) and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (during the Persian Gulf War of 1991). He was “embedded” for the BBC in the run-up to the war against Iraq in 2003 and was with British troops in northern Kuwait and the southern part of Iraq, near the city of Basra. In this capacity, Brown acted as a craven apologist for the US-led war and the ensuing occupation that devastated the country and killed hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants.

In an interview with the *Independent* in 2006, he described an incident in which he abandoned any pretence that he was simply a reporter of the war. He recalled that during one battle he witnessed an Iraqi lying dead on the ground after a gunner on a British tank “had blown a big hole in his chest—I remember seeing the guy with a hole in his chest and smoke coming out of it.”

He continued, “We went and shook the hands of the soldier that had killed him, which was a very bizarre experience because it was completely crossing the line. There was so much relief because we knew we had nearly been killed and somebody had saved our lives.”

In another account he recalled that he had kissed the gunner who killed the Iraqi. He wrote, “Reporters are supposed to be observers of the battlefield, not participants. I wondered if, by being so close to the British troops, I had somehow crossed an invisible line.”

Last year he wrote in the *Daily Mail*, “I was addicted to war zones, just like the ‘junkies’ who are the characters of my novel *Sandstealers*—reporters in search of the adrenaline fix that only war can give them.”

The BBC has defended Brown’s interview, despite acknowledging that it has received some 5,000 complaints. Kevin Bakhurst, deputy head of the BBC newsroom, acknowledged the “considerable number of complaints” before stating, “Mr. McIntyre was given several minutes of airtime to make a range of points, which he did forcefully; Ben challenged him politely but robustly on his assertions.”

What does all this represent? Since it was founded as a national broadcaster in 1926, the BBC has served as the faithful spokesman of the British ruling class, disseminating carefully crafted propaganda and shaping international opinion. However, on the basis of the famed “impartiality” and “independence” outlined in its charter, the BBC had always sought to maintain a degree of distance and an element of criticism on certain issues, even conflicting with the government of the day.

Brown’s interview with McIntyre is just the latest example of the BBC’s open emergence as a virtual ministry for propaganda on behalf of Britain’s ruling elite. The coalition government’s austerity programme of job cuts, wage freezes and cuts in welfare and social provision will cause mass unemployment and widespread poverty. The student protests were only the first indication of the explosion of anger that will inevitably result. In response, the ruling elite is marshalling its forces—from the police through to the media—in an attempt to intimidate and silence opposition.

Brown is a representative of the BBC’s role under conditions of growing social inequality—one that largely dispenses with the pretence of impartiality and functions openly as the pliant tool of the powers-that-be. He articulates the standpoint of the smug and socially privileged strata that populate the upper echelons of the media—those who are able to reconcile themselves to literally anything, whether it is bloody wars of colonial conquest or a violent police assault on a disabled man.



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