

Behind the Sun's diatribe against footballer Ross Barkley

Tony Robson
18 April 2017

Former editor of the *Sun*, Kelvin MacKenzie, has been suspended from his position at Rupert Murdoch's right-wing tabloid after authoring a column that is particularly filthy, even by his standards. In it, MacKenzie compared 23-year-old Everton footballer Ross Barkley, who is of mixed race, with a gorilla and defamed the working class of Liverpool.

The occasion for this stream of bile was an altercation that occurred at a Liverpool nightclub on April 9. During the incident, Barkley was physically assaulted in an apparently unprovoked attack.

The column headlined "Here is why they go ape at Ross" was accompanied by two photographs—one of the midfielder in a kneeling position with his arms dangling by his side, alongside that of a gorilla in typical stance with the caption, "Could Ross Barkley represent the missing link between man and beast?"

MacKenzie described Barkley "as one of our dimmest footballers." The "lack of reflection in his eyes ... makes me certain not only are the lights not on, there is definitely nobody at home.

"I get a similar feeling when seeing a gorilla at the zoo."

Pointing out that Barkley earned "£60,000 a week and being both thick and single, he is an attractive catch in the Liverpool area, where the only men with similar pay packets are drug dealers and therefore not at nightclubs, as they are often guests of Her Majesty [in prison]."

MacKenzie concluded that Barkley will have learned "a painful lesson. He is too rich and too famous" to be in places where "most of the customers have only just broken through the £7.50-an-hour barrier."

Confronted with a public outcry, the *Sun* was forced to announce the suspension of MacKenzie as a columnist pending an investigation. It removed the

offending article from its web site last Friday, after Merseyside police announced they were following up complaints against the newspaper for race hatred.

News UK, which owns the *Sun*, described the article as "wrong," "unfunny" and not representative of its views. Neither this, nor the claims of ignorance by the newspaper and MacKenzie himself as to the fact that Barkley has a Nigerian grandfather, can be accepted as sincere.

A simple search of the Internet provides this information.

Such is MacKenzie's right-wing pedigree that Murdoch once referred to him as "my little Hitler." MacKenzie's *Sun* column regularly spews out vitriol about refugees and migrants. MacKenzie and the *Sun* like to claim that, in doing so, they are speaking for the working class against the "out of touch" elite. His latest diatribe reveals the ferocious hatred and contempt for the working class concealed by such populism.

The *Sun* supported the Leave camp in last year's referendum on UK membership of the European Union. With their victory, MacKenzie and his ilk feel the wind in their sails. In a *Sun* column earlier this month, MacKenzie responded to the unprecedented threats by senior Conservative politicians that Britain would be prepared to go to war with Spain over Gibraltar—as it withdraws from the EU—by declaring he had "already gone from jaw-jaw to war-war."

He continued, "... our friends in Europe are quickly turning out to be our foes," before referring to the "creeps running Spain," as "donkey rogers," concluding, "We have plenty of cards to play and a bigger armed service always concentrates the mind."

It is striking that criticisms of MacKenzie's article concentrated solely on allegations of racism, while little has been said about the attack on working class males

in Liverpool, which constitutes the main thrust of his column.

There is no innocent explanation as to why MacKenzie's article was published in the *Sun* without due vetting, or that he is considered fit to write on any issue regarding Liverpool. This is the man, after all, who was editor of the *Sun* at the time of the Hillsborough football disaster in April 1989, in which 96 Liverpool supporters were crushed to death on the terraces of Sheffield Wednesday's stadium at an FA Cup Semi-Final.

In response to the tragedy, the *Sun* ran a notorious front-page article, "The Truth," filled with lies blaming supposedly ticketless and drunken Liverpool football fans for the tragedy. It falsely reported that Liverpool fans had picked the pockets of the lifeless victims, urinated on the police and beat up a police officer giving mouth to mouth resuscitation.

The *Sun's* article played a central role in a campaign of public disinformation, which was orchestrated by the government, police and authorities to cover up the truth about the disaster.

For decades the *Sun* has been boycotted by Liverpool's population, with Liverpool Football Club recently banning the tabloid from its stadium and training ground due to its coverage of Hillsborough. Following the MacKenzie column on Barkley, the same decision was taken by Everton Football Club.

MacKenzie's column amounted to a provocation—being published just one day prior to the 28th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster on April 15.

The column can only be understood as part of a vendetta by the *Sun* for the eventual uncovering of the truth that the police and authorities—not the fans—were responsible for the disaster. A truth that was established only thanks to the tireless efforts of the families and supporters over decades.

What stands behind this is a more fundamental antipathy, bound up with the traditions of socialism and militancy, which are associated with the working class in Liverpool. For MacKenzie, this was meant to have been completely expunged during the Thatcher years after the defeats and betrayals by the Labour and trade union bureaucracies.

MacKenzie was chief propagandist in his position as *Sun* editor from 1981 to 1994, virtually the entire

period that Thatcher was in office. The vilification of the working class of Liverpool formed part of a broader narrative that claimed opposition to the free market and the attacks on workers' social gains were the product of "victim status."

In line with this, the families of those who died at Hillsborough—and Liverpool's working class population—because they opposed the official state cover-up, were callously dismissed by the authorities as portraying themselves as "victims." Back in 2004, now Conservative Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson infamously described the city as wallowing in its "victim status."

This narrative was shattered when the truth finally emerged about the Hillsborough disaster last year.

Commenting on the historic ruling by the inquest that those who died were unlawfully killed by the actions of the state and authorities, the WSWS explained, "The verdict in the longest jury case in British legal history vindicates the extraordinary campaign by the families, friends and supporters of those killed, injured and traumatized.

"In the teeth of a state organised cover-up, they vowed to bring those responsible for the deaths of their loved ones to justice. Their fight to reveal the truth in the face of a catalogue of lies concocted by the police, the Conservative government and the right-wing media is a testament to the principles of class solidarity and struggle against enormous odds."

The complaints against MacKenzie are to be followed up by the UK press regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

The same IPSO exonerated MacKenzie in 2016 after he used his *Sun* column to promote Islamophobia in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Nice, France. He criticised Channel 4 news because the journalist they chose to cover the news item, Fatima Manji, wore a hijab.

After 2,000 complaints against MacKenzie, the IPSO carried out an investigation in which it ruled that his criticism was "reasonable."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact