

BBC's removing sports host Gary Lineker for opposing government anti-migrant legislation provokes public outrage

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The decision by the BBC to axe sports host Gary Lineker, after he tweeted against the Conservative government's brutal treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, has plunged Britain's state broadcaster into crisis. Mass public support for Lineker threatens the broadcaster's governing body and the positions of its leading figures.

Lineker, a renowned former football star and winner of the World Cup golden boot for his goals at the 1986 tournament, is a household name and fronts the BBC's *Match of the Day (MOTD)* programme.

On March 7, Lineker responded to a Home Office video in which Home Secretary Suella Braverman defended her Illegal Migration Bill, with the video titled, "Enough is enough. We must stop the boats." Braverman intends to deny the right to asylum to the few thousand desperate migrants who make the hazardous journey across the English Channel to enter Britain. The same day Prime Minister Rishi Sunak made a Downing Street speech announcing the policy standing behind a podium reading "Stop the Boats".

Lineker responded with a tweet, since viewed 16 million times, "Good heavens, this is beyond awful" and then defended his tweet with another answering attacks by Braverman's right-wing defenders: "There is no huge influx. We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries. This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s, and I'm out of order?"

Lineker, who has 8.8 million twitter followers, received a flood of support, tweeting the following day: "I have never known such love and support in my life than I'm getting this morning (England World Cup

goals aside, possibly). I want to thank each and every one of you. It means a lot. I'll continue to try and speak up for those poor souls that have no voice."

His intervention and refusal to back down prompted a government and right-wing media pile on, which only confirmed what Lineker said in his tweet. Senior government figures demanded action against Lineker, claiming that he had breached the government's impartiality rules for BBC journalists, and that it was impermissible to compare government policies to the Nazis who came to power in Germany in 1933.

The *Daily Mail*, a xenophobic rag which supported Britain's fascist Blackshirts in the 1930s, devoted three days of front pages and reams of coverage to demands that the BBC act against Lineker.

BBC Director General Tim Davie heard the message, stating Thursday, "The BBC absolutely puts the highest value on impartiality and that's clearly important to us." On Friday, the BBC announced that Lineker would "step back" from his *MOTD* role until there is "an agreed and clear position on his use of social media".

Lineker did not "step back." He was removed after refusing to apologise for his tweet. Factually the BBC had no grounds to take any such action against Lineker. He is employed as a freelance presenter, is not on the BBC staff and is not a news journalist and therefore not covered by "impartiality" rules.

Lineker's removal galvanised support for him. The *Daily Mirror* organised an online petition calling for his reinstatement, which reached 100,000 signatures in under 10 hours.

He also won the support of his colleagues at the BBC, with regular *MOTD* co-hosts Alan Shearer and Ian Wright refusing to appear in solidarity. Alex Scott,

Micah Richards and Jermaine Jenas followed suit. All six commentators scheduled to be working on Saturday's games for the BBC joined the boycott.

Such was the crisis engulfing the BBC that on Friday evening, Davie, while saying he would not resign, said that "success for me is Gary gets back on air."

Saturday's *MOTD* consisted of 20 minutes of match highlights, and no studio analysis or in-game commentary. On Sunday, the BBC was then forced to reduce coverage of the Women's Super League match between Manchester United and Chelsea. The *MOTD2* Sunday show cut its duration, with host Mark Chapman and pundit Jermain Defoe both refusing to appear and anchor commentator Guy Mowbray tweeting, "The scheduled commentary team are in full agreement with our BBC Sport colleagues."

The Labour Party was caught on the back foot and had to backtrack from the March 11 comments of Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper that Lineker "was wrong to say that" and his treatment was a "matter for the BBC."

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer was obliged to belatedly declare that the BBC "has got this one badly wrong and now they're very, very exposed, as is the government."

The BBC has been transformed into a subsidiary of the Tory government and functions today as nothing more than its propaganda arm. The major figures on the BBC's board and journalists within its news service are Tories.

In 2021, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport approved Richard Sharp, the government's preferred candidate, as new chair of the BBC Board. The multi-millionaire former Goldman Sachs banker was previously an adviser to then prime minister Boris Johnson and linked to then chancellor and current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. He has donated more than £400,000 to the Conservative Party and was embroiled in a scandal for facilitating an £800,000 loan guarantee for Johnson while he was prime minister.

The leading position at the BBC, Director General, is held by Davie, previously a local Tory council candidate and deputy chairman of his local party.

Robbie Gibb, the former Communications Director for former Tory Prime Minister Theresa May, is on the BBC board. Nick Robinson, the presenter of the flagship Radio 4 *Today* programme, is a former

Chairman of the Young Conservatives.

There were no complaints from the *Mail*, et al. about breaching impartiality, nor of the impermissibility of comparison to Nazi Germany, when billionaire CEO Alan Sugar, who fronts the BBC's prime time *The Apprentice*, tweeted in 2018 a mocked-up picture of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn sat in a car next to Hitler. This took place as the Labour right, backed by the Conservatives, spread lies that Corbyn and his supporters were anti-Semites, while prominent Zionists claimed that Jews would leave Britain en masse for fear of their lives if he became prime minister.

Moreover, Lineker was telling the truth about official demonisation of migrants echoing the language of the Nazis, and not like his critics lying through his teeth. This includes commentary comparing immigrants to cockroaches whose boats should be torpedoed —alongside imagery comparing them to rats, and Braverman's description of the government's legislation as preventing "the invasion on our southern coast".

Lineker's principled stand demonstrates that the government can only get away with any of its attacks on jobs and democratic rights because they enjoy the support of the Labourites and can rely on the trade unions to demobilise and betray opposition to their rule. Labour are at one with the Tories in demonising asylum seekers and refugees, claiming to represent the views of the "silent majority". Lineker has proved that both represent a vocal minority who can dominate political life only because the majority of working people have no one to speak for them.



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