

Embittered row between UK Labour Party leader Ed Miliband and Daily Mail over his father Ralph

By Julie Hyland
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A row between the *Daily Mail* and Ed Miliband has dominated political life in Britain over the last week. It culminated in outpourings of sympathy and support for the Labour Party leader.

The *Mail* ran a hatchet-job on Miliband's father, Ralph, who died in 1994. Miliband senior, a Jewish émigré who fled to Britain as a teenager from Belgium in 1941 to escape the Nazis, was an academic Marxist and leading light in the New Left that emerged in the 1960s.

Initiated by dissidents from the Communist Party who split in 1956, including the historian E.P. Thompson, the journal *New Left Review* claimed to be developing a new “humanist” version of Marxism. In the ensuing decades it acted as a meeting place for Stalinist-influenced historians and other academics and members of the pseudo-left groups such as the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Its various authors offered a combined advocacy of Western Marxist philosophies, the Frankfurt school, French structuralism, Maoism, anarchism, post-modernism, and sundry other petty bourgeois theories of student radicalism.

Within this mix, Ralph Miliband's contribution was to critique the Labour Party and how its doctrine of the parliamentary road to socialism enabled capitalism to survive. But, rejecting Trotskyism, he could propose no viable alternative. He spent years seeking to influence the Labour left, grouped around Tony Benn, arguing that it would eventually be necessary—at some undefined future point—for them to break with Labour and form a genuinely socialist party. But for all practical purposes he urged only a shift to a more radical and “left” reformist position by the party of which he was not a member but in permanent orbit around.

This family pedigree is well known and has not caused Ed Miliband any problem before, and not only because he has made a point of stressing his disagreement with his father's views. Miliband senior has never previously been depicted as a threat, with even the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* having

published a fulsome obituary to an “inspiring teacher of politics and internationally renowned figure of the British Left,” and his aspiration for a “democratic and open Marxism.”

The *Mail*, apparently incensed over Ed Miliband's attempt to garner popular support by proposing a temporary freeze on energy prices, and with Labour pushing for a form of press regulation, broke with this consensus.

Even by comparison with the newspaper's usual right-wing fare, the article on Miliband senior was hysterically anti-communist, shot through with barely concealed anti-Semitism and puerile jibes.

A note from the 17-year-old Ralph's diary recording his dismay at the nationalism he encountered on arriving in England was cited as proof that he was a “Man who hated Britain”, and who had dedicated his life to overturning the British way of life—a pledge the *Mail* claimed his son intended to fulfil should he win power. “Red Ed's pledge to bring back socialism is a homage to a Marxist father he idolized”, the piece ran.

Miliband expressed outrage at the “besmirching and undermining” of his father, though again he was at pains to distance himself from his father politically. The *Mail*'s opinion on his father's socialism was “perfectly legitimate”, he wrote, pointing out that “I have pursued a different path and I have a different vision.”

What Miliband most strenuously objected to was the depiction of his father as unpatriotic. Much of his reply—run by the *Mail*—consisted of detailing his father's service in the Royal Navy during the Second World War as evidence that “my father loved Britain.”

The Labour leader's response was met with more virulent commentary by the *Mail*, denouncing his father as the purveyor of a “poisonous creed” leaving an “evil” legacy, and Ed as someone determined to crush press freedom in a way that would drive a “hammer and sickle” through the heart of the nation.

The *Mail's* citing of the “jealous God of Deuteronomy” from the Old Testament caused further consternation amongst many. The *Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland wrote that he had been prepared to give the *Mail* the “benefit of the doubt, ready to conclude it [the first article] was motivated by anti-left, rather than anti-Jewish, prejudice.” The Old Testament quote, however, convinced him otherwise. “In the context of a piece about a foreign-born Jew, it felt like a subtle, if not subterranean hint to the reader, a reminder of the ineradicable alienness of this biblically vengeful people.”

The *Mail's* ravings are a political embarrassment to the entire ruling elite, especially when the press are arguing against a new regulatory framework.

It should be the last to speak of the sins of the father, given that it is still owned by the Rothermere family. It was under the 1st Viscount Rothermere that in the 1930s the *Mail* hailed Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists—“Hurrah for the Blackshirts”—praising Hitler and Mussolini for their “directness of purpose and energy of method.”

In 1933, Rothermere denounced those complaining of “Nazi atrocities” which, he wrote, “consists merely of a few isolated acts of violence such as are inevitable among a nation half as big again as ours, but which have been generalized, multiplied and exaggerated to give the impression that Nazi rule is a bloodthirsty tyranny.”

Hitler returned the compliment, extending the “appreciation of countless Germans, who regard me as their spokesman” to Rothermere.

“A newspaper which in the 1930s ran editorials praising Oswald Mosley and his Blackshirts is in no position to preach to a man who fought for this country”, the *Jewish Chronicle* opined.

Concern at anti-Semitism is not the only factor behind the extraordinary line-up of support behind Miliband—from the Conservative Party's Zac Goldsmith and Lord Michael Heseltine to Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

Some regard it as an unnecessary stirring up of the past. Heseltine stated that Miliband had “fought for the country and we now live in a totally different world to the clash between fascism and communism”, while former Thatcherite cabinet minister Lord Charles Moore, said it “beggared belief” that Ralph Miliband could be accused of a lack of patriotism.

“I never heard him ever say one word which was negative about Britain—our country”, he said in a statement.

Writing in the *Observer*, Will Hutton was most clear in expressing a concern that the *Mail's* attack would polarise an already deeply divided society.

“We live in a society in which all but the top 5% are suffering pressure on living standards, productivity has fallen catastrophically and innovation and investment are conspicuous by their absence”, he wrote. The danger was that the *Mail* could push Britain into “mutual loathing... deafening debate.”

The historian Simon Schama wrote in the *Financial Times*, insisting that Ralph Miliband's critique of Britain should be viewed as part of a great national tradition of dissent motivated by patriotism. He, like Oliver Cromwell, William Morris, John Ruskin, and George Orwell was motivated by concern and love for the country that gave him refuge.

Implicit in such an approach in Britain's leading business publication is an appeal for ruling circles to recognise that many nominally left academics and political figures can provide a valuable service promulgating a pseudo-democratic, pseudo-left “national vision” under conditions of sharpening class antagonisms.

Contrary to the *Mail's* deluded fantasies, “Red Ed” Miliband is presently advancing Labour as the vehicle for a variety of One Nation Toryism—embodied in the writings of the “Blue Labour” group led by Maurice Glasman with its slogan, “family, faith, flag.”

Calls for “shared sacrifice” in the national interest are seen as a vital ideological underpinning to justify Labour's real agenda of austerity, privatisation and the dismantling of welfare.

Such appeals have already found a response within petty bourgeois “left” circles. Writing in the *Guardian*, Priyamvada Gopal, contributor to the New Left Project, emphasised, “The *Daily Mail* may not realise, but Marxists are patriots.”

Echoing Schama, she stressed that Ralph Miliband came from a “long progressive patriotic” tradition in Britain, against an “insincere nationalism” that placed individual privilege over “collective wellbeing.”

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