

# Why the Mail Was Right To Attack Ralph Miliband (Plus: ‘My Nazi Past’)

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Ralph, Ed and David: Politics is a family affair

The Daily Mail has the right to talk about Ralph Miliband in relation to his son, the Labour leader Ed Miliband. Miliband Junior has made extensive references to the love and respect he has for his late father and the influence he had on his moral outlook. The character and background of a politician is important. So if the Mail thinks Ralph was a dangerous Marxist who had doubts about his national loyalties then it's valid, if barrel-scraping, to raise that.

But beyond this simple fact of freedom of expression and political genealogy this was a nasty, stupid and pointless attack that might well [backfire](#). I suspect it will garner [sympathy for Ed](#) and admiration for [his robust assault on the Mail's smear](#).

[My colleague Bart Cammaerts makes a much more [ideologically grounded assault](#) upon the Mail including some [interesting comments](#) by Ralph Miliband himself on the UK press as it was then, and, perhaps still is in [this blog post](#)]

## I Am Biased By My Background Too

I should declare an interest. My mother was also an immigrant to this country – though driven by economic not political circumstances. She never quite passed the cricket test, or rather the West Germany v England football test, in my eyes. She couldn't understand why I was upset when Netzer, Muller and co destroyed 'us' 3-1 at Wembley in 1972.

She would always buy German if she could. I think she only fully respected me on the day I turned up in a (second hand) Merc. And while she had little enthusiasm for the works of the European Union she encouraged a constant stream of foreign visitors to our house and was delighted when we, in turn, formed cosmopolitan friendships around the world.

She also gave 40 years of her working life to educating British children, most from deprived backgrounds – as well as raising five of her own, largely as a single parent. Her favourite annual media moments were Last Night of the Proms, the Boat Race and the Christmas Carol Service from Kings.

## Culture of Tolerance

Most of all, she thought that the British culture of tolerance was unique and precious. Not that 'they' didn't have prejudices – including against her. But she was quite clear about how much better the Brits were at accepting difference and allowing people to get on with their lives. She loved the quiet solidarity shown to her in times of need and the undemonstrative affection from our British-born friends.

But if you look closely through the Beckett family album, you'll find a monochrome photo of my mum wearing a swastika brooch\*. God forbid that I should ever get near elected office, but in the unlikely event that the wider world

ever took an interest in me, that would make a wonderful Daily Mail headline about 'Beckett's Nazi Past'. Although, considering the Mail's history of support for Hitler, they might see it as supportive rather than a smear.

Personality is an essential part of politics. This is not just a shallow media attitude. Political scientists have clearly shown that the public makes psychological, emotional and personal judgments about their leaders. The news media can try to discuss fine policy detail but in the end it is about trust. In a social media age of greater personalisation this is only going to increase.

### **Liberal Attacks**

The Mail attack on Ralph was desperate stuff. I easily get bored by liberals attacking the Mail for being right-wing, but I agree in this case that Geoffrey Levy's piece had all the hallmarks of the nastiest kind of propaganda with its mendacious associations and non-sequiturs.

It's good that the Mail have published [Ed's stout response](#), though they made sure to [surround it with their own case](#). For this kind of journalism to triumph it only requires that politicians don't fight back. In the battlefield of reputation there are new rules of engagement. As we saw from [Damian McBride's book](#) about his time as Gordon Brown's spinner, the politicians have indulged similar vindictive character assassinations. But social media, for example, allows much greater critique of these tactics which do little to engender public engagement with politics itself.

Politics in the 21st century is not going to get cleaner. Character will remain at the heart of the discourse of power. For politicians the task is to be true to your heritage, but to explain with transparency who you are and what you believe.

Update:

My colleague Dr Bart Cammaerts has [a different point of view on this](#), with some interesting quotes from Ralph Miliband on the media.

Not good when your main source argues against your article. [Ralph Miliband biographer says his work was misrepresented by the Mail.](#)

Interesting [view from Israel](#)

Off the main point (which is the use of father against the son) but [Benedict Brogan makes a point](#) about how we've forgotten the Cold War context of Ralph M's Marxism

[\* I am not certain, but my guess is that the brooch dates from when she served as part of an anti-aircraft unit in the last months of the war, along with hundreds of thousands of teenagers called up in those desperate days. The swastika was so ubiquitous that it's difficult to assign any special significance. A bit like a Brit wearing a union flag badge in the 1970s didn't mean you were a National Front supporter?]

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