

Complaint to the BBC on Laura Kuennsberg's report of 17/11/20



We write to complain about a piece BBC political editor Laura Kuennsberg delivered on BBC News at Ten on 17/11/2020. The subject of the piece was Keir Starmer's decision to deny the parliamentary whip to Jeremy Corbyn and also appeared on the BBC website in article form - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54996354>

We believe Ms Kuennsberg's piece was heavily skewed and violated impartiality guidelines.

We observed three significant issues with the piece:

1.

“When the (EHRC) report came out, Mr Corbyn suggested it had all been exaggerated”

So said Ms Kuennsberg in reference to Jeremy Corbyn's statement of 29/10/2020 (the day the EHRC report was published)

This is a shocking misrepresentation of Mr Corbyn's statement, which we suggest the BBC review in full.

The majority of the statement is dedicated to acknowledging the evil of anti-Semitism and the processes by which Mr Corbyn tried to clamp down on it as party leader.

This includes two clear, direct phrases which show, beyond doubt, that Mr Corbyn accepts there was a problem within the Labour Party and that he *considered* it a problem: “anyone claiming there is no antisemitism in the Labour Party is wrong” and “one antisemite is one too many”.

In his only reference to exaggeration Corbyn highlights that “the scale of the problem was also dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents”

Ms Kuennsberg completely removes this statement from its context and ignores direct comments acknowledging the seriousness of anti-Semitism.

In doing so she presents the reader/viewer with the false impression that Corbyn brushes aside the issue as mere “exaggeration” and does not take it seriously.

2. Ms Kuennsberg compounds her unfair reporting by referring to “Mr Corbyn's noisy band of supporters”, who greeted the news with “howls of outrage”. In the televised version she describes Corbyn supporters as a “tribe”.

Is this an impartial use of language by a political editor?

During Corbyn’s tenure as leader did Ms Kuennsberg refer to members of Labour who spoke out furiously (and repeatedly) against his leadership in terms like “noisy”, “howl” and “cult”?

An O-level English student could analyse the impact of such language. Corbyn’s supporters are associated with barbarism, animality and childish disruption (“noisy”).

Such terms are particularly insidious as they are likely to have an unconscious impact on the viewer and lead them to believe that the type of politics Mr Corbyn represents shouldn’t be taken as seriously as centrist Labour politics or Conservative politics – which, as we’ve noted, Ms Kuennsberg never describes in these terms.

Or can the BBC correct us on this?

3. Ms Kuennsberg concludes her report with the astonishing assertion that Keir Starmer had “no choice” but to deny Jeremy Corbyn the whip

We note that main recommendation of the EHRC report is that Labour leaders should not interfere in disciplinary matters. Given that Ms Kuennsberg had just reported on this recommendation she could hardly be unaware of it – yet she allows Mr Starmer a free pass for immediately violating the EHRC recommendations by intervening in a disciplinary matter and, in fact, suggests he had “no choice” but to do so!

The EHRC report includes a proviso that comments about “the scale of antisemitism within the [Labour] Party” are protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Mr Corbyn was, in effect, suspended then denied the party whip for making a statement protected by both the EHRC report AND the European Convention on Human Rights.

Again, Ms Kuennsberg is familiar with this report and as a public service broadcaster has a duty to report on it accurately. Does she feel that Keir Starmer had “no choice” but to violate the EHRC report and Jeremy Corbyn’s human rights? If so, why did she not inform BBC viewers of this? Did she not consider it relevant?

Finally, we note the immediate outcry that greeted denial of the whip to Corbyn. High-profile figures such as Diane Abbot, Len McCluskey and John McDonnell criticised the decision in strong terms. The decision sparked furious debate on social media and led to a third of Labour branches passing motions condemning the decision, despite the party leadership attempting to ban them from doing so.

On what basis did Ms Kuennsberg decide to ignore the views of a large proportion of the Labour Party and former shadow cabinet ministers who evidently thought, not only that Starmer had a choice, but that his choice was controversial to say the least?

This element of Ms Kuennsberg's report therefore lacks balance, accuracy and, again, heavily misleads the reader/viewer.

Conclusion

All three issues that we highlight above either mislead the public or indicate a breach of impartiality guidelines.

We accept that Ms Kuennsberg operates to news deadlines and that this can lead to errors.

However, when mistakes all tend in the same direction – making Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters look bad – it is difficult to avoid concluding that Ms Kuennsberg has a personal or political bias against Mr Corbyn and that this influences her reporting.

We note, in this respect, that Ms Kuennsberg has previously been censured for misrepresenting Jeremy Corbyn and that her coverage of him has consistently generated controversy.

We look forward to a statement from Ms Kuennsberg apologising to Jeremy Corbyn for misrepresenting him in her report and an indication from the BBC of what action will be taken to ensure that she does not continue a pattern of seriously misrepresenting a high-profile political figure and his supporters.

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