

Footballers, who traditionally come from working class and immigrant backgrounds, are regularly maligned in the public sphere as people who, although talented at the game they play, have little else to offer society. They are painted as playboys of low intelligence, self-interested and money-obsessed, while the media feign repeated shock over their inflated salaries as if they are personally responsible for the bloated excesses of modern football. In the UK, this accepted narrative has been blown apart by Gary Lineker, who, through using his platform to highlight the plight of the most vulnerable, has exposed the BBC's problematic 'impartiality' rules, put heat on the government, and triggered a mobilisation among other footballers and BBC workers in solidarity with him.

Last week, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced new government legislation targeting asylum seekers, while standing at a lectern with the slogan 'Stop the Boats' emblazoned across a Union Jack. The Trumpian optics were fitting as Britain's first Prime Minister of Indian origin announced a cruel package of asylum measures. Under the legislation any refugees, including children, arriving by boat to the UK would automatically be detained and then deported back to their country or to Rwanda, where the UK has signed an immigration agreement. Furthermore, these people would be denied access to the justice system to appeal decisions.

The right-wing press celebrated the announcement and touted snap opinion polls which showed the UK public as in favour of the legislation. The Labour Party didn't criticise the measures but argued that if they got into government they would be even *more* efficient at enacting internationally illegal asylum laws. Sunak's approval ratings received a bounce as he continued stoking the culture wars to divert attention from the UK's dire economic situation, a tactic he employed in January against the trans community.

This left a vacuum of mainstream criticism from the Left, which is where we get to Gary Lineker. Last Tuesday he tweeted that it was "an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people" and using language "not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s". Lineker, a deft media mover, highlighted the victims of this bill and drew parallels to the dangerous effects of using dehumanising language, while avoiding using inflammatory descriptors such as 'fascist' or 'Nazi'.

This non-inflammatory criticism sparked an enormous reaction from the right wing media and Conservative Members of Parliament who howled for days that Lineker should "stick to sports", had broken BBC impartiality rules and had offended the British public with a comparison to Nazi Germany. The BBC itself ran with headlines on the Lineker 'situation' rather than the policy itself. Labour also joined the chorus of criticism saying that they didn't "agree with what he said or think it was right to say" continuing their trend of walking in step with the Conservatives. On Wednesday, Lineker doubled-down saying he would always speak up for the "voiceless" and highlighted the hypocrisy of right wing "free-speech champions" who wanted him sacked.

By Friday, after the BBC had attempted to get Lineker to agree to a solution that was seen as unacceptable by him, they announced that he would be "stepping back" from presenting Match of the Day (MOTD) on Saturday until the situation could be resolved. The statement made it seem like a mutual decision by both parties although this framing quickly unravelled.

Minutes later Ian Wright, ex-Arsenal star and current BBC pundit who appears with Lineker announced that he would not be available in solidarity. Twitter erupted in anticipation for the third presenting star of MOTD and Newcastle legend, Alan Shearer, to announce his intentions. Again, minutes later he also said he would not be available to present the show. The BBC had delayed making a decision on Lineker until Friday, which indicated bowing to political pressure. They clearly did not predict what ensued.

By the time the BBC's sporting coverage was supposed to be broadcast on Saturday they had lost the presenters of their two other football shows, which forced them to be removed from Saturday's schedule. There were six Premier League matches set to be shown on MOTD but in another dramatic move all six commentators scheduled announced they would also join the boycott. Not only were presenting teams boycotting in solidarity, but so were stadium reporters at the BBC and wider production staff. BBC Radio 5 Live (its sport radio channel) was also impacted, with the station replacing three hours of scheduled live broadcasting with pre-recorded podcasts. What's more, the Professional Footballers' Association said that their playing members had expressed that they did not want to conduct post match interviews with the BBC.

As updated opinion polls indicated the public overwhelmingly supported Lineker, Labour quickly changed their tune to criticising the BBC and even Rishi Sunak released a statement highlighting Lineker's football talents while putting distance between government and the BBC. The airwaves were filled with eloquent ex-football players arguing against the overreach of BBC impartiality rules imposed on sport presenters and the hypocrisy that they encouraged criticism of Qatar but not the UK government. They continued to argue against the asylum policy and highlighted the racial elements of the bill.

In a matter of hours, the actions of an ex-footballer had created more solidarity for refugees and scrutiny of a cosy media and government relationship than any leftwing media or political party. What's more, the football world stood united behind him and gave devastating consequences to the BBC, which has done more damage to its credibility than at any other time in recent memory.

On Monday, the BBC announced that Lineker would return to present MOTD and the BBC would have to publicly apologise to the public and Lineker. Lineker will not be bound by any rules regarding his use of social media, which was underscored as he used his tweets again this Monday to remark his situation does not compare to those fleeing persecution or war. Lineker: 1, the right wing media, government and BBC: 0.