

Do we get the news we deserve?



by [Julia](#)

I found myself *ranting at the radio* last week. This is not an uncommon pastime for me, but the spluttering behind my steering wheel was more colourful, vehement and incoherent than usual. At issue was the spat between deputy Labour leader *Harriet Harman* and the second most widely read newspaper in the country, the *Daily Mail*, which was being intoned about in soothing accents on the BBC.

My interpretation of the story was that Harriet Harman was being accused of advocating paedophilia. The Mail has since said that they were not “smearing” Harman, but that is exactly what they were doing. Their article *breaking* this story and the subsequent sustained campaign on this issue carried the headline ‘*apologists for paedophiles*’, and Harman was repeatedly accused of having “strangely close”, or “shocking” links with paedophiles. She was repeatedly called on to apologise for these links. She repeatedly refused

- and I don't blame her.

My sense of frustration came from many things, but mainly I was offended by the **uniquely toxic** nature of the allegation levelled against Ms Harman at this time. We are currently in the middle of a sustained period of national soul searching on the subject of paedophilia born of the revelation that one of the most prominent national figures for children of my generation was allegedly a predatory paedophile responsible for untold amounts of harm. In fact, you would be forgiven for concluding that every man on telly of that generation was a predatory paedophile responsible for untold amounts of harm. We live in an ongoing whirl of changing attitudes to sexuality and anxiety about childhood and at a time of an emerging, determined consensus that the paedophile is an uniquely dangerous being who should not be allowed to express their predilection in public. I find it difficult to remember, but I think there was a consensus in the mid 1970's that paedophiles were a uniquely dangerous being. However there was clearly not a consensus that paedophiles should be prevented from expressing their views in public. Witness the name, The Paedophile Information Exchange (**PIE**) which just could not exist now – they would be lynched.

It is into this context, a national muddle of profound disgust and sorrow, self-righteousness and self-flagellation, that the Daily Mail lobbs its slur. The sub text is clear – this is an attempt to locate Harman in particular, her husband, and Patricia Hewitt within this ongoing discourse and taint them in the minds of the electorate by association. It is what it is.

Whatever the links of the **National Council for Civil Liberties** to PIE, it is difficult to see how Harman in particular was responsible for them. She got a job with the NCCL before she was a politician, an organisation with a thousand affiliates. PIE was one of them, positioning itself within a libertarian discourse of freedom of self-expression and the fight for gay rights. I've

worked for a lot of organisations and I didn't always like what they did. I don't hold myself responsible for all the actions of all my employers, and neither should I. And neither should you. And neither should Harriet.

Harman's refusal to apologise has had several consequences, and much comment has subsequently focused on how she has been "inept" in handling the affair. Firstly, it allowed the Mail to run and run the story. Others eventually fell into line. On 23 February, the Mail's article "How much longer can paedophilia apologists stay silent?" pointed out that even though the BBC had "ignored the story, those calling for the trio to explain themselves include Left-wing commentators who would normally be expected to back them." I don't think it entirely coincidental that it is shortly after this that I find myself ranting at the radio because this is the lead story on a flagship news programme on the BBC.

So, should Harriet Harman apologise, has she been inept? No. She has been offended. The story of the affiliation of NCCL with PIE had, unsurprisingly, been about for years. It got traction now because the Daily Mail wanted it to. And it's symptomatic of our political discourse. We complain about our politicians, but who would be one if every detail of your life before public office is up for grabs in this way, when you are going to be held responsible for an organisation having a distasteful affiliate when you were not responsible for affiliating the affiliate to the organisation. This is symptomatic of a news agenda which is filled up with prurient, guttural rehashed sledge masquerading as news when there is actual news that should be being reported. This paper plays dirty. And yes, it does turn my stomach a bit.

### **Some background readings**

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2523526/How-Labour-Deputy-Harriet-Harman-shadow-minister-husband-Health-Secretary-Patricia-Hewitt-linked-group-lobbying-right-sex-children.html> , 14 December 2013

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2562518/The-truth-Labour-apologists-paedophilia-Police-probe-child-sex-group-linked-party-officials-wake-Savile.html> 19 February 2014

[How much longer can paedophilia apologists stay silent? Even Left demands answers from senior Labour trio over links to child sex group](#) , by Guy Adams and Tim Shipman, Daily Mail 23 February 2013

[Daily Mail insists Harriet Harman campaign is not a vendetta](#) , BBC News 25 February 2014

[Harriet Harman: 'I'm not going to apologise'](#) , BBC News 25 February 2014

[Harriet Harman expresses 'regret' after Daily Mail claims](#) , BBC News 26 February 2014