

## **“Our Gary”: Did Lineaker Defeat UK Government’s War on Migrants?**

**By Scott Lucas**

In the final scene of the 1991 play *A Night With Gary Lineker*, the football player descends from the heavens to the sound of Luciano Pavarotti’s *Nessun Dorma*. He hovers in a radiant glow, offering hope to three lovelorn, life-torn Britons on holiday.

“Do your farts really smell of perfume?” asks Monica. The footballer proves they do. Fulfilling their — and our — dreams, he smiles and ascends.

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But it is 2023. And a post-Brexit UK Government has no tolerance for such dreams, especially if they are the dreams of migrants or asylum seekers.

### **Braverman Attacks**

The Government should have been enjoying a rare moment of triumph. On February 27, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and the European Union’s Ursula von der Leyen announced the “Windsor Agreement” to bolster Northern Ireland Protocol, ending years of tension over the post-Brexit status of the Irish island.

[See also Brexit’s Broken Britain and the Northern Ireland Protocol](#)

But even as Sunak and Von der Leyen were speaking, Home Secretary Suella Braverman was tweeting that [migrants were murderers](#) who should be deported to Rwanda immediately. Three days later, her office declared that the “Illegal Migration Bill” would stop anyone — migrants, asylum seekers, refugees — trying to reach the UK in small boats crossing the English Channel.

A “source” hijacked the Windsor Agreement for the initiative, [telling right-wing tabloids](#), “There is now a political imperative to seize upon the opportunities that have been provided by the Northern Ireland Protocol”.

Braverman went further in an [interview with the right-wing attack outlet GB “News”](#), pledging that anyone who did make it to the UK would be sent to Rwanda: “If you arrive in the UK illegally, you will be detained and you’ll be swiftly removed.”

At a constituency meeting, an 83-year-old Holocaust survivor, Joan Salter, [asked Braverman](#) to refrain from terms like “swarms” and “invasion” dehumanizing the migrants. Salter noted that the language was similar to that used in Germany in the 1930s against groups inside and outside the country.

Braverman responded, “I won’t apologise for the language that I have used to demonstrate the scale of the problem....We have a problem with people exploiting our generosity, breaking our laws and undermining our system.”

### **“Our Gary” Intervenes...and the Government Goes To War With Culture**

Like [her predecessor Priti Patel](#), Braverman is eagerly using migrants and asylum seekers as the punching bag for her political ambition. But far from restraining the Home Secretary, Prime Minister Sunak has enabled the attacks. The Illegal Immigration Bill was tabled in Parliament on March 7, with Braverman proclaiming that [“100 million” asylum seekers could come to the UK](#) if she relented.

The Bill threatened to violate international humanitarian law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention. [Braverman privately admitted](#) to Conservatives that her measures were “more than 50% likely” to be in breach. But publicly she told Sky News, “We’ve made it very clear that we believe we’re in compliance with all of our international obligations.”

Then she went back on the attack: “They are breaking our laws, they are abusing the generosity of the British people and we now need to ensure that they are deterred from doing that.”

At 2:25 p.m. on March 7, Gary Lineker tweeted:

There is no huge influx. We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries. This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s, and I’m out of order? ([@GaryLineker](#))

Lineker was only saying pointedly what Jean Salter and others observed about Braverman’s rhetoric. Professor Tanja Bueltmann, a historian at Strathclyde University, summarized:

As a German I can tell you this: when politicians speak in a language not dissimilar to that used in 1930s Germany, I recognise it. Why? Because I have been taught about it all my life—and that it needs to be called out and rejected. It’s a duty to do so, in fact. ([@TanjaBueltmann](#))

But Braverman and her Cabinet colleagues saw an opportunity for success beyond the tarnishing of migrants.

At the end of February, “Levelling Up” Secretary Michael Gove [told a gathering](#), labelled The Future of Conservatism, that success could come from confronting “the radical left” and “radical social transformation”.

He proclaimed, “Their world is divided into those who bear original sin – whether whiteness or some other privilege – and those whose suffering, linked indissolubly to their identity, gives them the moral authority to re-order this fallen world.”

In the guise of “bringing peace to our cultural war”, the Government — and eager right-wing outlets — could profit from waging war on cultural figures.

And so, on the morning of March 8, Braverman said she was “very disappointed” in Lineker’s irresponsible tweet. Asked if he should be sacked after presenting the BBC’s flagship football program Match of the Day since 1999, the Home Secretary dog-whistled, “That’s a matter for the BBC and they will resolve that.”

The Conservative Party’s deputy chairman Lee Anderson followed up, “This is just another example of how out of touch these overpaid stars are with the voting public. Instead of lecturing, Mr Lineker should stick to reading out the football scores and flogging crisps.”

The right-wing tabloids piled on. “It’s Time to Show Preening, Ignorant Poseur Gary Lineker The Exit Door,” [screached the Daily Mail](#). GB “News” featured [Conservative MP Andrea Jenkyns decreeing](#), “If the BBC doesn’t fire Gary Lineker, we should DEFUND them!”

Even if the BBC had a clear policy on social media posts by employees, Lineker — as a freelance presenter rather than a full-time staff member — was not bound by it. But BBC chairman Richard Sharp was a prominent Conservative donor who brokered an £800,000 loan to Boris Johnson during his tenure as Prime Minister. Another board member, Robbie Gibb — ardent Brexiter and former communications director for Theresa May — [has been described by former BBC Newsnight presenter Emily Maitlis](#) as an “active Tory agent” inside the Corporation. BBC Director-General Tim

Davie had told staff to avoid “virtue signalling” and directed them not to attend “public demonstrations or gatherings about controversial issues”.

On Friday, March 10, Lineker was suspended from presenting Match of the Day the following evening.

<p><h3>But Then The Cultural Twist</h3></p>

But Braverman, the Government, and the BBC executives had miscalculated.

Over the next 24 hours, Lineker’s colleagues took a stand alongside him. Match of the Day analysts Ian Wright and Alan Shearer refused to appear, with Wright emphasizing, “If the BBC get rid of Gary Lineker, I’m out. I’m gone.” Rising presenter Alex Scott, a former standout with the England women’s football team, said she would not host Football Focus. Other match commentators and analysts followed.

By Saturday night, Match of the Day had been reduced to a 20-minute program stripped of commentary, analysis, and any other accompaniment apart from a humming of crowd noise. Even the iconic MOTD theme tune was gone.

Perhaps more importantly, the public had not rallied to the War on Culture. Far from brandishing pitchforks, they [embraced Lineker](#). A typical post chided the BBC, “I think you’ve lost touch with your audience, your country, and reality, if you think messing with MOTD and Gary Lineker is going to go well for you.” Another explained, “The BBC is a public broadcaster. This isn’t Russia, Iran, or China. Not yet anyway.”

Recognizing the Government’s mis-step, the Daily Mail jumped ship: “Gary Lineker IS Match of the Day, There’s No Point Watching Now’.”

In the War on Culture, the Government had failed to comprehend English culture. This was not any “woke” activist or a comrade of Michael Gove’s caricature “Radical Left”. This was Gary Lineker — 48 goals in 80 England appearances, the leader who almost brought home the 1990 World Cup, the Saturday night fixture in living rooms across the country for 24 years.

Ministers could brandish the English flag to agitate for Brexit and then cover up its failures. They could brandish the flag to warn that “others” — the migrants, the asylum seekers, the refugees — would overrun “England”. But they had tried to brandish it against a man bound up with the Three Lions and that flag.

On Monday, March 12, Director General Davie gave way. Lineker was reinstated, with a note that rules on social media impartiality would be reviewed.

Lineker tweeted, just before his return to Match of the Day the following Saturday, “Ah, the joys of being to stick to football.”

But he had quietly changed the avatar on his Twitter account. He was standing, in front of Broadcasting House, alongside the George Orwell statue and quote, “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

Of course, Lineker’s victory does not mean that the Government has given up its War on Migrants.

Trying to regain the initiative, Braverman spent taxpayer money on [a flight to Rwanda](#) where she insisted that “this world-leading partnership” — with a country accused of [systematic human rights violations](#) — “is both humanitarian and compassionate and also fair and balanced”. A Home Office

official said that the first migrants and asylum seekers [would finally be deported](#): “We are certainly working towards getting the flights off before the summer.”

Cabinet Minister Oliver Dowden tried to portray the Government as the victim. “We are being forced to do it,” [he insisted](#). The Daily Mail had [regained its enthusiasm](#): “Can Braverman The Builder Fix Immigration System?”

Meanwhile, the Refugee Council estimated that, under the Illegal Migration Bill, more than 250,000 people — including up to 45,000 children — could have their asylum claims deemed inadmissible in the three years after the measure was implemented. The cost of detaining and accommodating them could be more than £9 billion.

For a moment, as in the happy ending in the 1991 play, the perfume of Gary Lineker had swept the room.

But all too soon, the toxic stench of a Government bent on waging its war — on migrants, on asylum seekers, and on a culture that might prefer decency and tolerance over xenophobia — may return.