



# STRUGGLES WITH COMMUNICATION

A Selection of Articles  
from My Blog (since 2009)



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This is from September 2010, just after Ed Miliband had been elected leader of the Labour Party. Seems like such a long time ago ...

## Who's optimistic now?

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"You were the future once ..."

When David Cameron famously made that remark on his first encounter with Tony Blair across the despatch box, he employed a very effective communication device. This week, Ed Miliband tried the same trick ("Mr Cameron, you were an optimist once"). It was clearly intended to have the same effect – if not a bigger one. The words "hoist" and "Cameron's petard" must have been bandied excitedly around the new leader's drafting table when some bright spark came up with the idea.

But it hardly registered at all. Why not? Lots of reasons, actually ...

When Cameron used the phrase, he wasn't just making a statement about Blair having his future behind him. Cameron was also planting in our minds the idea that he – David Cameron, newly elected leader of the opposition – was now our future. It was two statements rolled into one.

One of the most powerful selling techniques is to make everyone think something without ever actually saying it

But not so for Miliband. The words "You were an optimist once" came after a series of attacks on the government, a government with almost five years left to run. Ed Miliband clearly *isn't* optimistic about the immediate future. The double meaning simply wasn't there.

Miliband then claimed, several times in the closing of his speech, that he (and Labour) *are* now the optimists in politics. In doing so, he saddled himself with a claim that can be used against him in the exchanges to come. Cameron, by contrast, had never actually claimed to be the future. He had planted the idea in our minds without ever using the phrase about himself. One of the most powerful selling techniques is to make a statement which leaves everyone thinking something warm and exciting about the product, without the salesman ever actually making the claim.

As I write this, David Miliband has just announced his withdrawal – for the time being at least – from front line politics. Famously, he was *the* Miliband once. If Ed doesn't acquire some better communications advice, he might not be the Miliband for long.

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## When did you stop \*\*\*\*ing your wife?

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I don't know how to put this politely, so I'll follow *The Times* and use a lot of asterisks.

My attention has been caught by a recent [news item](#) (£) in which a vicar was taken to task for describing the Archbishop of Canterbury as a w\*\*\*\*r.

Fair enough. Taking the vicar to task, I mean, not the original use of the epithet. But the Rev Arun Arora, director of communications at the Church's headquarters in Westminster, justified his criticism by saying: "I think any right minded person would find a priest calling his archbishop an onanist to be utterly outrageous."

Now it's true that "onanism" is an acceptably polite term which embraces the sexual act of a w\*\*\*\*r. But isn't the Church's communications director rather missing the point here? We object to certain terms because they have a vulgarity to them, not because of the activity they describe. Or is he suggesting that it would have been OK if the vicar had, instead, called his archbishop a \*\*\*\*\*? The Archbishop is, after all, married (with children).

One thing is clear from all this. The Church allows respectful dissent, but it draws the line at vicars bashing the bishop.

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## Journalists in a tiz at Supreme Court's win-win decision

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I'm not sure quite how to say this. So I'll say it twice:

Yesterday, a young graduate won her claim against the government's back-to-work scheme. She argued that the regulations and the manner of their implementation were unlawful. Despite taking its case all the way to the Supreme Court, the government lost on three separate grounds.

And again:

The Supreme Court has affirmed the principle underlying the government's back-to-work scheme. Standing outside the court, yesterday, a young graduate announced through her lawyer that she was considering taking the case to Europe. Meanwhile, the government says the scheme goes on.

Both of these statements are quite correct.

And, no, they don't refer to two different cases. **Press coverage** leans towards the first presentation. But **the**

**Department for Work Pensions (DWP)**

**favours** the second. Not surprisingly,

commentators are taking sides. Legal blogger David Allen Green **tweeted** that the DWP's announcement was "incorrect and misleading", inviting his followers to read **the "damning" critique** of the DWP's stance by fellow legal journalist, Joshua Rozenberg.

Why can't the press report: Back-to-work scheme to continue, despite flaws in its original conception?

Rozenberg had found himself in the intriguing position of giving evidence to a committee of MPs and peers on, amongst other things, media reporting of human rights cases only a matter of minutes after reporting on Sky News that the government lost and then being shown the DWP's victory announcement. Rozenberg ended the day by writing the aforementioned piece for the Guardian, advocating scepticism of media reports in legal matters, but clearly (I think it's fair to say) taking the view that the DWP's presentation lacked fairness.

So what's the story behind all this?

There is no doubt that **the Supreme Court ruled** against the regulations underlying the DWP's back-to-work scheme. The Court also held that the regulations had not been implemented fairly. But the Court rejected a claim that the scheme amounted to forced

labour and was, therefore, fundamentally unlawful. The regulations needed fixing, as did the manner of their implementation – and that (we are told) was done earlier this year. The back-to-work scheme goes on, and lawfully so.

Now I understand why it is newsworthy whenever the government loses a court case, even on the grounds of some technicality which can be (and has been) rectified. It would have been a much bigger story if the back-to-work scheme had been declared unlawful, especially if a British Court had held that the scheme amounted to “forced labour”. But that didn’t happen.

So, faced with the actual outcome, which is the bigger story: “No, it’s not an illegal scheme” or “Re-writing the rules earlier this year was legally necessary”? Whether you’re in favour of the back-to-work scheme, against it or neutral, isn’t the news that it goes on what really matters to readers in the current economic and political climate? I’m not a journalist, but what’s wrong with reporting: Back-to-work scheme to continue, despite flaws in its original conception.

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In the early part of 2012, it was widely believed that, so long as Harry Redknapp wasn't found guilty of tax evasion, he would be the next manager of the England football team. That belief was mistaken. His next job was as manager of my team, QPR. But I didn't know that when I wrote the following piece.

## Redknapp admits his guilt?

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We all know that Harry Redknapp is innocent of tax evasion. **A jury has decided** that unanimously.

But readers of *The Times* newspaper may have been a little surprised by the verdict. Redknapp had, after all, admitted criminality. Or so the paper reported on 28 January 2012. Quoting evidence given during the trial, the paper reported Redknapp as saying in a taped interview with the police:

“I’ve brought up a fantastic family to try and nick a few quid off the income tax.”

A whole family of tax-dodging Redknapps? Surely this can't be right. Something must have been taken out of context. But no. Context doesn't help. The full quote was:

“I’m not going to ruin my wife and my wife’s life and my boys’ lives. I’ve brought up a fantastic family to try and nick a few quid off the income tax.”

So the man most likely to be England's next football manager believed that tax dodging was essential in order to avoid his and family's life being ruined. And yet ... And yet ... it just doesn't seem to fit with everything else in his evidence. What if we try that quote just *once* more, but this time with a change in the punctuation:

“I’m not going to ruin my wife and my wife’s life and my boys’ lives – I’ve brought up a fantastic family – to try and nick a few quid off the income tax.”

So there was criminality after all. Criminal mispunctuation by *The Times*.

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## A rule that Mae be broken

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I have certain rules. One of them is that, when a friend asks you to watch their daughter do a stand-up comedy routine at an upstairs theatre in an Islington pub, you say “No, thank you”. So when an email came in from a friend I hadn’t seen for over 20 years – and not likely to bump into any time soon, because he lives more than 3,000 miles away – it should have been a no-brainer. Except ...

Except that I remember how, in our student days, this particular friend could hold an audience in the palm of his hands and have them heaving with laughter. If his daughter had inherited even half of his comedy genes, it would be a very funny evening. And so it turned out: **Mae Martin** has, indeed, inherited more than half of her father’s comedy genes. Way more.

By rights, *Hotel Rwanda* star, Don Cheadle, should call his lawyer

With a microphone, a guitar and a show that’s been to Edinburgh and lived to tell the tale, she talked about summer camp, showers and sex.

Clearly, I’m not the most obvious demographic target for a 20-something comedienne – still less, a *gay* 20-something comedienne. But then the future for a gay 20-something comedienne who targets only her own demographic is probably a lot more Friday nights spent in a smoky theatre above a pub in Islington. (Yes, I know, smoke got banned from pubs years ago. But in some pubs, it lingers.) So it was good for Mae, and even better for me, that hers is cross-generational comedy. Not family comedy, though. This is definitely a 15-rating if it ever gets onto DVD. But clearly written for a wider audience than Islington pubs and Edinburgh Fringe.

It wasn’t all plain sailing. I did get a little uncomfortable when it became apparent that we were about to be treated to a Julia Roberts impersonation. Anyone who does an effective impersonation of Julia in my presence risks having me fall in love with them *on the spot*. Not something I wanted to happen here. Given all that I’ve written on this page, it’s clear that my unrequited love for Mae Martin would be like crime in a multi-storey car park – **wrong on so many levels**.



And speaking of levels, I did wonder whether I was always laughing at the same things as other audience members. Like a child who laughs at an extremely blue joke, oblivious to its true meaning, I wondered whether there were *double entendres* from which I was picking up only one *entendre*. Possibly. But one entendre was more than enough for me. And I was very pleased with myself for getting the *en passant* Dawson-and-Pacey reference. (Not sure, on reflection, that I should have admitted to knowing who **Dawson Leery** is, but that particular cat's not going back in the bag any time soon.)

By rights, Hotel Rwanda star, **Don Cheadle**, should call his lawyer if he ever heard what Mae had to say about a (fictional?) encounter between them. But apparently Cheadle's heard it and his lawyer remains safely in his holster. Which only makes me wonder whether the story could possibly be true ... In which case, Mae's father should probably be calling *his* lawyer. Which doesn't seem to have happened, either. Curious.

He has, however, contacted *me*. The gap of 20 years and 3,000 miles is to be bridged next month. So much for my rules.

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If I am honest about it, this piece doesn't really fit within the overall theme of this collection of articles. And it's about QPR again, but I couldn't resist dropping it in at the end. It's from April 2011, when times were happier.

## Neil and Adel: A love that cannot speak the name

When Queen's Park Rangers appointed Neil Warnock as manager, a little over a year ago, I was aghast: "Fourteen years since QPR last played in the Premier League, but if the chairman thinks Warnock is the answer, he must be asking the wrong question." How wrong was I?

Warnock has attracted contempt for most of his career. It's not just the **I hate Neil Warnock Group** on Facebook that put me off, or the adoption of the anagrammatical nickname "Colin \_ \_ \_ \_ \_" by opposing fans that worried me. Look him up on YouTube and you will find a whole selection of videos showing Warnock spouting vitriol at, or about, almost everyone who has ever stopped his teams winning. Even *The Times* offered a **column of condemnation** in 2007. And supporters of clubs he had previously managed warned that QPR followers should take a neck brace and sunglasses to matches, because the ball would spend so much time in the air. I feared that QPR would fall even further from their footballing pedigree of yesteryear.

Not a bit of it. The football has been entertaining. The results even better. QPR have won the Championship with room to spare, giving them promotion to the Premier League. On camera, this season, Warnock has been engaging, enthusiastic and as gracious about his opponents as he is about his own team. Even in defeat – which hasn't happened often this season – his use of the F-word has been measured: "That's football", he said after QPR unexpectedly suffered their worst defeat of the season (4-1) to bottom club Scunthorpe.

So what has happened to Warnock? Love, it seems, has changed the man. Love for Adel. And what a love it is ...

Adel Taarabt is a 21-year old Moroccan whom Warnock found at QPR when he arrived at the club. Skilful and selfish with the ball in equal measure, Taarabt was as likely to give away possession as to set up a colleague. QPR have flourished with players like that before. But never with one as petulant as Taarabt – if the match wasn't going his way, he would want to be taken off – and never before with a blood-and-guts manager like Warnock in charge.

But Warnock saw something in Taarabt that he hadn't seen in any other footballer of his ilk. Against all precedent, Warnock promised

Taarabt a place in the side whenever he was available and built a team formation designed to maximise his talents. Warnock even made Taarabt captain to instil in him a sense of responsibility to others.

Taarabt has flourished and the results have flowed. The relationship between manager and player seems to be little short of love. Yes, love – albeit that Warnock cannot speak the name. The manager is only ever heard to say “Tar-but” or “Tar-a-but”. Never “Ta-ra(b)t”.

Some people maintain that a leopard cannot change its spots (or, in the case of a QPR manager, his hoops). I have never really believed that. I do accept that sometimes it's not enough just to *want* to change. Some leopards need more than that. Maybe Warnock has calmed down with age and experience. Or perhaps he was affected by the realisation that, with QPR, he had almost certainly been given his last realistic opportunity to manage a side in the Premier League. I don't know. I've never met the man. But I like to think it all changed when Neil and Adel met and found a love that dares to win the game.

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