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Too much too young? Chuka Umunna bows out of Labour leadership race

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Gone, gone ... going? Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Author



Eric Shaw

Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Stirling

A mere three days after announcing his candidature for Labour's leadership, Chuka Umunna has quit the race. Why?

His own explanation was that he had not fully anticipated the degree of scrutiny that standing in the election would expose both himself and, perhaps more painfully, his family and friends.

A sceptic might respond that, as a seasoned politician, he should have known this. But there is all the world of difference between knowing something and actually experiencing it – as Umunna has for three days.

The Leveson inquiry exposed the extreme lengths to which tabloid (and sometimes other) reporters are prepared to go to get a story, particularly if it smacks of sex, scandals or celebrities (or being a

Labour politician who could be mercilessly mocked). Anyone who thinks that the tabloids, after Leveson's scolding, have mended their ways ought to get a plane back to Planet Earth as soon as possible.

The world of politics is no-holds barred and you have to be purer than Caesar's wife – or a big buddy of the press magnates – to be able to breathe freely. It is a big take for anyone, especially one so young as Chuka, to put up with the harsh, intrusive and relentless gaze of the media for years to come.



Michael Crick
@MichaelLCrick

Umunna was upset the press doorstepped not just his mother, but his girlfriend's parents and even her 102-year old grandmother

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That said, there were probably other factors at work. Chuka would have known that his growing reputation as an eager Blairite would cause unease throughout the party, not least because originally he was associated with the soft left. There was also a feeling among some that his media performances hadn't been totally convincing, and no-one is disposed now to underrate the importance of this. after what happened to Ed Miliband? In the modern world of mediatised politics, where there is a premium upon communicative skills and appearance, the ability to project oneself effectively is essential

Added to this was his age – 35 is extraordinarily young for a party leader – and weighty figures in the party felt that Umunna was not quite ready, perhaps resenting his youthful presumptuousness.

Finally, there have been reports (in private conversations I have had) of a considerable amount of negative briefings against Chuka, presumably from some of the other leadership camps. Off-the-record briefings have been a staple part of party politics for years but (within the Labour party at least) their intensity and pervasiveness have increased over the past two decades. Everybody seems to brief against everyone else and this is not atmosphere that fosters trust and fellow-feeling.

Finally, if there is anyone who still doubts, Ed Miliband's experiences demonstrated unequivocally that being a Labour leader of the opposition for five years must be of the least pleasant jobs in the world. You have to really, really want to be prime minister to be prepared to put up with it.

But Umunna is very young, highly presentable, intelligent and a smooth talker. He will remain a senior frontbencher and has plenty of time to make his mark.

 Chuka Umunna

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