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Leadership and the Labour Party: Narrative and Performance

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Author: John Gaffney

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Reviewer: Christopher Massey

John Gaffney's study of Ed Miliband's narrative and performance in *Leadership and the Labour Party* is a welcome addition to the limited academic research undertaken on Labour post-Blair. Gaffney skilfully manages to engage with both the theory and practice of leadership, whilst maintaining academic rigour and, impressively, readability. The author highlights that: 'Political leadership generally, and within the left particularly, is poorly theorised and ... inadequately understood' (p. 1), which is undoubtedly true.

Moreover, in the case of Miliband too much attention during his term of office was directed towards his own personal shortcomings and not on the Labour leader's narrative and the potential problems he faced. Thus, Gaffney provides a new contribution to the historiography surrounding not only the period after New Labour but also to the study of leadership and narrative. Gaffney's book provides a central text for any academic or student looking at political leadership and the development of narrative and also provides a unique insight into the Miliband years and the issues facing the modern Labour Party.

Spending two years researching a moving phenomenon – with no control over whether the outcome would fit the direction of such research, or indeed no control over whether Miliband even stayed as Labour leader (particularly relevant in November 2014 [\(1\)](#)) – would have been a difficult task. However, such fluctuations have added to and evolved Gaffney's research. Indeed, the pause between Miliband's defeat and publication is welcome. This has allowed the author sufficient time to reflect upon his research in the light of subsequent events. Obviously, this is most evident in the author's references to Jeremy Corbyn's succession to Miliband. Consequently, Gaffney's work clearly does not fall into the trap of the French habit of *histoire immediate* (p. 2) which he identifies as a possible pitfall.

Chapter one serves as both Gaffney's introduction and a look into the theories applied in each of the following chapters. In substance the first chapter reads as a fairly standard and detailed introduction into the research presented over the course of the next five chapters (p. 1–11). Gaffney also presents the theoretical considerations into his introduction (p. 12–21). This section makes the complex sound quite simple, intertwining the views of Aristotle and Weber to come up with his own framework for the study of political leadership performance. In this way Gaffney does not overburden the work with theory and this allows the monograph to be accessible to more than just political scientists.

Gaffney introduces the reasons for Labour's 2015 defeat early in the piece: the incumbency advantage of sitting MPs, Labour not countering Tory accusations of overspending before 2010, Conservatives doing better against Liberal Democrats than imagined, Labour fighting against all five other major parties, Labour not getting the message out, and a failure to follow through on rebuilding the base (p. 2). These factors clearly showcase a deep understanding of Miliband's issues. Gaffney describes the two most significant reasons for Labour's 2015 defeat as: being untrustworthy on the economy and Ed Miliband not being considered Prime Ministerial. Whilst these assertions do seem to marry up with the response Labour received on the doorsteps, Gaffney's footnoted point claiming that a 'near-universal opinion' was held that Miliband 'lacked charisma' (p. 3) perhaps takes away from the argument presented here. Gaffney later describes charisma as 'an event that takes place' rather than a quality or power. Yet Miliband's leadership featured numerous events which distinguished him – not always to his advantage – from his peers and indeed the opposition. Thus, for all of Miliband's warts, I do not think a lack of charisma using this definition can be accepted as a *near-universal* fact. Miliband's engagement, particularly with young voters (the under 30's appear to have decisively voted Labour (2)), and the – admittedly short-lived – 'Milifandom' phenomenon (later covered on pp. 186–7) run counter to this argument. That Miliband was not perceived as Prime Ministerial (and lacked a coherent narrative) is very probably correct, to say that he lacked charisma in a climate where Jeremy Corbyn – not the most polished of speakers – can attract tens of thousands to rallies, shows a world where narrative, or indeed ideology, can overcome a lack of oratory or presentational skills. The success of Corbyn's narrative is touched on lightly in Gaffney's concluding chapter, but could have also perhaps been fed into the introduction. Nevertheless, Gaffney's central argument – explicitly linking together Miliband's narrative (policy) failings alongside his performance – is undoubtedly a justified approach.

Chapter two provides a fascinating and well-researched insight into the entire history of Labour's leaders from Kier Hardie/Ramsay MacDonald all the way through to Gordon Brown. These individual analyses focus on lessons and party successes during the leadership of Labour's top (as it happens) men. Without spending too much time dissecting every detail a few points of debate are picked out for this review.

The introduction of the chapter two (p. 23) describes Clement Attlee as weak (or at least unassertive) and this I feel is a little unhelpful to the overall argument made, particularly as the main commentary on Attlee is thorough. Strength can manifest in very different forms. Attlee's ability to hold onto this position showcases the respect in which he was held, and the lack of consensus which could ever emerge about any potential challenger. Clearly, Attlee's strength was doing what no other politician could do, keeping a wide variety of ideologies, backgrounds and cultures together as one unit. This is recognised in Gaffney's specific section on Attlee when he reflects on the Labour leader's ability to reconcile opposing views, yet I would argue this evidences his clear strength as a leader. Whilst Attlee was never the most talented or the deepest thinker amongst his Labour peers, both the stability he provided post-MacDonald, and indeed the overwhelming successes he presided over between 1945–51, perhaps make him Britain's greatest ever Prime Minister.(3)

Gaffney's analysis of Neil Kinnock's leadership is excellent and rightfully grants Kinnock the recognition he deserves for beginning Labour's modernisation. Indeed, the six pages devoted to the analysis of Kinnock are more than Gaffney devotes to any other Labour leader outside of Blair. This is entirely justified. Kinnock's ability to modernise despite pressures from the left (both Benn's constant opposition, and from the Militant Tendency) and the right (with the breakaway SDP achieving some successes in the early part of his reign) is accurately described by Gaffney. Similarly, the parallels between the 1992 and 2015 defeats for Labour are well made.

Gaffney devotes the largest section, seven pages, to his discussion of Blair's leadership. The debate surrounding Blair's background and motivation, contrasting claims made by John Rentoul and Martin Pugh, is intriguing, with Gaffney correct in seeing merit in both accounts (and in ultimately aligning more with Rentoul's view of Blair's past). The depth of Blair's speeches is also highlighted showcasing New Labour as a new beginning, but not one without a rich past. Gaffney's decision not to be drawn into the Iraq debate is a

sensible one, instead the discussion focuses on the impact of Iraq on Labour's future leaders, not the merits or demerits of the invasion.

The second half of chapter two (pp. 67–79) focusses on a variety of leadership lessons drawn from Labour's past: the 'fatal flaws' of party leaders, the power of the NEC, and the party conference. This section achieves its aim of setting the scene for the analysis of Miliband's leadership, but could perhaps have dealt with a few of the items presented in a little more depth. Obviously it is a difficult task to balance the discussion of Labour's past and the present research, but a further line on Kinnock's Policy Review, Smith's pursuit of One Member, One Vote and Blair's Clause IV reform and later Partnership in Power review here could have provided some useful parallels to Miliband's own attempts at modernisation.

Chapter three looks at the development of the Labour Party's narrative in the post-2010 period. Gaffney covers this period expertly, highlighting in great depth Miliband's use of strategic publications such as the Policy Review, *Refounding Labour* and One Nation Labour. The author also successfully contrasts the counter-narratives to the official party position which emanated from the publications of Blue Labour, namely *Labour's Future* and *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*. Intriguingly Gaffney introduces Miliband's endorsement of *The Labour Tradition* as an implicit criticism of his own Policy Review process led by Liam Byrne and Peter Hain. Indeed, the lacklustre reception of Miliband's Review between 2010 and 2012 led to Byrne being replaced by Jon Cruddas.

Miliband's Policy Review aped Kinnock's own Review set in train by Tom Sawyer from 1987 onwards.⁽⁴⁾ Such parallels are hinted by Gaffney but could have been expanded. Gaffney argues that such Reviews are a normal feature of new leaderships; this is undoubtedly true, however whilst Smith pursued OMOV, and Blair presided over the Clause IV change and Partnership in Power, Miliband chose a path sharing more than just a name with Kinnock's Policy Review. Both Kinnock and Miliband inherited a Labour Party with a mountain to climb back to government. Even elements of Miliband's Review mirrored Kinnock's own, with the consultation events undertaken through *Refounding Labour* mirroring Kinnock's ill-fated *Labour Listens* events of the late 1980s.

The next section of chapter three looks at Miliband's major narrative success: the One Nation speech of October 2012. Gaffney describes Miliband's telling of the One Nation tale through an emotional and personal story – which resonated with both the press and public. Likewise the new direction (or at least new rhetoric) allowed Miliband to realign his Policy Review under a new head, Cruddas. A link is made between the Cruddas appointment and a more rhetorical and narrative direction of the Labour Party. This is excellent scholarship and the table on page 102 clearly highlights the change in a simple form.

A more difficult question to assess regarding One Nation is posed by Gaffney: 'what did One Nation see itself as being, what was it trying to do, what was it actually doing?' (p. 109) The author again places clear emphasis on the transition from Byrne to Cruddas in May 2012 as the key to understanding this question. The most intriguing conclusion drawn is that the second phase of the Policy Review actively attempted to move Labour away from policy driven narratives towards 'social fantasizing' (p. 109). Moreover, it is argued, that this shift allowed the leadership to merge the ideas of Blue Labour and other strands of potentially competing thought with the official Review. In this way Labour's thinkers came together and nurtured 'a perception of an original and forgotten social democracy or communitarianism adapted now to contemporary purpose' (p. 112).

In a later section analysing critics of the One Nation narrative Gaffney astutely points out that ultimately, despite the convergence of thought at the top of the Labour Party, the major problem with the new direction was its ultimate attachment to Miliband himself. The difficult circumstances in which Miliband operated, being criticised for being too left-wing on the one hand by Blair, and ‘austerity-lite’ by Len McCluskey on the other are also well highlighted. Consequently, ‘One Nation became vulnerable through personal attacks upon or undermining of Miliband’ (p. 114). In addition, the failure to translate the One Nation narrative away from Miliband into policy proposals are referenced and expanded later in the work (chapter five).

Chapter four analyses Miliband’s performance in the context of scholarship on rhetoric, persona, celebrity and the individual. Specifically, it uses the 2012 party conference to examine his leadership performance. The author also discusses the theoretical context of rhetoric, persona and celebrity by surveying the views of Finlayson, Martin, Street, and Drake and Higgins. Arising out of these discussions, Gaffney comes to the conclusion that his approach should concentrate on ‘leadership performance rhetorically, performatively and iconically’ (p. 120).

Gaffney’s analysis of the 2012 Labour conference explores two angles: Miliband’s ‘received’ persona (pp. 124–7), and a detailed examination of the leader’s performances in the period (pp. 128–44). He concludes that in 2012 Miliband moved from being a weak opposition leader to a credible potential Prime Minister. The first element explored, Miliband’s ‘received persona’ is a fascinating analysis of the criticism levelled at Miliband during the early years of his leadership. This takes into account the ‘Red Ed’ label, the controversial leadership victory over his brother, and the description of him as Wallace (from Wallace and Gromit). This section succinctly outlines the uphill battle facing Miliband after two years of relentless attacks from the opposition, the media and even within his own ranks.

The second section of the chapter analyses Miliband’s performance across the 2012 conference season. In the build up to the leader’s keynote speech, Gaffney states that the central issue of the 2012 Labour Conference surrounded the character of the Labour leader (p. 129). During the speech, Miliband was at pains to stress who he was as a leader and as a man. Gaffney’s focus then moves onto the keynote theme of Miliband’s 2012 speech: One Nation. The history of the term is well covered by the author, highlighting Burke, Disraeli and Churchill as users of the phrase before Miliband. One Nation, rather than providing specific policies, is accurately described by Gaffney as ‘both an umbrella (for future narratives) and a justification for policy initiatives’ (p. 137).

The monograph then moves on to the press reception of Miliband’s speech and the introduction of the One Nation ideal. This is summarised well, but the section, given the impact of the press on perceptions of Miliband’s leadership and rhetoric could perhaps have been expanded upon. Whilst, Gaffney references newspaper reports to show that the reception of Miliband’s keynote speech was ‘overwhelmingly positive’ (p. 138), the use of polling data to evaluate the impact of Labour’s change in narrative direction could have added to this analysis. Throughout 2012 Labour were riding high in the polls with consistent and often large polling leads recorded from March 2012 all the way through to May 2014.⁽⁵⁾ Miliband’s personal polling data after the keynote speech is referenced as being ‘very positive’ by Gaffney (p. 139), but no context as to his performance beforehand is given. Indeed, Gaffney’s argument could have been reinforced by detailing the small spike in Miliband’s personal ratings favour immediately after the 2012 conference.⁽⁶⁾

The fifth chapter of Gaffney’s monograph looks at the collapse of Miliband’s narrative in the period after the 2012 Conference. Gaffney is clear that his focus here is on narrative and performance and not upon answering why Labour lost in 2015 (pointing towards Tim Bale’s excellent, *Five Year Mission* to answer the latter question).⁽⁷⁾ Gaffney highlights numerous reasons why Miliband could not sustain his 2012 ‘rally’: scepticism within the Shadow Cabinet, a return to his former image in public opinion, and continued opposition from the Blairites. Centrally, however, Gaffney identifies the ‘real failing’ as the leader’s narrative (p. 148). He identifies two possible reasons for Labour’s loss of narrative. Firstly, a view that the Conservatives’ own failings – typified by the 2012 omnishambles budget – would be enough to see Miliband

to Number 10, thus Labour became more risk-adverse. Secondly, 'the rhetorical choice to construct One Nation as a rejection of New Labour rather than a reconciliation with or transcendence of it' (p. 150). Ultimately, Gaffney is persuasive in suggesting that the gradual abandonment of One Nation as an ideological underpinning for new party policy, led focus to be drawn away from Labour's grand idea towards Miliband's character in general.

Although touching on the Falkirk scandal and the Syria vote, Gaffney describes Labour's narrative in this period as often silent on key issues – particularly highlighting Europe, welfare and immigration. An excellent contrast is drawn between Labour's 2014 evasive silence on policy issues and the premierships of Attlee and Blair. Labour in 1945 and New Labour, it is argued, had a view on everything (p. 154). The failure to develop One Nation into an underpinning narrative in this period is highlighted as one of Miliband's chief failings and ultimately led any criticism to directly sit with the leader himself. Gaffney highlights that none of Labour's policy announcements throughout 2013 or 2014 fitted within any grand narrative. Thus, Miliband fought the 2015 election – it is argued – with the same leadership persona and even less of a narrative than when first elected in 2010.

The bulk of chapter five provides an 'annotated summary' of Miliband's performance in the election campaign, week-by-week, from 7 March through to the election on 7 May. Gaffney lightly surveys a wide spectrum of election campaign events but provides a more weighty evaluation of the TV 'debates': the 'non-debate' between Miliband and Cameron (pp. 168–73), and the challengers' debate (pp. 181–5). Both these analyses highlight Miliband's better than expected performance and the greater surety in the Labour leader's language. After surveying the 'Milifandom' and 'Milibrand' phenomena, Gaffney provides detailed analysis of Miliband's performance on Question Time. In this evaluation Gaffney is more critical of Miliband. He places particular significance on Miliband's weak response to questions about Labour's spending before the 2008 financial crisis, linking this – quite excellently – to the general failure of Miliband's post-2010 narrative.

Gaffney's conclusion to chapter five details that, on the whole, Miliband's short campaign was generally creditable and the Conservative's attacks on the Labour leader were often unsuccessful. (p. 197) However, Gaffney's key point – which is an excellent piece of original analysis – is that Miliband's failure to establish a clear narrative in the run-up to the election meant that he fought 2015 with 'only the personal.' (p. 197). By doing so, despite a better than expected performance in the campaign, Miliband unsuccessfully attempted to fight from a low base and ultimately came up short despite the opinion polls suggesting he would do slightly better.

Chapter six serves as the conclusion to Gaffney's monograph. Again, Gaffney stresses Miliband's failure to expand upon, or personalise to a sufficient extent, the One Nation narrative authored in 2012 (p. 208). This section revisits Miliband's high noon, the 2012 conference, where the Labour leader successfully able to refine the narratives of Glasman, Cruddas and Rutherford into his own clear idea for the party's future. In Gaffney's words Miliband 'literally and metaphorically became the party's voice' (p. 225). To Gaffney, Miliband lost in 2015 because his party inelegantly rejected New Labour in the years between 2010 and 2015, and also because the failure to secure a new narrative space entrapped the party. This links elegantly back to Gaffney's central argument throughout: Miliband's failure to build on One Nation doomed the party to a mere 'retail offer' in the 2015 election with no grand narrative or strong ideological underpinnings.

Gaffney's 'conclusion of the conclusion' section rightly deals with the Corbyn phenomena as much as Miliband's last days. Gaffney claims, unfortunately without much space for discussion, that Corbyn's election was 'a startling confirmation of the approach adopted in this book' (p. 240), namely the creative role of narrative as a condition of political performance. This bold statement is probably justified from his discussion of Miliband but further academic research into Corbyn's popularity is needed. Despite widespread opposition to Corbyn's leadership, poor personal and party polling data, and a somewhat clumsy oratory style – he defied the odds (and indeed overcame these problems in a way that Miliband, who faced a similar backdrop, could not). Whether this is this because Corbyn's clear narrative, firmly pinned in the

politics of the old left and encapsulated by the 'For the Many, Not the Few' campaign, can overcome his personal weaknesses is a subject for perhaps another book, but Gaffney provides the reader with the space to come to their own conclusion.

Overall, *Leadership and the Labour Party*, provides vital reading for academics and students interested in Ed Miliband's leadership of the Labour Party and the development of political narrative and performance. Gaffney makes a concluding remark that party narrative cannot be simply a story a 'party wishes to tell about itself' but has to 'correspond to the doctrinal issues' (p. 245), and this is something that the author proves Miliband never completely mastered (outside a brief period in 2012) but which Corbyn is perhaps beginning to become quite proficient at.

Notes

1. New Crisis for Ed Miliband', *The Guardian*, 9 November 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/nov/08/ed-miliband-crisis-labour-mps-back-leadership-change> [2]>[accessed 20 October 2017].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ipsos MORI, 'How Britain voted in 2015', 26 August 2015 <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2015> [3]> [accessed 20 October 2017]; YouGov, 'General election 2015: how Britain really voted', 8 June 2015 <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/06/08/general-election-2015-how-britain-really-voted/> [4]> [accessed 20 October 2017].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. University of Leeds <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/3930/britains_post-war_prime_ministers_ranked_by_politics_experts [5]> [accessed 20 October 2017].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Christopher Massey, *The Man at the Back: The Life and Journals of Lord Tom Sawyer* (Teesside, 2017).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mark Pack, *PollBase*, <<https://www.markpack.org.uk/opinion-polls/> [6]> [accessed 20 October 2017].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Pack, *PollBase*.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Tim Bale, *Five Year Mission*, (Oxford, 2015).[Back to \(7\)](#)

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[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/nov/08/ed-miliband-crisis-labour-mps-back-leadership-change>

[3] <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2015>

[4] <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/06/08/general-election-2015-how-britain-really-voted/>

[5] https://www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/3930/britains_post-war_prime_ministers_ranked_by_politics_experts

[6] <https://www.markpack.org.uk/opinion-polls/>

[7] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/labours-century-old-problem-the-politics-of-leadership-performance/>