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LABOUR'S CAMPAIGN: THE CORRECT DIAGNOSIS BUT THE WRONG DOCTOR?[1]

As Britons cast their votes, Labour pollsters told Ed Miliband to prepare to enter Downing Street as Prime Minister. It was reasonable for Miliband to believe them: all opinion surveys suggested he had a fair chance of emerging as the head of a minority administration. So, when the BBC announced its Exit Poll, Miliband was not alone in being shocked by its prediction of a Conservative government. For, if Labour's horrible performance in Scotland was widely anticipated, the party's failure to take more than a handful of Conservative-held English marginal constituencies was not. And it was in England, not Scotland, where Labour lost this election: even had Miliband won all 59 seats north of the border, David Cameron would still have been re-elected Prime Minister.

Scotland did however play a crucial role in England. The false prediction of a hung Parliament meant the prospect of a minority Miliband government supported by an 'anti-austerity' Scottish National Party (SNP) came to dominate English voters' minds. According to Conservative propaganda this would be a 'coalition of chaos'. Dominated by SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon, a Miliband government would destroy the economy while breaking up Britain. This grim prospect persuaded more than a few English voters to support Cameron's party rather than UKIP, the Liberal Democrats – or Labour.

The success of the 'coalition of chaos' narrative was however a symptom of a deeper problem: Labour's failure to evoke a positive response amongst the kinds of voters whose support the party needed most if it was to return to office. Many had doubts about the Conservatives, and some saw merit in parts of Labour's approach.

But most nonetheless considered Britain would be better led and the economy managed more ably under Cameron rather than Miliband. On these critical issues of 'statecraft' – in effect the art of governing competently - Labour had trailed the Conservatives since well before 2010.[2] Given that, and irrespective of what the opinion polls said, the result should not have been such a bolt from the blue.

1. The Blairite version

In the wake of Labour's defeat, commentators and party figures offered their explanations. As Milband was elected leader in 2010 arguing the party had 'to move beyond New Labour', it was no surprise that those associated with Tony Blair were the first to point the finger. After all, Peter Mandelson, one of the architects of New Labour, had warned Miliband even before he became leader that if he wanted 'to create a pre-New Labour future for the party, then he … will quickly find that it is an electoral cul-de-sac.'[3] With less than six months to go before polling, Blair himself predicted that Miliband's embrace of a 'traditional left-wing' agenda meant Labour would lose.[4]

Veteran New Labour hands launched a media offensive that ensured they set the tone for how many would explain the defeat. Three days after the election, former minister Alan Milburn, described Miliband's strategy as a 'hideous and ghastly experiment', which had defied 'the fundamentals of winning elections'.[5] Preeminent Blair biographer, John Rentoul bluntly claimed 2015, 'was an election that Labour could have won, and David Miliband could have won it'. For Ed had discarded what Rentoul called 'the eternal verities of the Blairite truth', something his brother would never have done.[6] According to Rentoul, a Blairite 'wants to win as

broad as possible a coalition of support on the centre and left to make the country fairer, whereas the non-Blairite left think you can go faster towards equality without the centre because such change will generate its own support'.[7] For Rentoul and others, keeping hold of the centre ground meant Miliband admitting Labour had contributed to the deficit by spending too much in office, and supporting much of the Cameron government's austerity measures. Instead, by opposing many of the government's cuts and attacking business, Miliband embraced a 'core vote strategy'.

Those seeking the party leadership after Miliband's resignation embraced much of this argument. According to Liz Kendall, Labour focused too much on issues of concern only to the poorest voters, failing to indicate it understood middle-class 'aspirations and ambitions'.[8] As a result, Mary Creagh, argued, Labour lost 'Middle England', that body of voters Blair is credited with bringing to the party in 1997. Small business owners were especially afraid of Labour, she claimed.[9] Indeed, Yvette Cooper claimed Miliband promoted an 'anti-business, anti-growth and ultimately anti-worker' agenda.[10] Even the trade union-backed Andy Burnham claimed Labour should have admitted it had spent too much in government.[11]

Adding just 1.5% to Labour's 2010 vote share was certainly a pathetic achievement; and, thanks to the Scottish disaster, the party held 26 fewer seats than in the previous election. But was this the inevitable result of Miliband's attempt to move on from New Labour? In 1852 Karl Marx claimed: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'.[12] Political scientists have subsequently explained change through the 'structure-agency' dichotomy, one that questions how far any agent, such as a party

leader, can transform the context in which they exist.[13] This prism is especially relevant to an explanation of the failure of Labour's 2015 campaign, which effectively began when Ed Miliband decided to stand as leader: for Miliband wanted to change how his party did politics.

Miliband believed the 2008 banking collapse had transformed politics to such an extent, if it were ever to win office again Labour had to campaign on a different platform to the one established by New Labour in 1997. But many in the party disagreed. To many MPs and officials as well as some members, the majority of whom had been schooled in 'the eternal verities of the Blairite truth', Miliband's strategy was wrong. To many of them, Miliband sought to turn it back into a 'traditional left-wing' party, one dominated by the unions and led by figures wanting to 'tax and spend' with no thought to its impact. But not only was this a grotesque distortion of the pre-Blair Labour party, it bore little relation to what Miliband offered.

Yet, whatever was the character of the party he sought to lead, Miliband indisputably did not persuade enough voters to support it. This chapter explores how far that failure was due to his shortcomings, be they strategic or presentational, or to the 'circumstances existing already'. For it was never going to be easy for Labour to bounce back from its 2010 defeat, especially as it had been largely due to a recession for which many held the New Labour years responsible. This allowed the Coalition to blame its austerity programme on Labour mismanagement while reaping credit for any signs of recovery. Moreover, Labour was no longer the sole repository for voters alienated by the government of the day: mid-way through the Parliament, the SNP in Scotland and UKIP in England claimed the support of many

who might otherwise have voted Labour in 2015.[14] In these circumstances, any leader would have found it tricky mapping a route back to power.

2. A new leader for a new era

Even before 2010 many in the party wanted, as the Blairite James Purnell put it after resigning from Gordon Brown's Cabinet in 2009, 'to open up New Labour, reinvent it and then eventually move beyond it.'[15] Having won two landslides the party's 2005 re-election was more difficult - but Blair's departure two years later was unaccompanied by any rethinking. Moreover, even before the 2008 crisis, growth had been slowing and voters were less keen on public spending. It was however the banking collapse that did for New Labour, the moment at which the Conservatives resumed their traditional place as the party most trusted to manage the economy.

Defeat convinced all but the most recidivistic Blairite that a critical eye needed to be cast over the period 1997-2010. For New Labour had emerged amidst a time of economic buoyancy in which Blair claimed Labour could make Britain fairer but within the free market and without increasing taxes. If the Blair-Brown governments modestly reduced poverty and inequality, the fiscal crisis – and the system of deregulation that made it possible - threw this achievement into reverse. Britons now had to deal with austerity, job insecurity and falling real incomes – and many blamed Labour for all three. Having been forced to raise the top rate of tax to 50%, to help pay for the billions needed to bail out the banks, in 2009 Labour also lost the support of an important media ally, Rupert Murdoch, who controlled *The Sun*.

Most Labour members therefore looked on the first leadership election since 1994 as their chance to choose someone who could set a new course.[16] David Miliband was the most experienced figure in the field of five. Despite being Blair's preferred candidate he was not uncritical of the Blair legacy, even proposing a 'mansion tax' on homes valued at £2 million or more. Most however still saw David – for good or ill – as a creature of the New Labour establishment. The former minister for Climate Change, David's younger brother Ed, believed only he could 'decisively move the Labour Party on from the Blair-Brown era'. Sensing the mood for change in the party he stressed more than did his brother New Labour's shortcomings.[17]

While a YouGov poll suggested David was the choice of 47% of voters to Ed's 19%, Labour's electoral college thought differently: by a margin of just 1.3%, Ed won. Divided into three equal parts, in this college of MPs and MEPs, party members and trade union levy payers, David's support was concentrated amongst the first two, Ed's in the third. Yet Ed's union support was on such a scale it compensated for his minority position amongst MPs and members. This led some to claim that leaders of the largest unions had 'fixed' the contest in Ed's favour although none produced evidence of fraud. The truth many found hard to swallow was that the party had elected someone promising to take the party in a radically different direction to the one mapped out by Blair.

How much of a change Miliband offered will be analysed below, but his narrow victory meant he was, as an advisor put it, always conscious of the 'thinness of his mandate'. Indicating his desire for conciliation, he twice asked his brother to be shadow Chancellor. For even if Miliband had wanted to, he could not base his leadership in the unions: while their votes helped him become leader, he feared that

too close an association would harm him in many voters' eyes. Thus, during his first leader's speech Miliband criticised 'irresponsible strikes' and events associated with the selection of a candidate for the 2013 Falkirk by-election suggest he was hardly the unions' unalloyed ally.[18] Yet, only a minority of MPs were convinced supporters and most of the Shadow Cabinet supported David, as had those at Labour's London HQ, some of them being reduced to tears when they heard he'd lost.[19] Ed Miliband was consequently said to cut an isolated figure in his own party. At best the new leader could expect passive acquiescence from the Labour machine for his change of course.

3. A post-New Labour strategy

Miliband's victory did not end the debate over Labour's new course. If advocates of 'Blue Labour' wanted the party to drop its unquestioned embrace of the free market, members of Progress supported a modified Blairism. Miliband even initiated a policy review although it is questionable how seriously he took that enterprise. For Miliband already knew his own mind. He sought not a 'pre-New Labour future' but a recalibration of Blair's approach, not to abandon the centre ground but to talk to it in a different way.

During the leadership campaign Miliband had praised New Labour's ability to unite lower and middle-income voters around its ability to speak to 'people's aspirations.'[20] But if Blair claimed he could help voters achieve their individual 'aspirations' in an era of affluence, Miliband believed he had to address their collective 'anxieties' in an era of insecurity. If Blair spoke for 'Middle England', Miliband aimed to represent the 'Squeezed Middle', a term mooted by John Healey

while still a minister in the Brown government, and which signified that large part of the population whose living standards were predicted to remain below what they had been before the fiscal crisis for years to come.[21]

In setting his course Miliband left unresolved one vital matter from New Labour's past. Various polls suggested that while a majority considered the banks to blame for the crash at least one-third believed responsibility lay with the Blair-Brown governments. Conservatives certainly claimed their Coalition was merely clearing up the mess left by Labour, an accusation made with ever-greater vehemence in the short campaign. Labour's own research suggested this assertion resonated strongly with those whom the party needed to win back. If unclear how Labour was to blame for the deficit, many voters were confident it had mismanaged the country's finances and so could not be again trusted to run the economy.

During the first months of Miliband's leadership, arguments raged over whether the party should defend the late government's record or concede mistakes were made.[22] It was however unknowable if either tactic would change minds or reinforce existing views. In any case, Ed Balls, the shadow Chancellor, did not believe Labour had anything for which to apologise, as spending levels had not been especially high. If many economists endorsed his view, leading Blairites believed Brown (but not Blair) had been culpable, although even they were divided over the issue. With his shadow Cabinet also split, Miliband believed he should leave this matter to History, confident he could concentrate voters' attention on his message for the future.

Right from the start Miliband believed, as an adviser put it, that 'taking on vested interests would be his calling card'. He cast himself as a tribune of the people,

standing up to the powerful to ensure fair treatment for the 'hard-working majority'. It was this ambition that informed his support for: the curbing of energy prices; an investigation into invasions of privacy committed by News International journalists; and challenging tax avoiders. Miliband outlined his new course during Labour's 2011 annual conference. Surprisingly, given his reputation, Miliband told those assembled that Margaret Thatcher had introduced necessary reforms, such as selling council houses to tenants, cutting punitive income tax rates and reforming trade union laws. More conventionally, he praised New Labour for building schools and hospitals, introducing a minimum wage and reducing child poverty. But both, he argued, had left unchanged 'the values of our economy'. This meant that even before the banking collapse, 'the grafters, the hard-working majority who do the right thing', stopped being adequately rewarded for their efforts. Their ambitions were frustrated as those at the top took what they wanted and it was this pursuit of the 'fast buck', Milband, argued, that had caused the financial crisis.

Miliband believed the banking crisis proved Britain needed, not 'traditional left-wing' policies, but a different kind of capitalism, one that looked beyond the short-term. He wanted to promote a fairer and therefore more efficient economy, believing that if workers were treated better they would become more productive and contribute more effectively to an expanding economy. For inspiration, Miliband and his team looked to Germany but also the United States and President Theodore Roosevelt who broke up abusive monopolies. This was because, Miliband argued, parts of the economy no longer served consumers' interests. In announcing plans to establish an Annual Competition Audit to challenge monopolies such as was found

amongst energy suppliers he even declared: 'It's Labour that is the party of competition'.[23]

If Miliband claimed that 'all parties must be pro-business today', he distinguished between business leaders such as Fred Goodwin, who ran the Royal Bank of Scotland into the ground while making millions for himself, with the likes of John Rose, of Rolls Royce, a man who created wealth and jobs. Miliband said he would support those emulating Rose, entrepreneurs, he termed the 'producers' who 'train, invest, invent, sell' rather than 'predators' like Goodwin just interested in 'taking what they can'. This would be achieved through measures the modesty of which belied Miliband's radical rhetoric, including: helping small businesses more easily access credit and giving government contracts only to firms with adequate apprenticeship schemes.

There was an unresolved timidity at the heart of Miliband's readjustment of the New Labour approach. Blair pursued an ostensibly 'preference accommodation' strategy, one that listened to what voters said they wanted and presented the appearance of giving it to them.[24] New Labour therefore did not directly challenge the public's preconceptions but, having won their support, covertly tackled core Labour issues, notably inequality. Miliband's biggest criticism of New Labour was however that its leaders' were relatively uninterested in equality, something Blair conceded.[25] He therefore wanted equality put at the heart of Labour's message, even though according to Ipsos-Mori it was an issue of concern to no more than one-sixth of voters. This meant Miliband – unlike Blair - needed to adopt a 'preference shaping' strategy, one designed to persuade voters of the issue's importance. Yet, while his 2011 speech argued that a more equal society would create a more

productive economy, the imperative for equality remained an underdeveloped rhetorical theme during Miliband's leadership.

4. Mis-communicating the message

It is one thing for a party leader to have a strategy and quite another to successfully convey it to the public. And his 2011 address illustrated some of Miliband's difficulties with regard to communication. The annual conference speech is one of the few times a Leader of the Opposition has more media attention than the Prime Minister. Yet, instead of being seen as outlining a vision of an economy productive and fair the meaning of his speech was subverted to such an extent some saw it as 'anti-business'.

Miliband's inept delivery did not help: that allowed his shortcomings to become the story of the speech. More fatally, Miliband did not appreciate how far journalists needed help navigating his unfamiliar 'predator/producer' distinction. In briefing the press, Labour's communications team could not give examples of which kinds of businesses were 'predators' and those that were 'producers'. Miliband's Front Bench colleagues had also not been informed, so they gave journalists inconsistent answers. Confusion abounded. Even sympathizers found it difficult to know how to interpret the speech: one even wondered if the 'predators' section was padding.[26] With the right-wing media already keen to depict him as 'Red Ed', according to one journalist the speech was 'very easy pickings for the press'. Some New Labour 'spin' might have helped Miliband get his message to the public: but that was something he ostentatiously disavowed.

Milband's team was taken aback by the media reaction so they quickly dispensed 'predators and producers'. Ironically, a Yougov poll suggested 55% of the public agreed with Miliband's assertion that 'predators, not producers' dominated the economy. Indeed, his call for a 'responsible capitalism' was subsequently echoed – although not acknowledged - by David Cameron. This suggested Miliband had identified an important issue. But instead of expanding on his strategic message Labour retreated behind a series of 'retail offers' that exploited people's immediate sense that their standards of living were declining under austerity. The most successful of these offers was Miliband's 2013 pledge to freeze energy prices. Yet while making an impressive impact it was not part of a sustained attempt to reshape how voters thought about the economy as a whole and left Labour vulnerable when energy prices fell. It also did nothing to address the party's poor economic record, meaning that while voters believed Labour was broadly on their side, tea and sympathy notwithstanding, it was not the best party to get the economy moving again.

Yet, when explaining his message arguably Miliband's biggest problem was Miliband himself - or rather the 'Ed Miliband' constructed by the media. All politicians have to tackle the gap between who they are and how they are perceived, and there was some substance to this 'Miliband'. When running for leader - the moment he first came to public notice - one member of the Lobby claimed: 'he looked like a dweeb'. Miliband was certainly not the most adept public speaker and his adenoidal voice was not an asset. As further evidence of the bitter legacy of the leadership contest, it was members of David's campaign who suggested these

attributes made Ed 'weird'; they were also the first to compare him with the animated character 'Wallace'.[27]

Miliband initially did not care about such seemingly superficial matters. But over time he was persuaded otherwise: by the short campaign he dressed better and his public addresses were more competently delivered. Miliband even – allegedly - had his adenoids removed. Yet, throughout his leadership the Labour leader was dogged by questions about why so many thought him 'weird' or a 'geek'. With less than twelve months before polling day, he was forced to confront the issue head-on, stating: 'If you want the politician from central casting, it's not me; it's the other guy. … I want to offer something different'.[28] But many voters did not want something 'different' and while claiming to be the candidate of 'substance' many did not know of what substance Miliband was made. For a public ignorant about policy, how a party leader looks is their guide to what the person is like. Physical attractiveness does play a part in political success: the superficial is the substance.[29]

An important influence on how the public regarded Miliband was the tabloid press, all but one title of which backed the Conservatives in 2010. With *The Sun*'s daily circulation halving to two million between 1997 and 2015, Miliband's advisors believed the press was less important than in the 1990s. Labour's communications team knew, however, that the press influenced what appeared on radio and television: BBC journalists in particular often let their peers in print dictate what they reported as 'news'.

Miliband's media problems intensified in 2011 when he supported an investigation into the phone hacking activities of News International journalists and backed the resulting Leveson Inquiry's proposals to regulate the press. Considered

by a Labour HQ insider to be a 'brave and principled stand' they also saw this stance as a 'mistake'. For the return of a Labour government now threatened Murdoch's commercial interests, as well as those other media magnates. As a result most tabloids, other than The Mirror, repeatedly draw readers' attention to the Labour leader's 'weirdness'. Miliband's 'alien' character was subtly indicated through references to his North London, intellectual and, more slyly, Jewish origin - or more crudely by exploiting his late father's Marxism so as to imply the Labour leader 'hated Britain'. A favoured tactic was publishing photographs that made Miliband look odd, most notoriously one taken in 2014 in which he unskilfully tackled a large bacon sandwich. That particular shot was reproduced many times, on television quiz and comedy programmes as well as across the front page of *The Sun* just before polling day, replete with the headline: 'Save Our Bacon'.

Added to this mix was that Miliband became party leader by beating his older brother. Labour's own research revealed that one of the few things voters ever knew about Miliband was that he had 'stabbed his brother in the back'. In an era when politics means so little but family so much, this soap opera narrative resonated, evoking as it did the Bible's Cain and Abel. Reactions to Ed's temerity went beyond politics: the left-wing MP John Cruddas supported David largely because of the visceral 'brother thing'.[30]

As a result of this brew, Miliband – who aspired to stand up to the powerful on behalf of the people – was more like a broken reed than a tribune. He actively harmed Labour's electoral prospects such that a May 2014 ComRes poll indicated that 40% of Britons were less likely to vote Labour while Miliband remained leader. This would not have surprised party workers across the country. According to one

who fought many by-elections held after 2010 it was not unusual for voters to state: 'I'm always Labour, but' – as their preface to an attack on Miliband. The Labour candidate for Warrington South claimed the 'Ed issue never stopped coming up on the doorstep – too many people just did not see him as an alternative prime minister.'[31] According to one midlands organizer, as 'Ed wasn't doing the business as leader' party workers stopped talking about him. Things were so bad, when a voter was reported as saying something positive about their leader, campaigners cheered. As they put it, the problem was 'intangible', the reasons given so 'flimsy': mention of Miliband's name often provoked a shrug and a sigh, no explanation considered necessary. As another Labour worker in the midlands reported, to most people, 'he just didn't look right'.

5. The party on the ground

One way to counteract media influence and convince people of Miliband's message was to reinvigorate party membership. During the New Labour years this had declined by 40% to below 200,000. But even before then, constituencies in Labour heartlands – especially Scotland and the north of England – were run by small bands of activists few of who made contact with voters. By 2010 the situation was as bad as it had ever been: indeed, advocates of 'Blue Labour' believed, the party's disconnection from ordinary people was an important reason for its defeat.

As part of moving on from New Labour, Miliband wanted Labour to become 'a community organization', one that could reach out to those millions for whom party politics had become an anathema.[32] But, according to Arnie Graf, the US community activist Miliband employed to give the initiative impetus, this meant

Labour transforming itself from being a top-down organisation.[33] Graf ran seminars with officials and activists to persuade them to embrace change but his reception was mixed. If the MP Tom Watson became a fan, one regional organizer claimed Graf's vision was 'not geared to a political party that needs to win an election'. To prove the effectiveness of his approach Graf focused his work in Preston but when Labour made little headway there during the 2013 local elections the sceptics prevailed. With a general election two years away, they argued, Labour should refocus on conventional methods.[34] As a result, one Miliband advisor regretfully noted, Graf's was 'a road not taken.'

If Labour had to make the most of what little it had, the party actually enjoyed a good record of doing just that. Thanks to local efforts, in 2010 the party retained a number of unlikely seats, notably Birmingham Edgbaston. To promote such efforts in 2015, the party's limited resources were distributed to constituencies where they were needed most. This formed the basis for what was by all accounts a successful campaign, at least when measured in terms of voters contacted, volunteers and leaflets delivered. From Scotland to Kent candidates and organizers described 2015 as the best constituency campaign they had ever fought. According to one midlands candidate in a marginal Conservative seat 'we had the money, we had the resources … in terms of the machine the party delivered.' By the time polling day approached Labour claimed its members had held over four million 'conversations' with voters.

Yet however good was the effort in the constituencies to make sure those identified as Labour supporters turned out to vote, it was the responsibility of the

national campaign to inspire people to want to vote for the party. And, many complained, that was where lay Labour's biggest problem.

6. The short campaign

Just as the transformation of Labour into a 'community' organisation made way for conventional electioneering, as May 2015 approached Miliband's ambitious policy review was sidelined for a vote-maximising approach. Indeed – especially after UKIP's strong performance in the May 2014 European elections – Labour became more conservative, aiming to accommodate voters' preconceptions.

It fell further back on a variety of 'retail offers' to targeted groups. These were however no substitute for a compelling overall case that might persuade voters from diverse backgrounds to support the party. Miliband's 2012 leader's speech had advanced such a theme, in the shape of 'One Nation Labour', although he regarded it as just a temporary rhetorical device. It nonetheless cleverly appropriated a traditional Conservative concept, one also adopted by New Labour prior to 1997, and in a way Miliband's 2011 speech had not, allowed him to claim the centre ground at the same time as advancing his post-New Labour course while also isolating the Conservatives as the party of the privileged elite. Miliband even won media praise for his efforts. For a time everything the party said or did was branded 'One Nation'. Despite this, a September 2013 ComRes survey found that only 25% of voters felt they knew what 'One Nation Labour' meant, an opinion shared by some Labour MPs. It was quietly dropped and by 2014 had all but disappeared.[35]

Lacking a persuasive theme, during the first weeks of the official campaign Labour did its best to address its main shortcomings while trying to focus voters'

attention on the Conservative threat to the NHS, that being Labour's one strong point. Miliband had always believed he could overturn his off-putting image, expecting a series of televised leadership debates would allow viewers to see him as he truly was. Labour had therefore fought strongly for holding the debates along the lines of the three broadcast in 2010. The Conservatives for the same reason sought to avoid them and ensured Miliband would only share the stage with Cameron in just one debate – and then with five other leaders. Even so, when Miliband did appear in front of millions of viewers he was not the weird-looking geek of tabloid repute. But perceptions built over the years were too strong to be transformed in a few weeks.

Labour used its manifesto launch to establish as strongly as it might that the party could be trusted with the economy. Challenging voters' perceptions, Miliband made a virtue of the modesty of the party's spending commitments, promising that every Budget would cut the deficit until it had disappeared. Indeed, Labour's pledge to increase spending on the NHS by £2.5 billion was exceeded by the Conservatives' undertaking to raise it by £8 billion. Such was the switch-around Labour appeared to have become the more fiscally prudent of the two main parties, an impression that did the party in Scotland only harm given it was fighting the 'anti-austerity' SNP.

Despite such caution, Labour retained policies that ensured the rich paid their share in reducing the deficit. It promised to reinstate the 50p top rate of tax and abolish the 'non-dom' tax status while reviewing other tax avoidance schemes. The party's extra NHS spending was moreover to be partly paid for by a tax on domestic properties worth over £2 million. Echoing Miliband's earlier pledge to stand up for the 'Squeezed Middle', the manifesto confirmed energy bills would be

frozen under a Labour government, as would train fares, while the minimum wage would be raised to £8 an hour and the 'bedroom tax' abolished.

To counter accusations it was 'anti-business' the party launched a separate business manifesto. This restated Labour's opposition to an EU referendum due to the uncertainty it would create amongst those considering investing in Britain. The party also committed itself to building up the country's infrastructure through high quality apprenticeships and a British Investment Bank. Labour similarly promised to lower business rates for small companies. Scepticism nonetheless remained on the doorstep. As with Miliband's image, Labour needed more time to tackle ingrained doubts about its economic trustworthiness.

In any case, during the last two weeks of the campaign, Labour's damage-limitation strategy was blown off-course by the 'coalition of chaos' narrative. With opinion polls showing Labour neck-and-neck with the Conservatives, Cameron's party decided to frighten voters with the prospect of a minority Miliband government dependant on the SNP. In this way Labour's collapse in Scotland made its decisive contribution to the campaign. Exploiting unappeased concerns that Miliband was unfit to be Prime Minister and incapable of running the economy, the Conservatives claimed the SNP would force Labour to increase spending while unravelling the Union.

That which a member of Miliband's team called the Conservative's 'Goebbels-like' demonization of the SNP was loyally echoed in the press and translated into lead items on radio and television news.[36] This forced Miliband to answer hypothetical questions about how he would handle the SNP if he led a minority government. As a result, Labour found it hard to win airtime for its actual

policies, such that officials complained to the BBC about its journalists' obsession with 'the Scottish line'. As a prominent Labour insider conceded, the party just 'didn't have a narrative strand to challenge it'.

Party workers across England reported the success of the purported SNP threat with few voters believing a 'weak' Miliband could stand up to a 'strong' Sturgeon. Even someone intending to vote Labour in an East London constituency was reported as saying: 'I'm not having England run by Jocks'. In the midlands, the 'coalition of chaos' was said to have firmed up Conservative support, drawn UKIP supporters to Cameron's party and caused the hitherto undecided to 'break to the Tories in a big way' in the last days.

7. An absence of statecraft

In essence, Labour lost the general election because it was led by someone unable to convince a sufficient number of English voters he possessed the skills necessary to be Prime Minister and that his party could manage the economy.

Since 2008 Labour had trailed the Conservatives as to which party people thought best able to run the economy. That lead varied but from 2013 it grew as the economy recovered, such that by April 2015 Ipsos-Mori had Cameron's party 18% ahead. When pollsters Greenberg Quinlan Rosner asked voters why they had not supported Labour on May 7th, at 40%, concern about its economic competence was by far the biggest overall reason. Fatally for Labour, middle-class voters and those over 55 years of age – the groups that turned out to vote in the greatest numbers - cited the issue more than the rest.[37]

The Greenberg survey also revealed that the third and fourth most cited motive for not voting Labour was the view that it would have been 'bossed around by the SNP' (24%) and a preference for Cameron over Miliband as Prime Minister (17%). The richest and oldest voting cohorts expressed some of the greatest concerns about Miliband's statecraft. But, even more importantly, amongst those who considered voting Labour but ultimately supported the Conservatives these reasons were respectively cited 30% and 32% of times. At 42%, the concerns such important swing voters held about Labour's economic ability were a little higher than voters overall. It was however their negative perception of Miliband that played a disproportionate role in determining why they rejected his party.

The Labour leader had correctly diagnosed the country's illness: the reality of declining standards of living for the many while the rich grew ever richer was empirically hard to deny. But he failed to convince the patient that he was the right doctor to administer the cure. Voters found elements of Labour's programme attractive, but Miliband's overall post-New Labour course remained counter-intuitive to most. He failed to appreciate the extent to which his modest challenge to neo-liberal orthodoxy had to be justified in clear and popularly understandable terms. For, the argument that austerity was the only solution to the deficit was something deeply ingrained in the minds of those middle-income voters whose support Labour required.[38] Too often, Miliband's attitude to communication was inconsistent and while he had improved by the short campaign, it was by then too late. Yet even had he been as skilled a communicator as the Tony Blair of legend, Miliband would have struggled, given perceptions of his party's responsibility for the

deficit, and the distortions to which he was personally subject. Flawed, naïve agency conspired with an implacable, unforgiving structure to defeat him.

In the absence of a broad, confident and comprehensible appeal, by 2015 Labour hid behind a series of 'retail offers'. This did it no good. For many voters, its enemies had defined what they took to be the character of Miliband's Labour; to others it remained just unclear. According to the General Secretary of Unite Len McCluskey, one of those said to have 'fixed' Miliband's election as leader: 'Labour had no central theme, defining what it stood for'.[39] Nick Bent, Labour's candidate for Warrington South had voted for David Miliband, but also felt it was 'the lack of a clear and consistent Labour narrative' that did for the party. This widely held view was best summed up by a midlands party worker who stated: 'If you asked people what the Conservatives stood for they could easily tell you but they would have struggled to say what Labour stood for'.

Conceding this lack of clarity, a member of Miliband's team of advisors believes the Labour leader should have made a more self-assured and earlier break with the New Labour years. Whether this was possible, and would have succeeded, given the constraints within which Miliband operated remains a moot point. But, in the absence of a credible leader articulating a coherent message, one that addressed the failures of the past and outlined a convincing programme for the future, it is no wonder many English voters preferred a Conservative party led by a relatively credible leader promising comparative competence. In other words, Labour lost because, despite the multiplication of party choice, in what remained a two-horse race to become Prime Minister, Miliband looked to be the least safe choice.

NOTES

[1] This chapter was informed by insights drawn from 15 confidential interviews with Labour members drawn from Miliband's team of advisors, national officials, regional organizers, candidates, agents, managers and campaigners - as well as a member of the Lobby. It has benefitted from sight of Goes, E., (Forthcoming) *The Labour Party under Ed Miliband: Trying but failing to renew social democracy*, Manchester, Manchester University Press while Bale, T. (2015) *Five Year Mission. The Labour Party under Ed Miliband,* Oxford, Oxford University Press was an invaluable guide to the period 2010-15.

[2] For an outline of the concept, Bulpitt, J. (1986) 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft', *Political Studies* 34:1, pp. 19–39.

[3] Anonymous (2010), 'Miliband hits back at criticism' accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11127658 on 2 January 2015.

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[5] *The Sunday Times* (2015, 10 May), 'Keep the red knives flying here'.

[6] Rentoul, J. (2015) 'David Miliband could have won it for Labour', accessed at http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/election-2015-david-miliband-could-have-won-it-for-labour-10234473.html on 10 May 2015.

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[8] *The Sunday Times* (2015, 10 May) 'Blairite Liz in race to be Labour leader'.

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[13] Hay, C. (2002) *Political Analysis. A Critical Introduction* Basingstoke, Palgrave, pp. 89-134.

[14] Matthew Goodwin and James Mitchell respectively deal with the challenges posed by UKIP and the SNP elsewhere in this book.

[15] *The Guardian* (2009, 18 July) 'James Purnell: I lost faith in Gordon Brown months ago'.

[16] See Dorey, P. and Denham, P. (2011) '"O, brother, where art thou?" The Labour Party leadership election of 2010', *British Politics*, 6:3, pp. 286–316; Hasan, M. and MacIntyre, D. (2011) *Ed. The Milibands and the making of a Labour Leader*, London, Biteback, pp. 191-254.

[17] Hasan and MacIntyre, *Ed*, pp. 177, 181, 184.

[18] This episode is explored in Justin Fisher's chapter in this collection.

[19] Hasan and MacIntyre, *Ed*, pp. 238-9.

[20] Fabian Society (2010) *The Labour Leadership*, London, Fabian Society, p. 56.

[21] Anonymous (2010), 'John Healey's fight for the "squeezed middle"' accessed at http://leftfootforward.org/2010/09/john-healeys-fight-for-the-squeezed-middle/ accessed 19 May 2015; and The Resolution Foundation (2013) *Squeezed Britain 2013*, London, Resolution Foundation.

[22] *The Guardian* (2015, 4 June) 'The undoing of Ed Miliband'.

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[27] Hasan and MacIntyre, *Ed*, p. 200.

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[30] Hasan and MacIntyre, *Ed*, pp. 210-11.

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[32] Hasan and MacIntyre, *Ed*, p. 198.

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[34] Sen, H. (2013) 'Why I'd sack Arnie Graf' accessed at http://hopisen.com/2013/why-id-sack-arnie-graf/ on 4 March 2015.

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[36] *The Sunday Times* (2015, 10 May), 'Keep the red knives flying here'.

[37] Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (2015) 'UK Post Election Poll for the TUC' accessed at http://www.gqrr.com/uk-post-election-6 on 20 May 2015.

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