

Ed Miliband and the bacon sandwich: Exploring the relationship between the serious and the frivolous

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*With a less than convincing showing for Labour in the local and European elections, criticisms of Ed Miliband's leadership grew louder. But there is a paradox at play: while his critics emphasise the need for serious policy and direction, the criticisms of Miliband are only ever trivial; about his looks or how he eats a bacon sandwich. **John Gaffney** explores the complex relationship between the serious and the frivolous, between policy and personality.*



In the aftermath of local and European elections, Labour party introspection began immediately: in particular, criticism of the party's direction, its attitude to UKIP in both sets of elections, the coherence of its message, its policies and their presentation, and, last and most, criticism of Ed Miliband. From the moment he was elected leader in 2010, there has been a lot of this at regular intervals, usually by individuals rather than by organised groups. I shall come back to the significance of this below.

The criticism tends to coalesce around Ed himself, not simply as a leader making the wrong decisions, but a person doing the wrong things. The first, after polling on Thursday 22 May, was [from John Mann MP](#) (in *The Guardian* on 23 May). He was followed by former minister, Graham Stringer. Then the 'Commentariat' (e.g. [Andrew Rawnsley in The Guardian on 24 May](#)). Part of the latter's role is to let the public know that such individual public criticisms reflect major dissension by a growing range of critics, many of them inside the shadow cabinet. And the criticisms not only coalesce around criticisms of Miliband's leadership, but around his personality: he is not bold enough, he misjudges, he lacks 'appeal', he doesn't take the fight to the enemy, he's (personally) afraid of taking on Nigel Farage. The criticism goes round and round. He, or the team around him, fail to grasp, are cut off, and should be bolder, and so on. Others' exemplary personal comportment is cited in contrast; for example, in *Labour Uncut* on 19 May: [Well done Yvette Cooper](#). [Well done David Lammy](#). [Shame on you Ed Miliband](#).

There is a paradox here of great interest. His critics place great emphasis on the serious – policy, direction, message – yet the criticism of the leadership when given voice is ever only trivial – what he said, how he looked. That's the paradox – and a clue to what is actually happening. To put it another way, you can't have, say, Unite the Union have a debate about how to eat a sandwich. And yet how you do eat one may be important, and how you might react to being criticised for the way you do even more so.

There seem to be two worlds here: the 'real' issues and the trivia. Traditionally, and it remains one of the party activists' strongest convictions, the Labour party is only interested in the former – people's lives, national policies, taking power – but it keeps being drawn to the latter. What if the two were related in a way as yet untheorised by the left, as yet, perhaps, 'unimaginable' for the left?

At the [Hay Festival on Sunday 25 May](#), [Alan Johnson](#) – there for an award for his book – found himself defending Miliband. It is interesting that – although urbane and witty in his responses – they were the classic ones: it was not about how to eat a sandwich with cameras trained on you or about the price of your grocery bill, but about the real issues. But Johnson too evokes the paradox, for his riposte and the use of humour were indeed themselves about image, experience and personality – his own – and establishing a relationship with your audience. The 'classic' defence was also [echoed by Peter Hain](#) in *The Observer* and Harriet Harman on the BBC TV on Sunday 25 May. The late Tony Benn started this dichotomy with his 'this isn't about personalities, it's about politics'. Well it is about personalities (Benn knew that more than anyone), and about the complex and consequential relationship between the serious and the frivolous.

Let us try and make the connection, for it is a dynamic and highly politically consequential connection. We can make four points; they are all related:

The first concerns the nature of the criticism. Within the party it goes along certain lines: the party/leadership is not bold enough, and – usually – should be more radical; or that a wider (i.e. Third Way) coalition across the classes is the only way forward (cf. [Atul Hatwal in Labour Uncut](#) 23 May); or, finally, that it *is* indeed about personality, and the current leadership has the right one. So one goes around the circle again, from say Mann to Johnson to Hain and back again. By the end of the Bank Holiday weekend, criticism of the critics and further advice were offered by more figures such as John Woodcock, Alan Milburn, and even Tony Blair. A first point we can note is that no one actually knows which of these poles is correct. Many projections are made, in particular about Miliband and No 10, yet the same confusion reigns. Will he be/not be prime minister, and will he be/not be because of what he is doing or because of who he is? If the two are linked, we need to know how.

The second point is that no one knows the answer because politics is not predictive. Are quiet advances being made with the electorate? How will we know before the next election? How can we measure public allegiance to a policy and its relationship to leadership? Their actual success cannot be known until it happens. For example, when did we become sure that ‘the right to buy’ was a successful policy and that Margaret Thatcher’s personality was part of it and its success? It is always retrospective. We cannot measure anything very much, and the relationship between ‘real issues’ and ‘leadership image’ is a case in point. Politics is only ever about what might be true. But what we should start with is to see that they are in a relationship. So the question is: how and to what effect?

Third, of course it is about issues and policies etc., and of course it is about leadership performance and image. They are inextricably related. Policy grows out of a narrative as does leadership, and if these three are not aligned, then a party will not succeed. Let us, rather than develop this theoretically here, look at how this applies to the UK Labour party today.

So our fourth point is that Miliband and his team and the party generally have done most of the things that are utterly necessary for the party to win in 2015. First, he has, in great part through a particular leadership style, kept the party together. No delegates have come away from a Labour Party Conference, not since Manchester 2012 at least, saying anything other than what a great conference it was and what a great leadership speech. This view extends to all of Miliband’s meetings around the country, and even to many of his exchanges with the public. In all these scenarios (off camera) he is both popular and confident, with his own style and a pretty much ‘real’ personality to match.

Second, he has overseen the realignment of the party’s narrative from 2010 onwards. It culminated in 2012 in One Nation, where he became its ‘author’ (although there had been earlier authors and voices – Glasman, Rutherford, Cruddas, and others), and this narrative has been developed since. He has a significant One Nation cohort of support around him, and a ‘truce’ with other big hitters who never mention One Nation. Is it enough of a narrative? Almost certainly not. Other views, other ways of seeing the party and its mission have also developed and are being folded (back) in – a social democratic approach drawing on the German model, Arnie Graf’s community approach, an IPPR-related ‘joined-up’ society (and added theoretical depth), even the Third Way has made its way back (it has to, its representatives win elections). He/the party have developed/are developing an increasing number of policies which are now being shot at the public and the policy ‘targets’ with increasing firepower and accuracy, *inter alia*, energy, banks, rents, railways, zero-hour contracts. Their often ‘emotional’ quality means the narrative of policy elaboration – like One Nation – can be framed in a populist way. And if you are up against Nigel Farage, using populist rhetoric is not a bad idea. One could even argue that the policies are now coming too fast and need gathering together as a pre-manifesto ‘package’/vision for Britain (and endless repetition by the party).

We can see, therefore, a relatively happy party (this is why so many of the criticisms are from unhappy *individuals*) and a coherent team (particularly the November 2013 additions to the shadow cabinet). The Labour party is one that tries to keep narrative, leadership, the party aligned.

What about the public persona then – the ‘appeal’ of Miliband – and his relationship to the public? Well, when it is mediated (TV or radio, rather than face to face) the relationship becomes more delicate. Team Miliband should be less concerned with the written media and more with the visual. But if Farage is the leadership model of 2014, what does he demonstrate? That there are creative spaces of possibility between the necessarily aligned narrative, party, and leadership, and they can be filled creatively – as Farage does – with leadership performance and one’s ‘personal personality’, which may or may not be real but seems to be. In Farage’s case it would doubtless mean, and in Miliband’s should, that if you are being overwhelmed by a bacon sandwich you reveal your true self by doing what we all do – laugh. And while we are on such trivia, most people don’t know the accuracy of their grocery bills – and Miliband was actually pretty close. What the Labour Party wants is a country where it isn’t that we feel guilty if we don’t know our grocery bill, but a country where everyone can forget how much theirs was.

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