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Young Pretender must show that the crown fits

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By Richard Hayton

AS Ed Miliband settles into his role as the 17th leader of the Labour Party, he might pause to reflect on the fact that only three of his predecessors – Attlee, Wilson and Blair – successfully led their party to majority General Election victories. Before Tony Blair came along, Labour had a dismal electoral record, winning a majority of more than five seats on just two occasions, under Wilson in 1966 and Attlee in 1945.

To make his the fourth name on the winners' list, the Doncaster North MP needs to overcome a number of pressing challenges at the next General Election. The first is the collapse in Labour's share of the vote – five million fewer people backed the pa

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arty in 2010 compared with 1997.

This is not a short-term problem simply attributable to the recession and Gordon Brown's lack of *je ne sais quoi*. Labour's share of the vote has fallen for three elections in a row, suggesting a more fundamental rethink is required. To recoup this amount of ground, Miliband junior needs to do much more than appeal to Labour's core support and to disaffected Liberal Democrats.

In his first newspaper interview, the new leader signalled recognition of this, pledging to readers of the Sunday Telegraph that he would show his party to be "on the side of the squeezed middle in our country and everyone who has worked hard and wants to get on". Ed Miliband knows as well as anyone that Labour needs to rebuild a broad base of support that reaches across boundaries of both class and geography.

At present, the party has just 10 MPs in the South of England, outside London, while Labour strongholds in Scotland, Wales and the North of England will see their seat numbers reduced at the next election as a result of government plans to equalise the size of constituencies.

The cornerstone of Labour's pitch to the country at the next election will be its critique of the coalition's handling of the economy in general and the deficit in the public finances in particular. It is crucial therefore for the new leader that he gets this right. His first big decision in this regard will be over the appointment of his Shadow Chancellor.

The MP for Morley and Outwood, Ed Balls, is the favourite for the post and would clearly relish the job of taking on George Osborne over the impending spending review. Balls is a man of substantial intellect and was the only candidate in the leadership election to develop a coherent and persuasive case against the scale and timing of the coalition's cuts.

But his appointment is not without risks for Miliband. The nature of his election, by the slimmest of margins over his brother, means that his first priority will be to unite the party.

Ed Balls' reputation as a hard-nosed operator and his über-Brownite credentials make him a divisive figure within Labour. Given that the new leader was also a long-standing confidant of the Brown camp, the more Blairite elder Miliband would have been a better bet in this respect if he could have been persuaded to stay on the front bench.