

Interview: Tim Bale on Ed Miliband's 'presentationally weak, but strategically astute' leadership of the Labour Party

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Ed Miliband has been Leader of the Labour Party for almost five years, having been elected in the summer of 2010, following one of Labour's worst ever election defeats. Despite many criticising his performance as Leader of the Opposition, he has the party on the cusp of regaining power – albeit as part of a minority government or coalition. Sean Kippin interviewed Tim Bale, the author of a new book about Miliband's leadership, to get to the bottom of what lies behind his successes and failures.



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Your new book is about Ed Miliband's leadership of the Labour Party. When it comes to Miliband, I'm stuck between two poles: on the one hand, I think 'he's done incredibly well to have the party anywhere near power after just five years', and on the other hand I can't help but feel that a different leader – be it his brother or someone else – would be doing better. Which do you think is closer to the truth?

I stand somewhere in the middle as well. It's always possible to run a counter-factual with a different leader and argue that they might have done better, but one also has to realise that although clearly austerity has presented the Conservatives with a problem in picking up votes since 2010, the Labour Party did do very badly at that election, and was facing a massive uphill task to win power back after just one parliament.

To even be in contention at all in 2015 is impressive. Especially when one considers the fact that in previous years when Labour has done poorly, it has fallen into some kind of civil war which has contributed to the party being out of power for a decade or so. I think that the prevention of that civil war has to be credited to some extent to Ed Miliband himself. While he isn't necessarily the best leader Labour has ever had, or maybe even the best leader the party could have chosen in 2010, I don't actually think he's been a disaster – and certainly not the disaster that some people might have expected.

So you think that strategically he's been quite astute, but presentationally he's struggled?

I think that's not a bad way of describing it. Presentationally he's had it wrong from the start in the sense that he genuinely believed that he could conduct politics in a currency and in a way that simply isn't possible now, in a 24/7 media environment that actually is quite image conscious. I also think that the fact that he was unexpectedly elected leader and only had limited time to prepare himself before doing the job also put him at a disadvantage. But when you think about the strategic course that he's had to take, actually many of them have been about right – particularly when it comes to internal party reform.

For example, he's the Labour leader who finally got rid of the condition that the Shadow Cabinet is elected by Labour MPs. He is also the leader who has come much further than any predecessors to reform the link with the trade unions, and when it comes to policy, although some people say that Labour have moved to the left under his leadership (and that's true to an extent when you look at certain populist policies on the economy and business), some of the things that Labour has suggested doing are actually quite in tune with what many voters would like to see. I think broadly speaking, that characterisation of Ed Miliband as being presentationally weak, but strategically reasonably astute is a good one.

On his political ideology and identity, again there are two rival schools of thought: one says he's a 70s, statist, socialist – Red Ed, and one from the left as a member of the political establishment who favours continued austerity. Who do you think is the “real” Ed Miliband?

Well, the glib answer is that if he's being attacked by both sides, he's doing something right! A slightly more nuanced answer would be that both sides probably have a point – in the sense that some of the rhetoric on business was a little ill-judged, and therefore put business's back up. On the other hand, some of the things that Labour wants to do, for example on resetting the market on energy and introducing more regulation on the financial sector was almost inevitable – not necessarily a bad thing, and not necessarily very left wing.

On the other hand, Miliband, when it comes to civil liberties, could be reasonably and fairly attacked from the left for the way that he and the Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper have moved the Labour Party in a more restrictive direction on immigration, and have broadly supported the Conservatives on terrorism legislation and on the interception and governance of internet communication. There's an extent to which by trying to pursue a middle way, one is bound to get attacked by both sides. Fortunately for him, the Green challenge, and the Liberal Democrat civil liberties challenge, doesn't seem to have been quite as damaging as some people might have predicted a few months ago.

Do you think that Labour's refusal to occupy that civil libertarian strategy could cost them in the election, given that their success in this parliament has in some ways been based on 2010 Liberal Democrat voters defecting to Labour. Does that undermine what some have described as the “35% strategy?”

I'm not sure if there ever was a 35% strategy, is the first thing I'd say. The second thing I'd say is that I'm unsure if it's possible to say that those people who came over to Labour from the Liberal Democrats are solely motivated by civil liberties concerns. Many are motivated by social and economic concerns, and were horrified at the fact that Nick Clegg got into bed with the Conservatives – civil liberties policies or not. That meant that they were going to go to Labour and generally stick to Labour. Clearly, since that initial poll movement after 2010, Labour has lost some of those voters. It may be that some of them have gone Green, some may have gone back to saying they won't vote, some have maybe even gone back to the Liberal Democrats.

The point is that inasmuch as the strategy was about holding on to those voters, it hasn't been completely unsuccessful. Seeing that strategy as being about 35% is probably incorrect. While I think there was a degree of realism in the Labour Party about just how many percentage points they'd realistically be able to add to their 2010 vote share, I don't think there was ever a “magic figure” in their heads that they decided they needed to hit. I think they were simply aiming to maximise their votes.

This is part one of a two part interview. Part two will be published on Friday 17th at 0830.

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