

How to lead the Labour party – it's not only about winning office, but about defining the political spectrum and reshaping British society

With Labour receiving just 29 per cent of the vote in the 2010 general election, Ed Miliband has a mountain to climb as the party's new leader. [Robin Archer](#) argues that a purely centrist approach to his new job would be self-defeating and that he has an unusual opportunity to revive British social democracy.

Debates about where Ed Miliband will lead Labour next are certain to dominate the rest of this year's Labour conference and indeed his whole first year in office. What does the leadership of Labour require? What should his leadership strategy be? To answer, we need to examine some fundamentals.

We know from opinion surveys that when UK voters' preferences are plotted on a left-right spectrum the resulting graph typically takes the form of a bell curve. The largest numbers of voters cluster around the median voter (the person in the centre of the left/right distribution), and decreasing numbers hold positions as we move further to the left or the right.

In plurality electoral systems dominated by two main parties (and even if the Alternative Vote is introduced, Britain will still fall into this category) two pure strategies are available. One is a *preference-shaping strategy* that seeks to use the power of party leadership to change voters' preferences by shifting the curve, so as to move the median voter's position somewhat to either the right or left. The other is a *centre-seeking strategy* that seeks to gain and retain office by locating one's own stance as close as possible to the current position of the median voter.

Each strategy could in principle deliver sufficient votes to guarantee electoral success. But in practice, most political leaders pursue neither strategy in their pure form, but rather a mix of the two. And therein traditionally lies much of the 'art' of politics. However, in recent decades, British politics have seen two leaders pursuing unusually militant or purist leadership strategies. Margaret Thatcher pursued a militant preference-shaping strategy on the right. But Tony Blair, reacting in part to the failure of the Bennite left-Labour approach of the 1980s, adopted an exceptionally intense, centre-seeking approach.

Yet the great paradox of the centre-seeking strategy is that it too has preference-shaping consequences. They're just not those usually anticipated by its proponents. For by moving Labour to the centre, this strategy also shifts voters' views and creates a new centre to the right of the old one – a new centre which, this strategy dictates, the party must now in turn move to occupy. So long as the Conservatives remain even a little to the right of Labour, the singular pursuit of a centre-seeking strategy has the effect of gradually shifting the centre of public opinion ever further to the right and leaves Labour itself moving endlessly to the right in pursuit of a moving target.

The authoritative *British Social Attitudes* surveys trace how this happened in people's responses to a range of standard questions about the welfare state, business interests, economic inequality, and government action to redress it. The latest volume demonstrates that during the new Labour years – but not during the preceding Thatcher years – public attitudes all shifted markedly to the right, including the attitudes of Labour party supporters themselves. The authors conclude that the data shows that 'in repositioning itself ideologically New Labour helped ensure that the ideological terrain of British public opinion acquired a more conservative character'.

The basic reason why this happened is that people's sense of what counts as a leftwing or right wing position is in part constituted by the positions that the leaders of the major left and right parties advocate. The distribution of voters' preferences and the position of the median voter are not just externally given realities to which vote-maximizing politicians must adjust. Rather, the preferences of voters are partly – though only partly – constituted by the appeals of political leaders. Political leaders can help shape opinion by shifting what counts as a left-wing or right-wing position on any given spectrum. But there is not just one spectrum. Leaders can also shape opinions by increasing or decreasing the salience of one spectrum with respect to another. For example, by decreasing the salience of class interests and questions of distributive justice, New Labour politicians made it easier for those seeking to increase the salience of ethnic and racial identity and questions around immigration.

Through these kinds of processes, Labour alienated large segments of the traditional electoral coalition on which it depends. There is little doubt that the anti-charisma of Gordon Brown played a role in Labour's defeat. But 80 per cent of the 5 million votes that Labour lost since 1997 occurred under the leadership of Tony Blair, and not just because of the Iraq war. Labour's now startlingly low share of the vote reflects a trend apparent throughout the new Labour years. By abandoning distributive justice and embracing the rich, it has alienated much of the working class whose interests it was founded to promote. And by its pursuit of a wide range of increasingly illiberal policies such as identity cards and pervasive DNA data bases, it alienated much of the progressive (or 'post-materialist') middle class.

Ultimately, the centrist strategy threatened the party's very survival. By 2010, it came close to being driven into third place in its share of the vote: an outcome that, if repeated in the next election, could very well leave it a bit player, much as the Liberals were in the early twentieth century in just a few short years between 1918 and 1924.

What is the purpose of Labour party politics? The answer may seem obvious, but it needs restating. Labour's purpose is to influence the direction in which our society develops – to shape social and economic outcomes. There may be arguments about exactly which outcomes to pursue. But whatever they are, it is the outcomes that matter.

Occupying office can, of course, be a very important way of doing this. But parties that are out of office can also have fundamental effects on social outcomes by helping to set the agenda, establish what count as acceptable outcomes, and determine where the center of politics lies. The failure to grasp this betrays one of the most profound misunderstandings of the apostles of New Labour. Philip Gould's "definitive account of the rise of New Labour", *The Unfinished Revolution* makes clear that the underlying premise of the New Labour project was the belief that, since the Conservatives had held office for more than twice as long as their opponents during the twentieth century, the Labour party had been largely a failure.

But Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson and the rest, failed to notice that much of that period (especially the thirty post war years) was characterized by a social democratic consensus: a consensus established in part by a relatively brief but critical period of innovative Labour government (1945-51), and subsequently entrenched when the Conservatives, in order to secure government, shifted their position to come closer to the new centre of public opinion which Labour had established. During the post-war years (and indeed in some earlier periods too), even while Labour was out of office, the party still helped to set the agenda and maintain a consensus around its goals and earlier achievements. Since the rise of New Labour, the party held office continuously for longer than previously, but it was Labour's opponents who maintained a consensus around their earlier achievements.

All other things being equal, a long tenure of government is better than a short one. But when we look back over Britain's experience of parliamentary government, from the great reform acts in the nineteenth century to the development of the welfare state in the twentieth, it becomes clear that a long tenure of government does not necessarily achieve more than a shorter more purposeful one. This is especially true of a shorter more purposeful one at a critical historical juncture in which existing ideas and institutions have been discredited by major events like wars or economic crises. Conjunctures like these shake up established public attitudes and allow new institutions to be built that entrench a different balance of power between social interests, irrespective of the future partisan complexion of the government.

For the last couple of years we have been living in such a period, following the credit crunch, the financial crisis and a major recession. Yet in the wake of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression, Labour failed to make use of a rare historical opportunity to realign politics and shift basic assumptions and institutions. The irrationality and inefficiency as well as the injustice of under-regulated markets were there for all to see. Yet so enmeshed had New Labour become with neo-liberal assumptions – so complicit with a post-Thatcher consensus which it had positively embraced – that it was unable to grasp the quintessentially social democratic opportunities on offer.

This is what Ed Miliband now needs to do. He must avoid the dangers of pursuing a pure centre-seeking approach and seize a rare historic opportunity to try to redefine where the centre of British public opinion lies, and create renewed pressure for social democratic change. Instead of pursuing an endless series of ever more illiberal measures – instead of being 'less than liberalism' – Labour must opt for 'liberalism plus' – for the longstanding socialist idea that liberal goals of individual freedom and the equal worth of human beings can only be realized if we act collectively to change the distribution of economic power and resources. It should be Labour's moment.

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