

Book Review: Speaking Out: Lessons in Life and Politics by Ed Balls

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*21 years after leaving a career in journalism to work for Labour in opposition, following shock defeat in the May 2015 general election, then UK Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls abruptly found himself without a job. In his new memoir, **Speaking Out: Lessons in Life and Politics**, he reflects on his life in politics, offering a wider commentary on Labour's transition from opposition to power and back again as well as key political events and relationships of this period. While readers looking for answers to Labour's current predicament may need to look elsewhere, this is a worthwhile and often moving account of one individual's growth across a political life, finds Peter Carrol.*

Speaking Out: Lessons in Life and Politics. Ed Balls. Cornerstone. 2016.

Find this book: 

At the May 2015 general election, then Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls attended the count for his seat as the Labour MP for Morley and Outwood entertaining the possibility that he might become Chancellor of the Exchequer. Instead, Balls found himself unemployed, ending a 21-year political career which included spells as a close advisor to Gordon Brown at the Treasury, three years as Children's Minister and four years as Shadow Chancellor serving under his former treasury colleague Ed Miliband.

It is the theme of disappointment that runs throughout Balls's readable account of his political life — disappointment in not becoming Labour leader, disappointment in his failure to become Chancellor and disappointment at inadequate recognition for his achievements at the Treasury.

Balls's memoirs also offer a deeply personal account of his weaknesses and mistakes. He recounts the difficulty in moving out of the shadows of a powerful mentor to assert his own identity and independence, and offers an affecting description of how he handled his middle-age diagnosis of a speech impediment.

Reporting the cruel goading by the Conservatives in the House of Commons when his stammer struck as he stood up to speak, he describes how being bullied at school prepared him for his colleagues' response in the chamber, and how he eventually came to use his disability to inspire children. And, reflecting on his return to teach at Harvard University 25 years after attending as a student, he lists how he was wrong on almost every assumption he had held about the world.

Balls's story is told as a series of themes from his political life rather than chronologically. Like most political memoirs, he allows himself the benefit of the doubt on every big judgement where he had a role, most notably keeping Britain out of the Euro currency and the decision to award independence to the Bank of England. These successes are dwelt upon and explained at great length, with Balls's intellectual opponents on the wrong side of the argument identified, while he offers readers repeat reminders of his forewarning a decade ago of the political time-bomb that increased immigration would bring to the political system.

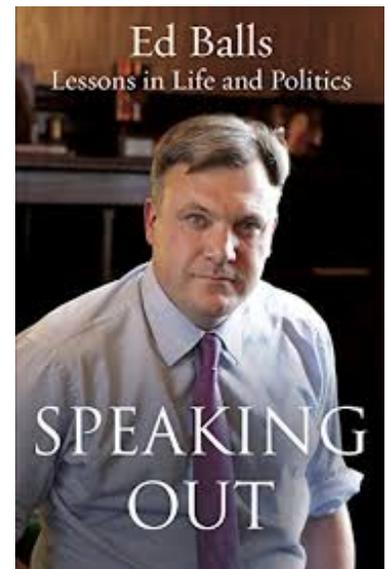




Image Credit: Ed Balls being interviewed by Michael Crick for the BBC on 27 June 2007
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The defining decision of the New Labour government — to join the US invasion of Iraq — is viewed with detached and slightly bemused horror from the Gordon Brown-run Treasury. The missionary zeal in Tony Blair's personality is described as a dangerous weakness that would have probably led him to force Britain to join the Euro if he hadn't been distracted by 9/11. Blair's lack of knowledge on economic issues is detailed unsparingly: Balls recalls humiliating him in a meeting when he corrected him on the average household income for a UK family — Blair's estimate was £60,000, three times the actual figure.

The 'calamitous' and 'naïve' Ed Miliband is also criticised extensively for his failure to appreciate or understand the market economy and weak leadership as he failed to build a cohesive team for the 2015 election. Balls reveals that the former close friends' relationship deteriorated to the extent that they only spoke twice during the whole election campaign, which is described as far more dysfunctional than anything Balls encountered during the Blair-Brown years. Miliband's successor, Jeremy Corbyn, is dismissed swiftly as an unserious politician embodying some of the party's worst instincts, consciously taking the Labour party into permanent opposition and having little chance of electoral success.

Balls's accounts of his relationships with David Cameron and George Osborne, his Conservative opponents between 2005 and 2015, is a highlight of the book, richly describing the politicians' respective characters. Personally, Osborne is charming company who maintains friendly relations with Balls when they regularly meet with their families after joint media interviews; professionally, he is a ruthless and calculating figure who is always likely to put short-term Conservative party gains over the national interest. This contrasts with the odd and arrogant Cameron, who is prone to hissing insults in the Commons chamber and angry eruptions in private. Cameron was so aloof that he would refuse to acknowledge Balls when they passed each other in the corridors of Westminster, a habit that he has retained even after Balls departed frontline politics. The EU referendum was the result of Cameron and Osborne's short-term calculations rather than a substantive analysis of the best interests of the UK, while the roots of Brexit are traced to successive Labour and Conservative governments playing the isolationist and nativist card when it suited them, reinforcing the inherent Euroscepticism amongst the British public that was ultimately impossible to shift.

Towering over the memoirs is the hyperactive, relentless and demanding presence of Gordon Brown. Moods are read, calls are taken and mistakes are hidden from view. But Balls's mentor is portrayed as a dedicated and humane public servant, who, perhaps rather dubiously, is claimed to have had no involvement in the coup that led to Blair's removal as prime minister in 2007. Brown's stiff public persona is explained by his intense separation of personal and private affairs, and his almost 'regal' sense of duty. But Balls expresses disappointment about the lack of loyalty shown by Brown when his administration began to collapse from 2008, and tells of how he was hung out to dry by his mentor as he tried to save his own prime ministership.

Other notable themes include an insightful chapter in which Balls details how he managed the demands of the 24-hour media environment. But his evident enjoyment of the blood sport of high-level politics jars with a later chapter on his realisation of the importance of the vocational aspect of politics, and how the positive impact he had on constituents' lives was the most worthwhile contribution over his career. Balls' commitment to developing a 'hinterland' — hobbies and interests away from politics — is reflected on as a valuable addition to his political armoury as well as a career-lengthening benefit, suggesting his recent turn as [Saturday night ballroom dancer](#) has been brewing for a long time. An entire chapter of the book is also devoted to Norwich football club, continuing New Labour's rather tedious obsession with football.

The end of the book poses a number of challenges that Labour must overcome to win a governing majority again, followed by an array of solutions from Balls. But while Balls is excellent on retrospective economic analysis and honest about the mistakes that led to New Labour being swept from power in 2010, his prospectus for the party's future is less convincing. Why does the party of the centre-left continue to be punished for the excesses of liberal capitalism that caused the financial crisis, while the Conservatives, the true champions of the free market, are rewarded? For answers to where the party goes after two successive defeats and the fractious summer of 2016, readers may be better served looking elsewhere; for those looking for an account of an individual's growth and change over a political lifetime, the book is a worthwhile and often moving read.

Peter Carrol is a Media Relations Officer at LSE and MSc student in Politics and Communication. [Read more by Peter Carrol.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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