

Book Review: Five Year Mission: The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband

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Five Year Mission: The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband provides a detailed, insightful and at times riveting account of Ed Miliband's failed attempt to revive Labour's electoral fortunes following the 2010 electoral defeat and the demise of New Labour. **Eunice Goes** considers this essential reading to understand Miliband's failures that ultimately cost him his job in the recent 2015 general election.

Five Year Mission: The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband. Tim Bale. Oxford University Press. 2015.

In *Five Year Mission: The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband*, Tim Bale gives us a detailed, insightful and at times riveting account of Ed Miliband's failed attempt to revive Labour's electoral fortunes following the 2010 electoral defeat and the demise of New Labour. Bale's book was published before the 2015 general election, but he identified the major weaknesses of Miliband's leadership that contributed to Labour's catastrophic defeat on 7th May. For that reason, this book is an essential read to anyone interested in understanding why Labour lost, as well as its current existential crisis.

Since voters delivered their ruthless verdict on Miliband's agenda for Britain, the Labour Party has been trying to make sense of what happened on election day. But because the wounds of the electoral defeat are still open, that period of inward reflection has also been characterised by bitter attacks against the former Labour leader. Indeed, some Labour MPs are so angry with Miliband that they resent his presence in the House of Commons and believe he should atone for the sin of losing the election by not turning up to work. This mindset reflects the belief held by many Labour politicians, activists and quite a few influential media commentators that Labour's catastrophic defeat is the exclusive responsibility of Ed Miliband. Bale's analysis pours some cold water into this understandably harsh judgement of Miliband's leadership by reminding us that winning an election after a single term in opposition 'would be a trick that very few British Leaders of the Opposition have been able to pull off'. In other words, there is only so much good or harm that party leaders can inflict.

Make no mistake, Bale does not evade the task of judging harshly Miliband's leadership failures in terms of party management, presentation and of course policy decisions, but he contextualises those failures. By doing so, he enhances our understanding of parties in opposition. In particular, he brings to the equation two crucial aspects: context and the mundane but crucial day-to-day demands of leading a party that happens to be in opposition. This book shows that context undermined Miliband's leadership in a variety of ways. Firstly, he became leader of the Labour Party in the twilight years of European social democracy. If in 2008, European social democrats – and Miliband included – believed the global financial crisis had paved the way for a 'social democratic moment', by 2010 the possibility of that moment had clearly evaporated. European social democrats were by then faithfully wedded to the austerity doctrine.





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This is a crucial point that the author draws our attention to in the introduction and which deserved greater development in the remaining sections of the book. Further references to the crisis of European social democracy would have helped to better understand Miliband's difficulty in challenging the coalition government's narrative on the deficit and in developing a 'credible' approach to the economy. However, this neglect is a reflection of Labour's internal debates that tend to be quite insular. Throughout the almost five years of his leadership, Miliband barely addressed the Eurozone crisis that was – still is – unravelling in Europe and undermining the electoral base of European social democratic parties. It turns out that this political insularity distorts political debates. What is clearly part of a general European trend is often presented (though not by Bale) as British exceptionalism.

But there were other contextual factors that undermined the Labour Party under Ed Miliband. Bale shows how media hostility to Miliband damaged the party's electoral prospects. By constantly presenting the Labour leader as not up to the job of Prime Minister it shaped the public perception about his leadership skills and Labour's approach to the economy. More interestingly, Bale revealed that Miliband's team devoted considerable energy obsessing about ways to simultaneously fight and cajole the media.

Bale's chronological analysis shows us as well that despite all the media talk about party unity, Miliband's grip over the party was weak. Although throughout his almost five-year leadership of the Labour Party there was no open civil war, there were plenty of guerrilla tactics deployed by disgruntled backbenchers and unhappy and/or ambitious frontbenchers against the leader. More importantly, he reveals how party management issues had the effect of delaying policy development and contributing to Miliband's chronic indecision.

Five Year Mission also offers a fascinating insight into the internal life of political parties. Often studies of political parties focus on either the high politics of electoral strategies or on the high minded task of developing ideologically coherent manifestos, but often these studies neglect the mundane stuff that can get in the way of these two activities. In this book, he shows how the unexciting but relentless daily demands of managing a party's interventions in parliament, reacting to minute media stories, party rows and disagreements about tactics and strategy, and MacMillan's famous 'events' interplayed with the high politics of manifesto drafting and rethinking social democracy for the post-crash era.

At times Bale seems to suggest that the 'vision thing' is a luxury few political parties can afford to indulge and focuses perhaps too much on the day-to-day life of the Labour Party. It would have been interesting to learn more about Miliband's attempts to develop a transformative political agenda. That was after all the reason of his bid to the

leadership of the Labour Party in 2010. In the conclusion Bale tries to make up for this with a prescient analysis of Miliband's intellectual and political ambivalence. Writing in the present tense, Bale concludes that Miliband has 'ambitions to be radical but, not necessarily unreasonably, fears the consequences'. It is hard to think of a more fitting definition of Milibandism than these words.

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