

Ed Miliband's proposed reforms to the relationship between the Labour party and its affiliated trade unions reveal the ongoing struggle for the heart of Labour

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*Ed Miliband was under intense pressure to take action and distance the Labour party from strong union influence following the selection scandal in Falkirk. **Eric Shaw** examines these proposals and argues that the suggested changes do not really form a coherent programme. He asks why this has come about and sees it as an ongoing struggle for the heart of the Labour party between Blairites and the unions.*



Ed Miliband has announced some sweeping changes in the political and financial relationship between the Labour party and its affiliated trade unions. These have, so far, only been sketched out and we await to see what precise form (in terms of rule changes) they will take. The anticipated reforms include:

1. A shift from collective to individual affiliation to the party: in future trade union members would make an individual choice to join the party rather than being automatically affiliated through the decision of their union executives and conferences.
2. Limits to the amount of money aspiring candidates can spend in selection contests.
3. New limits on outside earnings by MPs and new rules on conflict of interests too.
4. The selection of candidates for the London mayoralty and for parliament by primaries in which all party sympathisers and not simply members would be entitled to vote.

Why these reforms? Why now?

The first point to be made that the suggested changes (and others too) do not really form a coherent programme. The first and the fourth bear directly on the party-union relationship, the other two do not. Neither are likely to be particularly contentious. One suspects that they were thrown in to make the package as a whole more palatable. Secondly, there are lots of loose ends. What will be the implications for party funding? Here a distinction needs to be made between union Political Funds, composed of the contributions of political levy-payers, and affiliation fees to the Labour party. Many unions have Political Funds but do not affiliate to the Labour party (e.g. all the teachers unions).

Affiliated unions contribute two types of funding to the party, affiliation fees and donations. The amount of money raised by the former might well plummet if few trade union members opt to join the party, as GMB's Paul Kenny predicts. This could be compensated by higher donations but unions will be under pressure (especially from the left) to use it for campaigning rather than filling Labour's cash boxes. One safe prediction is that the party's funding base will shrink.

Thirdly, what form will primaries take? The idea might seem attractive, particularly with party membership at a low ebb, and more democratic.



Ed Miliband: Lacking a solid block of support within his own party
(Credit: Jocian)

But how can the party guarantee that only party sympathisers will vote? (There is no equivalent to US-style voter registration by party in the UK). What about the cost? And would not those with a high media profile have a distinct advantage?

Fourthly, Ed Miliband promised an end to 'machine politics' in the Labour party. It is not entirely clear what he meant by this phrase, but he was obviously referring to concerted efforts by trade unions to secure the selection of union-backed candidates. It is true that unions have increasingly pooled their efforts to back favoured candidates to maximise their influence. But this is not the only example of what Gerry Hassan and myself in our book '[The Strange Death of Labour Scotland](#)' called 'network politics.' The unions were not the only network nor even the most powerful. When they controlled the party, the Blairites proved adept in parachuting their candidates into safe seats, often in close collaboration with the party organisation. Blairites might like to dwell on the parable of moats and beams.

Fifthly, why now? How is it that a dispute over a selection contest has exploded into a crisis for the Labour party? Unite tactics in Falkirk might be, as one trade union official put it, 'not very edifying', but irregularities in selection conferences are hardly unusual – in all parties. How, as another union official put it, 'did we get from Falkirk to here?' To answer the question one has to place the episode in a historical and political context. As argued in Lewis Minkin's definitive 1992 study, '[The Contentious Alliance](#)', the relationship between the party and unions has always been governed by norms, conventions and inherited traditions. These came under intense strain during the Blair/Brown years as the trade unions' impact on policy was sharply curtailed, dwarfed by that of industry and, in particular, the City.

But after 2010 the unions have been seeking to recoup their influence. The Blairites – who find themselves with a leader with whom they are often at odds – have been resisting this. A key emblematic issue is that of public spending cuts, with the Blairites (and probably Balls) convinced that Labour, to regain economic credibility, must toughen up its stance and the unions (and Keynesian economists) rejecting this. There are other disputes simmering under the surface. The Blairites probably regard the unions as their most formidable obstacle to the resumption of the 'New Labour project'. In short, there was a lot of dry tinder awaiting to catch fire.

Who struck the match? It is worth noting that journalists with strong Blairite sympathies (such as Phil Collins in the Times and Dan Hodges in the Telegraph) were quick to portray the events in Falkirk as a trial of strength between the unions (especially Unite) and the leader, as well as grossly exaggerating their significance. Senior political figures with New Labour affiliations, such as David Blunkett and Jim Murphy added fuel to the blaze – as did anonymous briefings by 'senior frontbenchers' (we can all have a stab at guessing their identities). All this was a gift to the Tories and their allies in the press.

To conclude: what is likely to happen next? One can only speculate. Miliband lacks a solid block of support in the party. Thus none of the top three frontbenchers (Douglas Alexander, Ed Balls and Yvette Cooper) can be regarded as Miliband loyalists and only a minority of the shadow cabinet voted for him in the leadership election. His position has been further weakened by the willingness of Blairite critics to relentlessly brief against him. The unions will be deeply upset by the turn of events and some will be in an un-cooperative frame of mind. Many of the party will be disturbed by what appears to be a rushed and ill-considered approach to reforming party organisation. The reforms are being touted as signalling a transformation in how Labour does politics. If so, why were they thrown together so hastily and with so little reflection? Mobilising support for the changes will not be easy.

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About the Author

Dr Eric Shaw is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Stirling.

