

# Complacency and factionalism: Miliband's Labour is still a work in progress

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*Don't expect any big-bang announcement to electrify activists, the media and the electorate in general at the Labour conference, writes **Eunice Goes**. This is a result of two oddly combined factors – complacency; many feel that Labour can just scrape through and win the 2015 general elections if it continues to pursue a 'less is more' approach, and factionalism; the party is not yet ready to deliver that sleek, coherent and compelling big idea because it is still divided about what path to follow, about which values the party should stand for, and about what kind of vision it wants to promote.*



For those Labour activists and media commentators who spent the summer hammering out the need for an amazing hat-trick by the Labour leader Ed Miliband, the Labour Party Annual Conference that starts on Sunday in Brighton will be a disappointment. Surely, there will be plenty of new policy announcements ranging from local job creation schemes to building new social housing, from 'devolved provision and delivery of public services' to 'people-led politics'. There will be as well fierce words against zero-hours contracts and many promises to address the 'cost of living crisis'. Moreover, Jon Cruddas will unveil the first stage of the party's Policy Review and he will make it sound as exciting as he possibly can. We can also count on Ed Miliband's spin-doctors and advisers to come up with enough wonky words to please the pundits. But all this activity will not hide a simple yet important fact. There won't be any big-bang announcement to electrify activists, the media and the electorate in general at the 2013 Labour Party Annual Conference. The announcement of a big idea won't happen for two main reasons. The first one is complacency and the second is factionalism.

## Complacency

The five-year fixed parliament has had a strange effect on the Labour Party. Senior policy-makers feel that they still have plenty of time – around 18 months – before the next general elections takes place. Thus, speech-writers and policy advisers are under pressure to deliver in the next few days a very good speech with some solid content however the fire-works and fanfare have been reserved for 2014. Indeed, next year's annual conference will be the launch pad for Labour's electoral campaign.

There is some justification in pursuing this strategy. As a party of the opposition with limited resources to set the political agenda Labour does not want its best ideas to be stolen by the coalition parties. Thus, it is only natural that Miliband keeps some of his best cards close his chest. However, this is not a risk-free strategy as events of the past weeks suggest. Since Labour started to talk about the 'living standards crisis', both the Conservatives and the Liberal-Democrats have announced proposals, such as raising the minimum wage, free school meals (incidentally, an [idea pioneered](#) by Labour-led local councils in Southwark, Hull and Islington) and some other policy ideas that fit into that agenda. It is also very likely that in the next 12 months both coalition parties will not only talk about living standards but they will be delivering some policies too.

Complacency is also felt at the level of the party's electoral expectations. Everyone in the party is aware of Labour's soft lead in the opinion polls and of Miliband's [dismal personal ratings](#), but many feel that Labour can just scrape through and win the 2015 general elections if it continues to pursue a 'less is more' approach. It is this 'less is more' approach that is behind Labour's recent endorsement of the coalition's public spending cuts, of the cap of on welfare spending and behind Labour's tough language on immigration. But as Jon Cruddas put it, this '[strategy of small differences](#)' with Labour's opponents is not conducive to electoral success.

## Factionalism

Thus, complacency partly explains Labour's policy and ideational lethargy. But there is another factor – perhaps more dangerous – that explains it to a T and that is factionalism. In other words, the Labour Party is not yet ready to deliver that sleek, coherent and compelling big idea because it is still divided about what path to follow, about which values the party should stand for, and about what kind of vision it wants to promote.

These divisions go beyond the usual fights between the Blairite wing, the Left and those who position themselves somewhere in the middle. These divisions are also between those who believe that Labour's future depends on a radical decentralising and democratising agenda and those who argue that the mandarins in Whitehall (and preferably at the Treasury) still know best; between those who are pushing for more radical ideas and defend the pursuit of an ambitious 'politics of the good life' and those who argue for minimal changes.

This state of affairs is not aided by Miliband's deliberative and inclusive style of leadership. By trying to incorporate every viewpoint and strand of opinion, his agenda is defined in the end not by an ambitious and compelling political narrative but by half-measures and half-ideas that satisfy no one. Moreover, by being so accommodating he sounds and looks weak and that in itself contributes to the feeling that the party is directionless.

As a result of these two oddly combined factors – complacency and factionalism – the 2013 Labour Party annual conference will not be the stuff of legend. There is no doubt that there are emerging themes and innovative policy ideas around democracy, the decentralised state, and equality, but the party is still too divided to be able to present next week a clear, consistent and compelling vision for the future. In other words, the development of Labour's new agenda is still very much a work in progress.

It is true that Miliband and his team still have several months ahead of them to develop a Labour programme of government that is innovative in its narrative and package of policies, but they should remember that the clock is ticking.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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