

The Rhythm Of Opposition: Ed Miliband's Strategy

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2011-4-1

There is nothing like seeing an animal in its natural habitat to get a sense of it's real instincts and innate strengths. So it was listening to Ed Miliband in conversation with the Independent's Steve Richards at a European social democratic work-fest hosted by the [Policy Network](#).

Ed thrives in such intellectual company and he set out articulately his optimistic world-view of a less elitist, less tribal politics. A world where the economic argument is redefined around reducing inequality through a new kind of wealth production rather than simply through taxation and welfare. A society that is made big through stronger associations but not by reducing the role of the state. You get the drift.



But how do we get there? The independent conservative Peter Osborne has [praised Edward Miliband's achievement](#) in putting Labour into a winning position. Osborne also lauds the fact that he thinks Miliband's Labour Party now offers a clear (left-wing) choice to the Tories.

So Miliband could just sit on his poll lead and hope it lasts until the next election. But I think most people think that by then the economy will be relatively improving and ratings for the incumbents will climb.

Sympathetic commentators [like Richards himself](#) as well as [more left-wing voices](#) also fear that there is no meat on Miliband's visionary bone. In addition they have doubts about the man's tactics and his personal ability to take the electorate to this alternative universe.

So at the Policy Network event, I asked Miliband if he agreed with Steve Richards that it's 'time to tell us where Labour is heading'?

His lengthy reply was, in effect, an elegantly and confidently argued 'No'.

"There is a rhythm to opposition" he explained. He has first set out the building blocks of his manifesto: the new definition of equality; the commitment to the New Generation; and the new sense of community.

He said he must also first take time to define what is different about Labour now to the administration of which Miliband was himself a key figure. He said he accepts that they did make economic mistakes and that they went too far to reduce civil liberties. But he's not going to spend his time trashing things that he thinks they got right for the sake of it.

And, yes, he said, there will be things he has to say and do that will be a challenge to his party. 'People ask me all the time to promise to reverse this or that policy, but I can't promise'.

It's just that he won't say what any of those things will be.

It's clear that Miliband is a politician to his finger-tips. That's quite useful if you run a political party, of course. He's not going to offer any hostages to fortune or any detail for examination until he has to.

However, until he does start coming up with some defining policies – however broadly set out – I fear that he's not going to convince anyone of his vision for a more open politics and a credible alternative way of running the country.

I think that this is a particular problem for Miliband because he's not a natural or inspirational popular communicator.

Put him in a room full of politicos like today and he's terrific. Likewise when talking to Party members. That's both impressive and useful in running political machines. But it's also part of the problem. He is clearly a polished product of the kind of elite politics that he's so keen to re-connect to the public.

I don't think that's fatal. People may end up a little tired of the Prime Minister's slick presentational gifts and hanker after an earnest clever chap with some real political passion (although to be fair to David Cameron I don't think he's remotely as superficial or as glib as his enemies like to pretend).

But I still think that if Ed Miliband is going to pro-actively shape the debate and set the agenda in time for the next election, he might have to start doing things of substance a little earlier than is entirely safe. A few risks and conflicts might actually help improve his standing in the way that it did in different ways for Kinnock, Blair and Cameron.

The rhythm of opposition is not supposed to be too relaxing. At some point – and I think relatively soon – he is going to need to find something that changes the mood-music. He needs some clashing cymbals instead of soothing symbols.

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