

# Theresa May, Ed Miliband, and the problem of the 'personalised political'



*Should political leaders strive to make voters identify with their values and interests? [Judi Atkins](#) looks at Ed Miliband and Theresa May's attempts to this effect, and explains why they failed.*

On 13 July 2016 the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, [announced](#) her intention to lead a 'one-nation government'. Her carefully cultivated image of strength and stability provided much-needed reassurance in the aftermath of the vote to leave the European Union, and the Conservatives were soon rewarded with a [16-point poll lead](#) over Labour. The Party's popularity remained high and, in the view of many [commentators](#), May sought to capitalise on this by calling a snap general election for 8 June 2017.

May's stated rationale was that a decisive victory for the Conservatives would strengthen her hand in the upcoming Brexit negotiations, and on this basis she made the general election about '[which leader and which team people trust to take the big decisions that matter to Britain](#)'. Thus, she offered the electorate 'strong and stable leadership to guide Britain through the years ahead' and, moreover, presented herself as the personification of this narrative. However, the ubiquity of the 'strong and stable' mantra attracted ridicule, with critics describing May as '[robotic](#)' and lacking in empathy. Following a 'terrible' campaign the Conservatives lost 17 seats, leaving May a weakened Prime Minister without a parliamentary majority.

May's leadership performance is an example of the 'personalised political' which, as [John Gaffney and Amarjit Lahel](#) explain, involves 'bringing the self in some way into responses to wider issues' and so affords the speaker a populist means of inviting an audience to identify with their values and interests. This strategy – and its failure – recall the fate of Ed Miliband, which I examine in my contribution to the edited volume [Voices of the UK Left: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Performance of Politics](#). Here, I demonstrate that Miliband's case for One Nation Labour employed the same three narratives of modernisation – party traditions, 'new times' and national renewal – that Tony Blair and Harold Wilson once used to great effect. However, by offering himself as the embodiment of these narratives, Miliband created a self-referential rhetoric that had limited appeal beyond Labour's core supporters.

The first modernisation narrative centred on party traditions. In constructing this narrative, Miliband made references to luminaries from his party's history, notably Clement Attlee and William Beveridge who, though a Liberal, was a key architect of the welfare state. This enabled him to locate his approach within Labour's traditions, reaffirm his commitment to its principles, and cultivate his leadership character by allying himself with pioneering figures from its past.

A second narrative stressed the necessity of breaking with the Blair-Brown governments, to which end Miliband characterised the present as 'new times'. This was achieved through an ideological periodisation, which was based on the assumption that the certainties of the New Labour era were swept away by the global financial crisis of 2008. These developments rendered New Labour's approach outdated and, to meet the challenges of 'new times', Miliband contended that his party needed to be bolder in its efforts to realise its core values. He thus framed modernisation as Labour's only option, while laying the foundations for a radical programme of national renewal.

Labour's ultimate goal was to rebuild Britain as One Nation, an objective that underpinned a third narrative of national renewal. As Miliband told his [party conference](#) in 2012:

I didn't become leader of the Labour Party to reinvent the world of Disraeli or Attlee. But I do believe in that spirit. That spirit of One Nation. One Nation: a country where everyone has a stake. One Nation: a country where prosperity is fairly shared. One Nation: where we have a shared destiny, a sense of shared endeavour and a common life that we lead together. That is my vision of One Nation. That is my vision of Britain.

Here, Miliband sought to win the assent of his listeners by inspiring them with a vision of a better future for Britain, one that contrasted starkly with the divided society he claimed the Coalition's policies had created. He also articulated 'One Nation' in terms of his personal beliefs, a move that would have significant consequences for his leadership.

By aligning himself with historical party figures, Miliband offered himself as the present embodiment of Labour traditions. Although he acknowledged the achievements of New Labour, Miliband rejected as ill-suited to 'new times' those aspects of its approach – notably the disregard for the duties of those at the top of society – that were contrary to his own principles. Meanwhile, 'Old' Labour's way was discarded due to its neglect of rights and responsibilities *per se*, which again ran counter to Miliband's values, though he [endorsed](#) its commitment to collective endeavor.

Miliband was therefore positioned within, and in opposition to, aspects of Labour's ideological heritage by virtue of his personal convictions. In the same vein, his commitment to inclusion and social justice provided a basis from which to criticise the 'unfair' policies of the Coalition. The three narratives thus converged within Miliband's leadership persona, creating a solipsistic rhetoric that failed to connect with the electorate. Indeed, his inability to reach out to this wider audience was seen as an [important factor](#) in Labour's 2015 general election defeat.

Miliband's problems seem minor in comparison to the challenges confronting Theresa May. Her 'disastrous' speech at the [2017 Conservative Party conference](#), her continued [poor performance](#) in interviews, and the recent '[botched](#)' [Cabinet reshuffle](#) have only reinforced the widespread perception of her as a weak leader who is not up to the job. With May's image as the embodiment of strength and stability now a distant memory, her political future is looking more uncertain than ever.

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Note: the above draws on the author's chapter [Voices of the UK Left: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Performance of Politics](#).

### About the Author



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