

## 10 | HOME AFFAIRS: TOO HOT TO HANDLE?

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*Crime and migration trigger greater insecurities and more distrust than perhaps any other issue, and so are where the political stakes are highest. Ed Miliband's approach to these issues will be firmly grounded in his social liberalism and economic egalitarianism, but it is his self-confidence in speaking about morality and culture which sets him apart from the 'left liberal' social democrat norm of the last fifty years.*

*This means robustly placing Labour on the side of struggling low and mid income families, saying that only with radical economic reform is it possible to combine continuing migration with security and prosperity for all. But Ed's themes of community and culture are important because they offer 'social' solutions to what people perceive as social problems. Ideas like responsibility 'contracts' – between communities and newcomers or young offenders – could animate Ed Miliband's agenda of a more responsible, moral society.*

**E**d Miliband talks fairly infrequently on home affairs and when he does he is more softly spoken than the tough, no-nonsense home secretaries of the mid New Labour years (David Blunkett, Charles Clarke and John Reid). But Ed's views on crime and immigration should not be mistaken for permissive liberalism. His generation of Labour leaders may not take pleasure in appearing to

stigmatise ex-offenders or migrants, but they have no appetite for a 1980s-style cult of victimhood either.

Instead Ed is reaching towards a policy for the Home Office that may include a dose of social liberalism, but also views crime and migration through two other lenses – both of which are key to his worldview more widely. First there is Ed’s Croslandite prioritisation of economic and social inequality above all else; and second Blue Labour’s emphasis on strong communities as vehicles for morality, culture and connection.

Two of Ed’s best speeches illustrate this attempt to blend liberal, egalitarian and communitarian perspectives. First, in May 2010 in the Fabian speech in which he announced his leadership bid, he singled out immigration to demonstrate the limits of New Labour’s technocratic, globalising outlook. True, he affirmed his own liberal values, but he also emphasised the legitimacy of people worrying about immigration (just weeks after the Gillian Duffy affair) and explicitly made this case through the social democratic prism of inequality and class:

*“Britain’s diversity is an enormous strength: economically, culturally, socially and we should never cease saying it... But the truth is that immigration is a class issue. If you want to employ a builder it’s good to have people you can take on at lower cost, but if you are a builder it feels like a threat to your livelihood.”*

Fifteen months later, in the wake of the August 2011 riots, Ed’s thoughtful response re-affirmed the classic New Labour formula of tough liberalism: ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’. But it also touched on traditional social democratic concerns with economic opportunity and a Blue Labour emphasis on culture and ethics. He explained the criminal choices of the looters with reference to two dislocations affecting society at large: first, the rise

of 'me-first, take what you can' values and culture; and, second, growing economic inequality leading to parallel lives, diminished opportunity and lost hope:

*"We have to state the most inconvenient truth of all: yes, people are responsible for their actions. But we all bear a share of responsibility for the society we create... those on the left who dismiss arguments about culture are wrong, so are those on the right who dismiss the importance of opportunity and hope."*

This focus on inequality and community when talking about home affairs is part of a wider attempt to re-position Labour in the minds of the lower half of the income distribution. So far Labour's offer to this broad constituency has been mainly economic, focused on jobs and standards of living. But a 'social' message is needed as well, since issues like immigration did so much to turn people in these groups away from Labour in the first place.

In the lead-up to the 2010 general election, immigration was not just symbolic of Labour's perceived failings, it became what Deborah Mattinson has termed a "vortex issue". In other words it was the frame through which people comprehended and linked together a whole range of disparate concerns, be they economic and social anxieties, the sense that public services were prioritising undeserving groups, or antipathy towards out-of-touch politicians.

Ipsos MORI's regular tracker polls indicate that anxiety about immigration has subsided since 2010 (presumably in part because the Conservatives are more trusted on the issue). But people still invariably mention migration when asked about government or politics, as the Fabian Society discovered in recent focus groups on the future of the state.

Labour is never going to win a head-to-head contest that focuses narrowly on the volume of migration. Before

the last election, Ipsos MORI found that just six per cent of people who were worried about immigration thought Labour were the best party on the issue – and this number has been fairly stable over time. The challenge for the left is instead to create the conditions in which concerns can subside or broaden, so that people do not translate wide social and economic concerns into a narrow obsession with immigration numbers. A straight competition on crime policy should be more winnable although it is still tough territory. Crime was an issue New Labour embraced much more whole-heartedly and successfully; according to Ipsos MORI, the Conservatives have been stronger on crime amongst people worried about the issue throughout the 2000s, but Labour was able to establish a lead in the 1990s.

Labour learnt in office, however, that concern about immigration – or other tricky issues – will not subside if you ignore the problem and hope it will go away. Before 2010 the public were angry with the political establishment because they felt they were being told that complaining about immigration was taboo, bordering on racism. Labour politicians need to talk about immigration precisely because people sensed that migration was ‘off-limits’ and this helped stoke the toxicity of the issue. Voters need to feel they have ‘permission’ to raise their concerns about migration and that politicians are prepared to listen.

Talking about migration may also help to moderate opinion, since silence will leave the terrain open to wild assertion from the right. We can be pretty sure, for example, that UKIP or Migration Watch UK will try to stoke up anxieties before the UK fully opens its borders to Bulgarian and Romanian workers in 2014, even though in reality most academics expect little new immigration from south eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> It’s a good example of where Labour needs to be open and receptive to people’s anxieties, and make calls for sensible contingencies, but also explain why there is little to fear.

Ed has already been upfront about immigration in two important ways. First he has loudly and publicly accepted Labour's failure to anticipate the huge influx of central and eastern European migrants, as part of a wider strategy of 'distance and contrition' which has been essential to re-earn permission for a hearing. Second he has been confident in criticising the coalition government for failing on in its own terms, both in relation to policing the UK border and achieving its cap on net migration. Challenging the government's competence and sewing the notion that the Tories were disingenuous in the promises they made in 2010 helps to reduce the Conservative's general credibility and also makes it harder for them to draw discussion onto topics where they would normally expect to be at an advantage.

On crime and policing Labour has been more ambivalent in speaking up. This is firstly because the party does not wish to disown its record of reducing crime by over 40 per cent or increasing police numbers by a fifth. Here Ed and Yvette Cooper do not want to publically concede to past errors or omissions, even though the police service remains in many ways an unreformed and monolithic institution. Second, the most obvious line of attack on crime is to criticise falling police numbers, as part of the general 'too far, too fast' narrative. But it is harder to attack the government on 'cuts' than on 'competence' since Labour has accepted most of the coalition's overall spending plans.

Looking ahead, the party needs to develop proposals for how it would improve outcomes after 2012 with no extra money. Over time it will therefore be in the party's interests to detach people's idea of success from levels of spending. For example it may be tempting to link the slight rise in acquisitive crime to falling police numbers, but the academic evidence suggests the relationship is pretty weak and it will not serve Labour's long-term

interests to emphasise it unduly.<sup>2</sup> For now however Labour has parked the issue by establishing Lord Stevens' Independent Commission on the Future of Policing which will consider whether we can achieve 'more for less' through fundamental reform of police techniques and organisation.

Talking about immigration and crime of course needs to be handled with care, to avoid stoking up the issues. Labour should never again try to out-flank the Conservatives to the right. Indeed for a leader like Ed, this would be a disaster. Trying to out-tough the Tories on home affairs would simply lack authenticity and plausibility, and so further alienate people from politics. But he must also side-step a trap the Tories would like to set, where he gets positioned as a soft, metropolitan liberal on a binary axis between permissiveness and authoritarianism.

The solution is for Ed to talk about people's concerns but also quickly widen-out the conversation, to take it into terrain where he is comfortable and can push home an advantage. And it is his egalitarian and communitarian convictions that will help him achieve this delicate task.

No one is in any doubt of Ed's egalitarian credentials. This means he can counter any impression that he is a soft-touch on home affairs by robustly placing himself on the side of struggling low and mid income families. This reflects the findings of the Searchlight project *Fear and Hope: the new politics of identity* which found that the key population segment which is both Labour-inclined and concerned about immigration is primarily motivated by economic and social insecurities rather than cultural conservatism.

Ed can argue (in a way that New Labour globalisers never could) that if migration is not working for the bottom and middle then it is beside the point whether it is good for GDP. After strongly standing up for anxious families Ed will be in a position to say that only with radical economic reform is it possible to combine continuing migration with

security and prosperity for all. A similar argument goes for reducing crime and disorder. In his riots speech Ed argued that reordering the economy to create greater equality, opportunity and hope would be critical in turning young people away from crime and irresponsibility.

In other words, debates on home affairs can be shifted sideways to focus on the labour market and economy. Indeed, the best way of arguing that Labour is sticking up for low income communities is by being truly ambitious on pay and working conditions. Ed should return to the radicalism of his leadership campaign and embrace a national living wage and also push for sector-wide pay rates in migrant-heavy industries. His pitch should be that better pay will attract British workers into jobs that immigrants do now, bringing opportunity, responsibility and security to struggling low income communities. Higher pay will allow the lowest earners to work a little less and care for their children a little more, and it will give that extra incentive for young people on job seekers' allowance to find their first job.

Alongside decent pay Labour needs a tough message that there will be a zero-tolerance on under-cutting by unscrupulous employers – a message that will appeal also to the metropolitan liberal constituency who worry about migrant exploitation. For example the party could consider placing new requirements on big business to take more responsibility for their supply chains.

There also needs to be a positive message that every job in Britain must be good enough for British people to want. Labour should set out to lead a social movement on the quality of work. Once a living wage is promised, groups like Citizens UK could turn their attention to working hours, flexibility and control in low paid work. Meanwhile the unions need to spread their tentacles far further into unorganised workplaces and make themselves relevant and affordable for people in casual and self-employed work.

Labour should also be ready to pick fights with employers and agencies who recruit migrants first, over and above the registered unemployed. Employers with all-foreign workforces might be challenged using equality legislation and agencies could be required to recruit through jobcentres. This would all tie-in well with a 'tough-love' message for people who are long-term unemployed; that Labour will guarantee the availability of jobs, but that everyone has a responsibility to accept them.

This economic package would show that Labour's beef is not with migrants but with the firms which employ them unnecessarily and that the party's first priority is to help people who already have ties to Britain into well-paid, good quality work. This could be a powerful message for poorer, struggling families who need to feel that the party of labour is serious about creating good jobs and tackling youth unemployment, alienation and sometimes anti-social behaviour.

After saying that the problem is not migration *per se* but fairness at the bottom of the labour market, Ed will then be able to be robustly pro-employer when it comes to the migration of highly-skilled migrants and legitimate students. This will be important within the 'opinion-former' classes who have liberal views on migration the rest of the country does not share. It could also help counter the impression that Labour is being anti-business with its talk of raising pay and ending exploitation.

Ed's message on home affairs is not merely economic, however. Ed's themes of community and culture are important because they offer 'social' solutions to what people perceive as social problems. In 2010 Gillian Duffy was not complaining about a race to the bottom on wages but the changing character of her community. When talking about looting and disorder Ed was brave to widen his condemnation of individual families to the broader context of a culture and values that promote 'greed, selfishness, immorality'.

Ed now needs to extend his argument about culture and values to cover new migrants as well. He can avoid any talk of imposed assimilation – which the *Hope and Fear* analysis suggests is not a key dimension of immigration concerns for Labour sympathisers (and can actively alienate established ethnic minority families) – but he can still emphasise responsibilities and shared values, with respect to personal behaviour and to how people establish themselves in broader communities. In office Labour pursued this agenda with English language requirements and the beefed up citizenship process. The current government is doing something similar by strengthening the regime that prevents family migrants becoming dependent on the state. But these national rules alone are too abstract and transactional.

Labour needs to think through how to bring to life its instincts about migrants' rights and responsibilities locally, in the context of place and communities. So Ed should explore the scope for 'contracts' – real and implied – between newcomers and the communities they are settling in. This would start with a much more hands-on role for local authorities, who should feel empowered to develop detailed plans in areas of high migration, be that because of temporary workers or family reunions. Ideas might range from placing pressure on parents with poor English to take part in family education programmes through to mandatory stipulations that newcomers must make (achievable) community contributions before being eligible for social housing.

Ed's self-confidence in speaking about morality and culture sets him apart from the 'left liberal' social democrat norm of the last fifty years. It is to his credit that he is comfortable talking about real communities and the need for values and norms that are embedded within the contexts of shared lives and mutual obligations. Culture and community are also the areas where the solutions are hardest

to specify however. It is easy to say that you believe in responsible communities but harder to bring it about, as David Cameron has found to his cost with the 'big society'.

But issues of crime and migration trigger the greatest insecurities and the most political distrust, so are where the stakes are highest. Vagueness and good intentions will not do. But if Ed embraces four or five substantial ideas that embody the idea of responsibility 'contracts' – with newcomers and young offenders – it could animate the agenda of a more responsible, moral society.

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### Endnotes

- 1 'EU Accession of Bulgaria and Romania: migration issues: briefing document', Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford; Review of the transitional restrictions on access of Bulgarian and Romanian nationals to the UK labour market, Migration Advisory Committee, 2011.
- 2 Ben Bradford, Police numbers and crime rates – a rapid evidence review, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011.