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Marc Stears

To have any sense of whether Ed Miliband is to continue to turn the Labour party around, we need to know more about the man himself, his organising ideals and his natural political capacities. His political journey reveals an instinctive egalitarian who developed a means of practising politics that was deeply democratic; an efficient administrator of New Labour's redistribution by stealth who realised people needed to be persuaded to change their minds and behaviour.

The crash of 2008 opened up a new paradoxical age and required a politics that was equally paradoxical: one that was more openly committed to its core values than before but that was also focused on building unlikely alliances in order to bring those values to realisation. The kind of energised, democratic, open-minded and engaging politics that Labour needs now more than ever is the politics that Ed Miliband does best.

Even though many appear to have forgotten it, Ed Miliband took over the leadership of the Labour party at a desperate time in the party's history. Its performance in the last general election was one of the worst in its entire existence. After years of internal division followed by incompetent leadership, Labour was all but wiped out in large swathes of the country. And in the immediate months after the election, the party was not

in a position to renew itself. Instead, it was thrown into a leadership election where the leading two candidates were brothers whose political positions were widely – if mistakenly – interpreted to reflect the very schism that did so much to damage the party in the first place.

The nature of the Labour leader's vision is, then, more pressingly important than at any moment for decades. If Ed Miliband is to continue to turn the Labour party around he will have to possess a set of ideals that can capture the heart of the nation and to become a virtuoso in performance. Nothing less will do. To have any sense of whether that is possible, we need to know more about the man himself, his organising ideals and his natural political capacities.

Ed's intellectual journey

When I first met Ed Miliband, in October of 1989, he was already beginning to shape a political vision. He had emerged, of course, from an incredible household. His father, Ralph Miliband, was the most prominent British-based Marxist intellectual of the age. His mother, Marion Kozak, was an equally prominent campaigner for progressive causes. Their house just off Primrose Hill in North London was a constant meeting point for radical intellectuals and politicians from all over the world.

Despite this background, there was never any doubt that Ed was Labour. He had read his father's books, including *The State in Capitalist Society* and *Parliamentary Socialism*, both of which cast severe doubts on the Labour party's ability to deliver far-reaching change to Britain. But it was clear to all who knew him that although Ed admired each of these books, he was entirely unpersuaded by their central arguments. A properly radical Labour party, Ed always insisted, could build the public support necessary to transform the country, to make it fairer and more equal.

Ed spent most of his college days thinking and arguing about both the nature of that desired transformation and of the means of achieving it. Most of the formal teaching he received in political philosophy was inspired by the John Rawls' 1971 masterpiece *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls' theory, at least as he was taught to Oxford students in the early 1990s, offered a distinctly liberal view of the purposes of politics. The goal of political life, on this account, was to secure a set of basic rights for everyone and to work towards a narrowing of the gap between rich and poor. Indeed, so strong was Rawls' dedication to reducing that gap that he insisted the only inequalities that should be permitted should be those demonstrably to the advantage of the very worst off in society.

There was much in this vision that attracted the young Ed. It seemed to offer, in particular, an academically respectable defence of the kind of egalitarianism to which he was instinctively sympathetic. But Ed was opposed to the ivory-tower philosophical abstraction of Rawls' theory. This abstract philosophising meant that Rawls had forgotten that the actual rights and equalities that citizens currently enjoy – such as the equal right to vote – had been won through long struggle by real people acting together across the course of history. Ed felt Rawls' apparent ignorance of these movements needed to be put right. In 1991, he bought a book containing selected writings on 'human rights' from the 18th and 19th centuries. Reflecting on it, he wrote that some Oxford tutors "may lead us to believe that political theory began in 1971, but this book suggests otherwise."

Democracy as a means and an end

Ed's early academic reflections on politics led him to some profound conclusions, even if he was still a very young man. A proper political philosophy, in his view, took issues of rights and equality seriously but always located those

issues in the practical possibilities of actual times and places. Change needed ideas, but it also required people, movements and parties, not just philosophies.

These nascent academic thoughts were reinforced by his experiences of practical political action. Although Ed loved many aspects of Oxford life, he was consistently disappointed by some of its more traditional practices. He was unsettled by living in an institution that excluded most of its members from its decision-making. In the Oxford of the early 1990s, students were very rarely permitted to discuss the issues that directly affected their lives and neither were the vast majority of college staff. Ed was shocked at the pay and conditions that the college cleaners had to endure but he was even more outraged by the fact that they had no means of representation. There were no unions, no works councils, not even a culture of consultation.

Ed's response was to develop a means of practising politics that was deeply democratic. His goal in university politics was simple: to get people involved. He wanted every student to come to the college junior common room (student union) meetings, to argue about the issues and to dedicate themselves to doing something practical after the meetings. He spent hours strategising with friends, as all aspiring student politicians do, but he spent just as much time, if not more, talking to those who were unlikely to agree with him. Ed recognised that change could be built only if he connected with everyone. Even the most conservative student or member of college staff had to be drawn into the process.

Pragmatism and New Labour

There were those around Ed at university who were uncomfortable with his politics. Some of those, of course, were turned off by his radicalism. Oxford in the early 1990s, after all, was home to the Bullingdon Club as well as to the largest CND branches in the country. Others, though, were

disappointed by what they saw as by his pragmatism. At the time when he was JCR president, Ed was always keen to build the broadest possible consensus before taking any action. Unusually for a student politician, he was uneasy about dramatic political risks, preferring to hold back on action until he was fully persuaded that effective support could be mobilised. None of this was because he lacked principle. No-one thought that. It was a strategic sense that change required broad and popular support.

Such caution was rare in student politics, but it was a characteristic that served him well as he graduated from student politics to national Labour politics. In the early years, the New Labour project seemed entirely right and natural to Ed. If Labour was to be able to make a difference to people's lives it had to secure office and it could only secure office if it connected directly with a broad range of the people of Britain.

There were undeniably individual aspects of early New Labour that unsettled him. As a young man, he wasn't as comfortable in some of the company his more senior colleagues were keeping. But he rarely displayed any of this unease in public. He was satisfied with a general approach to politics that emphasised the necessity of building up from the population rather than seeking simply to impose a set of principles and policies from above. And he was confident too that it was the means to electoral success. Ed had no sympathy at all with the oppositionism and self-described moral purity of the militant far left. Real, sustainable change mattered to Ed, and that would not come from intellectual discussion or minority politics alone.

The drift from New Labour

Ed's admiration for many key elements of the New Labour project should not be underestimated. As anyone who has read the multitudinous memoirs of New Labour will know,

he was adept at helping those running the state machine. He appreciated the intricacies of the tax-benefit system and always evinced a faith that the cause of social equality could at least partially be progressed through effective administration. The instinctively democratic capacities of his youth did not find a natural outlet in such a role.

As the government aged, though, doubts surfaced as to the desirability of this approach to politics and Ed began to notice them. As support for the government ebbed away, like many in the party Ed became increasingly uncomfortable with aspects of New Labour's apparent desire to follow focus groups and opinion polls rather than to engage in a deeper conversation with the public. Having been elected as an MP and moving towards the cabinet, he began again to insist that Labour should try more openly to convince the public of the merits of their case. There was a problem when politics became detached from people's everyday lives; a problem when people thought politicians too distant from their concerns.

In lectures to the Fabian Society and other supportive groups, he announced a desire to shape a new public opinion – a “new consensus” as he called it – rather than to follow established orthodoxy. This was the task that aspects of New Labour had abandoned, he began publically to argue. Too often New Labour governments sought change by stealth, through clever financial adjustments that it hoped no critics would notice. There was some merit in that, but the less positive result was that New Labour rarely made an effort to persuade the country of the need for a new direction, at least in the most controversial of terrain.

Ed seized the opportunity that his post as climate change secretary allowed him to move beyond these self-denying ordinances. Climate change, after all, required that people be persuaded to change their minds and behaviour. Here was the politics he had grown up with. A politics where a large number of people cared about the issues, where

young people were even willing to take to the streets, and where he was personally able to get out and make a persuasive case to the people of Britain. It was no coincidence that this was the moment that Ed truly emerged on the national scene. Ed got his political energies back in this moment and the belief grew that he could do politics in a new way.

A new political vision for Labour

The crash of 2008 transformed the context within which politics took place, making this commitment to a new form of politics even more timely. The crash thus not only terminally destabilised Gordon Brown's Labour administration. It opened up both new opportunities for politics and serious new challenges for the centre-left.

The precise combination of opportunities and challenges was dizzying. The collapse of the financial services sector revealed most importantly that Britain's political economy was not fixed forever, but it did not do so in a way that crafted a straightforward alternative. The crash had destroyed public faith in an under-regulated market; at the same time as it had rocked confidence in the capacity of government to predict economic crises. It had also alerted people to the grave dangers of severe inequalities – especially inequalities of power – at the very same time that it had made them anxious about the size of the public debt.

This was a new paradoxical age. What was required in such a time, Ed began to argue, although not in these terms, was a politics that was equally paradoxical. One that was more openly committed to its core values than before but that was also focused on building unlikely alliances in order to bring those values to realisation. Just at the moment when Ed Miliband began to consider leading the Labour party, then, he became even more conscious than before of the need to find a way of combining real radicalism with the search for sustainable social coalitions.

During Ed's leadership campaign and the first two years as Labour leader, he thus displayed a continuing emphasis on far-reaching innovation in exactly this terrain.

The idea of 'responsible capitalism' that has played such an important part in Ed's second year as leader was one of the clearest results of such a conception. No longer willing to countenance a political economy that failed to deliver higher wages and better conditions for working people while rewarding some at the top with vast increases in pay and power, Ed announced a clear intention to reshape the balance of Britain's economy. At the same time, however, he recognised that such a transformation had to enlist the energies and support of Britain's businesses and business leaders themselves. A broad coalition of support would have to be built to generate a new economy for Britain. It would not emerge directly from government nor could it come from empty oppositionism.

This shared commitment to reconciling a politics of principle and realism echoes across the policy agenda. As other chapters in this volume illustrate, it stands at the heart of the understanding of public service reform, of broader social responsibility and of civic renewal that Ed Miliband has begun to sketch out. But it is not just policy that was impacted by Ed's understanding of the post-crash era. Underpinning his view was also a new conception of how politics itself should be conducted.

Organising the new politics

In the hours immediately after Ed delivered his first Labour party conference speech as leader, he broke with tradition to attend a fringe event. That event was the assembly organised by the Movement for Change, the community organising wing of his brother David's leadership campaign. The room was crammed with organisers and community leaders, young and old, from all over

the country, who had come to tell their stories. They gave witness to community efforts to eradicate knife crime, to eliminate alcohol-induced anti-social behaviour, to save leisure centres, and to safeguard jobs. All of these efforts were united by one thing: a style of politics that involved coming together and arguing, openly, respectfully, but forcefully, in public.

As any new leader would, Ed Miliband came into that assembly somewhat tentatively. He was asked directly whether he was going to commit to ensuring that this kind of politics was central to the Labour party once again. His answer was simple: "I'd be crazy not to."

That answer was the right one. The most inspired aspect of Ed's pitch for the leadership was his commitment to the campaign for a living wage. This campaign was the perfect example of the very kind of politics that Labour needs in order to rebuild: people with no previous political allegiance coming together to argue directly and in public with their neighbours and their employers in order to secure a better life for themselves and their fellows. Such politics is a million miles from either the strategy of avoidance advanced by the more cynical of our spin doctors or the empty oppositionism of the traditional left. It offers the possibility of drawing people back in to politics and of restoring the reputation of the Labour party in the process.

There is no doubt that Ed Miliband knows this. There is no doubt, too, that he developed the personal capacities as a young man to engage in the kind of politics that Labour now requires. Probably more than any politician of his generation, Ed knows how to bring an argument into the public in a way that does not polarise. He knows how to focus on broad-based appeals rather than just on the core vote. He knows how to organise and to mobilise effectively even with the most unlikely of allies. He knows how to craft a winning coalition.

There must always be an anxiety too that it is a long time since Ed had the chance to practice this kind of politics himself and that it is extraordinarily difficult to do it from the leader's office. He was an efficient administrator of New Labour's agenda, and the pressures on his time and his energies are more intense now than they have ever been. But there should also be no doubt that this kind of energised, democratic, open-minded and engaging politics is the politics that Ed Miliband does best and is the politics that Labour needs now more than ever.

"Here's to a radical Labour government," Ed Miliband scribbled inside a book he gave me as we set about campaigning in the 1992 general election. Now, twenty years later Ed has a real sense of how it might be achieved. It requires a newly democratic form of politics. A radical Labour government will only be built slowly over time by the continual efforts of people all over the country to argue for Labour's causes, persuade others of their merits, and to organise for their victory in the short and the long term.

I believe that Ed Miliband is the leader to bring change to the way that we do our politics. I believe too that if he does, he might deliver the government of which he has long dreamed.