

Ed Miliband and One Nation Politics

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British Labour Party leader Ed Miliband has been accused of being wonky and clunky at speeches but easy and more conversational in interactions. If TV vox pop interviews are anything to go by, half the UK's population don't even know who he is.

So this week he changed his approach to the annual [party leader's speech](#). He memorised it, ditched notes and autocue, and delivered it fluently for an hour, with audience participation. He's been accused of going AWOL over the last few weeks. No wonder. He must have had a hundred rehearsals in front of the mirror.

Stylistically it worked. The pundits deemed him to have 'spoken human'. He made a good go of being an ordinary guy from a London comprehensive school, opposing a government of posh boys who want to attack pensioners to finance tax cuts for their own. He made people laugh and spoke passionately.

But it depends how much of the speech viewers saw. The snapshot they watched may have been about 'one-nation', a phrase he used 46 times. Clips they caught could have focused on an evangelism about Britain rather than his desire to tackle inequality.

Miliband mentioned the 'predators' and 'producers' of his [2011 party speech](#), but avoided '[predistribution](#)', his buzzword of a few weeks ago, although proposals on prices, cartels and vocational education addressed this.

The theme of one-nation politics allows him to steal the Tories' clothes, and shows '[Blue Labour](#)' isn't dead. Miliband bigged up post-Olympics patriotism for his party, yet dressed it in the language of social divisions, between posh and plebs, public and private, north and south.

But 'one' and 'nation' aren't the right words for what needs to be done. Some will say these are just rhetoric to win support and we shouldn't be disdainful. But Britain isn't 'one' and, more importantly, in the process of tackling inequality it won't be. Addressing divisions will entail conflict, which should be warned of upfront, or the mission won't succeed, and greater equality not secured.

The word 'nation' is also dangerous. It encourages putting our own ahead of others internationally more needy, not the outward-lookingness Miliband flagged up. The issue isn't that we all have the same passport. It's that we're divided by sector, class and other social inequities.

You can't criticise the Conservative international development secretary for being against international development if you then bump up the rhetoric of nation, a concept in contradiction with global obligations, not otherwise mentioned in Miliband's speech. And the notion of nation fails to prepare people for addressing the catastrophic global crisis of climate change.

One test of the internationalism that saved the Miliband family from the Nazis is in immigration policy. But Ed contradicts his appeal to his migrant roots, endorsing anti-immigration on the spurious grounds that it's bad for the core working class, and their wages, something that hard economic evidence shows is, at most, very unevenly the case.

Miliband spoke with a multicultural group behind him, and in the face of [attitudinal evidence](#) that majorities aren't against immigration from skilled workers, students, temporary migrants and close family. But he speaks of tightening up on these forms of migration or fails to challenge the Tories when they try to close them down.

One way to tackle the exploitation of British and migrant workers is a living wage, which Miliband encourages but says is unaffordable nationally. Another route is strong trade unions for wage bargaining. But he shows irritation whenever unions come up. Under New Labour inequality increased despite policies that redistributed, because wage inequality in the neo-liberal economy they favoured grew. Miliband's redistribution engages with this.

Predistribution and responsible capitalism have potential for the left. The rich would share the burden of austerity more. And society would be made fairer before we needed to redistribute.

But policies have to be equal to this. Tougher enforcement of the minimum wage, rather than raising it, won't do the job. Neither will an easily ignored worker on every remuneration committee. Longer term reporting by companies will barely make inroads into power relations or corporate culture. These are the proposals of career policy wonks. Anyone who's worked in the real economy of worker-manager relations knows they're nowhere near enough. And it's going to take more than hiving off their retail function to deal with the banks.

Miliband's been proposing weak policies behind better concepts for some time now, and we await more proposals with the clout to work. It's wrong to criticise those who say policies are lacking. It's not good having electorally appealing rhetoric if after a year of repeating it, and some easily marginalised policies, you don't have more to come up with. Whether British capitalism will be responsible or predistributional, and whether people will buy this, depends on the policies not the ideas.

Miliband addressed economic inequalities. But behind these are class and power relations. There isn't enough in Labour's approach to suggest that relations that stop us being 'one' will be tackled. To engage with what divides us requires saying that divisions will plague the attempts to equalise.

We need policies from Labour. These have to go from the inequities Miliband has addressed to proposals serious enough to stand up against the class and power that will oppose him, and address international problems of development and environment. If he can find these the rhetoric of 'one nation' will seem like something done to win people over in 2012, before the confrontations and global responsibility of government, needed to overcome inequality and go beyond insularity.