

Ed: The Milibands and the making of a Labour Leader

A transparent attempt to rebrand Labour

Part one

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This is the first part of a two-part review

Ed: The Milibands and the making of a Labour Leader (Biteback Publishing, ISBN: 978-1-84954-102-2) is less a biography than an extended memo, written by Mehdi Hasan and James Macintyre from the standpoint of explaining to disappointed supporters of David Miliband how his younger brother, Ed, won last year's Labour Party leadership election.

Labour's membership consists of middle class, right-wing forces and many of these believed that David, the eldest and most experienced brother, who had served time in government as foreign secretary, would have been the best choice as Labour Party leader. They have difficulty getting their heads around why this did not happen, given that Miliband was the heir apparent as far as the Blairites within the party were concerned.

Hasan and Macintyre repeat what many of them are saying or thinking:

"Why did Ed do it? Why did this apparently kind, gentle man with strong emotional sensibilities, put politics and ambition before family and decide to stand against his own brother? Why didn't he, say, run David's campaign, seek to influence the leadership from within, avoiding any of the real family fallout that was to follow?"

Hasan is senior editor [politics] at the *New Statesman* and a former news and current affairs editor at Channel 4. Macintyre is politics editor at *Prospect*, which, it boasts, "has established itself as a must-read title with key figures in government, journalism, policy making and business".

Both have had turns producing and appearing on the BBC's current affairs program *Question Time*, which specializes in manipulating public opinion in a rightward direction.

After putting the question once again, "What makes a man put politics and ambition before family", they go on to state, "Ed Miliband is perhaps the least understood political leader of modern times."

Their book "reveals where he has come from and where he is going; his unique upbringing, against the backdrop of tragedy and with a prominent Marxist thinker for a father..."

The authors are quick to make a disclaimer about the rushed and shallow approach of their work, reassuring readers that it is not "intended to be a final, definitive account of his life and career" and admitting that while "Biographers often spend years studying, exploring and examining their subjects, this book has been completed, often through late nights and weekends, over only six months."

They state that "the majority of our sources preferred to remain

anonymous", another indication of the lack of seriousness with which the pair approached their subject.

However, this is not the main fault of their book. It is predicated on the big lie that New Labour was simply a "project" of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown that ran out of steam, and that nobody knows which direction Labour will now take.

Hasan and Macintyre are concealing the fact that in the 1980s and 1990s, the Labour Party went through a fundamental transformation. The pressure of the intensifying world capitalist economic crisis exposed the full effects of British imperialism's long historical decline, forcing the Labour Party to ditch its reformist programme and become a right-wing overtly pro-capitalist party no different from the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats.

The Blair-Brown years were no mere aberration, but the form through which that transformation took place. This phenomenon was not simply restricted to the Labour Party in Britain. All the social democratic parties and organisations throughout Europe went through the same process.

In alliance with US imperialism, the previous Labour government launched predatory imperialist wars abroad, making them directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands throughout the Middle East, as well as young British troops who lost their lives in an illegal war. Together with the strike-busting activities of the trade union leaders, who sold out one struggle after another, the Labour Party is also responsible for plunging millions of working class families throughout the UK into insecurity and poverty.

The Labour Party under Ed Miliband will not move "we know not where", least of all to the left of the Blair-Brown governments, as Hasan and Macintyre imply, but continuously to the right.

Nowhere do the authors address these critical questions, because they have no interest in the fate of the working class. They represent the same right-wing, privileged middle-class layer as the governmental advisors that make up a large part of their target readership. Their writing is difficult to follow, particularly the second half of the book, which goes into great detail about the internal workings of government, the opportunist back room deals and the bureaucratic leadership election process.

Several times I felt like throwing it in the bin, but every now and then they would pick up on some interesting fact or amusing anecdote.

During the 2010 leadership election campaign the capitalist press gave a great deal of attention to the close relationship the Miliband brothers had enjoyed with their late father, Ralph. A whole chapter of the book, entitled "Ralph", is dedicated to him.

The authors write, “The Miliband home became one of the best known and best attended London meeting places for Marxists, socialists and radicals from around the world. Regular visitors included the cultural critic Raymond Williams, the historian and writer E.P. Thompson, the author and activist Tariq Ali and the doyen of the Labour left, the then-MP and ex-Cabinet minister Tony Benn. ‘Marion [Ralph Miliband’s wife] is a very good cook,’ says Benn. ‘We’d have a lovely meal and then we’d sit and talk.’”

Having painted this picture of radical left activity, however, the authors stress that the Milibands were still loyal to the entire party apparatus:

“But it wasn’t just radicals and revolutionaries who were made to feel welcome at Edis Street: Ralph and Marion entertained people from across the left and centre-left. Clive Jenkins, the ‘champagne socialist’ trade union leader and friend of the tycoon Robert Maxwell, was a visitor to the house. So too was Giles Radice, one of the tribunes of Labour’s pro-European, centre-right faction. The boys were exposed to a range of arguments and political opinions from a very young age.”

Later they write “Ed’s whole childhood was one long and intense lesson on the meaning of politics, the left and the Labour Party.”

Contrary to the claim made here, Ralph Miliband was never a Marxist. In advance of the Nazi invasion of Belgium, Ralph and his father, Sam, escaped and eventually landed in England in 1941. In 1943 Ralph enlisted as a student at the London School of Economics, where he came under the influence of socialist academic and Labour Party intellectual Harold Laski.

It was Laski’s intervention with the Labour home secretary that led to Sam’s right to stay in Britain being made permanent in 1952 and his mother and sister becoming naturalized one year later. “Meanwhile, Ralph had returned to the LSE where Laski helped him to secure an assistant lectureship in political science in 1949”.

It was probably as a result of Laski’s encouragement that Ralph “joined the Labour Party in the early fifties and was drawn to its Bevanite left wing. But he left the party a few years later, disillusioned with the ‘revisionist’ direction that Labour was taking under Hugh Gaitskell, never to rejoin. Instead, Ralph became one of the leading British voices of the New Left, an intellectual movement consisting of those who rejected the Labour and Communist parties and were trying to salvage Marxist, socialist tradition from Stalinism and the crimes of the Soviet Union”.

The New Left movement was in fact created by forces hostile to Marxism and the socialist revolution. Soviet leader Nikita’s Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” in 1956, detailing some of Stalin’s crimes, coupled with the Stalinist bureaucracy’s military crushing of the Hungarian Revolution had discredited the Communist parties, at a time of acute crisis for British imperialism. The revolutionary upsurge of the emerging Arab proletariat, epitomized by the struggle of the Egyptian masses, led to Britain losing the Suez Canal to President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalist regime.

There were proletarian forces from within both the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Labour Party that reacted by turning to the left and seeking a way forward, when they came across the Marxist analysis advanced by the British Trotskyists led by Gerry Healy.

But there were petty-bourgeois political tendencies that reacted entirely differently to this profound shift in the class struggle internationally. They were animated by fear of the development of an independent movement of the working class breaking free of the

social democratic and Stalinist parties. They set-out to build a middle class “buffer” to protect the bureaucracy’s exposed rump, the “New Left”. They called themselves communist, socialist and even Trotskyist, but their perspectives and programme were aimed at dragging the working class back behind the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The New Left movement is responsible for introducing the nationalist, ethnic-and gender-specific theories that have led to so much confusion over the last 30 years, as well as helping the imperialists divert workers and youth along dangerous communal lines in South East Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Hasan and Macintyre write that “Ralph’s book, *Parliamentary Socialism*, was a product of his disillusionment; it was a scholarly and polemical case against the Labour Party”.

Scholarly it may be, but it was opposed to any turn to revolutionary socialism. Although *Parliamentary Socialism* makes various criticisms of the Labour Party, its main role was to encourage illusions amongst youth, in particular, that you can have socialism without smashing the capitalist state. While Ralph Miliband would condemn “the sickness of Labourism,” he did not do this from the standpoint of a Marxist, but a bourgeois democrat. The title of his last publication, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, published the year he died in 1994, tends to speak for itself.

Reading *Ed*, you realize just what a privileged lifestyle the Miliband brothers have enjoyed. The site of the family home, Primrose Hill, is one of the most beautiful and desired areas, an oasis in the middle of what is more generally a run-down and poverty-stricken area of north London. Haverstock is one of the best state schools in the county and was provided a lot of money with which to attract the best teachers and “greenhouse” its most promising pupils.

“Overall Ed was clearly at ease in the school, albeit happiest among the ‘middle class contingent’. He may have been bullied, as he confessed to a Treasury colleague two decades later, but he certainly didn’t retreat into introspection.”

Both brothers visited America, and when his father lectured there, Ed would occasionally come over and actually lived with him and went to school there for a short time. Both brothers went on to Oxford University and its Corpus Christi College, where they were elected at different times president of the Junior Common Room.

Interestingly, “David Leopold, who teaches politics at Mansfield College, Oxford, and taught Ed’s Marxism paper, remembers a ‘clever, sharp student who could think, not only about the arguments but about objections and so on’”.

“Despite taking a Marxist paper and being the son of Britain’s most famous Marxist theoretician, Ed himself wasn’t a Marxist. Says Leopold, ‘He was critically interested in Marxism. He wasn’t a believer, he was open-minded-and he was certainly capable of getting a first.’”

To be continued



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