

Ed: The Milibands and the making of a Labour Leader

A transparent attempt to rebrand Labour

Dave Hyland

13 September 2011

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," 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, "the majority of our sources preferred to remain anonymous", another indication of the lack of seriousness by 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 affects 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’s 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 dragooning 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 family home in 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 with 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’.”

Once he left university, Ed Miliband had a period working for Channel Four before moving seamlessly into government as a special advisor to the Treasury. He was a supporter of Gordon Brown, while David, who had also been a special advisor but was now a Labour MP, was a supporter of Tony Blair. This was the first time the brothers had ever been in opposition.

Apparently, in his never-ending battle with Blair, Brown, as chancellor of the exchequer, was always on the lookout for those he could appoint as special advisers. Of course, Blair had to have his own, as did other ministers.

By the time Blair was forced to resign as prime minister in 2007, a whole industry of “special advisors” had grown up within the corridors of power. Their job is to supply the plans and the useful and slanted statistics that would keep the government in office.

We are told by Hasan and Macintyre that Ed Miliband has visited Harvard University twice. The first time, with the encouragement of Gordon Brown, was in the autumn of 2002, when he became a visiting scholar at Harvard’s Center of European Studies (CES).

“Every year Harvard admits about thirty scholars from around Europe and the USA. He was personally invited by the then-director of the CES, Peter Hall ... the scholarly Hall was familiar to Ed; two years earlier, in 2001 he had co-authored a book called *Varieties of Capitalism* with the economist David Soskice—father of Ed’s ex-girlfriend, Juliet.”

Later the authors write: “Ed had the opportunity to make contact with some of the West’s most progressive thinkers, including the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, famous for his work on social capital, and the Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel, who taught the celebrated ‘Justice’ course at the university for the last two decades.”

In 2003, Miliband decided to extend his stay by a term in order to teach for the first time in his life. “Ed returned to Harvard in the autumn of 2003, but this time to the university’s government department rather than the CES. His background as an advisor to Gordon Brown helped him obtain such a prestigious post.”

The course he taught was entitled, “What’s Left? The Politics of Social Justice.”

According to Harvard, its theme was to compare the recent experience of “left-of-center governments in different European nations and the US” in order to examine “policy dilemmas confronting politicians seeking social justice amidst trends like globalization, economic insecurity and multiculturalism. And it explores innovative, feasible ideas in welfare,

economy and society which can define a future for progressive politics.”

Miliband’s target audience consisted of future Democratic Party functionaries, with the aim of providing a left veneer for the pro-business agenda now being implemented by the Barack Obama administration.

Hasan and Macintyre insist, “Ed’s story cannot be fully understood outside the context of his struggle to emerge from the shadow of his elder brother, David.”

They provide no evidence for this. Rather than there being a “big struggle” to emerge from David’s shadow, there was a deep brotherly love between them. Even when Ed joined Brown’s economic team at the Treasury, the two brothers were close.

The election of Ed Miliband as leader of the Labour Party at this particular moment in time *can only be understood* within the context of the developments in the crisis of the world capitalism system and the continuing decline of British imperialism.

At the last minute, and after a campaign in which five candidates had participated, the Labour bureaucracy decided hesitantly and by a narrow margin of 1.2 percent that Ed Miliband should be leader and not the strong favourite, David.

This was particularly due to the vote of the trade union bureaucracy, which decided that the Labour Party had to look as if it was making a new start. On the hustings, the Iraq war was still the biggest issue. While David is still closely associated with that war, having stood by the decision to invade and refused to apologise, Ed had been in the US at the time of the parliamentary vote to support war and said that if he’d been able to vote, he would probably have voted against.

Ed Miliband also boasted of the “proudest personal moment in my career”—his “securing extra funding for the [National Health Service] out of general taxation, and instituting a tax credits regime that put more money in the pockets of the poorest workers while encouraging those on benefits to get jobs.”

Not for the first time Hasan and Macintyre act as apologists for Ed Miliband and Labour, for this was the time when the NHS was being handed over to the private sector. Working tax credits are a form of means tested benefits. Although rolled out in 1999 with great fanfare, amidst the claim that they would reduce child poverty while making work pay, the actual result was that employers got a gratis top-up on the low wages they pay, thereby helping them maintain low wages. Although some claimants received up to £50 a week more, many others landed in a bureaucratic nightmare and thousands of pounds in debt.

The official announcement of Ed Miliband’s leadership victory in September 2010 was an incredibly tense affair. A yell let out from the audience, which wasn’t so much celebration as relief because at times the contest had been very ugly. The authors give a description of how the rival supporters of each brother “squared up to one another” at the July 13 reception organized by the Trades Union Congress at Summer House, in Westminster. By the announcement it was clear there was a split right down the middle of the bureaucracy.

One of the more amusing passages in the book reads: “After the announcement, Ed was to be taken triumphantly backstage. The plan was he would be greeted by a party official and escorted off to a holding room to gather his thoughts and then do a round of press interviews. Like all the other candidates, he and his team practiced the choreography... Now, though, something was horribly wrong. The party’s personnel had disappeared; they had voted with their feet. Many had headed to bars to drown their sorrows. One senior party official admits today that ‘at least 80 percent of the party backed David.’ Some Labour press officers were spotted sobbing outside by members of the Ed campaign.”

He was portrayed by the trade unions as “consensual” and “communal,” but what they wanted was a visible distancing operation that in fact leaves Labour’s rightward course unchanged in most respects, while shifting it even further to the right in others.

It is certainly likely that the union bureaucracy felt his collaborative approach more useful to them, in line with their own practice of breaking up strikes by restricting them to local campaigns based on nationalist perspectives. Miliband himself went to the length of organizing a photo-call visit to Billingsgate Market to defend market porters’ feudal rights.

Hasan and Macintyre are forced to state: “Some in the party worry about the nostalgia and social conservatism inherent in the so-called ‘Blue Labour’ communitarian project pushed by, among others, Jon Cruddas and Maurice Glasman—who, less than a year after meeting Ed, had become an influential member of the leader’s inner circle (and was rewarded by the new leader with a peerage).”

But this does not address the real significance of Miliband’s attraction to these figures. Cruddas and Glasman’s “Blue Labour” agenda is based upon asserting nationalism as the basis for access to welfare state allowance together with an anti-immigration agenda.

Since his election, Ed Miliband has been working night and day to heal the rift in the party, knowing you can’t lead any party with only 20 percent support.

Miliband has had an almost impeccable training in bourgeois politics and the Labour bureaucratic machine, having joined the party at 16. It is also clear that “government by coalition” is his preferred method of governing. He already intervened to save Tory Prime Minister David Cameron from facing calls to resign over the Murdoch phone-hacking crisis when he called a meeting between the leaders of the three main parties and reached a common agreement on the matter.

Under him, the Labour Party is holding various meetings with the Liberal Democrats and preparing to push bourgeois politics in Britain ever further to the right.

British society is rotting away as the elite layer gorge on money stolen from the working class through illegal bank operations and privatisation of the utilities and public services. The economic/social gap between rich and poor widens daily, reinforcing class antagonisms. Some form of “government of national unity” cannot be ruled out.

By any social indicator, the British bourgeoisie has lost any moral right it may have thought it had to rule. The country is moving into a pre-revolutionary situation. In electing the younger Miliband, a small majority of the Labour bureaucracy, particularly the trade union bosses, decided he offers them at this point the best political cover for the stormy period lying immediately ahead.

The Tory-led Cameron government is using those caught up in the recent rioting to see if it can get away with making even greater attacks on democratic rights, drive through more cuts in health and education, and force the working class into more humiliating poverty.

Hasan and Macintyre portray Ed Miliband as some kind of leftist democrat who can save capitalism, not unlike his hero Bobby Kennedy. But this is absurd. The world capitalist crisis has moved on half a century since then and deepened, driven forwards by the advances in technology and science it cannot utilize for the betterment of all, but only to enrich the few. It is not a flourishing but a degenerating bourgeois democracy that exists today, and it is the proletarian world socialist revolution that is on the agenda.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact