



Ed Miliband

Electoral liability?

Can Labour win the May election with Ed as leader? **Ian Richards** looks at the evidence

The 2015 election could be the most exciting and unpredictable contest in living memory. With at least half a dozen parties vying for influence and voting intentions still unclear, even the bookies are uncertain what will happen on 7 May. However, one thing seems to be obvious — Ed Miliband will cost Labour votes and may be the difference between Labour winning or losing the election. In an age of partisan de-alignment and 'presidential' election campaigns, leaders can be a key electoral asset or a vote-shedding liability. Why is Ed Miliband so often seen as a liability?

Ed is 'not ready'

In early February the polling company Ipsos MORI released data revealing that 63% of the public think Ed Miliband is not ready to be prime minister. Only 8% 'strongly agreed' that he is ready (compared with 43% who 'strongly disagreed'). To put this in a wider context, these figures are similar to the polling numbers for the ill-fated ex-Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith back in 2003. They are even worse than ex-Labour leader Michael Foot's ratings in the early 1980s.

What's his problem?

Ed Miliband's leadership problems go all the way back to 2010 when he was elected Labour leader. As he had been strongly backed by the unions in the leadership

election, his opponents were quick to present him as 'Red Ed'. The fact that he took on and beat his brother, David Miliband, not only undermined his relationship with his sibling, but also damaged his integrity for some members of the public. His image problems started back then and have never been corrected.

Miliband has since added to his woes with a series of public-relations 'own goals' (or 'gaffes', as they tend to get called). From mangling a bacon sandwich to offering a homeless man a few pennies, Miliband has made it easy for the press to ridicule him and present him as not prime ministerial.

It's not the policies

For Labour-leaning commentators Miliband's inadequacies are all the more frustrating when many of his policies appear comparatively popular. Policies like the 'mansion tax', energy price-freeze, tackling corporate tax avoidance and the reintroduction of the 50p tax rate poll well with the public. Miliband even scores well when voters are asked which of the main party leaders 'understands people like me'.

As the journalist George Eaton has argued, it is not policies that are Miliband's problem but his 'personal brand'. To some critics he simply appears socially awkward and lacks charisma. The US pollster, Dick Morris, once said 'charisma is the most elusive of political traits'. Maybe Miliband just lacks this all-important X factor.

Others blame a weak Labour media operation and believe too many of the party's media advisors have a newspaper, rather than TV, background. Jason Cowley recently argued that Miliband 'doesn't understand the lower middle class...he doesn't understand Essex Man or Woman'. The same point could be made about David Cameron, but the difference is that he is seen as 'prime ministerial' and polls well on most measures of leadership.



Can Labour win?

Of course, if Labour loses the 2015 election it won't only be because of Ed Miliband's image problem. He inherited a party that suffered one of its worst ever defeats in 2010. And in the eyes of the public Labour is largely to blame for the economic crisis that developed after 2009.

However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, at present, Miliband is a drag on the party's fortunes. Whereas David Cameron is more popular than his party, Ed Miliband consistently polls as less popular than his.

None of this means that Labour can't win in 2015, or at least become the largest party in Parliament. The outcome of the election is likely to remain far from obvious right up until polling day. What is clear at present is that if Labour does win, it will be in spite of its leader and not because of him.

Weblinks to follow up

Negative news for Miliband:

<http://tinyurl.com/ptxezez>

More positive news: <http://tinyurl.com/osok6uz>

Questions and activities

- 1 Make a list of Ed Miliband's strengths and weaknesses as party leader.
- 2 Why, and in what ways, has leadership become more important in elections in recent years?
- 3 'Ed Miliband will be the difference between Labour winning or losing the 2015 election'. Do you agree?

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