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“The Wall was Too High”: the Four Predicaments of Mr Miliband

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"The Wall was Too High": the Four Predicaments of Mr Miliband

L'obstacle était trop grand : les 4 difficultés de Monsieur Miliband

Eric Shaw

"Hey you, don't help them to bury the light
 Don't give in without a fight.....
 But it was only fantasy.
 The wall was too high,
 As you can see.
 No matter how he tried,
 He could not break free.....
 Pink Floyd "Hey You" in *The Wall*

- 1 The 2015 elections inflicted a devastating defeat on the Labour party. Until the last moment polls indicated that a minority Labour government backed by the SNP would scrape through. In the event, the Tories gained an absolute majority, the first time since 1992 in a result no one had anticipated. Ed Miliband immediately resigned and the search for a successor has begun.

Party	Percentage	Gain/loss	Seats
Conservative	36.9	+0.8	331
Labour	30.4	+1.5	232
UKIP	12.6	+9.5	1
Liberal Democrat	7.9	-15.2	8
Scottish National Party	4.7	+3.1	56
Green	3.8	+2.8	1

Others (Mainly in Northern Ireland)			23
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- 2 Source BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results>
- 3 Let me begin by explaining what this paper is not about: it is not an analysis of why Labour suffered such a devastating election defeat, nor does it seek to explore its election campaign strategy in any detail. It also ignores the crucial aspect of Scotland, where, crushed by the SNP, Labour lost all but one of its 41 seats: in effect this was a separate election.¹
- 4 The issue the paper explores is why Labour was never likely to succeed.² And it does so by probing four major predicaments: lack of confidence in Ed Miliband as a potential Prime Minister, in Labour's ability to run the economy, in its capacity to manage the explosive issue of immigration and in its will to tackle (alleged) pervasive welfare abuse.
- 5 The first section of the paper consists of a detailed examination of these predicaments and evaluates Labour's efforts to resolve or mitigate them. The second section consider whether, as many commentators alleged, that Labour lost because it failed to come to terms with "reality", that is was out of tune with public opinion on the issues of the economy, immigration and welfare (see, e.g., Philpott, 2015). This article paper argues that "reality" is a rather more ambiguous concept than this argument allows, and that the "reality" which Labour failed to recognise was a constructed reality. The paper uses the metaphor of the dwellers in Plato's Cave to illustrate the fact that the subjective mental universe of many voters was at variance with empirically verifiable facts. The paper then uses concepts from social psychology to scrutinise the rather different ways people apprehend social realities.
- 6 If many (though not all) voters inhabited Plato's Cave should it follow that, as senior Labour frontbenchers, Chuka Umunna, maintained, Labour "*must start by meeting the voters where they are, not where we would like them to be*"? (Guardian 29 June 2015). Or would this failure by the party to affirm its own values simply, as former prominent Labour MP Bryan Gould riposted, lead voters to conclude that Labour was "*fatally short of both courage and convictions*"? (Guardian 21 July 2015). The third section of this article contends that political parties do have the capacity to modify mass perceptions but only be devising a plausible narrative, that alter the way people construe key salient societal issues. This the party failed to do, disabling its capacity to tackle any of its four predicaments. The paper concludes with some brief reflections on the party past and present.

Labour's four predicaments (1) The problem of leadership

- 7 We now live in an age when fixed party loyalties and class allegiances have faded and where voting is no longer an expressive act but a conscious decision. But how is that decision made? Rational choice theory, deriving from the work of Anthony Downs, sees voters as rational calculators or "*utility maximizers*" driven by self-interest. Scrutinising party programmes and ideology, they decide which party is closest to them in the political spectrum and which policies coincide most closely to their own preferences and will therefore maximize their "*utility*".³

- 8 This approach makes quite implausible assumptions about voter willingness to seek information and undertake sustained cognitive activity. Valence theory takes a more realistic approach. It argues that, rather than engaging in a time-consuming and demanding process of learning about party policies voters rely on simplifying "*heuristic devices*" or shortcuts. Research in the UK has shown the two principal such devices are evaluations of party leadership and economic competence.⁴ The section will focus on the first of these, the next section on the second.
- 9 Why is leadership so important? Unlike issues and policies, which are complex and often abstract, party leaders are highly visible embodiments of their parties.⁵ The greater the confidence voters repose in a leader, then the more trust they will place in the capacity of the leader's party to "*deliver the goods*". Conversely, lack of faith in a leader undermines faith in the party. Three attributes of leadership are of particular relevance here:
- 10 The possession of the qualities seen as required to be an effective Prime Minister; communicative ability, that is the ability to persuade people of the validity of their message; Affinity, or the possession of a personality which people find attractive and appealing.
- 11 Miliband's predicament was that he, very consistently, scored poorly on all three counts. Whilst Cameron conveyed a sense of being competent, decisive, self-assured and willing to take tough decisions (all major prime ministerial qualities) Miliband was seen as weak, irresolute and ineffectual.⁶
- 12 A party's capacity to communicate its message effectively relies heavily on the performance skills of its leader, especially on television. Unlike Tony Blair, Miliband was neither a polished televisual performer, with his delivery too often stilted and wooden, nor a telegenic personality.⁷ According to John McTernan, formerly a senior aide to Tony Blair, "*the Labour leader is compelling in private; empathetic, intelligent and charming. Yet this does not come across in all his public performances – in particular, it does not survive the journey through the camera lens and into the living room*" (John McTernan, *Financial Times* 24 September 2014).
- 13 But it was on people's judgment of his personality that Miliband trailed most heavily behind David Cameron. This judgment is more affective than reasoned; a matter of how people feel about leaders, whether they like or dislike them, whether or not they find them congenial and attractive. Miliband's public image was an extraordinarily negative one. He was widely seen as odd, pathetic, "*geeky*", and "*uncharismatic*", a man who had "*stabbed his brother in the back*". The character trait most often used to describe him was "*weird*." The sheer intensity of this hostility, sometimes verging on loathing, is striking and, doubtless influenced by the unremittingly scathing coverage meted out to him by the right-wing tabloids. The virulence of the Murdoch press indeed intensified after Miliband's decision (bravely and against the advice of a number of senior frontbenchers⁸) to challenge News International over the phone hacking-scandal. An avalanche of vitriolic personal denunciation was the inevitable result.⁹
- 14 Miliband's capacity to place a firmer stamp of authority was sapped by the narrowness of his majority over his brother, by his poor personal ratings and by relentlessly unflattering, but off-the record, briefings by many of his colleagues who portrayed him as arrogant, aloof and indecisive.¹⁰ All this was demoralising and, not surprisingly, Steve Richards of the Independent reported "*a mood of paranoia and suspicion*" around him.¹¹

- 15 When the campaign commenced, perceptions became less negative as Miliband was exposed to more voters and performed better than anticipated on TV interviews. But it was too little, too late.¹² Well before the election campaign, Miliband's media-propelled caricatured image had congealed in the public eye to form a gestalt through which all information was filtered and this proved impossible to dislodge. A party's leader should operate as its most effective exponent: for Labour, Miliband was a hindrance and this first predicament was never overcome.

Labour's four predicaments (2) the problem of economic credibility

- 16 If leadership quality, according to valence theory, is the first heuristic to simplify voting choice, the second is evaluation of economic competence. Which of the two major contenders for government office is most capable of managing the economy and hence delivering improved living standards, jobs and stable prices? ¹³ Labour's second predicament was that voters consistently preferred the Conservatives and by a wide margin with, for example, with much greater confidence in George Osborne than in Ed Balls as a Chancellor of the Exchequer.¹⁴
- 17 It rapidly became evident that poor economic ratings was a major problem for Labour: the question was how to address it. Here there were differences over two main issues, broad economic strategy and fiscal policy, between three strands of opinion : (1) Ed Miliband and his closest advisers, (2) the Blairite/right-wing of the party, including the senior frontbencher and elections co-ordinator, Douglas Alexander and (3) the Shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls.
- 18 Miliband's analysis, in brief, was as follows: Labour had forfeited the voters' confidence because it was associated with a flawed economic model inherited from and in its essentials preserved by the Blair/Brown Governments. Under this free market model economic activity was skewed by an inflated and inadequately regulated financial sector prone to speculative activity – which was why the UK had suffered so severely from the financial crash. This was coupled with a low-skill, low-wage growth model characterised by insecure and precarious work that stifled productivity and growth, and exacerbated labour exploitation. Whilst growth did revive in 2013 it was unstable because wage stagnation depressed demand causing heavy reliance on high private debt and a re-ignited housing bubble. The outcome was, in an oft-repeated sound-bite, a *"cost of living crisis in which rewards from higher growth accrued primarily to a privileged few whilst living standards for most others, the 'squeezed middle' as well as the poor, languished."* ¹⁵ This was the system of *"predatory capitalism"*.
- 19 Miliband's initial prescription for restoring Labour's standing on the economy, unveiled in his 2011 Conference speech, was to call for a radical reform of the British economic model by replacing *"predatory capitalism"*, with its *"cosy cartels"* and *"vested interests"* with *"responsible capitalism"*. *"Responsible capitalism"*, based on the German model of *"concerted capitalism"*, would be characterised by more sustained investment, a more highly-skilled workforce, firmer regulation and a more equitable pattern of distribution.¹⁶ The transition to *"responsible capitalism"* would be effected through the reconfiguring of the institutional interface between finance, industry and labour including such institutions as

a state investment bank to foster long-term lending, enhanced vocational training and major infrastructure investment.

- 20 How realistic this move to a more socially-regulated form of concerted capitalism was is a moot point since theorists of "*varieties of capitalism*" argue that problems of "*path dependency*" greatly complicate the task of shifting from one "*variety*" to another. But, for Miliband, an additional problem was that many influential voices in the party did not even believe the effort was worthwhile. Shortly after his conference address assailing "*predatory capitalism*" Lib Dem Business Secretary Vince Cable texted Labour's leader to commend him for "*the most important social democratic speech for forty years*".¹⁷ Many of Miliband's senior colleagues, including Ed Balls, Douglas Alexander, Jim Murphy (then Shadow Defence Secretary) and Shadow Business Secretary Chukka Umunna sharply disagreed. For such politicians securing the support of big business was a key to the success of New Labour and the language of "*corporate greed and 'predatory capitalism'*" - as well as the call for a new 50% income tax band for the very wealthy - heedlessly put this at risk.¹⁸ They rapidly communicated their reservations to Miliband.
- 21 Miliband, it seems, had not anticipated so negative a response and the concept of "*predatory capitalism*" was soon abandoned. Instead, he shifted towards a more cautious strategy, one designed to rebuild Labour's economic credibility by formulating and highlighting a series of tangible policies that focus groups indicated would galvanise public opinion. These included a freeze on energy prices, the reintroduction of the 50% tax rate (for those earning over £150,000), an increase in the minimum wage, a restored 10% tax band on low income-earners, the so-called "*Mansion Tax*" on houses worth more than £2m and a one-off tax on bankers' bonuses. Whilst some of these policies overlapped with those contained in the "*responsible capitalism*" approach they took the form of discrete pledges rather than integrated elements of an alternative, overarching programme.
- 22 In fact, such broader economic matters were increasingly overshadowed by more immediately contentious issues of fiscal policy. From the inception of his leadership Miliband was faced with the allegation that Labour's reckless over-spending had caused the financial crash. For many on the party's right (though not for Miliband and Balls) there was some validity in these charges. Impatient with Miliband and Balls' refusal to accept this they wanted a much tighter fiscal stance. A willingness to take a tough line on spending was, they asserted, "*fundamental to being regarded as a credible alternative government*".¹⁹
- 23 Under pressure, Miliband and Balls eventually agreed to shift towards a more astringent fiscal stance. Thus a future Labour government would acquiesce in many of the Coalition's cuts, adhere to its spending plans for the first year in office, impose a cap on most welfare spending and agree to more means-testing of benefits.²⁰ But the two men were equally keen to retain room for manoeuvre. Thus whilst they pledged to eliminate the current budget deficit - the gap between tax revenues and day-to-day spending - within the next parliamentary term, they rejected the much tighter Tory goal of an overall budgetary surplus, promising to proceed more slowly on deficit reduction and to rely more on higher taxes.²¹ Disputing claims (from the left) that the two main parties had converged, the Institute of Fiscal Studies reported that Tory policies required a "*colossal*" reduction in public spending whilst Labour's did not. As a result, the IFS's deputy director Carl Emmerson concluded that the choice over tax and spending was starker than at any general election since 1992.²²

- 24 As the party moved into the election campaign, it struck was a balance between left-leaning populism and fiscal caution. The former was epitomised by Miliband's call for the "irresponsible rich" to bear a larger share of the burden of compressing the deficit through higher taxes²³ and tough measures to curb "industrial scale tax avoidance."²⁴ But equal attention was given to asserting Labour's "fiscal responsibility." Thus the manifesto promised that no additional spending would be financed by borrowing (although Labour would borrow to fund infrastructure projects, a major difference from the Tory plans); cuts would continue until the deficit was eliminated; borrowing and the national debt would be progressively reduced and a surplus delivered on the current budget "as soon as possible in the next parliament".²⁵
- 25 Neither arm of the strategy had much effect as Labour continued to lag well behind on economic competence. Polls regularly found that the majority of voters accepted the Coalition's story that Labour had caused the financial crisis, that tough austerity measures were a vital for the economy and that a government led by Miliband and Balls would ruin the nation's finances.²⁶ This second predicament, like the first, was never resolved.

Labour's four predicaments (3) the problem of immigration

- 26 Voters have always preferred the Conservatives over Labour as being "tougher" on the issue of immigration. Labour's vulnerability on the issue intensified as the salience of the issue mounted with a rapid expansion in immigration accompanied by hardening attitudes towards immigrants.²⁷ In one extensive survey, Lord Ashcroft found that 60% thought immigration had a negative impact on the country with many believing that immigrants took jobs away from British workers, were claiming too many benefits, were lowering wages and were putting an unfair burden on hospitals and schools.²⁸ Amongst voters who backed Labour in 2005, those who were most worried about immigration were most likely to desert the party in 2010.²⁹ After 2010, immigration was perceived as one of the three key problems (along with the economy and the NHS) confronting the country. Labour's problem was that many believed that the interests of immigrants and the native population were in conflict with each other, it that it placed the interests of the former first.³⁰ The more heated the public debate over immigration, the more opinion (especially working class opinion) was alienated from Labour. This was Miliband's third predicament.
- 27 The remarkable rise of UKIP – which triumphed as the largest party in the 2014 European elections – was the principal expression of the upsurge in the political prominence of immigration. Initially, there were hopes amongst Labour strategists that this would benefit the party by splitting the right-wing vote, but it soon became evident that UKIP was making deep inroads into Labour's own working class base. For example, between 2005 and 2013, Labour's support among white working-class pensioners collapsed from 45% to 26% whilst UKIP support leapt from 3% to 28%.³¹
- 28 The party was uncertain how to respond to which was, in truth, an intractable predicament, oscillating from one approach to another. Thus, in his 2010 acceptance speech Miliband conceded the previous government had ignored rising anxieties about immigration and reassured voters that he understood their "frustration [...] that we didn't seem to be on your side."³² Initially, he construed the problem of immigration as primarily

one of a defective, malfunctioning labour market. Cheap labour was being sucked in because employers were competing on price rather than quality, and rather than investing were expanding low-paid jobs at pay rates many British people were reluctant to accept. His remedy was to strengthen labour protection, tighten regulations governing working conditions and inhibit employers from undercutting wages through imported labour.³³ The cultural sources of anti-immigrant feeling, especially significant in areas of high Muslim population, were more or less ignored. It soon became apparent that, whatever its merits, this initial approach was not assuaging voter insecurities and not arresting defections from Labour.

- 29 With anxiety mounting over its vulnerability on the issue, the party switched tack pledging to be "tough" on immigration. The manifesto combined elements of the two approaches coupling labour market reforms with promises to reduce low-skilled immigration from outside the EU, prevent EU migrants from claiming benefits for at least two years (and from claiming child benefit for children living outside the UK) and stronger action to stop illegal immigration.³⁴ However, this new approach appeared to be no more effective. According to the polling agency Survation, immigration was responsible for the loss of many votes to UKIP and this contributed directly to Labour's failure to win marginal seats in the North and the Midlands.³⁵
- 30 In truth there was no easy solution to Labour's predicament on immigration since the party's liberal values were so incongruent with popular sentiment. Miliband acknowledged that the previous government had tended to ignore the impact of migrant labour on wage levels, especially amongst the low paid, though he tended to skirt the impact on social cohesion as the native population struggled to adapt to the heavy influx of immigrants, many with different cultures, customs, languages and values. But however much the party hardened its stance it could never outbid UKIP and the Tories. The plain fact was, as an influential Labour blogger commented, that "*immigration is one of those issues on which it's hard-wired into the public imagination that we are 'soft'. And no amount of tough-talking rhetoric [...] has helped our case a jot.*"³⁶ Miliband had anticipated that having an informed and candid debate on immigration would be an "*incredibly hard thing to achieve*".³⁷ In practice, impossible – rendering the third predicament impossible to resolve.

Labour's four predicaments (4) the problem of "welfare cheats"

- 31 The brunt of the Coalition's spending axe fell on those reliant on welfare benefit, the unemployed, the sick, the disabled and the low-waged. But this did not alienate popular support. To the contrary: the cuts have been popular, with YouGov polling finding that about 60%-65% believed government welfare reductions were about right or were not deep enough.³⁸ A British Social Attitudes Survey in 2014 revealed that less than a third of the population felt that the government should spend more on welfare, a sharp reduction from previous years.³⁹ It was Labour's natural instinct to defend the most vulnerable members of society from severe benefit reductions, but this merely fed the popular perception that it was "*soft on welfare spongers*". This was Miliband's fourth predicament.
- 32 Research has shown that whether or not people approve of benefits is contingent upon whether the groups that receive them are seen to be "*deserving*." Notions of desert are, in

turn, heavily influenced by how the problem which social benefits are meant to tackle is framed. Framing involves selecting, highlighting and presenting aspects of perceived reality in a way that privileges a particular diagnosis of the problem, invokes a moral evaluation, and prescribes a remedy.⁴⁰ The key distinction here is between individualistic and societal frames: whether problems such as poverty and unemployment are construed as the responsibility of the poor and unemployment themselves (the individualistic frame) are as the result of social factors (the societal frame). Survey evidence has chronicled the growing popularity of the former at the expense of the latter. For example, a majority of voters evidently believe that poverty is a lifestyle choice rather than the result of social and economic conditions⁴¹ and 59% feel that "*most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one*" (the figure for 1993 was 27%).⁴² Research has found that a very large proportion of people are convinced that social security "*sponging*" and welfare fraud are ubiquitous and that the excessive generosity of benefits causes "*dependency*" and discourages the search for work.⁴³ This obsession with "*welfare scrounging*" - that is the receipt of benefits by those who do not deserve them - has been fuelled by media (especially tabloid) reporting which imputes the plight of the poor to their own fecklessness, irresponsibility and anti-social behaviour.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly the Tory rhetoric of "*strivers versus skivers*" caught the mood of the nation with Labour depicted as a "*soft touch*" for "*welfare cheats*" and the pampered "*workshy*".⁴⁵ When focus groups were asked who they thought Labour represented, one of the stock images was of "*a slob lounging at home on his sofa*."⁴⁶ As a result very large numbers of voters identified Labour as the party not of "*ordinary, hard-working*" families but of benefit claimants.⁴⁷ Ever since the Thatcher years Tory strategy had been to drive a wedge through Labour's social base by exploiting, sharpening and amplifying existing divisions between those in work and the poor, welfare recipients and immigrants. As long ago as 1989 one commentator had noted how adept Thatcherism was at negative stereotyping. It was "*superb at parcelling people up as outsiders, malcontents or morally undeserving 'scroungers'*".⁴⁸ Endlessly reinforced and magnified by the Conservatives and the right-wing press (and increasingly, by television)⁴⁹ such ideas had entrenched themselves in the public psyche, and the "*hard-working families*" vs. the undeserving poor cleavage has increasingly displaced traditional notions of class identity.

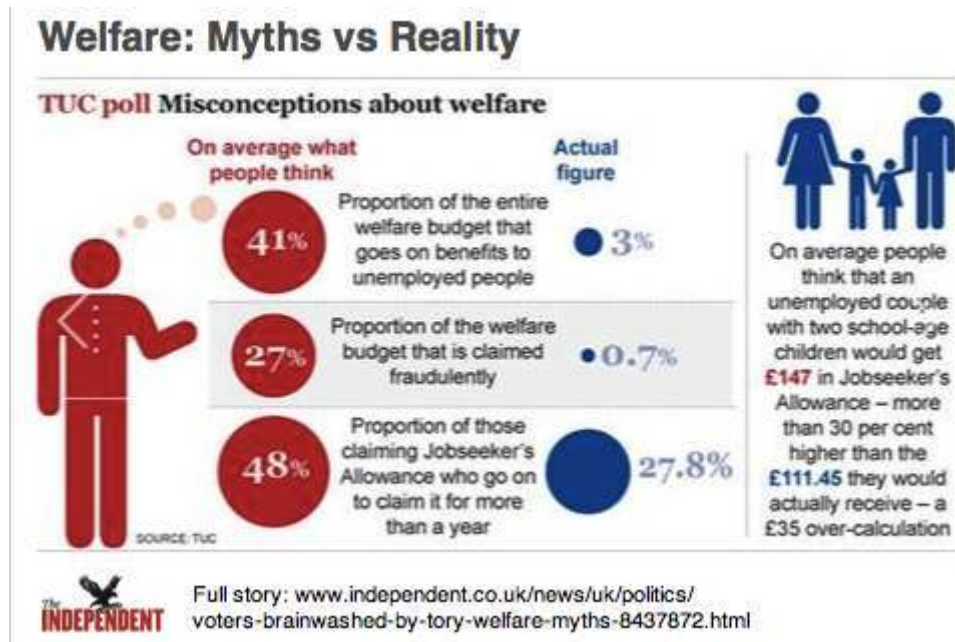
- 33 How was the party to respond? Again, there was uncertainty and equivocation in Labour's upper echelons. The right of the party was clearer in its strategy. "*Transfixed by dire polls showing voters see them as soft on welfare*"⁵⁰ they pressed for a more robust line on welfare: in the words of frontbencher Liam Byrne to "*get tough on those who are consistently shown to be shirking their responsibilities*";⁵¹ or, as his successor as Work and Pensions Shadow, Rachel Reeves, declared to show that "*we are not the party for people on benefits*" and would be "*tougher than the Tories*".⁵² However Miliband knew that matching the Tories' rhetoric would be impossible, would inflame opinion in the party and would simply give grater coherence to the myth of mass welfare fraud. But he was caught in a dilemma, as the Tories well knew. By criticising the Tories' "*cruel and unfeeling*" cuts, Labour rendered itself "*vulnerable to being portrayed as defending the interests of a dodgy, workshy minority against the decent, hardworking majority*".⁵³ On the other hand, if it backed Tory measures it would anger its own members, subvert its core values and probably have little to show for it. The point about predicaments is they cannot easily be escaped and on this, the fourth predicament, Labour did not.

In Plato's Cave

Imagine human beings living in an underground den which is open towards the light; they have been there from childhood [...] and can only see into the den. At a distance there is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners a raised way, and a low wall is built along the way, like the screen over which marionette players show their puppets. Behind the wall appear moving figures, who hold in their hands various works of art, and among them images of men and animals, wood and stone, and some of the passers-by are talking and others silent. ... They are ourselves and they see only the shadows of the images which the fire throws on the wall of the den; to these they give names. (Plato, *The Republic*).

- 34 So far, we have charted public attitudes on a range of issues – on Miliband's leadership, on the economy, immigration and welfare benefits. For most politicians and many commentators the extent to which these attitudes corresponded to a verifiable reality is not an issue of any real importance. Rational choice theory takes it as axiomatic that voters act as informed rational decision-makers whilst valence theorists seem uninterested in how voters use heuristics to make evaluations. Equally, it was not a matter that interested the bulk of Labour politicians.
- 35 The point of departure in this paper is rather different. Its hypothesis is that the gap between perception and reality is, for many, wide with the majority of voters having at best a desultory interest in politics, a meagre awareness of the issues and little appetite to find out more. These voters – this paper suggests – are the dwellers in Plato's cave who see reality not as it might present itself to the informed observer but through "the shadows of the images which the fire throws on the wall of the den".
- 36 This may seem a sweeping statement so let us inspect some of the research evidence. Take, for example, the issue of immigration. An Ipsos MORI poll reported that the public's average estimate of the proportion of the UK population that is foreign-born was 31 per cent: the official estimate is of around 13 per cent.⁵⁴ Similarly YouGov research reported that respondents exaggerated the proportion of immigrants on any sort of benefit by a factor of over 7.⁵⁵ Most people believe that immigrants are a huge burden on the state. In fact between 2001 and 2011 overall immigration to the UK made a positive net contribution of about £25billion. *"Rather than being a drain on the UK's fiscal system"* Dustmann and Frattini, two leading experts on migration economics concluded, *"immigrants arriving since the early 2000s have made substantial net contributions to its public finances, a reality that contrasts starkly with the view often maintained in public debate."*⁵⁶ Other research has found that the widespread belief that immigrants have *"taken our jobs"* and seriously depressed wage levels is incorrect.⁵⁷ In summary, perceptions of the impact of immigration bear *"little relationship to objective assessments"* with people in general having *"a very poor understanding of the scale and nature of immigration"*.⁵⁸
- 37 The same pattern unfolds on the question of welfare benefits. A survey found that on average people believed that the percentage of the welfare budget spent on the unemployed people was 41%. The actual figure was 3%. They believed that 27% of the welfare budget was claimed fraudulently: the real figure (according to Government statistics) was 0.7%.⁵⁹ A report commissioned by an alliance of British churches found that the perception of the majority of the population that poverty was largely due to sloth, irresponsibility and addiction to drink and drugs, had no basis at all in empirical

evidence. The ease with which social benefits could be accessed and their generosity were both grossly exaggerated (See table below).⁶⁰



Source: *Independent* 4 January 2013.

- 38 It does not follow from this that all public opinion is equally poorly-informed: in fact research consistently shows that minorities of voters are well-informed. To explain and conceptualise the difference between the two, we need to understand the psychological mechanisms through which people process political information. Social psychological research has found that faced by a mass of data people act as “*cognitive misers*” who economise “*as much as they can on the effort they need to expend when processing information.*”⁶¹ They do so by relying on “*cognitive shortcuts*”, or “*schemas*”. Schemas are sets of pre-existing beliefs, preconceptions and expectations about a particular issue, group or event which help “*guide what we attend to, what we perceive and what we infer...a kind of mental short-hand.*”⁶²
- 39 However, schemas can vary widely in nature, quality and intellectual rigour. Though it is commonly assumed that people absorb messages and formulate opinions in more or less the same way, research has consistently shown that this is not the case. People differ considerably in their reasoning capacity, their use and application of concepts and in the contextual knowledge they have at their disposal.⁶³ For example, research into how people consume the news uncovered “*pronounced differences in the extent to which news is remembered and understood by different sections of the audience.*”⁶⁴ The key variable here is education. Higher levels of education, as one would expect, provide people with greater ability to process and more motivation to search out information as well as more skill in assessing it by manipulating concepts.⁶⁵
- 40 Petty and Cacioppo have sought to conceptualise the operations of differing schemas through their Elaboration Likelihood model. Elaboration refers to the extent to which a person “*scrutinises the issue-relevant arguments contained in the persuasive communication*” with the propensity to do so a function of “*a person’s motivation and ability to evaluate the communication presented.*”⁶⁶ They distinguish here between two distinct modes of response to communications, the “*central*” and “*peripheral.*” The “*central*” mode takes the

form of a considered and thoughtful examination of the arguments and evidence. Those who follow the "peripheral route", in contrast, respond less to the substance of the message than to "some simple cue in the persuasion context", e.g., an attractive or appealing source.⁶⁷

- 41 The assumption made by most analysts, journalists and pollsters is that the bulk of voters process political messages through the central (or rational) mode. In fact, as indicated above, the majority of people consume political messages and information with a very modest degree of rational engagement. They tend to be "unfamiliar with ideological constructs; often unable to define or explain them; and anyway not much interested to make use of them."⁶⁸ Politics is at most a side-show in the drama of their lives, a poor competitor with more pressing and rewarding pursuits. They do not attend closely to what is happening, do not utilise reliable sources of information, do not engage in prolonged cognitive activity, find handling abstract concepts time-consuming and often rely on affect-driven heuristics in making judgments. In their survey of focus group findings, Mattinson and Tyndall concluded that "many voters do not understand how politics works. Some find the constant change, impenetrable language and many layers of political structures complicated and confusing. voters find it hard to understand the issues, hard to relate to the politicians, and hard to trust the process."⁶⁹
- 42 In short, the larger portion of the electorate relies heavily on the "peripheral route" to ingesting political information. In this process negative or positive cues – e.g. politicians' appearance, facial expressions, general demeanour and likeability – are of crucial importance. For these dwellers in Plato's cave it is "the shadows of the images" than matter most. All this is neatly illustrated by the much publicised incident of what the Sun called Miliband's "bacon sandwich disaster photo."⁷⁰ In May 2014 Miliband was photographed munching a bacon sandwich. This rapidly evolved into a major news item (with hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube). For the Mail, the "pictures of him clumsily scoffing a bacon-and-ketchup sandwich" was "a desperate attempt to [make him] look like a man of the people" – but instead demonstrated that he was an unelectable "Mr Weirdo."⁷¹ Such a man was plainly utterly unsuited for the premiership. Other newspapers, the broadcasters and the social media, followed suit to such a degree that Miliband's and the bacon sandwich entered into popular folklore. It appeared to operate as an effective persuasion cue consolidating a highly negative image of Miliband

Labour's narrative failure

- 43 If the way in which people absorb information is a function of their schemas or cognitive maps what role, then, can a party's communications strategy have? The first point to stress is that whilst opinion-formation is an individual act it takes place in a collective process and in a social context. People, in responding to events and making judgments draw heavily upon the wider world of debate, argument and political advocacy.⁷² In other words, "how we think and what we think is rooted in the particular set of meaning-saturated signs and symbols we inherit in a given political setting."⁷³
- 44 This leads to a second point. Public opinion is not fixed and immutable. Rather "people are active, thinking and feeling agents whose perceptions and understandings of the world...are always subject to change as a consequence of how they experience a world that is itself subject to change."⁷⁴ Opinions are often in a process of flux as people's schemas interact with their

experiences and observations of the social world which are, in turn, filtered through the mass media. This brings us to the third, fundamental, point. Reality is not simply a given set of facts containing their own, intrinsic meaning: it is the outcome of a process of construction.⁷⁵ Because the meanings of issues, problems and events are not self-evident, how make sense of them is primarily a function of the interpretive framework people use. These frameworks have been labelled "narratives".⁷⁶

- 45 A narrative has been defined as "*a fundamental way in which we grasp the meaning and the ordering of the events we experience and in particular of how we understand human actions and their effects.*"⁷⁷ Narratives supply the mental maps which confer some sort of intelligibility on the raw data of events and experiences.⁷⁸ Since the process of narration is an inherently social one⁷⁹ political parties can make strategic interventions: by highlighting issues for debate, delineating problems, invoking values and proposing policy solutions they contribute to the gradual unfolding of the public conversation.⁸⁰ Crucial to the success of a party's persuasive strategy is its ability to mobilise mass content for its favoured narrative.⁸¹ This involves framing.
- 46 As noted above, framing occurs where particular aspects of reality are chosen and magnified with the intention of eliciting support for a preferred understanding of societal ills and a preferred set of recipes.⁸² It entails distilling from an otherwise "*overwhelmingly complex reality*" a particular narrative or story-line to enable the essential features of a problem to be readily grasped.⁸³ "*Research suggests*" an influential psychologist commented, "*that our minds naturally seek out stories with a particular kind of structure, something that is coherent, has an initial setting, protagonists, a problem that constitutes the central story line, obstacles that stand in the way, a sense of who the main protagonists are, and some form of resolution.*"⁸⁴
- 47 The Conservatives, as we show, understood the importance of narratives but Labour, crucially, failed to do so. The central hypothesis of this rest of this article is that this failure had a fatally disabling impact of the party's strategy gravely impairing its capacity to intervene effectively in the national debate. The point is illustrated by a case study of Labour's feeble, listless and ineffective economic campaign.
- 48 As we have seen, valence theory stipulates economic credibility as one of the key heuristics determining partisan choice, and on this criterion the Conservatives outshone Labour by a handsome margin. Some might argue that this simply reflected objective circumstances from 2013 onwards, with rapidly falling unemployment, revived growth and price stability. This certainly gave some credence to Tory claims. On the other hand, the period 2010-2015 was one of stagnant and for many falling living standards and growing economic insecurity. The post-recession recovery has been the most sluggish on record, productivity had hardly risen and was lagging well behind comparable countries and the UK was running a very high balance of payments deficit.⁸⁵ One survey of prominent macroeconomists found that two thirds of respondents disagreed with the proposition that Coalition policies had had a positive effect, whilst only 15% agreed.⁸⁶ Oxford University economics Professor Simon Wren-Lewis concluded, the Conservatives had "*presided over the worst recovery from a recession for hundreds of years, and an unprecedented fall in real wages.*"⁸⁷
- 49 If Tory economic success was not self-evident why then did people judge it favourably? Economic issues are incredibly complex and research has found that most voters are unfamiliar with economic concepts and experience difficulty in making sense of economic data.⁸⁸ Why then did voters consistently rate Labour as much less capable of

running the economy than the Conservatives? Two considerations seem to have been particularly influential:

Attributions of responsibility for the financial crisis

- 50 A crucial aspect of a frame is the cognitive mechanism of "*responsibility attribution*". The process of stipulating who is responsible for a particular problem "*reduces information and decision costs and provides a ready basis for political judgment.*"⁸⁹ The Conservatives (and LibDems) were quick to recognise this. The economic narrative propounded by the Coalition to depict the economic crisis was simple, cogent and straightforward with the adept use of easily-digested and vivid images and pithy, punchy soundbites all of which were endlessly repeated. It was "*all Labour's mess*". The financial crash occurred had occurred on its watch. Labour had brought the economy to the edge of bankruptcy through extravagant over-spending and piling-up debt. It had "*maxed out on Britain's credit card*" and failed to "*mend the roof when the sun was shining.*" It had squandered money on the lazy and the pampered at the expense of "*hard-working families*", splashing out great sums on a sprawling and swollen welfare system. It had disregarded the obvious fact that you had to balance the books and "*you can't spend what you don't have*". These linguistic formulations resonated in part because they were reiterated and reinforced by most of the organs of mass opinion, in part because they gelled with "*common sense.*" "*Common sense*", Hall and O'Shea argued, "*is a compendium of well-tried knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices*", rather like sedimented deposits which have been layered over the years and thereby gained a solid grasp on the public mind, acquiring the status of "*the plainly obvious*".⁹⁰ Anything that lies outside the preferred range of meanings was plainly wrong, even outlandish.
- 51 This was dramatically demonstrated when Miliband appeared before an audience of the popular news-programme, Question Time to field questions from the audience. He faced a series of angry questioners interrogating him over his party's responsibility for the recession. When he bluntly denied that "*Labour had caused the crisis*" much of the Question Time audience exploded in a paroxysm of disbelieving rage. How could you have trust in someone who denied irrefutable fact? As a senior Labour MP, Alan Johnson, put it, "*when that Question Time audience turned on Ed Miliband, the die was cast. The public became convinced that Labour had indeed driven the car into the ditch and declined to return the keys.*"⁹¹
- 52 As Johnson added, "*We seemed to have no effective riposte to Cameron's successful distortion of our economic record in government.*"⁹² Labour's efforts to develop a rival economic narrative were halting, hesitant and half-hearted. Vital to effective framing is the ability to forge connections and weave together ideas in such a way as create "*a coherent interpretation on the whirls of events and actions around us.*"⁹³ But such framing was almost totally neglected by Labour. Instead it preferred bland, dull and banal soundbites and catchphrases like the "*the cost-of-living crisis*", "*the squeezed middle*" and "*a recovery made by the many and built to last.*" Given the party's heavy reliance on the broadcasting media to disseminate its message, it was especially damaging that, time and again, it used its access to scarce broadcasting time for point-scoring, denunciations of ministerial incompetence and cavils over policy details – the whole paraphernalia of knockabout politics which so bored and alienated voters. The opportunity for narrative-building went by default.

- 53 For the party's right after the election, Miliband and Balls' failure was not their inability to formulate a rival economic narrative but their reluctance to acknowledge the established one. By stubbornly refusing to apologise for Labour's past fiscal improvidence they forfeited the voters' trust.⁹⁴ The problem with this analysis was that, quite simply, it involved giving credence to a myth. Whilst the UK's public finances "*were not particularly strong compared with those of other advanced economies*", the prestigious Institute for Fiscal Studies maintained, equally they "*were not in a bad state on the eve of the crisis*".⁹⁵ The cause of the crash was, the Treasury's top official, Sir Nicholas Macpherson declared, "*a banking crisis pure and simple*", a view echoed by Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England at the time.⁹⁶ "*The last government*", Wren-Lewis averred, "*did not borrow excessively...The recession was a consequence of overleveraged banks and the collapse of the US housing markets.*"⁹⁷ The proposition that Labour's fiscal stance caused the crisis of 2008-2009 was, Nobel Laureate economist Paul Krugman tartly put it, "*nonsensical.*"⁹⁸
- 54 Labour's huge mistake was not its unwillingness to "own-up" but its failure to contest the Tory narrative. As Lord Skidelsky (Keynes' biographer) observed, it left "*the telling of Labour's story to the Conservatives.*" As a result "the Conservatives have been able to take the narrative of the crisis away from Labour and turn their disastrous economic stewardship to political advantage."⁹⁹ Krugman was "*astonished*" by the limpness of Labour's response to "*the austerity push*" and by its willingness "*to accept claims that budget deficits are the biggest economic issue facing the nation.*"¹⁰⁰ The leading economic journalist, William Keegan, put the matter pithily: "*Labour was ineffective in countering the Big Liethat Gordon brown was responsible for the recession.*"¹⁰¹ It was, Krugman concluded, guilty of "*an absolutely terrible job of making its case.*"¹⁰²
- 55 The contest for narrative ascendancy is of crucial importance since most politically inattentive voters – the dwellers in Plato's Cave – are, social psychological theory holds, "*cognitive misers*" who in making judgments will rely heavily on what ideas are most easily accessible. If only one interpretation of a problem is readily available then it is highly likely to be the only one noticed, understood and accepted.¹⁰³ The Tories offered a well-crafted narrative which was relentlessly hammered home. Labour responded with, in the words of Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, "*a minimalist agenda that was out of sync with the magnitude of the problems.*"¹⁰⁴ The Tory narrative monopolised the field and set the terms through which all subsequent debate was conducted.¹⁰⁵ "*The initial view of a social crisis caused by out-of-control capitalism*", Andrew Marr wrote, was replaced by the belief that it was a bloated, out-of-control state that was largely to blame. That has probably been the single most important political fact of the past five years."¹⁰⁶

Judging economic competence

- 56 For a narrative to gain ascendancy, it has to "*win a kind of credibility, legitimacy or taken-for-grantedness for itself*", which in turn involves "*marginalizing, down-grading or de-legitimizing alternative constructions.*"¹⁰⁷ Here the media play an essential role since voters are reliant on them for relaying and distilling complex information about the economy. They operate as communication gatekeepers "*controlling what messages reach the public...through their control over the organisational channels of communication.*"¹⁰⁸
- 57 Labour's problem here was that it inhabited a media environment in which most news organisations (including the broadcasters) were largely content to recycle received

economic orthodoxy about the debt, the deficit, welfare spending and the purgative powers of austerity. The antipathy of most of the newspapers was predictable, given that right-wing newspapers commanded not far short of 90% of total readership. But Labour's difficulty was compounded by the fact that most TV journalists and producers bought into the ruling austerity narrative. In broadcast interview after broadcast interview during the election campaign, Labour spokespeople were relentlessly interrogated about how precisely they could eliminate the deficit as if this was self-evidently the test of economic probity and good-sense. Krugman noted the striking contrast in the UK between "*the consensus of professional economists*" and "*what passes for economic analysis in the news media – even in high-end newspapers and on elite-oriented TV shows.*" At a time when the austerity paradigm had been discredited amongst most macroeconomists "*to the point where hardly anyone still believes it*" it was still uncritically accepted and regurgitated by the bulk of the UK media.¹⁰⁹

- 58 A key role in shaping economic debate is also played by those who acquire the status as disinterested experts.¹¹⁰ In analysing those who appear on the media, Deacon and Golding distinguish between advocates, who are "*associated with a particular position*" and arbiters, who are "*regarded as non-aligned providers of information.*" The views of the latter "*are treated with much greater deference.*"¹¹¹ The media (especially the broadcasters) regularly employ business representatives, especially from the City, as authoritative economic arbiters, seen as uniquely suited by virtue of their occupational location and specialist knowledge to pronounce on the health of the economy and on the feasibility of party policies.¹¹² One study of the interpretations of the financial crisis found that City voices figured disproportionately in BBC programmes and they were treated "*as impartial experts rather than as representatives of a sectional interest.*"¹¹³ This follows a common and recurring pattern. In Stuart Hall's terminology, these voices were "*the accredited witnesses [...] who had a privileged access, as of right, to the world of public discourse and whose statements carried the representativeness and authority which permitted them to establish the primary framework or terms of an argument.*"¹¹⁴
- 59 This posed a major problem for Labour. In angering business the party was incurring the enmity not only of a powerful bloc which wielded very considerable structural power but also of one which acted as an agent of legitimisation, whose representatives – as "*accredited witnesses*" – were able to set the terms of the economic debate. The business community was particularly aggravated by the prospect of having to pay a higher rate (50%) of income tax¹¹⁵ which former Labour City minister, the financier Lord Myners, dubbed "*predatory taxation*" and "*the politics of envy.*"¹¹⁶ During the election campaign, a letter signed by 103 senior business leaders (including a number who had backed New Labour) warned that a "*change in course*" would "*put the recovery at risk*" and would "*threaten jobs and deter investment.*"¹¹⁷ This received very extensive and mainly uncritical extensive media coverage – far fuller than the survey of macroeconomists mentioned above that appeared on the same day¹¹⁸ – and was treated as informed and impartial commentary. The perception that Labour would be "*bad for business*" and, therefore, "*bad for the British economy*", framed much of the debate on economic issues in broadcasting as well as most of the press.
- 60 To Blairite critics after the election, Miliband had "*allowed the impression to arise that we were not on the side of those who are doing well*" and "*creating wealth*"¹¹⁹ and, except for Jeremy Corbyn, the contenders to replace him as leader all admonished him for heedlessly offending business.¹²⁰ Andy Burnham (ostensibly a non-Blairite) called for an admission

that Labour "*got it wrong on business*" and promised that under his leadership Labour would "*celebrate the spirit of enterprise*", praise "*the everyday [business] heroes of our society*" and "*champion wealth creation*."¹²¹ Former shadow chancellor Ed Balls after the election criticised what he dubbed as Miliband's "*anti-business*" stance adding that it "*was no secret that I thought from the very beginning that Ed needed to position himself better with business*."¹²²

- 61 In fact it can be argued that "*anti-business*" Labour had exhibited a circumspection verging on timidity towards business.¹²³ Over the years business organisations, especially in the financial sector, had been found to be responsible for endemic malpractices including a long series of mis-selling scandals, over mortgage endowments, personal pensions, Personal Protection Insurance (PPI), card protection insurance and interest-rate swaps; and major cases of rigging of interest rate (Libor) and exchange rate (Forex) markets, both of which had cost the banks and insurance companies billions of pounds in compensation and fines. To this can be added the countless billions lost to government revenues through rampant and massive tax evasion and avoidance, hugely dwarfing much-publicised welfare fraud.¹²⁴
- 62 Most damaging of all was the deep involvement of British banks and other financial institutions in the speculation-driven financial crash. None of the above issues (with the partial exception of tax avoidance) figured prominently in Labour's campaigning and the occasional criticism of business tended to be tentative, hesitant and very carefully modulated. For example, there was no systematic analysis of industry's poor record in productivity, investment and employee training largely responsible for the weak performance of UK manufacturing.
- 63 But in the eyes the right of the party it appeared the behaviour of the financial and corporate sector should be more or less exempt from critical invigilation, certainly on any sustained and rigorous manner. Lord Mandelson, a senior minister in the Brown government, averred that Labour would never be seen to be economically credible without demonstrating that it "*understood business*."¹²⁵ In effect, what was good for British business was good for the nation as a whole. Some time ago, Crouch pointed out that New Labour was "*moving beyond the rapprochement and co-operation with business interests which is essential to all social democratic parties to becoming simply a business party*."¹²⁶ That movement stalled under Miliband: whether it should resume, as the party's right urged, became a matter of some contention in the leadership race, and the outlook remains unclear.

Conclusion

- 64 None of Labour's four predicaments was resolved and any prospect of victory slid away. Crucial to effective campaigning is the capacity "*to define the party and its principles in a way that is emotionally compelling and tells a coherent story of what its members believe in*."¹²⁷ Far from narrating such a story, the party was obsessed with short-term presentation, with grabbing favourable headlines through often disconnected policy initiatives and with wrong-footing the government in tactical manoeuvres that often left voters bored, exasperated and baffled. Initially some tentative efforts were made to play with larger themes, such as the flirtation with "*Blue Labour*" and "*predatory versus responsible capitalism*" but these soon vanished from Labour's lexicon. The party then played with the idea of "*One Nation Labour*", drawing upon some Blue Labour ideas and formulating an approach that could appeal to both the poor and the "*squeezed middle*." But the concept lacked clarity, precision and resonance, and the leadership was never fully committed. In 2013

the "omnishambles" budget which witnessed a slump in the Coalition's popularity opened a gap between the two main parties, convincing the inner leadership that it could dispense with broader themes and rely instead on what Cruddas called a "minimalist, safety-first offer."¹²⁸ The "offer" consisted of a list of focus-group tested policy - but essentially un-coordinated - "winners" such as an energy price freeze, a 10% income tax band, a higher minimum wage and above all pledges for more nurses and doctors for the NHS. For the last two years of the 2010 Parliament Labour's strategy was essentially two-pronged: a combination of advocacy of these policy "winners" and effort to undermine and discredit the Coalition's record.

- 65 But even here Labour's message too often was communicated in a hesitant and ambivalent manner, lacking confidence, clarity and consistency. The party denounced the heartlessness of coalition cuts, whilst conceding it would be unable to reverse them. It accepted some measures (caps on benefits) whilst rejecting others (the bedroom tax). It gravitated towards more stringent fiscal targets but appeared chary about specifying how they would be met. Above all, it was reluctant, to contest the right's terms of engagement, "*hiding its own good actions behind tough talk*", its "*foggy messages hiding agonised ambivalence*".¹²⁹
- 66 The most effective way in which politicians "*can manipulate the issue positions of voters [is] by manipulating the interpretations to which voters are exposed.*"¹³⁰ Labour's faltering efforts here meant that too often voters were only exposed to one interpretation, that of the right. It had no rejoinder to the proponents of austerity and its response to the anti-welfare assault was often almost contrite and apologetic. As Stuart Hall and his colleagues presciently observed in 2013, "*Labour is not yet winning hearts and minds. It shuttles between conflicting ways forward. [and] appears tongue-tied when invited to enunciate an alternative set of principles, to outline a strategic political approach or to sketch out a compelling alternative vision.*"¹³¹
- 67 For many within the party Labour was crushed because it had lost touch with reality. "Not since 1983" frontbencher Tristram Hunt announced, "*have we been so out of step with the prevailing mood of the nation.*"¹³² As we have seen, on the crucial issues of the economy, immigration and welfare benefits, there was much truth in this claim. But here lay Labour's ultimate predicament. Any party to gain office must take account of public opinion - but to what extent? What if that opinion sat uneasily not only with the party's own values, ethos and tradition but with empirically verifiable reality? As the above account has shown, mass attitudes on contentious issues were often permeated by misconceptions, misinformation - or even plain prejudice. Such attitudes often formed the stuff of the "reality", which, as Hunt and others contended, Labour had ignored. All "*realities*", it could be admitted, are to some degree contrived but some more so than others. Labour's final, perhaps debilitating, weakness was the inability or unwillingness of most of its leading figures to even confront this problem: to what extent should the party adjust its policies to reflect or seek to reshape popular opinion where that opinion does not form the basis for rational, effective and progressive policies?

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NOTES

1. With one major exception. The Tories' late campaign claim that a minority Labour government propped up by the SNP would seriously destabilise the UK seemed to have persuaded many swing voters to rally behind them.
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ABSTRACTS

This article discusses why the Labour party was highly unlikely to win the British general election of 2015. It does so by probing four major predicaments: lack of confidence in Ed Miliband as a potential Prime Minister, in Labour's ability to run the economy, in its capacity to manage the explosive issue of immigration and in its will to tackle (alleged) pervasive welfare abuse. The article agrees that, in the key issues of the economy, immigration and social welfare Labour was quite out of tune with public perceptions and attitudes but then suggests these many of these were, in turn, at variance with empirically verifiable facts. The article then contends that political parties do have the capacity to modify public perceptions and attitudes but only by devising plausible alternative narratives. This the Labour party signally failed to do, disabling its capacity to resolve any of its four predicaments.

Cet article montre pourquoi une victoire travailliste aux élections législatives de 2015 était peu probable, en analysant quatre obstacles principaux : le manque de confiance en Ed Miliband comme premier ministre potentiel, en la capacité des travaillistes à gérer l'économie, en leur capacité à se saisir de l'enjeu potentiel explosif de l'immigration, et en sa détermination à s'attaquer à la fraude aux allocations sociales, supposément très répandue. Cet article accepte l'idée selon laquelle, sur l'économie, l'immigration et l'Etat-providence, le parti travailliste était en décalage avec les perceptions et les attitudes dominantes dans l'opinion publique, mais il suggère aussi que ces perceptions et attitudes étaient elles-mêmes en décalage avec les faits vérifiables empiriquement. L'article avance ensuite que les partis politiques ont la capacité d'influer sur les perceptions et les attitudes, mais seulement en construisant des discours alternatifs plausibles. C'est ce en quoi le parti travailliste a échoué de manière spectaculaire, se privant ainsi des moyens de surmonter ses quatre obstacles.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Parti travailliste, opinion publique, discours politiques, communication politique, Ed Miliband

Keywords: Labour party, public opinion, political narratives, persuasive communication, Ed Miliband

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