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Hayton, Richard

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## Richard Hayton: At long last, Miliband finds his voice... but now he has to make sure that his message is heard

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Ed Miliband has seized the initiative in the scandal enveloping the media empire of Rupert Murdoch. Picture: Stefan Rousseau/PA

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DURING last summer's fraternal contest for the Labour leadership the personal qualities of the candidates were closely scrutinised. Supporters of the frontrunner David Miliband emphasised his intelligence, experience, and statesmanlike presence.

Acknowledging these attributes, backers of his younger sibling countered that he had a greater ability to connect with voters, particularly the young and those who had grown disillusioned with politics during the New Labour years. Ed, it was said, could "speak human".

If this ability had proved decisive in Ed Miliband's eventual victory, he struggled to deploy it effectively during his first nine months in office. However, galvanised by the phone hacking scandal and the broader issue of media plurality, the Labour leader has finally found his voice.

In taking on Rupert Murdoch's media empire, he demonstrated courage as some in his party urged caution. Miliband successfully seized the political initiative and left the Prime Minister trailing by calling for a public inquiry, demanding the resignation of Rebekah Brooks, and tabling a motion calling on News Corporation to drop its bid for BSkyB. Aided by investigative journalism by The Guardian, he also ably called into question David Cameron's judgment in relation to his decision to hire the former editor of the News of the World, Andy Coulson.

Combined with his recent successful move to scrap the procedure for electing the Shadow Cabinet, his leadership over phone hacking has helped Miliband establish his strongest hold yet on his party. Having endured months of murmurings about his performance, he now looks firmly ensconced in his role and has the opportunity to take Labour forward in his own image.



The question for Miliband now is whether he can show the same kind of leadership on other important issues of public policy, and articulate a convincing message to the electorate about what his Labour Party stands for more broadly.

A low point for the Labour leader came at the end of June, as he struggled to articulate a response to the public sector strikes. In an interview lasting just two-and-a-half minutes Miliband was asked five different questions about the strikes, but was able to provide only one identikit answer, which he repeated five times.

The strikes were wrong, Miliband claimed, as the negotiations were still ongoing. On the other hand, the Government was condemned for acting in "a reckless and provocative manner".

The problem was not with Miliband's position, but how he expressed it and what it said about his leadership more generally. As the video of the interview went viral (with over 200,000 views on YouTube alone) his robotic replies were widely ridiculed and did nothing to enhance his "human" credentials.

But they were also symptomatic of a deeper issue. So determined was he to stick to his prepared script that he was unable to engage in any meaningful conversation with the interviewer beyond his desire to place on the record the line he and his advisers had resolved to take.

This tactical positioning is a necessary part of the day-to-day political and media circus in which all modern politicians must participate. However, the Labour leader is in danger of failing to learn the lessons of William Hague's fruitless tenure as Leader of the Opposition.

Politicians need to do more than chase what political scientists sometimes call "the median voter position". Recovery after a heavy election defeat is about more than tactical victories: it requires a broader strategic repositioning and a meaningful process of policy renewal.

Parties need narratives to hold all the different elements together. Elevating issue-based tactics over strategy ultimately leads to the allegation that you are engaging in bandwagon politics. Miliband was so keen to get out the message that he thought the strikes were wrong that he forgot to explain (either to the general public or the trade unionists who helped to elect him) how that fits his vision for Labour politics.

The reflexive use of soundbites and the party line is a habit which extends far beyond Mr Miliband and has permeated nearly every corner of our political life. It is one of the reasons nearly all politicians can sound the same, and fuels public disillusion with politics. It also erodes the quality of debate, sometimes over profoundly important issues.

The mantra of the current government from David Cameron downwards is that the structural deficit must be eliminated within four years. Whatever one thinks of the sagacity of such an approach to economic management, it should not be allowed to close down legitimate debate by becoming a catch-all justification for virtually any policy. If the Treasury received a pound each time a member of the Government claimed that policy x, y or z is necessary because of "the mess we inherited from Labour", the national debt would be well on the way to being paid off.

The proposed changes to public sector pensions are precisely the kind of issue which require detailed scrutiny and discussion, but have been swept along in a tide of deficit reduction rhetoric with scant attention paid to the actual facts.

David Cameron's claim that the system was in danger of "going broke" is not borne out by the evidence gathered by the Government-commissioned review of the issue. The recent report by Lord Hutton projects a gradual fall in the cost of public sector pensions, from a peak of 1.9 per cent of national income in 2010-11, to 1.4 per cent of GDP in 50 years' time.

Challenged by Evan Davis on the Today programme to defend the claim that the system was unaffordable, the Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude floundered. The best he could muster in response was the claim that the system is "untenable". Vague statements such as these do nothing to inform the public about what is actually being proposed, and we need the Opposition to scrutinise them relentlessly to test the veracity of the Government's claims.

But to engage effectively in debates such as these, the Labour leader needs a coherent story of his own to combat the powerful austerity narrative which has been deployed by coalition ministers. Miliband now needs to use the political capital he has accumulated during the News Corporation furore to make his voice heard on the central issues facing the country: the economy, public services, and the burgeoning eurozone crisis.

It is an immense challenge, but one that is vital not only for his own political future, but for the health of our democracy. It is a heavy burden for one man to carry and he still has some way go to rise to the task. After all, he is only human.

Dr Richard Hayton is senior lecturer in politics at the University of Huddersfield.

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