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## The Conservatives in Coalition: “How the Tories are opposing Miliband’s Labour Party”

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**Andrew Crines** looks at the Conservative rhetoric aimed at undermining Labour and argues that the appraisal of Ed Miliband as an unworthy foe may have laid the foundations for a degree of destructive complacency amongst the Tories.

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The rhetorical attitude of the Conservative Party towards the Labour Party is key to understanding the broader relationship between the Coalition and Opposition. The strategy for the Conservatives is to simultaneously divorce both Labour and Liberal Democrat progressives whilst also attributing the Blair/Brown premierships for the global economic downturn. By doing so, this prevents the Labour Party from exploiting any possible splinters within the junior partner.

Moreover, the Conservatives aim to portray Ed Miliband as ‘the wrong choice’ for Labour, but the ideal choice for them. By choosing Ed over David, Labour have stepped back from posing a serious rhetorical challenge. This is enhanced by connecting Miliband with the narrative of left wing radicalism which grew during the early 1980s and has been exploited through Conservative rhetoric since. In order for this strategy to prove most effective, David Cameron must portray the Coalition as more than a numerical necessity. Rather, it is for the survival of the British economy that brought together Liberal ‘progressives’ and Conservative ‘freemarketeers’, subsequently attacking Labour through the rhetoric of ‘in the national interest’. This national interest binds the two together, and seeks to exclude Labour from the debate over the economic strategy.

To understand how the Conservative rhetorical form is deployed against Labour, it is important to acknowledge the Tories professed to rejoice at the election of Ed Miliband as Labour leader, believing that he would be the less convincing of the two main candidates to pose a challenge to the Coalition. Ed Miliband is viewed by Conservative elites as ‘fearful’, ‘timid’, lacking oratorical skill, posing little challenge. For the Conservatives, these issues made him the preferred choice for Labour leader, as they enable Cameron to portray him as a weak leader subservient to trade union interests. In contrast, the Conservatives feared David Miliband’s more convincing communicative style and greater political stature.

This appraisal may however have laid the foundations for a degree of complacency amongst Conservatives, who do not see Ed Miliband as a worthy foe and therefore do not take him seriously. The Tories hope Ed Miliband may remind the electorate why Labour leaders cannot be trusted as Prime Minister, safely believing the real heir to Blair is residing on the backbenches, that Ed as the heir to Kinnock will hold Labour back. Media coverage appears to support this position, with the [Independent reporting](#) “with Ed in charge, voters are split, putting Labour neck and neck with the Tories on 38 per cent. But when respondents were asked by ComRes how they would vote with alternative Labour leaders, David Miliband was three points ahead of David Cameron.” The leading Conservative blogger, Tim Montgomerie [confirms this perception](#), saying “Tories take great comfort from Ed Miliband’s electability. David Cameron apparently believes that Labour won’t remove him. George Osborne thinks that they might well change leader. Every Tory hopes that Mr Cameron is correct.”

Rightly or wrongly, this tactic of undermining Miliband’s credibility by contrasting him against his brother appeared to provide initial dividends. In the long term, however, it is a risky strategy. By not fully challenging the Labour leader, believing his weaknesses as a communicator will preclude him from power, the Tories

run the risk of Miliband becoming the 'accidental Prime Minister', a highly damaging label given the developing onset of degenerative tendencies in the Coalition.

As well as regarding Ed Miliband as 'their choice for Labour leader', Conservative rhetoric has also sought to showcase the Labour leader as being out of touch with the post-Third Way world and simultaneously in the pocket of the Unions. In terms of rhetoric, Labour's link with the Unions has historically served the Conservatives well. Because of the perceptions of 'shop floor militancy', this radicalism contradicts the electorate's innate conservatism, thereby enabling the Tories to portray Labour as equally radical and alien to the British mentality.

With New Labour now firmly dead, Old Labour is back in charge. Miliband's [support from the Unions](#) left him "*wide open to attack from the Tories and rightwing elements in the media*", making it harder for him to defend British business. This is an issue which Cameron successfully exploits at the despatch box. Recently, speaking on the liberalisation of employment law, [Cameron argued](#) his reforms are "*about reform to drive growth, it is much too hard for companies to restructure and get the right people that they see as fit to do the job*".

In order for businesses to bring in the talent required, Cameron argued they would need to dismiss unproductive staff that held back productivity. These proposals were attacked by Miliband, however because of his apparent link with the Unions, his critique was easily [dismissed by the Prime Minister](#), saying "*We are taking all of these steps which have led to the greatest number of small business start-ups last year in the country's history. Of course, you cannot support any changes to employment regulation because you are in the pocket of the trade unions.*" With little defensive position, Cameron is able to undermine the Labour leader through such rhetoric. Such rhetoric constructs a convincing narrative of Miliband being too close to those Unions, connecting the Labour leader to the pre-Blairite period.

As well as the issues above, the Conservatives also rhetorically [remind the electorate](#) that "*Labour left Britain with record debts that people know we have to deal with to avoid an economic crisis... Now Labour is in opposition, Ed Miliband has shown weak leadership by jumping on the bandwagon of opportunism.*" This twin method of linking the spending of the previous Labour government with Miliband's leadership aims to suggest Labour needs to provide an [alternative strategy](#), and that "*it's time Labour's leader gave us answers, not bandwagons and a blank sheet of paper*".

Through such rhetoric, the Conservatives strive to showcase Labour's incompetence both in government and subsequently in opposition. Cameron's rhetoric attributes the debt to factors beyond the global crash. [He argues](#) "*A problem built up before the recession, caused by government spending and planning to spend more than we could afford. It had nothing to do with the recession. And so growth will not sort it out.*" By adopting this approach, Cameron argues the economic incompetence of the Brown government led to the debt, rather than it simply being the result of the 2008 crash.

The Conservatives are approaching the Miliband leadership with a degree of rhetorical counter-revisionism. Succinctly, given the election of Ed over David Miliband, the Tory critique is able to circumnavigate entirely the Blairite philosophy. Consequently, the Conservatives are able to deploy an older form of anti-Labour rhetoric, highlighting economic incompetence, a connection to the Unions, and ineffective leadership. These areas are sensitive to the Labour opposition, given their exposure historically to them. Consequently, in terms of rhetorical delivery, the Conservatives are opposing Miliband's Labour Party through a classic critique, which has historically served them well electorally.

**This is the fifth in a series of posts by contributors to the recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of](#)**

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### About the author

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