

## LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE REPORT

### LEADERS SPEECH

This conference was always going to be interesting; twelve months ago Ed Miliband was elected Leader.

He has had one year to assess the state of the party, listen to various opinions and signal to the party the direction his leadership will take.

Most media pundits grudgingly gave him credit for his handling of the phone hacking scandal but for the rest of the year he has been below the radar regarding Labour's new policy agenda.

The difficulties that Ed Miliband has to overcome are the amount of baggage left from Labour in power and the individuals who exercised that power. He attempted to distance himself from the past by stating in his speech;

"I am not Tony Blair or Gordon Brown....I am my own man and I am going to do things my way".

The problem is there are many New Labour supporters who cannot, or will not, come to terms with the fact that the brand they have peddled for years is now toxic.

There are many in the Shadow Cabinet who remain suspended in a New Labour bubble, who have failed to grasp that their world fell apart with the fall of Lehman Brothers and the run on Northern Rock.

The speech was the first attempt from any Labour Leader for many years to challenge the orthodoxies of neoliberalism. The critique was small, Ed Miliband only dipping his toe in the waters of change, but it's a refreshing start.

He said "It is a crisis of the promises made over the last 30 years". This the first criticism of capitalism's iron grip on mainstream political thinking since Thatcher in 1979. He called for a "New Economy" not predators.

He singled out Fred Goodwin as an example. He said "I tell you something, Fred Goodwin should not have got that salary, and I tell you something else: we shouldn't have given Sir Fred Goodwin that Knighthood either".

The Right Wing media, as you can imagine, were infuriated. The Telegraph reported "a lurch to the left", and "Red Ed" and "union poodle" from the Murdoch press and from the Daily Mail that Ed had declared war on capitalism.

He went further when he turned his attention to private equity and asset stripping. Using the example of the Southern Cross debacle he said; "Look at what a private equity firm did to Southern Cross Care Homes, stripping assets for a quick buck and treating tens or thousands of elderly people like commodities to be bought and sold. They may not have sold their own grandmothers for a fast buck, but they sold yours. These aren't the values of British business, it must change."

The truth is Ed Miliband is right, the whole neoliberal edifice is on the edge of a cliff. His job in the years to come, before the next election, is to convince the Party, country and his fellow MP's that there is a real alternative to aggressive, greedy something for nothing capitalism. He concluded by looking forward to a better future by saying; "I aspire to be your Prime Minister, not for more of the same, but to write a new chapter in our Country's history"

We can only hope that the first step on this path, despite the many twists and turns that may follow, leads to a better, fairer more equal society than the last thirty years have provided for working people.

### THE ECONOMY DEBATE

Ed Balls in his speech to conference called for immediate measures to kick start the economy, including cuts in VAT and a levy on Bankers' bonuses. He called for the building of 25,000 affordable homes and 100,000 jobs for young people.

Ed gave a compelling critique of the Government's current economic strategy of cutting the deficit without management to grow the economy.

He told conference that George Santayana's warning that "those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them" was about to be realised and that no country had ever cut its way out of an economic position as bad as it is today.

Ed Balls with his close working relationship with Gordon Brown is still carrying baggage from the past. However his Keynesian approach is a more credible way forward than George Osborne's slash and burn public services cuts.

He went on to attack the Chancellor's so called "Safe Haven" economic position. He said "Tory Britain is no safe haven, with millions of families struggling with high bills, worried about jobs and what their children's futures hold".

The speech was well received but if a move is to be made towards Ed Miliband's "New Chapter in our Country's History" more radical, economic thinking may be required.

### **REFOUNDING LABOUR**

Refounding Labour appears to have been originally a plan to reduce the voting power of Union members in leadership election but this has been watered down.

The current system is only to be slightly adjusted with 3% of Labour's electoral college going equally to supporters who are not members of the Labour Party. But this rule change will only apply to the leadership contest and not in selecting Members of Parliament or other officials.

The details of how the system will work are still not clear and the deadline for this is to be worked out is March 2012.

### **OTHER HIGHLIGHTS**

Iain McNicol the former GMB national Political Officer was elected as Labour's General Secretary. He made a rousing speech, supporting Labour's links with the Trade Unions. He looked very pleased to be General Secretary and he never lost his smile for the rest of the week.

Young labour activist Rory Weal received a standing ovation for his speech supporting the welfare state in the struggle for dispossessed working families.

Andy Burnham, in a question and answer session, introduced the Head Teacher Yvonne Sharples from a school in Speke, a deprived area of Liverpool. Her speech was an inspiration for all the good things in education Labour has striven for, the school had made a massive difference to many children in the area but the Tory led Government had made things difficult by continually changing the rules. She was right to say "shame on you" to the Government for their deceit. With more Heads like Yvonne Sharples our children would get the education they deserve.

Yvette Copper, Shadow Home Secretary, gave a good speech on law and order, but she was in a sombre mood following the death of a miner at Kellingley Colliery.

Harriet Harman had a go at the Cameron and the posh Tory toffs in the cabinet when referring to them she said "They think Downton Abbey is a fly on the wall documentary". It's true, many of them have butlers.

The booing, when the name of the former leader Tony Blair was uttered from the podium, raised a few eyebrows. This goes to prove that change is in the air especially when the constituency delegates, normally so compliant, were booing along with many others. This point was emphasised by the delegate from Bolsover who attacked former ministers for coining it in with their dodgy memoirs.

James Stribley, our very own Mr Remploy, managed to get his message straight to the top. When Ed Miliband had concluded his leader's speech he strode forth into the cheering masses smiling and shaking hands, suddenly an imposing figure clad in a GMB fleece thrust his hand forward to the great leader and quietly uttered the words "Don't forget Remploy Ed". The message had hit bulls-eye. Ed nodded and he was off.

Dave Prentiss of Unison demanded that the Labour Party supported the rights of workers in their fight with the Government regarding Pension cuts. "If there is a strike we expect support from this, our Party" he demanded in his speech.

Len McCluskey told the Tribune rally that "New Labour died when its assumptions about the capitalist system were shown to be false."

GMB General Secretary Paul Kenny said; "I think during the years of new Labour, both through Gordon and Alistair's period as Chancellor, that on far too many occasions the interests of the City (City of London Bankers) seemed to hold sway." Paul Kenny also said; "Ditch the bankers Ed, they won't vote for you."

On Ed Miliband, Paul Kenny went on to say; "If he comes across as himself and stands up for people, people will reconnect.

Five million people left and didn't vote Labour between 1997 and now. You've got to get three million of those back and you will not do that by making sound bites. That means occasionally you are going to say the unpopular thing but I actually think that what we want from politicians, straight, I am sick to death, quite frankly, of living through a generation where image has been everything and substance you put up now and again."

Wise words, this theme continued at the winning Labour and new generation fringe meeting, where it was good and refreshing to see so many young faces with a passion for left of centre politics.

Labour did admit they had made mistakes in government. Ed Miliband, Ed Balls and Harriet Harman all expressed regret, but Ed Balls made it clear that Labour overspending was not the cause of the financial crash.

I think it's for the best if Labour has done with apologising and moves forward with Ed Miliband's "big idea" to redesign capitalism for the new century. I don't think Ed has realised the forces that will be unleashed against him by the capitalist elite or the enormity of the challenge that he will have to overcome.

**Steve Jennings**  
**Political Officer**