

LSE Government Department

The HotSeat Videocast

Dr Jonathan Hopkin discussing the election of Ed Miliband as leader of the Labour Party.

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Ariane Sparks: Hi. I'm Ariane Sparks. Welcome to the Hotseat. With us today to discuss Ed Miliband and the future of the Labour party is Dr Jonathan Hopkin. Thanks for being with us, Jonathan.

Dr Jonathan Hopkin: It's a pleasure.

Ariane Sparks: Some see Ed Miliband's victory as a return to the core, old Labour ideals of the party. Do you agree?

Dr Jonathan Hopkin: No, not really. It's hard to say at the moment because he's not proposed any concrete policies but the basic message in his speech at the Labour party conference was not Old Labour, there was no real appeal to a return to trade union power or nationalisation of industries or anything like that. It was more heading in the direction of European-style social democracies so trying to make a generous welfare state compatible with market capitalism and also hinting at more effort on the environment, gender relations, family life. So not really old Labour but neither was it particularly oriented in a new Labour, sort of free market direction as we had under Tony Blair.

Ariane Sparks: A majority of Labour parliamentarians and party activists supported David and not Ed in the leadership battle. Do you think that these divisions will continue or will Ed be able to unite the party under his leadership?

Dr Jonathan Hopkin: Well, it's hard to say because we've never had a contested election for the leadership of this kind in the Labour party. When Tony Blair was elected, which was the last election of a Labour party leader, there was no other prominent candidate so he was widely expected to win. Gordon Brown, famously, agreed not to stand. So this is the first time we've had a straight fight for the leadership out in the open. So with no real history to base ourselves on in imagining what will happen. The fact that David Miliband has now decided to stay out of politics for a while makes it much easier and I think the party probably wasn't so deeply divided on policy lines as it might have been in the past. The only example historically that I can think of that might have been similar was the battle for the deputy leadership in the early 1980's between Tony Blair and Dennis Healy and that really laid bare all the divisions within the party but I don't think the Labour party currently has divisions anything like what it was then. So I don't see any reason why the party can't unite around a leader; especially if he proves successful electorally.

Ariane Sparks: The deciding factor in the outcome of the leadership battle was support from the trade unions. How beholden to the unions will Miliband be?

Dr Jonathan Hopkin: Well, that is something the opposing parties have seized upon because they see it as a chance to suggest that Ed Miliband is a return to everything that was unpopular about Old Labour in particular, the fact that it was perceived as being too close to the trade unions. There is an important distinction that has been made in that Ed Miliband won the trade union college of the leadership vote but that was not block votes by trade union bosses as the stereotypical image controlled by the trade unions was in the 1970's and 1980's, the trade union block votes that were blocks of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of votes determined by the decisions of the trade union leaders themselves. In this case, Ed Miliband won votes from individual members of trade unions so, effectively, it was a ballot of people who were members of trade unions but ordinary citizens. So this doesn't imply any particular dependence of Ed Miliband on trade union leaderships although it is true that the support he got from some trade union leaders was a big help. I think also Miliband, if he's sensible, will probably try quite hard to immediately distance himself from the trade unions to avoid committing himself to supporting strike actions in particular. There are likely going to be a lot of strikes coming up and he'll probably be very, very careful not to give the impression that he's supporting the strikers putting the public to a lot of inconvenience. I think, strategically, he'll probably make a move to avoid that.

Ariane Sparks: In his first major speech as party leader, Miliband stated that the Labour party had lost their way, they'd lost the public trust and must now work to regain that trust. How do you think Miliband will set out a plan to achieve this?

Dr Jonathan Hopkin: I think it's hard to know. In practical terms, he may engage in some kind of operation of trying to increase Labour party membership, get new members involved, sort of reach out to the grassroots because he did state in his speech that he felt Labour had become a new establishment and was perceived as being removed from ordinary citizens. It's difficult to do because Labour party isn't a very strong party, it doesn't have a strong membership and I think, in practical terms, that will be tough. I think in terms of discourse, what he is trying to do, what you could see in the speech was that he's trying to hold his hands up and say we made mistakes, we apologise, trying to win back the public's trust by recognising that the Iraq war is widely perceived as an error and that Labour was in government when the financial crisis blew up and they have to take some responsibility for that. By taking responsibility for policy mistakes, and saying that he intends to move beyond some of the old policies that proved unpopular and trying to create new policies, that's probably the way he will try to play it.

Ariane Sparks: Ok, we'll leave it there. Dr Jonathan Hopkin you are off the HotSeat. Thank you for being with us.

Dr Jonathan Hopkin: Thank you.

Ariane Sparks: And thank you for being with us. Please tune in next month for our next edition of the HotSeat.