What Makes for an Effective Leader of the Opposition?

Report produced by the Centre for British Government, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, and the Centre for Opposition Studies

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Report Summary

The position of Leader of the Opposition has been described as the worst job in politics. An effective Leader of the Opposition is seen by the electorate as a potential Prime Minister in waiting. Thus effectiveness is about regaining power. However, their ability to regain power is dependent upon the interaction between their political skills and the political circumstances that they face. As the Labour Party elects their new leader, this report considers examples from post-war British politics of effective (and ineffective) opposition leadership.

Our report considers the following in terms of their political skills:

- Their ability to initiate and implement policy change
- Their abilities at party management
- Their proficiency in terms of public communication
- Personality factors, including emotional intelligence.

Our report identifies that circumstances beyond their control impact upon them, such as:

- The performance of the incumbent government
- The length of time that the incumbent Prime Minister has been in power

Our report concludes that to be successful the Leader of the Opposition needs a trigger – an economic crisis, policy failure, party divisions or scandal – to exploit and that their ability to exploit this is greater if the party of government has been in power for a long time. This establishes a conducive environment but then the Leader of the Opposition needs to be able to exploit it. Effective opposition involves demonstrating that the party has changed in policy terms and repositioned itself towards the centre ground of British politics and this process is agreed within the party. Change needs to be demonstrated and this demands that the Leader of the Opposition is an effective communicator and that they can demonstrate their credibility through their performances in Parliament, in interviews and in speeches. The Leader of the Opposition will face considerable scrutiny and criticism so high levels of emotional intelligence and resilience will be required.
Introduction

The reasons for the defeat of the Labour Party at the General Election of May 2015 are complex and varied. Identifying who is to blame seems more straightforward. In the eyes of newspaper and television political commentators defeat was the fault of Ed Miliband. His decision to offer his resignation continues a recent pattern within British politics. When we consider the two main parties we note that since 1983 only one leader who has been defeated at the polls has survived to lead their party into the next General Election - that being Neil Kinnock who suffered defeats at both the General Elections of 1987 and 1992. Defeat led to the resignations of two defeated Prime Ministers – John Major in 1997 and Gordon Brown in 2010 – and including Miliband five Leaders of the Opposition – the others being Michael Foot in 1983, Kinnock in 1992, William Hague in 2001 and Michael Howard in 2005. The speed with which defeated party leaders exit the stage has been even quicker in the case of Brown and Miliband. Whereas Foot, Kinnock, Hague and Howard continued to act as party leader and Leader of the Opposition until their successors were elected, Brown and Miliband departed with immediate effect, allowing Harriet Harman to experience (or endure) two spells as acting Leader of the Opposition.

These developments indicate that there is a reduced tolerance of failure which is reflective of the increasing personalisation of politics (Langer, 2011). The increasing personalisation of politics has been tied to the shift away from positional politics based on the class based cleavage to valence politics based on the perceived competence (or otherwise) of the respective party leaders (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley, 2004). Within this shift there has been a stronger emphasis on the personality and charisma of the respective party leaders. Both within British politics and elsewhere there is an increasing awareness that leaders have a strong influence upon voter preferences (Bittner, 2011).

As a consequence the Leader of the Opposition is viewed – by the media; by their parliamentarians, activists and voters – to be the brand of their party and a Prime Minister in waiting. In this context the weekly gladiatorial battle that is Prime Minister’s Questions gives the Leader of the Opposition an opportunity to showcase their superiority and expose, humiliate and embarrass the Prime Minister (Bates, Kerr, Byrne and Stanley, 2014). The dual between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the
Opposition has been intensified by the moves towards leadership debates in General Election campaigns and personality driven campaigning (Seawright, 2013). This creates high expectations and with it comes intense scrutiny. Parties pay close attention to polling evidence on whether the leader is more or less than appealing than the party as a whole, and how (as the ‘shadow’ Prime Minister) the leader fairs when the pollsters ask ‘who would make the best Prime Minister’ (Heppell, 2012: 239).

In order to be seen as a potential Prime Minister in waiting it is necessary to demonstrate that you are an effective Leader of the Opposition. This leads to the obvious question: what constitutes effectiveness in terms of opposition leadership? The obvious answer is regaining power. Tables one and two (pages 5 and 6) provide evidence of the electoral impact of Conservative and Labour opposition leaders. The more detailed question is not identifying just when opposition leaders are effective but identifying what factors may contribute to electoral recovery – the central determinant of effectiveness. Our view is that the ability of any Leader of the Opposition to come across as effective is determined by the interaction between their political skills and the political circumstances that they face (similar determinants as those that define Prime Ministerial performance, see Theakston, 2002). The second part of this report considers the impact of circumstances, but it does so after we identify and explore the skills that we feel are essential for effective opposition leadership.
Table One: Conservative Party Opposition Leaders from Churchill to Cameron

Tables one and two identify the ‘impact’ of each Leader of the Opposition since 1945 – table one for Conservative leaders and table two for Labour leaders. Impact is defined by the change in total votes; vote share; parliamentary representation and arithmetic from when they became Leader of the Opposition (i.e. from the most recent General Election) to when they ceased to be so – either because they resigned, were removed (via death or confidence motion) or because they became Prime Minister.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Total Votes (Millions)</th>
<th>Vote Share (Percentage)</th>
<th>Parliamentary Representation (Seats)</th>
<th>Parliamentary Arithmetic (Majority)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winston Churchill</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>9,577,667</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>13,717,538</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>Conservative majority 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+4,139,871</td>
<td>+8.2</td>
<td>+108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alec Douglas-Home</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>12,001,396</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>Labour majority 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>12,001,396</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>Labour majority 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Home resigned before facing the electorate (July 1965)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Heath</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>12,001,396</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>Labour majority 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>13,145,123</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>Conservative majority 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+1,143,727</td>
<td>+3.0</td>
<td>+26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Heath</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>11,872,180</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>Labour minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>10,464,817</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-1,407,363</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
<td>-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Thatcher</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>10,464,817</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>13,697,923</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>Conservative majority 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+3,233,106</td>
<td>+8.1</td>
<td>+62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Hague</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>9,602,957</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>Labour majority 179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>8,357,473</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-1,245,484</td>
<td>+1.1</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iain Duncan Smith</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>8,357,473</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>8,357,473</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Duncan Smith removed from party leadership in October 2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Howard</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>8,357,473</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>Labour majority 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8,772,473</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>Labour majority 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+415,000</td>
<td>+0.6</td>
<td>+31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Cameron</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8,772,473</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>Labour majority 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10,726,555</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>Conservative led coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+1,954,082</td>
<td>+3.7</td>
<td>+110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table Two: Labour Party Opposition Leaders from Attlee to Miliband

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Total Votes</th>
<th>Vote Share</th>
<th>Parliamentary Representation</th>
<th>Parliamentary Arithmetic</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Callaghan resigned before facing the electorate (October 1980)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clement Attlee</strong></td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>13,948,385</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>Conservative majority 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>12,405,254</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>Conservative majority 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-1,543,131</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>-38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hugh Gaitskell</strong></td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>12,405,254</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>Conservative majority 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>12,216,172</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>Conservative majority 100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-189,082</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
<td>-19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harold Wilson</strong></td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>12,216,172</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>Conservative majority 100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>12,205,808</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>Labour majority 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-10,364</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
<td>+59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harold Wilson</strong></td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>12,208,758</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>Conservative majority 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>11,645,616</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>Labour minority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-563,142</td>
<td>-5.9</td>
<td>+13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>James Callaghan</strong></td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>11,532,218</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>Conservative majority 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>11,532,218</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>Conservative majority 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-Callaghan resigned before facing the electorate (October 1980)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Michael Foot</strong></td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>11,532,218</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>Conservative majority 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>8,456,930</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>Conservative majority 144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>-3,075,288</td>
<td>-9.3</td>
<td>-60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neil Kinnock</strong></td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>8,456,930</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>Conservative majority 144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>11,560,484</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>Conservative majority 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+3,013,554</td>
<td>+6.8</td>
<td>+62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>John Smith</strong></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>11,560,484</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>Conservative majority 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>11,560,484</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>Conservative majority 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Smith died before he could contest a General Election (May 1994)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tony Blair</strong></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>11,560,484</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>Conservative majority 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>13,518,167</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>Labour majority 179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+1,957,683</td>
<td>+8.8</td>
<td>+147</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ed Miliband</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8,606,517</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>Conservative led coalition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>9,347,304</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Conservative majority 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>+740,787</td>
<td>+1.4</td>
<td>-26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaders of the Opposition: Identifying the Skills needed to be Effective?

In assessing Leaders of the Opposition we need to acknowledge that there is a distinction between identifying tasks associated with the position and effectiveness (i.e. skills demonstrated) in performing those tasks. Skills such as negotiation, persuasion and motivation will help the leaders’ ability to influence outcomes and facilitate change. Initiating change will be dependent on their interpersonal skills which will be tied to their social astuteness; their networking capabilities and their communication skills. Their ability to seem genuine, authentic and straightforward will also aid their ability to be effective as it will enhance their reputation as a credible political operator, both in the eyes of their party colleagues but also the wider electorate. Our model for assessing effectiveness in opposition leadership pulls together both specific tasks and skills. It includes the following:

- Their ability to initiate and implement policy change
- Their abilities at managing their party
- Their proficiency in terms of public communication
- Personality factors, including emotional intelligence.

Policy Change

In order to be a credible alternative party of government the Leader of the Opposition faces the complex task of constructing a policy agenda which fulfils a number of particular requirements. First, that policy agenda must secure the backing of their own party, both in terms of their fellow parliamentarians but also in terms of the membership and activist base. Second, that policy agenda also has to appeal to sections of the electorate who has rejected the party at the last General Election. Third, that policy agenda cannot be a shopping list of unaffordable or unwanted commitments that cannot be delivered in practice – i.e. the policy agenda that is constructed has to be seen to respond to electoral concerns and sound credible and deliverable once they do enter power.

These requirements create competing pressures for the Leader of the Opposition. For example, appealing to the membership and activist base may pull the party towards greater ideological purity and away from the centre-ground of British politics. Appealing to the new voters whose support is needed to move from opposition and into government incentivises opposition leaders to move
towards the centre ground (Taylor, 2010: 490). Another complex question for Leaders of the Opposition relates to whether their rhetoric on policy is about critiquing government policy or offering alternative solutions – if they do offer alternative solutions how and when should these be presented. Therefore, when evaluating policy development in opposition the key questions are:

- Can they offer change and thus demonstrate political adaptability?
- If they can what form does that change take which relates to how they are positioning the party?
- If change is evident is policy change presented in a detailed and specific way, or is it presented in terms of values when in form their broad vision of policy?

*Is policy change possible?*

When we consider the first question on can they demonstrate change we should acknowledge that will rarely be unproblematic because change may challenge long cherished and deeply held party traditions and symbols. Parties can be reluctant to accept the need for change and in this sense they may not be the vote maximising rational acting politicians that we may assume them to be (Bale, 2010: 1-21). For example, in an attempt to nullify Labour’s weaknesses on taxation Gaitskell attempted to address the Clause IV conundrum in 1959, only to be forced into a humiliating retreat by his own party that was unwilling to change (Jones, 1997: 1-23). Leaders of the Opposition may also lack the credibility or political capital to initiate the substantive policy adaptation needed for political recovery – for example, Hague and Duncan Smith both attempted to reposition and repackage Conservatism in the period between 1997 and 2003, but were forced to retreat (Bale, 2010: 67-134).

Parties will be more willing to accept policy change and political repositioning if the leader has strong personal approval ratings and the party is improving its position in the opinion polls. This partly explains why Blair could succeed where Gaitskell failed (on Clause IV in 1995, see Kenny and Smith, 1997), and it also partly explains why Cameron could sustain his modernisation and adaptation of Conservatism post-2005 whereas Hague and Duncan Smith could not (Hayton 2012). These comparisons demonstrate that the wider environment shapes the speed with which policy change can be pursued – for example, it should also be acknowledged that Thatcher was more tentative in
initiating change in opposition (between 1975 and 1979) than she would have wanted (Kavanagh, 2005: 219-42).

*What type of policy change should be considered?*

The second question is if the party is willing to engage in a process of policy change then what is the broad direction of change that they want to pursue? The critical issue here is how to interpret the policy mood and the underlying attitudes within the electorate. The fact that your party is in opposition should tell the party something about the need to explore which issues matter the most to voters, especially floating voters, and which party is preferred on those issues (Norris and Lovenduski, 2004: 85-104). Four examples immediately spring to mind: the Conservatives in 1945 and 1997 and Labour in 1979 and in 2010.

In 1945 the electorate returned a Labour administration which saw the embedding of social democratic values which reflected the prevailing mood for a more activist state (Fielding, 1992). The reaction of the Conservative opposition in 1945 was revealing. They broadly accepted the parameters of the Labour driven policy agenda and committed themselves, for example, to the welfare state and to full employment. Change was driven by pragmatism and calculation. To negate the unhelpful associations of the party with mass unemployment in the 1930s and to nullify the electoral assets that Labour had on employment and the National Health Service, the Conservatives moved leftwards and towards the centre-ground of British politics. Their reward for policy compromise and ideological pragmatism was to regain power and enjoy three successive terms in office between 1951 and 1964 (Willetts, 2005).

In 1979 the electorate returned a Conservative administration with a clear commitment to rolling back the frontiers of the state; addressing the trade union ‘problem’, and accepting that the curbing of inflation would have to take priority over the pursuit of full employment (Kavanagh, 1990). The policy mood had shifted. The crises of the 1970s and the debates about governmental overload and excessive trade union power had discredited the Keynesian demand management solutions favoured by Labour. They also created the political space for the Conservatives to provide an alternative via the politics of the free economy and the strong state – i.e. Thatcherism (Gamble, 1988). Now in opposition Labour concluded that the lesson to be learnt from their rejection in 1979 and the election of Thatcher was that they were not left wing enough. Just as electoral scepticism about trade union influence was
intensifying so the Labour left increased their influence within the party. The so called hard left, mobilised by Tony Benn, set about redistributing power within the Labour Party. Increasing activist influence on policy resulted in a commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the European Community (Seyd, 1987). It also resulted in democratising leadership selection and removing this responsibility from the predominantly socially democratic parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). They created a complex Electoral College, within which the trade union had a one third tranche (alongside the PLP and Constituency Labour Parties) and given the block vote this appeared to reinforce the impression on increasing trade union influence upon Labour politics (Quinn, 2012: 57-63).

In 1997 the electorate turned to New Labour as electoral concerns about excessive trade union power and governmental overload had been replaced by doubts about the quality of public service delivery. The New Labour strategy of triangulation – of claiming that economic prudence was compatible with pursuing social justice – created a strategic conundrum for the Conservatives as they entered opposition (Beech and Lee, 2008). Both Hague and Duncan Smith attempted to downplay the traditional Conservative emphasis on tax, Europe and immigration to create the political space to focus on the more salient issues of public service delivery and poverty and social inclusion. However, neither were able to sustain that rhetorical change of emphasis. Two years into his leadership tenure Hague moved away from his strategy of ‘reaching out’ to new voters and retreated into a ‘core-vote strategy’ to shore up known Conservative support. This culminated in the disastrous General Election campaign of 2001 and its obsessive focus on Europe. This drowned out the Conservative message on other policy issues which happened to be of greater concern to voters than Europe was at that time. There was a sense of déjà vu about the Duncan Smith tenure as he also downgraded traditional Conservative messages; made no impact on the opinion polls and thereafter retreated back into a Thatcherite comfort zone. The difference was Duncan Smith was removed from the leadership by the Conservatives via a confidence motion whereas Hague survived. Both had initially tried to transcend Thatcherism and reorient Conservatism to the realities of the New Labour era and the new policy preferences of the electorate. However, with parliamentarians and members sceptical to the strategy in the first place, they both ended up solidifying Thatcherism, even though it was counter-productive in electoral terms (Dorey, Garnett and Denham, 2011: 9-56).
Both Hague and Duncan Smith could intellectually understand how and why the Conservatives had been rejected and were in opposition. They both realised that they needed to reach out beyond their own core vote in order to maximise their vote base in the future. Their ideas in the initial stages of their leadership tenures were broadly sensible but they backed down from their pre-determined approach due to hostility within their party. Backing down told the electorate that the party was unwilling to adapt and re-orientate itself to the centre-ground of British politics. Backing down in the face of internal party criticism also weakened Hague and Duncan Smith in the eyes of the electorate. In 1945 the Conservatives identified how and why they had been rejected. They accepted those reasons and adapted. Neither Labour in 1979 nor the Conservatives in 1997 could accept why they had been rejected and prolonged periods of strategic (and policy) confusion would follow, which would further erode electoral trust in their abilities, as they endured long periods in opposition (Mitchell, 1983; Snowdon, 2010).

As Labour entered opposition again in 2010 two shadows hung over the party. The first shadow related to the toxic legacy of Blair (McAnulla, 2011). For all of success of New Labour it was never fully accepted within the party and the questionable intervention in Iraq had snapped the fragile trust that had existed between the Blairites and non-New Labourites. The second shadow related to the banking crisis. As the tax yield fell as the economy crashed into recession, so the Brown administration bailed out the banking sector, but in doing so racked up massive levels of public debt. These two shadows left Ed Miliband with an uncomfortable legacy and a crisis of political identity and economic competence. Under Miliband three choices appeared in terms of strategic positioning and policy change in relation to New Labour. They were encapsulated by the so called shades of Labour debate – i.e. Red Labour and the abandonment of New Labour; Blue Labour and the modification of New Labour; and Purple Labour which constituted continuity New Labour (Beech and Hickson, 2014).

Although Ed Miliband was not himself aligned to Red Labour his critics in the press and his political opponents were quick to label him ‘Red Ed’ – partly because it rhymed and partly due to the fact that he only secured the Labour Party leadership due to the support of the trade union tranche of the Electoral College. During the course of that leadership election, Ed Miliband had distanced himself from New Labour and he criticised the Blair era on three fronts: (1) the decision to invade Iraq; (2) their over privileging of the financial service sector and (3) their failure to address income differences (see Macintyre and Hasan, 2012). Although his critics wanted to identify him with Red Labour
Miliband seemed to be initially more comfortable with the language of Blue Labour. Blue Labour implied an economically interventionist position and questioned New Labour for their uncritical view of the market economy and their failure to recognise the destructiveness of neo-liberalism which had severed the connection between Labour and its community traditions. However, it was the Blue Labour’s socially conservative mentality – and its emphasis on family, faith and work ethic - which provoked disquiet. Within this the Blue Labour claim that New Labour had ruptured trust between the working classes and the party on immigration (and that policy concessions were needed to address this) that caused Miliband to distance himself from the Blue Labour label. Running parallel to the claims of Red and Blue Labour was the counter-defence from Purple Labour. They offered a clear policy direction with positions of education credit; universal childcare and insurance based welfare. They claimed that the dominant focus in opposition should be on explaining how a future Labour government would rebalance the economy (code for cuts) in order to re-establish trust in the economic competence (for more on the shades of Labour debates see, Philpot, 2011 and Greary and Pabst, 2015).

The shades of Labour debate reflected the fact that Ed Miliband faced the difficult task of decontaminating the New Labour brand. For differing reasons he felt unable for fully embrace any of the shades being advanced by differing factional groupings within the party. His solution to the range of alternative strategies emanating from within the party was to amalgamate the shades under the unifying narrative of ‘One Nation Labour’ (Atkins, 2015). It was broadly interpreted as a shift to the left relative to its New Labour inheritance, due to its emphasis on helping low and middle income earners, its desire to promote manufacturing, its focus on long term investment, and its focus on those at the bottom of the labour market (Hattersely and Hickson, 2013: 213-4). The failure of One Nation Labour narrative to convince voters that they could be trusted with the economy contributed to their electoral rejection in May 2015. His successor faces the same problem that existed in 2010: how to construct a credible post-New Labour policy agenda and narrative.

**Demonstrating policy change: Details and specifics or just values?**

Our analysis recommends that to be an effective Leader of the Opposition the best advice in policy terms is to listen to the electorate’s policy preferences and change the prioritisation, content and tone
of policy accordingly. Having made the strategic decision to try and do so the next dilemma for any Leader of the Opposition is working how to present that policy change.

The reality is that working out how and why the party has been rejected – and which policy issues were primarily responsible for rejection – is a time consuming process for parties. There will be resistance to change and accusations that change implies selling out and abandoning principles. These factors can slow down the process of change and risks the Leader of the Opposition suffering from accusations of inertia. This can lead to the Leader of the Opposition falling into the trap of simply criticising Government policy alone. They have to respond to the media and electoral expectation that they outline what they would do instead.

When considering what they would do instead there are two broad approaches that can be adopted. The first approach is to be very detailed in terms of policy. This makes it clear to the electorate what the policy objectives of an incoming administration would involve. Taken together those detailed policies create a bigger picture – or what political commentators call the vision – of what they as a party of government would stand for. There are four risks associated with this approach. First, providing policy detail, which will involve change, has the potential to stir up discontent within the party. Second, providing detailed policy prescriptions to the policy problems that are predominant can be restrictive. The political environment of opposition may look different once you are in government five years later and you may then need to adapt and change policy direction or emphasis. The detailed policy position outlined in opposition as the ‘solution’ may be used against you in government to imply inconsistency or hypocrisy. Third, outlining detailed policy solutions in opposition before fighting the General Election campaign provides the governing party (and other opposition parties) with the time and space to find fault with them before campaigning starts. Can the policy proposed be afforded? Can it be implemented? Which sections of the electorate will be worse off as a consequence? Finally, there is always the possibility that the opposition may come up with a detailed and credible policy in opposition which the Government then, in effect, pinches and adopts thus neutralising it as an electoral asset (Fletcher, 2011; Bale, 2015a).

The detailed policy approach in opposition is no longer the favoured strategy of opposition parties. Examples from post-war history explain why. First, there is the example of the Heath opposition that went into a 1970 General Election campaign with a very detailed policy platform. The assumption was that this detailed policy platform would be implemented once entering power. But the Heath
administration became buffeted by events and their economic strategy became openly questioned two years into power. Fearful of the implications of rapidly increasing unemployment the Heath administration changed policy direction in terms of economic planning, regional development, public expenditure, incomes policy and industrial relations. To Heath’s sympathisers these were pragmatic adjustments. To his critics these were U-turns. It was the detail in their opposition policy platform that provided the evidence which the media, the opposition and his own right wing used against him. (Hennessy, 2000: 336). Second, there is the example under Kinnock’s opposition leadership, when the shadow Chancellor, John Smith, delivered his shadow Budget in the run up to the General Election of 1992. It outlined in detail what the economic priorities of an incoming Kinnock led administration would be. It created the opportunity for the Conservatives to launch a hard hitting series of attack adverts (e.g. ‘Labour’s Tax Bombshell’). It also ensured that the primary focus of the election campaign became tax, an issue upon which Labour were at their most vulnerable, as it rekindled doubts about Labour’s ability to manage the economy effectively (Gould, 1998: 45).

Both Blair between 1994 and 1997 and Cameron between 2005 and 2010 fall into the category of creating a general impression of the values and priorities that will guide them, rather than too many detailed policy prescriptions (and thus hostages to fortune). This perspective reflects the view of Churchill towards opposition. R. A. Butler recalled that Churchill felt that: ‘when an opposition spells out its policy in detail; the Government becomes the opposition and attacks the opposition which becomes the Government’ (Butler, 1971: 135).

**Party Management**

The above discussion on policy development highlights how policy change is necessary but immensely difficult to achieve. The Leader of the Opposition needs to negotiate with party elites and factions and persuade those sceptical of change of its necessity. This aspect of opposition leadership has the capacity to erode the leader’s credibility and the party’s electoral appeal, reflecting the old maxim that the electorate will punish divided parties. Therefore, securing party support for changing policy and strategy is an essential perquisite for recovery. Identifying whether the party is on message can be identified by two factors:
• Evidence of policy and strategic disagreement, often evident via parliamentary rebellion, conference disagreements, or dissent expressed via the media; or
• Evidence of support being withdrawn by key elites or by key factions within the party.

Open signs of dissent

Historically the Labour party have undermined their chances of recovering power by open signs of dissent in opposition. Their period in opposition between 1951 and 1964 was riven with ideological driven disputes. The feuding was between the social democratic consolidators and the socialist left. It was about overarching political strategy and embraced three key issues: first, unilateral nuclear disarmament; second, their commitment to nationalisation; and third, the Common Market. Their socially democratic party leader, Gaitskell, won the battle to reaffirm their commitment to multilateralism (reinstated as policy in 1961 after conference had endorsed unilateralism a year earlier). He lost the battle over nationalisation as he was forced to back down from his plans regarding Clause IV of the party constitution in the 1959-60 period. The squabbling over these issues coincided with challenges to his leadership of the party in both 1960 and 1961. The factional alignments within the party were blurred by Gaitskell’s attitude to the Common Market. The traditional distinction at the time was the socialist left was hostile to entry and the social democratic right was in favour. Gaitskell surprised and disappointed his fellow revisionists by siding with the left during his ‘thousand years of history’ speech at the 1962 Annual Conference (Brivati, 1996: 227; 336, 367).

This factional infighting continued during the opposition era post-1970 and post-1979. Even a highly skilled manager of party disputes such as Wilson experienced difficulties. The dominant issue in the 1970 to 1974 opposition era was the Common Market. Wilson sought consensus by opposing the Heath administration on the terms of entry to the Common Market, not the principle, which was not supported to the pro Common Market Labour right. Consensus was also sought via a commitment to holding a referendum on renegotiated terms of entry under a forthcoming Labour administration. The parliamentary rebellion and frontbench resignation of Roy Jenkins (the elected Deputy Leader of the Labour Party) was a huge embarrassment to Wilson and a sign of the problems that would lay ahead for the party (Bell, 2004). Policy shifts in opposition post-1979 – committing Labour to unilateralism and withdrawal from the Common Market – contributed to the defections of prominent social democratic figures on the right and the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in early 1981 (Crewe and King, 1995).
In comparison to the previous periods when Labour entered opposition in the post-war era – in 1951, 1970 and 1979 – the period from 2010 to 2015 was characterised by relative harmony. The ideological configurations of the PLP in the aftermath of New Labour had apparently made the labels of Labour left and right seem out dated. The debates that did emerge in opposition – between the advocates of Red Labour; Blue Labour and Purple Labour – failed to generate the heat and passion of the past. Whatever disagreements may have existed between Red, Blue and Purple Labour largely bypassed the electorate as Miliband managed these disputes via the unifying (but nebulous) narrative of One Nation Labour (Bale, 2015b).

The pattern in terms of the Conservatives in opposition is reversed. Their most recent transition from government to opposition (in 1997) was characterised by factional infighting, whereas other transitions (in 1945, 1964 and to a lesser extent 1974) were characterised by better attempts at presenting a united front. In 1945 the process of policy reappraisal and internal organisation that was pursued was broadly accepted by the PCP without significant dissent. In 1964 the process of renewal involved policy and organisation change as well leadership change as Douglas-Home made way for Heath. The Conservative opposition period between 1964 and 1970 had an added complexity when compared to the 1945 to 1951 period, in that Heath had to deal with the views of Enoch Powell on immigration. The period of opposition between 1974 and 1979 had the capacity for division after Thatcher annexed the party leadership from Heath and set about re-orientating the party in his economic approach and its strategy for dealing with industrial relations (Willets, 2005; Garnett, 2005; Kavanagh, 2005; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005)

Heavyweight support

Thatcher, however, benefitted from the loyalty that she was able secure from senior Conservatives between 1975 and 1979. Here the willingness of William Whitelaw to back her was crucial. She had defeated him 146 to 79 in the February 1975 Conservative Party Leadership Election. Given that Whitelaw was identified with the paternalistic left wing of the party his refusal to support her would have created divisions and undermined her. Furthermore, although in policy terms Thatcher was moving the party in an economically rightwards direction her shadow Cabinets in the 1970s retained, for reasons of unity, a number of Conservatives who would later be defined as wets – e.g. Francis Pym, Iain Gilmour and James Prior. In the late 1970s Hague was not as successful as Thatcher in terms of assembling the strongest frontbench team that he could. Given that he had only 165
Conservative parliamentarians to select from he could ill afford the self-imposed exile of Kenneth Clarke whom he had defeated for the leadership. Clarke’s refusal to serve reinforced the feud within the party over European integration. Other high profile figures such as Stephen Dorrell, Virginia Bottomley and Peter Lilley retreated to the backbenches. This pattern continued under Duncan Smith. The leading two alternatives to Duncan Smith in the 2001 Conservative Party Leadership Election – Clarke and Michael Portillo – both refused to serve post 2001 (Denham and O’Hara, 2008: 48-69).

The refusal of defeated candidates for the party leadership, and for other heavyweight figures within the party, to serve on the opposition frontbench has increased in recent years. This trend has occurred at the same time as (a) politics and electioneering has become more personalised and leadership centred (as mentioned above); and (b) opposition leaders have more recently been acquiring the position after considerably less parliamentary experience (Between 1945 and 1980 the average age when becoming Leader of the Opposition was 58 years old which was after an average of 24 years in Parliament; since 1983 those figures have fallen to 45 years old and 12 years parliamentary experience, Heppell, 2012: 243).

Thus earlier generation Leaders of the Opposition were more experienced when holding the position and they were able to share the burden of opposition with fellow experienced political elites. For example, when Wilson re-entered opposition in 1970 his frontbench benefitted from the parliamentary presence and the shadow Cabinet insights of heavyweight ex Cabinet ministers such as James Callaghan, Denis Healey and Anthony Crosland. Compare this to the circumstances that Ed Miliband faced. Considerably less experienced than Wilson he lost from his inner sanctum experienced, credible and stabilising Labour figures such as Alistair Darling; Jack Straw and Alan Johnson (although Johnson briefly served in the shadow Cabinet before stepping down in early 2011). The greatest loss to the collective opposition effort of Labour was the refusal of David Miliband to remain within the shadow Cabinet. The cumulative impact was that Ed Miliband entered his new role in similar circumstances to Hague and Duncan Smith – i.e. an inexperienced leader devoid of high profile experienced political heavyweights which thus intensified the focus on him alone. When Cameron was Leader of the Opposition he realised the value of experience and the unifying symbol of binding the heavyweights to him. This was evident by the fact that he persuaded both Hague and Kenneth Clarke to reassure their frontbench responsibilities, which reflected his inclusive approach to shadow Cabinet management (Bale, 2009).
Public Communication

Running parallel to the process of initiating policy change and maintaining party cohesion comes the challenge of communicating the ‘new’ approach to the electorate. Effective communication in opposition combines two elements:

- The overarching marketing of the new approach under a new party leader,
- The individual communication skills of the new party leader or their skills at oratory.

Effective Marketing of the ‘New’ Approach

Just as in policy, the political communications of an opposition party and its leader should be as Churchill outlined: ‘a lighthouse not a shop window’ (Fletcher, 2011). It is not about setting out a detailed presentation but offering a sense of direction, a narrative, or better still, a theme of an alternative credible and competent government. Indeed, Powell identified, as early as 1959, what he termed the ‘categorical imperative’, the *sine qua non* for opposition success. ‘There must be a great, simple, central theme, branching into all fields and subjects of debate, but in itself easily grasped, which runs through the words and actions of a successful opposition’ (Powell, 1959: 340-341). Of course, the parties utilise the skills of political strategists/spin doctors in the facilitation of such necessary themes for the successful outcome of any campaign; increasingly the ‘external’ professionals of an electoral professional party (Panebianco, 1988). There should always be a two-fold purpose to this approach, it is incumbent upon the strategist to define their own party/leader in the best possible light but is just as necessary, if not more so, to define your opponent; as Roger Ailes, Bush Senior’s spin doctor explained: ‘whichever of us defined the other and ourselves most effectively would win’ (Devlin, 1995: 186 and 197). But the professional requires credible material to work with, you cannot make a claim to voters that is simply unbelievable, you can add emphasis, crystalize or even ‘manipulate’ feelings that are already in the voter’s mind, inviting them into an act of participation with the party or leader but not if there is an air of incredibility to the message.

It is instructive that Powell’s critique was aimed at Labour in the 1950s as it was claimed that its 1959 campaign was based upon the explicit rejection of modern media techniques and expertise and a future strategist of the party, Mark Abrams, was of the opinion that this failure was because any such exercise could have led nowhere as the ‘party simply did not have the machinery that could have taken survey
findings and used them to help shape effective political propaganda’ (Rose, 1967: 63 and 64). When Wilson became Labour leader in 1963 he hired Abrams and others who helped construct the successful ‘time for a change’ narrative of replacing the 14th Earl of Home with the young dynamic Mr Wilson who would implement the white heat of a technological revolution, while appearing with the Beatles in 1964 in an earlier form of celebrity endorsement (Rosenbaum, 1997). Thatcher and her advisers would further transform political campaigning in Britain with an intensification of the techniques of marketing (Scammell, 1995) with the claim that ‘the way Mrs Thatcher was presented to the electorate in 1979 owed more to the American techniques of packaging a presidential candidate and projecting an image than had ever before been seen in Britain’ (Cockerell, et al, 1984: 194). It is also instructive to note that many of the strategists who would be identified with Thatcher’s communications successes were in place for Heath but he was simply not receptive to such expert advice and his treatment of them bordered on the disdainful (Kavanagh, 1995). Thatcher would not make the same mistake utilising their expertise even for the party leadership election of 1975. The iconic Labour Isn’t Working poster in the run up to the 1979 election encapsulated such a coherent successful theme that resonated with what was already in the voter’s mind.

Those who staffed Labour’s Shadow Communications Agency from 1985 were heavily influenced by the persuasion techniques of the Thatcher period and would eventually go on to construct the ‘New party’ theme with its new campaigning principles and new campaigning organisation offering a ‘new political purpose’. Adapting Clinton’s New Democrats campaign messages, they offered up the ‘symbolic sacrifice’ of Clause IV in order to demonstrate the extent to which the party was new (Gould, 1998; Wring, 2004). Again, many of these strategists, or as Clare Short would have it, ‘people who live in the dark’, were in situ for Kinnock’s leadership but in 1987 and in 1992, the electorate clearly had difficulty in envisaging Kinnock as a leader suitable to be Prime Minister; notwithstanding the considerable effort by his ‘spin team’ to address such weakness and for what we now see as the over-praise for him and the party’s campaign at the time. And although there is no doubt that Cameron by 2010 had turned around the fortunes of the Conservative party considerably, particularly from the dark days of the late 1990s, mistakes by ‘team Cameron’ through the long, medium and short election campaigns were to deny the party an overall majority in 2010. In the context of the economic crisis, with Brown having some of the lowest approval ratings in opinion poll history there is no avoiding a verdict of failure with regards to a core message that gave clarity, consistency and lessened confusion; that desideratum of a simple central theme which resonates with the electorate (Seawright, 2013).
Arguably the 2015 campaign uncannily resembled that of 1992, with the electorate having serious misgivings over the idea of Ed Miliband as Prime Minister. For both campaigns, the economy, leadership and the National Health Service (NHS) would feature prominently as salient issues and ones on which, in a valence framework, the election would be won or lost. Just as in 1992, the Conservatives wanted to emphasise the lack of trust in Labour on the economy, with a repetitive and consistent theme of ‘competence not chaos’ to reflect their advantage on this topic over Labour. Again Labour emphasised the ‘save the NHS’ message which did little to address their weakness on the issue of the economy and if anything their use of the leader in the campaign actually exacerbated the level of circumspection on his suitability as a potential First Minister. The farcical episode of the rather vacuous ‘six key pledges’ carved in the ‘Ed stone’ encapsulated the shortcomings of the Labour campaign, and no matter the amount of twitter followers, politicians should be aware of the potential electoral pitfalls in any endorsement from Russell Brand.

Communication skills or persuasive capability

Marketing matters because party leaders play an increasingly dominant role in campaigning and this explains why such care and attention is now taken to package and present the party leader (Denver, 2005: 292-9). This reflects that assumption that leaders do have the ability to persuade and thus influence public attitudes through their speeches, through their interviews, through their performances in Parliament or in press conferences. Effective or ineffective rhetoric and oratory thus shapes electoral perceptions of the competence of leaders (Finlayson, 2014). How do Leaders of the Opposition seek to persuade the electorate that the approaches of the Government are flawed and that their alternatives are more appropriate? The methods of persuasion differ – does the Leader of the Opposition use appeals based on emotion or logic and evidence? Two Leaders of the Opposition who were well known for their speeches were Foot and Kinnock, but too often their speeches were emotionally charged and evoked the support of known Labour voters rather than the undecided (Stewart, 2015; Moon, 2015). Both were also famous for rhetorical interventions in relation to the factional infighting within their own parties as much as they were for attacking and undermining Thatcher – think of Kinnock’s 1985 Labour Party Conference speech attacking Militant. Rhetoric based around logic and evidence can have a place and can demonstrate soundness of argument and suitability for the demands of office – think of Smith in the period between 1992 and 1994.
Intellectualising policy debates to gain credibility was the approach that Ed Miliband effectively adopted. However, although his intellect was not questioned he was an unconvincing conference speaker and televisual performer (Gaffney and Lahel, 2013).

The most effective type of opposition leader in rhetorical terms is the leader whose credibility is acknowledged – i.e. their political capital is high and reported as being so – as this means that their arguments carry weight because they are widely respected (Bennister et al, 2015). Political capital, however, is transient and can be lost – think of Blair. The political capital that a Leader of the Opposition carries can be high because they have recently been elected and have a clear mandate, or because their party is ahead in the opinion polls, or most importantly when their personal opinion poll rating outranks that of their party. When their credibility and political capital is high their arguments, be those based on emotion or logic and reason, are more likely to gain a more sympathetic press interpretation, and are therefore more likely to be persuasive. Leaders of the Opposition whose political capital was high, and who were effective communicators, were Wilson (in his first period between 1963 and 1964), and Blair and Cameron. All three presenting themselves as agents of change or modernisers whose rhetoric was based on the removal of discredited long serving administrations.

**The ‘Personal Factor’**

The pursuit of a new policy agenda; the challenge of gaining the consent of the party for that new policy agenda; and the demands to communicate that new policy agenda effectively, place Leaders of the Opposition under considerable pressure. How do they cope with the expectations heaped upon them? How do they react to the inevitable criticism that will come their way from within their own party, their critics on the opposition benches and from within the media? Do they have the emotional intelligence to separate that criticism into that which is worthy of recognition and that which should be dismissed? If they cannot do this, and it is evident that they cannot or that it is a struggle, it will raise question marks about their character and their suitability to being Prime Minister. These questions encapsulate what is best described as the ‘personal factor’ that needs to be considered when assessing opposition leaders. Two critical issues in this regard are:

- Are they resilient and authentic?
- Are they organisationally effective and can they make decisions?
The need for resilience and the value of authenticity

Being Leader of the Opposition is a severe test of character and personality. The pressures are unrelenting, the demands and expectations huge, and there is no hiding place. Individuals’ strengths and weaknesses - in terms of emotional intelligence, approach to personal relationships, cognitive style, and so on - are soon exposed, and can make a significant difference to their effectiveness, and success or failure, in the job. They need to be able to deal with criticism, frustrations and setbacks; handle other strong personalities in their team of advisers and shadow ministers; show resilience in the face of the ups and downs of politics week-by-week and year-by-year; and demonstrate their suitability as a potential Prime Minister. Problems on these fronts, or defects of temperament, won’t by themselves sink an Opposition but they can make all the things that Oppositions need to do to be successful in policy, strategy and campaigning terms more difficult to achieve (Fletcher, 2011).

Attractive personal qualities may earn respect and even admiration in many quarters, but may not help cut the mustard as an effective Leader of the Opposition. Douglas-Home, back in the 1960s, was a wonderfully decent, modest, honest, upright, old-school character – a manifestly good man – but lasted only nine months in the job, with Conservative backbenchers wanting to see more fire-in-the-belly and a more robust style of opposition to the then Labour government (Thorpe, 1996). Foot was a civilised and cultivated literary figure, with friendships across the political spectrum, an idealist, a man of principle and a romantic. He was straightforward and ready to listen, but even he could not keep the Labour Party from tearing itself to pieces in the early 1980s, and he never stood a chance against Thatcher at her most rampant (Morgan, 2007). At the opposite end of the personality spectrum, as it were, Heath was awkward, tense, humourless, unclubbable and difficult to like but, all the same, won the 1970 General Election, though more because of the failings of the then Labour government than the public (or his colleagues) warming to his personal qualities as Leader of the Opposition (Campbell, 1993).

Authenticity is crucial. There is an argument that Kinnock, in his struggle to rebuild the Labour Party and make it electable 1983-92, had to in effect shut down parts of his personality in order to appear more ‘serious’ and ‘statesmanlike’. The bonhomie, ebullience, ‘mateyness’ and humour that helped win him the party leadership were progressively ditched in an attempt to seem more ‘heavyweight’ and
to project ‘gravitas’. But the result was uncomfortable for him and unconvincing for the voters (Westlake, 2001). Equally, Ed Miliband’s attempt to humanise an abstract policy speech by telling a story about ordinary people, such as the person called ‘Gareth’ he had met while walking on Hampstead Heath, did not come across as convincing or counter claims that he was ‘geeky’ or worse (Crines, 2015).

Self-confidence and self-belief are also essential. Attlee’s self-confidence and steeliness were hidden by a dull, unassuming, diffident public persona that would make it hard for him to be elected today but helped him hold a party of prima donnas and factions together (Thomas-Symonds, 2010). John Smith was totally secure in himself and also a great ‘people person’ – affable, approachable, tolerant, laid back, using his personality to wield together into a team the discordant personalities of his Shadow Cabinet (Stuart, 2005). Things can go wrong, however, when self-confidence mutates into stubbornness, arrogance, intolerance and inflexibility as it arguably did in the case of Gaitskell, who seemed to want to demonstrate his courage, principle and control by ‘taking on’ and challenging his own party on several high-profile policy issues, but at the cost of advertising and exacerbating party disunity (Williams, 1978).

Running the opposition organisation and decision-making

A Leader of the Opposition does not face the same sort of continuous tidal wave of briefings, paperwork and information flows, and decisions to take (on matters great and small) as a Prime Minister does, but still needs high level intellectual and decision-making qualities. Churchill could get away with lofty ‘hands off’ and broadbrush approach in the late-1940s, but that would not work nowadays. Intellectuals tend not to do well at the top of politics, but a clear and decisive if not a hugely original mind is needed. Duncan Smith failed to establish credibility with his colleagues on this front. Ed Miliband illustrated another potential problem here, showing, in a way, how excessive analysis can lead to paralysis. Questioning the data and the options, thinking things through deeply for himself, being on top of the details and intellectually massively self-confident, he was at the same time notoriously and damagingly prone to indecision and often unable or unwilling to delegate properly (Bale, 2015b).
Opposition politics is a team game and the presence or absence of good people skills can therefore make a crucial difference for a Leader of the Opposition. Although he was rational, hard-working, on top of details, and publicly calm and cool, it did not help Hague, for instance, that he was a rather self-contained loner who, because he didn’t apparently need much emotional support himself, did not appreciate that other people did need understanding and empathy from their leader (Nadler, 2001). Blair on one level fitted the model of the emotionally literate leader modern politics seems to demand, but some parliamentary colleagues found him at times to be distant and unempathetic, or else evasive and ambiguous when it suited his purposes (Seldon, 2004). Sometimes a clique of advisers, aides and cronies cuts a Leader of the Opposition off from colleagues in the wider party and interferes with MPs and shadow ministers getting the access and establishing the sort of personal rapport and mutual understanding they need for the Opposition team to function well. That ‘Team Miliband’ was sometimes seen to be a rather dysfunctional shambles – likened more to a medieval court than a properly functioning office – reflected badly on Ed Miliband’s approach to organisation and decision-making (Bale, 2015b).

Leaders of the Opposition: Recognising Circumstances shape perceptions of Effectiveness

It therefore clear that a Leader of the Opposition who hopes to make it to Downing Street needs to demonstrate high levels of political skill in terms of coping with the tasks associated with their role. However, their ability to succeed and regain power is also influenced by the following variables:

- The performance of the incumbent government
- The length of time that the incumbent Prime Minister has been in power

**Governmental performance**

The ability of any Leader of the Opposition to make an impact is dependent upon the incumbent government experiencing difficulties – economic performance, internal divisions, scandals – which create a perception that a change of government is necessary. All a Leader of the Opposition has to do is make sure that their party is seen as a credible alternative, and that they are viewed as a credible
alternative Prime Minister – i.e. ensure that they are positioned to exploit any perception of incompetence attached to an incumbent administration (Norton, 2009: 31-33). Therefore, as Ball outlines opposition politics is shaped and conditioned by the performance of the government and ‘the recovery of unity, support and morale in opposition flows from the difficulties of the government, rather than causing them in the first instance’ (Ball, 2005: 4).

There tends to be a correlation between economic performance (growth; unemployment; inflation) and perceptions of governing competence. When the economy is seen to be delivering increases in living standards then this aids the government’s electoral prospects – think for example of New Labour and their easy re-election in 2001. When governing parties are engulfed by economic crises, such as Labour in the late 1970s (from the IMF crisis of 1976 through to the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79) or the Conservatives after Black Wednesday and their humiliating expulsion from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (September 1992), it provides windows of opportunity for opposition parties to exploit (Shepherd, 2013; Kettell, 2008). Smith captured the mood of the nation in the aftermath of the ERM crisis when he described Major as: ‘the devalued Prime Minister of a devalued Government’ (HC Deb, Vol. 212, Col. 22, 24th September 1992).

Governing parties seeking re-election need to be able to demonstrate not only governing competence but also internal unity. Leaders of the Opposition need to highlight when divisions exist within the governing party and reinforce a message that those internal divisions make them unfit for office. If the governing party seem broadly unified – e.g. the early years of New Labour – then the Leader of the Opposition has little to exploit. However, when the governing party does have internal disagreements it is essential that the Leader of the Opposition can construct withering soundbites to encapsulate why that disunity is damaging to governmental effectiveness and thus the national interest. Blair was particularly effective at this both in Parliament – ‘I lead my party, he follows his’ (HC Deb, Vol. 258, Col. 655, 25th April 1995) - and when electioneering - ‘there are two Conservative parties fighting this election and John Major is in charge of neither of them’ (Seldon, 1997: 723).

One of the central requirements of any Leader of the Opposition is to expose and exploit failings within Government. A classic illustration of an opposition leader failing to do so effectively was Kinnock in relation to the Westland crisis of early 1986. A dispute had emerged within Cabinet over the future of the Westland Aircraft company and within that the British helicopter industry. Thatcher
favoured a solution based around an American consortium but her Defence Secretary, Michael Heseltine, favoured a European consortium. The crisis centred round the leaking of a letter from the Solicitor General - Patrick Mayhew - that implied the case for the European consortium (that Heseltine was advancing) was characterized by factual inaccuracies. Thatcher had asked Mayhew to construct the letter and then with the ‘express consent’ of Brittan, and the ‘implied approval’ of Thatcher (Dunleavy, 1990: 33) the letter was leaked to the Press Association. Discrediting and undermining Heseltine, and the European option, appeared to be the objective. The critical question was whether Thatcher authorized the leak?

The central parliamentary objective for Kinnock, when Labour tabled an opposition motion, was to offer a forensic dissection of her denial in the hope (or expectation) that he could demonstrate that she was complicit with the leak. Kinnock chose not to offer a dispassionate assessment of the factual gaps and admissions within her statements through which the contradictions could have emerged. He struck the wrong tone with his parliamentary intervention and offered a partisan speech accusing her of dishonesty. This had two consequences. First, momentum for the opposition was lost as the Speaker of the House of Commons asked Kinnock to withdraw the accusation of dishonesty. Second, by adopting such an excessively partisan tone, Kinnock succeeded in mobilizing Conservative backbenchers to defend their leader. Kinnock had failed when Thatcher was at her most vulnerable and it reinforced an already established image of him as a partisan point scorer, rather than a statesmanlike leader (Westlake, 2001: 390).

**Timing in the electoral and governmental cycle**

The timing of being Leader of the Opposition is significant as it informs the climate of expectation or the political mood. This is will shape perceptions of the power of the Leader of the Opposition – both within and beyond the party – and will determine whether they are viewed as constrained or empowered by circumstances. Leaders of the opposition can be constrained by acquiring the party leadership shortly after their party has been defeated at the polls. Defeat will be indicative of something fundamentally wrong with the party in terms of policy platform, party unity, organisational ability and electioneering. It will more often than not mean that the new party leader inherits the leadership with the party behind in the opinion polls, and thus they are immediately constrained. Such leaders will
usually have fewer avenues of opportunity to exploit when facing a recently elected administration to which the electorate are more willing to give the benefit of the doubt in the short term.

Leaders of the opposition who were clearly constrained upon acquiring the role in recent times include Kinnock, Hague, Duncan Smith and Miliband (all elected as party leader within months of their parties suffering crushing election defeats). On a slightly less severe end of constraint could be included Thatcher, Smith and Cameron, although they had more reason for optimism than Kinnock, Hague or Duncan Smith. Thatcher faced a Labour administration that had virtually no parliamentary majority and was internally divided. Smith faced a Conservative administration with a small parliamentary majority that was badly divided over Europe and within months of Smith becoming leader he had ‘Black Wednesday’ to exploit. Cameron and Smith both had the opportunity to exploit the fact that the incumbent government had been in power for a considerable amount of time. Multi-term administrations tend to suffer from degenerative tendencies, when for example their ability to avoid culpability for past mistakes and withstand the ‘time of a change’ argument is significantly reduced. Thus, the ideal time to be Leader of the Opposition is against a long serving administration engulfed with economic difficulties and against an uncharismatic Prime Minister with question marks concerning their legitimacy – e.g. Wilson against Douglas-Home (1963-1964); Blair against Major (1994-1997); and Cameron against Brown (2007-2010).

Summary

The quasi-constitutional role of being Leader of the Opposition – of exposing the limitations of government policy and holding them to account – is not really the hard part of the role. The real challenge is the party political role of making their party electorally competitive so that they can win again. That is the primary determinant of effectiveness, but this is by-product of a range of factors, some specific to the individual holding the role, and some reflecting the circumstances that they face.

Our report does acknowledge the constraining influence of circumstances. Oppositions need a trigger – economic crises; policy failure; governing party divisions; scandal – to exploit. The likelihood of the
electorate turning against the governing party for one of the above is intensified when the governing party has been in power for a long time.

Our report notes that the ability to come across as an effective Leaders of the Opposition will be enhanced if the incumbent can demonstrate that the party has changed. The narrative or over-arching vision of the party needs to be seen to have evolved to signal to the electorate that they have listened, although policy change may not need to be fully spelt out. The process of change must broaden the appeal of the party. It must be informed by a clear appreciation of the issues of greatest electoral concern and the issues most likely to cause voters to switch back to the opposition party. By implication this will mean seeking the centre ground of British politics and the location of the median voter. The danger lies in listening to the radicals within their own party whose ideological fervour excites the already committed and frightens off the undecided. When initiating change the leader must ensure that the party – both at parliamentary and extra-parliamentary level – remains unified. Internal feuding over policy specifics, or worse still navel gazing about internal party procedures, will alienate. The need for all to look outward and to listen to those who did not vote for them and to understand why is central. An opposition party within which some conclude that the electorate were wrong or have been misled is destined to start fighting amongst themselves. Factional disputes and personal battles are obstacles to recovery, especially if the most talented figures within the opposition party are involved, and some land up refusing to serve on the frontbench.

If, however, an opposition party can incrementally reposition itself and remain unified then they have the foundations for being a credible opposition. To be seen as a government in waiting, then they need the Leader of the Opposition to be seen to be an effective communicator. Evidence of credibility will be provided by their performance in Prime Minister’s Questions, in set piece speeches and in interviews. As the public face of their party a charismatic leader who excels in these areas will generate attention and positive publicity for the party. The cumulative impact of changing policy; maintaining unity and being the public face and brand of the party is immensely pressuring. To succeed the Leader of the Opposition needs to be remarkably thick skinned as criticism is inevitable. The levels of expectation are so high and the scrutiny to which they are subjected to so intense. It is therefore not surprising that it has often been described as the worst job in politics.
Jeremy Corbyn is probably the most unexpected Leader of the Opposition in the post war era. He is on the ideological outer edge of the party he leads. His strategy is based on pulling enough of the electorate to where his Labour Party will be positioned (i.e. on the outer left), rather than positioning the Labour Party towards the centre ground and the location of the median voter. It is a strategy that is questioned by the majority of his own parliamentarians. His policy change agenda assumes that the electorate can be persuaded but if the New Labour faction refuses to embrace ‘Corbyn-ism’, then the danger is that Labour become defined by two characteristics: first, being seen as extreme; and second, being seen as divided. On the issue of perceived divisions, Corbyn’s ability to manage the party at parliamentary level will be tested by his past behaviour. A habitual rebel may look a hypocrite demanding loyalty. On a personal level it is difficult to determine how Corbyn will cope with the demands of leadership and its responsibilities. Thirty years on the backbenches provides us with little insight into how the pressures will impact upon him. However, that Corbyn defies the traditional assumptions about political leadership has been part of his appeal. His outsider status and his unwillingness to compromise on strongly held principles over three decades means that no one can accuse him of being a faceless career politician. His appearance (from his dress sense to his beard), and his refusal to pander to the advice of image consultants, means that he has an air of authenticity that could be appealing in what has been cynically defined as an anti-political age.

Bibliography


