



Batrouni, D. (2017). One Nation, disconnected party: The evocation of One Nation aimed to unite the nation, instead it highlighted the Labour party's divisions. *British Politics*, 12(3), 432-448. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-017-0054-8>

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Link to published version (if available):
[10.1057/s41293-017-0054-8](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-017-0054-8)

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One Nation, disconnected party

The evocation of One Nation aimed to unite the nation, instead it highlighted the Labour party's divisions.

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Abstract: This paper explores Ed Miliband's evocation of One Nation in his 2012 Labour party conference speech. It first surveys the views of members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and key advisors to Miliband on One Nation, with a focus on the debates surrounding its purpose and substance. What becomes clear is the amount of confusion amongst backbenchers and shadow cabinet members of the PLP regarding its purpose. Second, the paper explains the respective, and drastically different, positions of the Policy Review team and Ed Miliband and his leadership team over the purpose of One Nation. Third, this paper highlights that there was a fundamental disconnection between the two principal centres of policymaking under the tenure of Ed Miliband's leadership and that this ultimately undermined One Nation by allowing Ed Miliband quietly to drop it for a 'cost of living' narrative. It concludes that the evocation of One Nation was a missed opportunity for the Labour party, which subsequently allowed the Conservatives to reclaim that territory.

Keywords: Ed Miliband, Labour Party, One Nation, Policymaking

Introduction

'One Nation' was the central theme of Ed Miliband's leadership speech to Labour conference in Manchester, 2012. In it, he spoke about Benjamin Disraeli and his vision of One Nation, remarking: "it was a vision of a Britain where patriotism, loyalty, dedication to the common cause courses through the veins of all and nobody feels left out. It was a vision of Britain coming together to overcome the challenges we faced" (Miliband 2012). He continued to explain that his own vision of One Nation was about capturing that spirit of a nation "where we have a shared destiny, a sense of shared endeavour and a common life that we lead together (Miliband 2012). As this article will show, the utilisation of an old Tory slogan was warmly received by political commentators in the British press. Yet, despite this warm praise, One Nation did not last long in the lexicon of Ed Miliband's policy statements. This paper will argue that this was due to the ad hoc nature of Miliband's One Nation idea and the competing perspectives within the party's policymaking machinery.

The following analysis draws on thirty semi-structured elite interviews with Labour MPs, including backbenchers, junior shadow ministers and senior cabinet members as well as key personnel in Ed Miliband's office and principal members of the Policy Review team. Obviously such interviews need to be interpreted with care, so the arguments made by the interviewees have been checked against other sources with particular care towards examining potential differences with interviews undertaken before and after the 2015 general election. Unfortunately, the latter issue was unavoidable as some key interviewees would not undertake any interviews before the election. Quotes derived from interviewees after the general election are specified throughout the article. While some differences were apparent, for example the candid nature of the responses post-election, certain key themes became clear regardless of when the interview took place. One such theme was the differing views on One Nation.

Two distinct views can be discerned from the interviews with various actors in the PLP, particularly from the two principal centres for policymaking in the Labour party: the leadership and the Policy Review team. The first view was that One Nation represented a short-term tactical repositioning of the party. This view emphasised that One Nation was merely a slogan that aimed to ‘steal the clothes of the Conservatives’. This was mainly held by the leadership team, especially the leader. The second view was that One Nation was a ‘big idea’ that could be used to construct a “policy narrative” to the public of the renewed purpose of the Labour party (Gaffney and Lahel 2013a: 494). This interpretation emphasised that One Nation conveyed a broader message and had the ability to combine a narrative or vision of a united society with concrete policies behind it. This view was primarily held by key members of the Policy Review team. These two competing interpretations created a generic view, mainly amongst the wider PLP, of confusion around the purpose of One Nation. This confusion resulted in many MPs not engaging with and eventually dismissing One Nation as a substantive idea. Thus, these competing views weakened the idea, making it easier for the leadership team to drop One Nation and move on to a ‘cost of living’ narrative that was based on a policy retail offer.

Miliband’s One Nation

Miliband attributed One Nation solely to the Conservative party, speaking specifically about Benjamin Disraeli. He did not cite or refer to the Labour party’s previous evocation of One Nation, the most recent of which was Blair’s and New Labour’s foray while in opposition in the 1990s (see Wickham-Jones 2013). Of course, Miliband was keen not to be closely associated with New Labour, emphasising in his first speech as Labour leader: “Be in no doubt. The new generation of Labour is different. Different attitudes, different ideas, different ways of doing politics” (Miliband 2010). While ignoring Labour’s previous excursions into One Nation was politically useful from an internal party

perspective, it was also useful from an external perspective. By citing Disraeli and One Nation conservatism, a policy platform which was largely constructed post-1945 (see Bridgen 2000; Walsha 2000), Miliband purposively referred to an aspect of conservatism that explicitly concerned itself with the inequality gap between the rich and the poor. In opposition, Blair had talked about inequality when he evoked One Nation at the 1995 Labour party conference, but during New Labour's term in office "incomes at the very top of the distribution saw the strongest growth...largely as a result of that most measures of income inequality nudged up" (Joyce and Sibieta 2013: 198). Tackling income inequality was one of Ed Miliband's primary priorities and he was determined to move beyond New Labour, so any association with Blair's use of One Nation would have been tainted by an association with New Labour more generally and its failure on tackling inequality more specifically. Therefore, he focused on One Nation, the Conservative idea. This tactic worked for Miliband in terms of the glowing press coverage his One Nation speech received. Polly Toynbee (2012), of the *Guardian* Newspaper, described it "as a stroke of genius", D'Ancona (2013), then of the *Spectator* Magazine, believed Miliband "had struck gold", while Steve Richards (2012), of the *Independent* Newspaper, thought it was the "political moment when New Labour gave way to One Nation Labour". Such was the extent of the political commentariat's approval that Peter Hitchens (2012) lamented in his regular *Sunday Mail* column that "Britain's media pundits make sheep look like rugged individualists" because "it's always more or less the same. The favoured one makes a speech and the word goes out 'That was a great speech!' and everyone says and writes that it was."

While some columnists thought the speech signified a profound moment when Labour moved beyond the dichotomy of 'Old' and 'New' to the territory of 'One Nation' Labour (Toynbee 2012), Miliband and his team interpreted this success as being based on "us [being] really clever because it's stealing a Conservative term; therefore [Ed Miliband] was going on to Conservative territory", explained a key advisor to Miliband. Amongst backbenchers of the PLP there was appreciation for

this tactical move, with one backbencher commenting that “it was a clever policy to pinch that idea; to pinch [the Tories’] clothes”. Thus, for the leadership and a few backbenchers, the success of One Nation was viewed as being based upon its political adeptness at capturing Conservative political territory. Yet, members of the PLP directly involved with One Nation reported that there was a broader argument over and above moving on to Conservative territory. One junior shadow minister argued that One Nation “was designed to say everyone should play their part”, while another described its purpose as bridging the divides the Conservatives were creating between “the public and private sectors, the young and the old and the North and the South. Innately people don’t like divides and One Nation is about bridging divides”. These views did not disregard the political appropriation of One Nation from the Conservatives, but instead focused more on the attempt to use One Nation to develop a coherent national message that spoke to voters beyond the party’s electoral base; to speak to the country as a whole.

In essence, both views represented two sides of the same coin. One Nation was a communicative tool that provided two political aims: (1) signalling a new Labour strategy that ‘imagined’ a new territory (Gaffney and Lahel 2013a: 494) and, (2) stealing the political clothes of the Conservative party. This duality of purpose was a recurring theme in a number of interviews with personnel in and around Ed Miliband. A senior shadow minister who laid claim to convincing Ed Miliband to adopt One Nation, stated that “our vision [was] a more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity across Britain because without that Britain doesn’t succeed as a country. What is a way in which you articulate that in a catchy phrase and bluntly steal their clothes – One Nation”. A backbench MP and confidant to Ed Miliband corroborated this analysis and explained that “One Nation was a critique of the Tories, so as a politician you could see the advantage of it straight away, it [also] allowed us to have a go at them. It was an expression of the kind of society he wanted to create”. I was informed that the society Miliband wanted to create was a more equal one, where being patriotic was about

ensuring no citizen or region was left behind. A leading member of the Policy Review team explicitly stated that One Nation was about getting “out of the perception of interest-based politics” and contesting the national story because “every time Labour won it has contested the national category”. According to this interviewee, this fundamentally required an engagement with patriotism, a subject with which this MP believed certain sections of the Labour party had been historically uncomfortable.

The role of patriotism in the genesis of Ed Miliband’s evocation of One Nation should not be underplayed. In fact, it is fundamental. Marc Stears (2015), a friend and close advisor to Ed Miliband and co-author of the One Nation speech, explicitly stated after the election that “in the summer of 2012, [Ed Miliband] was essentially trying to capture two things: [first] that although his “economic mission was fairly radical, it was a majoritarian one” and, second, he wanted to capture what was the spirit of the Olympics because what “Ed was really keen for the conference speech to do was to demonstrate how that spirit was a left spirit, so you could be patriotic but Labour.” It was, according to Stears, about generating a patriotic feeling that was about everyone doing their part and that everybody should be “concerned about the well-being of everybody in the country, not just the few people at the top” (Stears 2015). While this interview took place after the general election, interviews before the election corroborated Stears’ story that this engagement with patriotism was predicated on Miliband’s economic mission; a mission that was kept vague for the intended audience, the public.

What was the economic mission then? A confidant to Miliband explained that part of the appeal of One Nation was that it allowed them to “come back to this notion of inequality”. It allowed “us to talk about the issue of [inequality]. [For example], why does a boy born in Glasgow today have an average life expectancy of 55, [while] somebody born in Bournemouth on the same day probably

lives to 84". Essentially, argued a senior backbench MP, the emergence of One Nation "was a means of selling old principles: equality and eradicating poverty". Miliband's economic mission, according to these views, was about promoting the notion of tackling inequality. Inequality was a purposively understated theme in One Nation, because as a member of Miliband's team put it after the general election: "we wanted to have a project, a sound-bite for a project, a character of a project which was about equality, but wasn't lefty equality. It wasn't hectoring about inequality". This seemed to work, with a senior Labour backbencher commenting that One Nation was "an idea which can capture the imagination...that the [Labour] party was for everybody, not just for people on benefits". The leadership was concerned that tackling inequality head on would be met with scepticism amongst middle class voters. This fear was reinforced in their minds as they met some internal resistance to the economic mission. A veteran left-wing MP recalled, "I remember someone saying to him [Ed Miliband], who is now quite high up [in the party], when I hear the word inequality and I'm middle class, I hear the sound of you thieving my privileges. I'm not having anything to do with inequality. Ed's response was well I'm not compromising. That was a conversation almost within the first 24 hours" of Miliband's Labour leadership victory.

According to a friend of Miliband's, dealing with inequality "was always of central interest" to Miliband. Consequently, there was a determination to make this the central focus of the Labour party's policy. This determination was corroborated by Miliband's engagement with predistribution, a term coined by the Yale Professor Jacob Hacker. Delving into the details of this is beyond the remit of this paper, but it should suffice to say that Hacker suggested predistribution as an economic model to combat and reverse the growing income gap in the USA (see Hacker 2011 and Hacker and Pierson 2010). Predistribution was incorporated into One Nation, with Tristram Hunt (2013: 146), MP for Stoke Central and a member of the shadow cabinet, describing predistribution as the "political methodology of One Nation". One Nation was thus an attempt to mix patriotism and

inequality; it was patriotic to tackle inequality and it had the added political bonus of marching on to Conservative territory.

Except for a few MPs, these broader themes did not fully permeate throughout the PLP. I interviewed close to twenty backbench MPs and shadow ministers in 2013 and it became clear there was a lack of knowledge about One Nation's purpose. While all MPs understood there was a rhetorical ambition to it, there were a wide variety of opinions regarding its purpose beyond that. Broadly, the mixture of opinions can be compartmentalised into two groups: (1) MPs who believed that there was substance to it and (2) the MPs who believed it to be entirely superficial. Those MPs who were supportive recognised there was a duality to One Nation: that it operated at the communicative level, but that it also aspired to be a 'policy narrative'. For a shadow cabinet member, One Nation "[spoke] to an earlier sort of communitarian concept. It is all about nationalism, reciprocity, solidarity between people, communities – fundamentally Labour, left, Christian values that underpin Labour throughout [its] history". A prominent backbencher argued it was both a communicative tool and an idea: "they are slogans [he simultaneously refers to the Third Way], but...they are ideological concepts. That's creating the parameters in which we operate". Another MP, a veteran backbencher, put it in more pragmatic terms: "you have to crystallise an emotion and philosophy into a short, snappy soundbite. Nowadays things have to be packaged into little bite-sized samples". One junior shadow minister detailed the practical necessity of One Nation, which he defined as a framework, "I think it is very important that ideas sit within a bigger framework. If we didn't have that concept and people came at us with random good ideas we would have ended up with a lot of interesting ideas that didn't gel together, making it harder to communicate and probably less effective". Indeed, another junior shadow minister explicitly stated that "[Labour's] policies were viewed through the One Nation prism". A mixture of shadow ministers and backbench MPs, therefore, understood One Nation was an idea that was intended to act as an

umbrella for Labour's forthcoming policies and simultaneously to communicate a vision, philosophy or theme to the public.

The second and larger group of both backbench MPs and shadow ministers, however, were far more sceptical and unclear over the purpose of One Nation. One backbench MP explained, "I don't really know what it means. It is a line in a briefing that you are supposed to repeat". A long standing backbench MP shared this opinion, expressing the view, "it seems a crass idea...every prime minister or party leader seems to believe they need some slogan, some solution to everything". This MP continued explaining that they "usually consist of three words: The Third Way, Back to Basics, the Big Society now. These gimmicks and ideas...no one talks about the Third Way now, and I don't think anyone will talk about the Big Society after the next election". This was the start of a recurring theme amongst sceptical MPs, namely that One Nation was disparagingly referred to as a slogan. Referring to the leadership of the party, a senior left-wing MP explained that in an attempt to differentiate themselves "they came up with a slogan – an old Tory slogan. I believe in the idea of One Nation...but who knows what it means?" The tone of such responses suggested that One Nation lacked substance and therefore it was pointless to seriously engage with it. To them, it was only a marketing tool. As a relatively new backbench MP observed: "the Third Way and One Nation are slogans" but they did acknowledge their utility ending with the sentence, "you have to be media savvy". This view was reaffirmed by a veteran backbencher who noted that "in modern politics you need to have some handles. You need to have a badge." It would be a mistake, however, to see this particular view as the sole preserve of backbench MPs. For example, a shadow minister candidly stated that "One Nation isn't an idea – it's a branding." He continued explaining that they had tested a lot of names, "I heard it could have been Next Generation Labour, Next Labour, Modern Labour, One Nation Labour". In more stark terms, another senior shadow minister stated, "no, it wasn't [an idea]. I mean it was a good speech delivered in Manchester, but anything could be One Nation". A

close aide to Miliband, who spoke to me after the election, confirmed this by explaining “One Nation [was] not an idea. [It was] “a helpful label”. Given this figure was intrinsically involved in the entire policymaking process, members of the PLP were right to question the acclaimed substantive nature of One Nation advocated by some MPs and the Policy Review team.

Clearly, amongst backbench and frontbench MPs, there was a variety of opinions about One Nation. However, a closer inspection of the responses reveals a unifying bond between them: a concern that there was no policy substance behind it. This view was almost universally held. In interviews held in 2013, it was common to hear complaints that One Nation did not have “a fleshed out policy agenda behind it”, explained a junior shadow minister; “One Nation is not fully developed. It needs fleshing out. It is being developed across all spheres of government – this takes time” said a right-wing backbencher; and, “you need to create the whole sandwich, not just the surround of the sandwich. That [One Nation] creates the surround; that’s essential. But it’s not enough in itself”, explained another senior backbench MP. The need for policies to back it up was essential for it to last, according to a seasoned backbench MP. For that you have “to prove it is real; prove it affects the individual; and prove it will make [their] life better”. Another shadow minister explained One Nation was “an overarching idea”, but that it needed “more detail to sit behind it”. A veteran MP who had worked closely with Miliband also felt that although “in the modern world, that is used to advertising, [required us] to have a badge, there’s got to be more to it than just a badge; it’s got to have some substance”. As a result, another veteran MP, who had been a senior government minister, argued that One Nation was “disappearing just as fast as the Third Way. The reason for that is...we don’t provide a narrative behind it”. These concerns did not dissipate over time. In 2014, Chakelian (2014), a writer for the *New Statesman*, observed that One Nation had dropped off Labour’s lexicon during Labour’s conference that year. She asked several MPs why. Simon Danczuk, MP for Rochdale, told her “where the slogan is connected to policy, I think it has more resonance...

One Nation isn't tied to anything, is it?" On similar lines, both Stella Creasy, MP for Walthamstow, and Chi Onwurah, MP for Newcastle upon Tyne Central, explained to her that One Nation did not resonate well with voters on the doorstep. This view was based on One Nation lacking policy detail which MPs could explain to voters. In interviews which took place in 2015, analogous problems were raised. An MP very close to the policymaking process stated frankly, "it was a good line for Ed to pursue, because [it was] cohesive and patriotic, but it needed to be developed as a substantive idea". Even interviews undertaken post-election conveyed the same message about One Nation's problem when it was first evoked: the 'policy narrative' lacked policies.

Disconnect

The Policy Review

The Policy Review was the party's official policymaking body under Ed Miliband, which he had set up in 2010 after his leadership victory. The Policy Review team, by the time of the evocation of One Nation, was headed by Jon Cruddas, MP for Dagenham and Rainham, who had replaced Liam Byrne midway through 2012. According to Gaffney and Lahel (2013b: 334), this change was made principally because under Byrne the review did not deal with "ideology and narrative." Miliband appointed Cruddas to rectify this, and immediately began to develop the idea of One Nation after Ed Miliband's One Nation speech in October 2012. A senior aide to Miliband recalled that "Cruddas was really excited [after that speech], because he thought Ed is finally not just talking to the left but to the country and trying to reach out. [So] he went back [to the Policy Review] with the idea that One Nation gave him the orientation for the next few months". At the time, Cruddas (2013a: 5) openly stated this was the case: "in 2013 the Policy Review will be building the story of One Nation Labour and creating the policies that will give it detail and substance". This highlights the fact that when Ed Miliband evoked One Nation there was indeed no policy substance behind it and the Policy Review team knew it. Therefore, the team headed by Cruddas, in conjunction with people like Professor

Jonathan Rutherford, a close friend of Cruddas, felt they had to develop a number of policies to fill this vacuum.

At the Labour party conference in 2013 the extent of this work was shown with the publication of the One Nation book entitled 'One Nation: power, hope and community' (Reeves and Smith 2013) and the release of two policy-focused documents, *One Nation Economy (2013)* and *One Nation Society (2013)* – the latter document was released a few weeks after the conference. The One Nation book was a collection of articles from the 2010 intake of MPs, edited by Rachel Reeves, MP for Leeds West, and Owen Smith, MP for Pontypridd. Its purpose was to showcase “the freshness and energy” of these new MPs and their ideas which had a “deep resonance [with] the values of One Nation” in the party and the country (Reeves and Smith 2013: 14). A member of the Policy Review team explained that the team had organised and put these “One Nation MPs together”, admitting the process “was all a bit top down, political management”. Nevertheless, the book itself was theory-heavy, but policy-lite. The Policy Review documents, on the other hand, were the complete opposite. They were explicitly policy-focused documents, setting out key policies of One Nation Labour. Ed Miliband (2013b: 5), in the foreword for the *One Nation Society* document, described “One Nation Labour’s goal” as helping to “build a stronger society, one where everyone feels they have a part to play in shaping Britain’s future”. Cruddas (2013b: 8) based the policies set out in One Nation Society on three pillars: devolving power to people; shifting resources from high cost reaction to prevention; and citizen contribution. All three focused on reshaping public services that routinely empowered and included citizens in their delivery and creation. In the *One Nation Economy* document, the joint foreword from Ed Miliband and Ed Balls stated that “a One Nation Economy [is] built on the understanding that Britain’s working people are our country’s greatest asset and so when they do well, Britain will do well too” (Miliband and Balls 2013: 6). Cruddas (2013c: 7 - 8) based the policies in this document on four pillars: a rejection of trickle-down economics and a re-focus on

everyone benefiting from growth; the backing of key areas that encourage economic growth and high quality jobs; challenging endemic economic problems within the country; and, a dynamic private sector.

These One Nation documents conveyed the effort the Policy Review team had put into developing the policies that were to sit behind One Nation. It also reflected how Cruddas and Rutherford, in particular, had enthusiastically captured One Nation and had driven it, fervently trying to add substance to it after Ed Miliband's 2012 conference speech. We know that part of this enthusiasm can be put down to the belief that Ed Miliband was finally speaking to the country, not just the party. However, the main reason for Cruddas' and Rutherford's enthusiasm was their belief that the evocation of One Nation was an opportunity to resurrect some of the key elements of Blue Labour, but under a different banner. This was picked up by a number of MPs, with a senior backbench MP arguing that "One Nation would not have happened without Blue Labour". Cruddas and Rutherford had been advocates of Blue Labour (see Rowenna Davis 2011), but were left bereft after Blue Labour's demise following a number of controversial comments made by Lord Glasman, its founder. A key exponent of Blue Labour explained, "it sort of blew up, Maurice (Glasman) went into hiding for six months and kept quiet. By that time it was all in pieces actually, I thought we had it [but it] all had disintegrated", until "suddenly Ed asked Jon to lead the Policy Review". In other words, Cruddas and Rutherford were handed another opportunity to re-engage in the debates Blue Labour had started. Apparently, this was an open secret, with a key player in the Policy Review team explaining "it was consolidating the thinking in and around what was known as Blue Labour into the heart of the party itself both in terms of the leadership, the advisors, the Policy Review, the sentiment or character of the party". Another close source to the Policy Review believed this opportunity had been handed to them because "Ed knew Blue Labour was on to something. A lot of them understood that [they] were right somewhere" and One Nation captured some of that thinking. Outside observers

immediately picked up on the similarities between the two. Ferguson (2012), then the editor of Labourlist, posted an article the day after Miliband's One Nation speech in which he argued that One Nation Labour was in fact "Blue Labour 2.0". Stears (2015) acknowledged this and candidly stated that, "Yeah, that's right. It was a moderated version of what Blue Labour had been about...it was a speech [the 2012 Leader's speech] about ethos and the common good, and both those were Blue Labour concerns." One Nation was a chance to resurrect aspects of Blue Labour, particularly and critically the aspect of patriotism, without the controversy that Blue Labour had by then acquired.

For Rutherford and Cruddas, the idea of One Nation and their positions at the top of the Policy Review offered them not only an opportunity to develop key themes of Blue Labour, but to continue the intellectual renewal of the Labour party itself post the financial crash in 2008. One Nation would "address the question about what the Labour party is for", explained a junior shadow minister (Interviewee 3). This view, in fact, was also held by Stewart Wood, a friend and key advisor to Ed Miliband. Wood, Rutherford and Cruddas thought that One Nation could be far more significant than a framework or a slogan: it had the potential to shift the political paradigm. Wood (2013: 319) argued that One Nation was "a challenge to the ethic of the post-79 settlement", while Cruddas and Rutherford (2014: 14) followed this up a year later stating One Nation was nothing short of a bid to "build an alternative to the political settlement pioneered by the New Right." This argument, although sincere at the time, was overblown. In hindsight, a member of the Policy Review team explained that One Nation was more about constructing a "narrative about what Labour stood for [and] how it saw the country". What these quotes show, however, is that there was a disparity even amongst the Policy Review team regarding the possible scale of One Nation.

Nevertheless, in 2013 and 2014, Cruddas, Wood and Rutherford believed One Nation could instigate a Thatcher-like shift in the political paradigm. Yet, this largely bypassed many MPs and shadow

ministers. This was exemplified by comments from two shadow ministers, one of whom said “all the One Nation stuff feels very remote to me...Jon Cruddas and few other people are doing things that will be gradually revealed to us”, while the other conceded that “I don’t really interact with the Policy Review, which is probably a failure on my part, but I think it’s probably also a failure of the Policy Review, because people aren’t that clear about how it engages with the PLP”. This, according to a prominent observer, led to Cruddas having a vision of what One Nation could have been while “most MPs just saw it as a brand. They saw a brand used at one conference, one speech and then get dropped” which was “partly because Labour MPs did not engage in Cruddas’ thinking and the Policy Review as much as he expected them to”. Perhaps more fundamentally, a critical member of the Policy Review team did not share the same vision for One Nation as Cruddas or Rutherford. This person told me, post-election, that the documents, *One Nation Society* and *One Nation economy*, were “not really attempts to broaden One Nation per se, but rather to widen the story over the economic agenda”. However, it was clear that this particular interviewee did not have a close relationship to Cruddas and Rutherford and was unsympathetic to their views. In fact, this interviewee’s evidence, as will become clear, closely reflected Ed Miliband’s view on One Nation.

Ed Miliband and the Leadership team

With the release of the book, *One Nation: power, hope and community*, Ed Miliband indicated, in its preface, that One Nation was more than a slogan: “One Nation is a British idea rooted deep in our history and language. It is not a Conservative idea or a Labour idea” (Miliband 2013c: 7). What he did not say was that it was a temporary idea. Yet, Ed Miliband and Stears only envisaged, at least initially, One Nation as “a moment in Ed’s leadership” and “so when we gave the speech we had imagined [it] a temporary articulation of his vision, but not the final version” (Stears 2015). In corroboration, a close aide explained “I think for a lot of people in our team it was a device to deliver a good speech rather than an orienting framework for the next few months”. These post-election

responses were substantiated by interviews I undertook in 2013. For example, its temporary nature was alluded to by an MP close to Miliband, who said it was “a very useful slogan in projecting what Ed Miliband was trying to say at the time”; around the London Olympics. The intention, explained Stears (2015), was an attempt to utilise a phrase which would speak to the majority of the public and capture the spirit of the Olympics; to capture the “progressive patriotism and collective identity” that the Olympics had generated. However, there were two problems in developing it. The first was that One Nation had been expressed midway through the political cycle and “no serious opposition announces large chunks of policy halfway through” and second, “the bigger truth, is that no one expected it to be the success it was” (Stears 2015). The success lay in the positive response it had received from the British press. This caught the leadership team by surprise. A fellow close aide to Miliband substantiated Stears’ story stating that it was “broadly right”. This surprise success, it can be surmised, was the reason the leadership team paused, considered and then decided that One Nation should be developed. This would explain why, initially, Miliband acquiesced with Cruddas and Rutherford basing the whole Policy Review around the idea of One Nation. If it had failed, they would have moved on from One Nation, which was the original intention.

Yet, One Nation did not last long. Despite “some of us who were really keen to make that our thing. We did for a while, then we didn’t anymore by mid-2013”, explained a senior Miliband advisor post-election. Why was developing One Nation so short-lived? There were several factors, all of which mutually reinforced each other. Firstly, there were a few interviewees who alluded to Ed Miliband having the character trait of “intellectual restlessness”, which tended to motivate him to “move on from one thing to another”. As a close adviser stated, “Ed had a tendency to alight on interesting things and then move on too quickly”. Secondly, as several interviews unveil, Miliband was never truly wedded to One Nation, always planning it to be temporary in nature. It was only its initial success that prompted a greater commitment to it, yet this was always superficial. In Miliband’s

mind, One Nation was never the final version of Labour's message to the electorate. Thirdly, and finally, Stears (2015) explained that "not enough people within the team bought into the same vision. The [pollsters] definitely didn't want all that stuff, they wanted straight-forward economic appeal... strategists wanted a stronger retail appeal."

Therefore, within the leadership team, there was a divide over the nature and purpose of One Nation. In the end, the strategists and pollsters prevailed, and by mid to late 2013 Miliband switched to the 'cost of living' narrative, believing that the continuing wage squeeze was setting the economic agenda and such a switch would speak better to people's concerns. This was noticed by a backbencher at the end of 2013 who stated that "we've obviously done focus groups asking what [voters] think and clearly people are feeling the cost of living crisis. So we are now seen more in touch with that because we keep going on about it". This moment appears to be highly significant, with a senior advisor stating at this time they "were no longer re-thinking how the Labour party does its work anymore, we were in which policy works?". This marked a shift in Ed Miliband's thinking and in the ideational discourse in the party. It became more focused on retail policies, dropping the bigger thinking on ideas and the regeneration of the party.

The precise point of this seminal switch, according to a senior aide, was the policy announcement of the "energy price freeze" in Miliband's Labour conference speech in 2013. This is interesting, because this policy would have easily fitted within the One Nation narrative, but Miliband decided not to frame it under the One Nation banner. Instead, he chose to promote it, as well as others, as stand-alone policies. He stated that:

"if we win the election 2015 the next Labour government will freeze gas and electricity prices until the start of 2017. Your bills will not rise. It will benefit millions of families and millions of businesses. That's what I mean by a government that fights for you. That's what I mean when I say Britain can do better than this" (Miliband 2013d).

This “went so well, [that] Ed just wanted more of those. So we ended up, through a focus group process, producing an energy price freeze, cap rents on the social sector, but also an immigration mug and sticking to Tory spending limits”. That speech was the moment the “ideas project gets marginalised”. This move towards a retail policy offer was noticed and lamented by people in the Policy Review team. Riddell (2015), for example, noted Cruddas’ disillusionment with the way Ed Miliband was not addressing the big intellectual questions and was instead reverting to a policy retail offer aimed at achieving 35% of the vote. This interpretation was substantiated by interviews undertaken with members of the Policy Review team. One explained that “there were moments in 2012...where this stuff was in play and it was energetic and exciting, there was a possibility that we could mainline into the total strategy of the party through the One Nation Trojan horse”, but “[Ed Miliband] moved into the cost of living frame”. Others explained, with post-general election hindsight and in a rueful and disappointed tone, that “I think Ed saw that as a tactical move, not a strategic opening where he could take the party. And then, after less than six months, Greg Beales came up with more polling which said cost of living, he dropped One Nation, the cost of living became the thing”. This retail turn and the dropping of One Nation was instructive of the disconnect between the main protagonists of the Policy Review team and Ed Miliband. In short, there was a fundamental disagreement over One Nation’s purpose and nature.

The Policymaking Machinery and One Nation

In 2013, Labour’s party conference openly displayed this disconnect between the different principal centres of the Labour party’s policymaking machinery. On the face of it, the Policy Review team, in conjunction with the shadow cabinet and the National Policy Forum (NPF), were primarily responsible for creating policy. In reality, policymaking was a far more disjointed and informal process. In many instances, members of the shadow cabinet, explained one such member, were

“told to do our own thing” in relation to the creation of narrowly focused policies consonant to their portfolios. However, from a broader perspective, an MP close to Miliband informed me that:

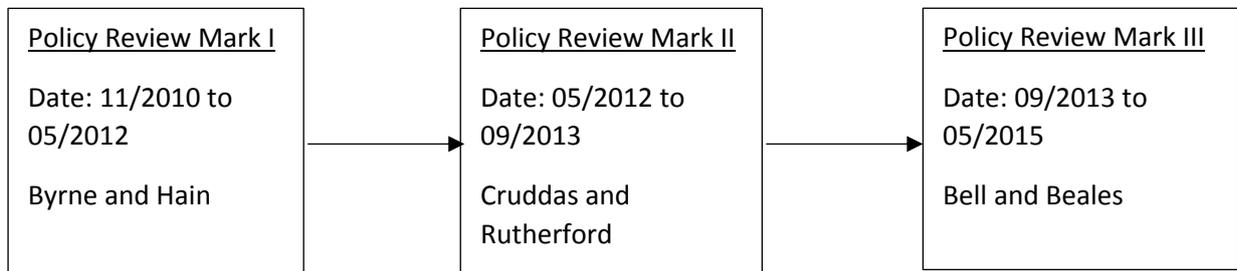
“I don’t think the shadow cabinet under Ed Miliband acts as a sort of policy motor, it’s more a coming together for a reaffirmation of purpose or redefinition. I think the work goes on elsewhere, but it won’t [happen] at shadow cabinet. The shadow cabinet is the icing on the cake if you like. It’s not the cake”.

Another interviewee close to the leadership substantiated this analysis, stating clearly that policy “didn’t come from other members of the shadow cabinet, for better or for worse”. Policy, largely, also did not come from the NPF. Instead, its role focused on “consolidat[ing] a lot of thinking in terms of the formal policy party positions”, but even in this regard the leadership team influenced it heavily (Stears 2015). When it did develop some policies, noted a member of the Policy Review team, “some of it was good, some of it was rubbish, it was all pretty generic, there was nothing innovative there at all”. Its primary purpose was “about protecting the party from itself”, explained a previous member of the NPF and junior shadow minister. Therefore, in practice both the NPF and shadow cabinet were consultative policymaking bodies, as opposed to playing a collaborative developmental role. In reality, according to a senior advisor to Miliband in an interview undertaken post-general election, policy was developed by Torsten Bell, Head of Policy in Ed Miliband’s office, and his team: “The instinct of that team was to run everything from the centre. And that’s the way Ed wanted it, it wasn’t Torsten’s fault, Ed wanted it that way. Torsten was based in Miliband’s office [and] policy was produced in deadlines for speeches.” Not a single interviewee expressed the view that the NPF played a critical role in policy development, but a number recognised the centrality of the leadership’s office, particularly Torsten Bell.

The official policymaking body, the Policy Review, can be demarcated into two distinct parts, Mark I and Mark II (Gaffney and Lahel 2013b: 331). For Gaffney and Lahel (2013b), Policy Review Mark I

covered the period of Liam Byrne’s leadership between November 2010 and May 2012. Policy Review Mark II started with the replacement of Byrne with Cruddas. This is important to recap, because there is a Policy Review Mark III period. While Gaffney and Lahel’s analysis finished mid-way through 2013, my analysis concluded on May 2015. Policy Review Mark III covers the period when Cruddas and Rutherford were effectively side-lined and became subordinate to Greg Beales, Director of Strategy and Planning for the Labour Party, and Torsten Bell. As a Miliband advisor stated after the election, “Cruddas and Rutherford did not run the Policy Review”.

Diagram 1 – The Policy Review Periods



(Source: partially drawn from Gaffney and Lahel 2013b: 331)

Policy Review Mark III started at Labour conference 2013 when Ed Miliband turned away from ideas and went towards a retail policy offer. According to a member of the Policy Review team this moment represented “Ed’s worst instincts” in terms of a technocratic approach to policymaking, which this interviewee defined as, “choose a policy this week, poll it, popular, then next week, another policy and keep going - a retail offer”. A fellow interviewee concurred, stating “I think that is right, I agree with that. I think from conference 2013 we stopped being in the ideas business altogether. It was a deliberate shift on Ed’s part, he made a choice at conference that year to go for the energy price freeze. That inaugurated a period when we were much more in the business of retail policies”. This was disparagingly referred to by David Axelrod, brought in by Miliband as a senior strategic advisor, as a “vote Labour and win a microwave” strategy (Wintour 2015). Yet, unlike the obvious change of the Head of the Policy Review which underlined the migration from Mark I to Mark II, the change to Mark III was not obvious. It was informal in nature, with Ed Miliband directly

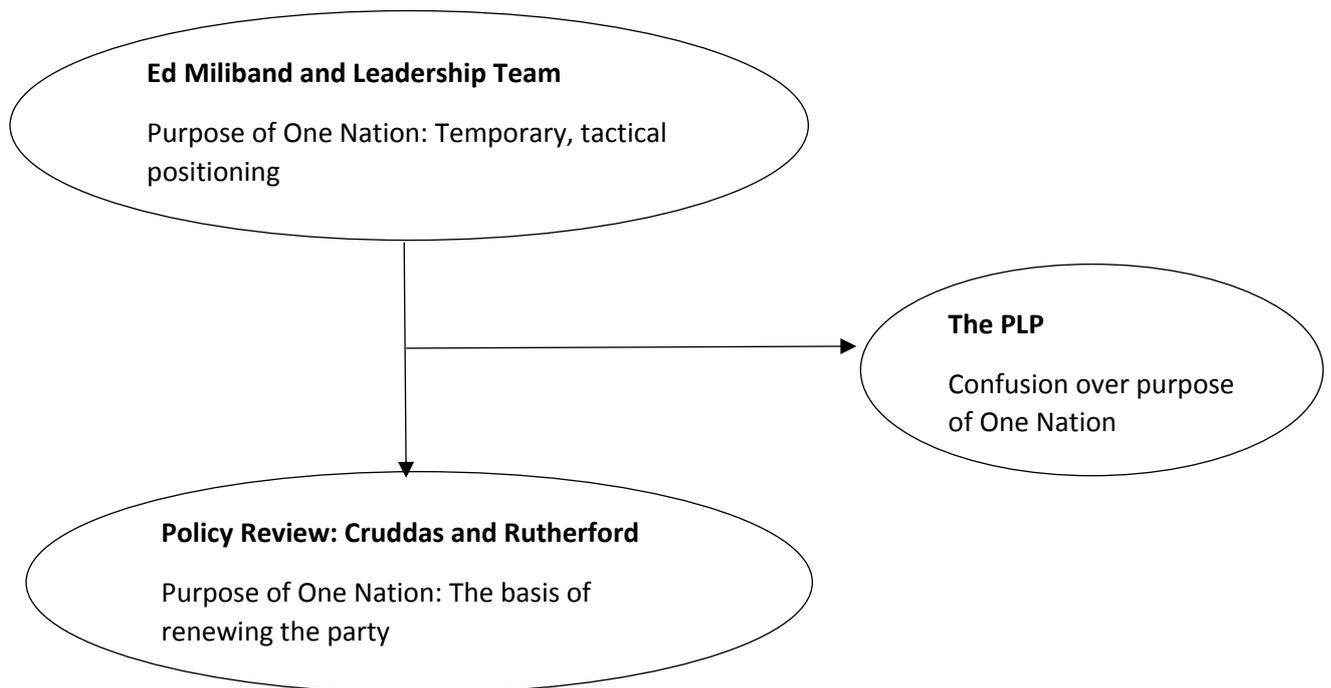
asking Torsten Bell, in conjunction with polling from Greg Beales, to develop policy, largely bypassing Cruddas and the Policy Review. This dealt a fatal blow to One Nation. I was told from this point onwards that “Torsten Bell was instrumental in keeping separate the Policy Review and the thinking that was going in the meetings from the inner policymaking which was orientated around Ed”. In effect, Cruddas “wasn’t in charge of his own Policy Review. Torsten and his team [ran everything]”.

From Cruddas’ and Rutherford’s point of view, Labour’s 2013 conference was the public platform to display the more fleshed out One Nation idea. They had co-ordinated the release of the One Nation book and had started to publish One Nation policy documents, which explicitly combined the One Nation narrative with specific policies. While these policies largely remained until the 2015 general election, the overall narrative was effectively side-lined with the success of the energy price freeze policy. This shift was orchestrated by Ed Miliband. Meanwhile, and simultaneously, Cruddas and Rutherford carried on with their own timetable, agenda and structure. This is evidenced by the release of the eBook, *One Nation: Labour’s political renewal* in September 2014, a long time after Ed Miliband’s turn to the ‘cost of living’ narrative. This was because, explained a member of the Policy Review team, “Jon was arguing for the bigger story, the more romantic side of politics. What we needed first was the politics and the story, and then the policy would illustrate and give it detail”. Although Cruddas lost that battle, he never gave up making his point.

Conclusion

This battle was just a symptom of the disconnect between the leadership team, the Policy Review and the wider PLP over the purpose of One Nation, the dynamics of which I have set out in the diagram 2.

Diagram 2 – Two Policymaking Centres and One Nation



There is deliberately no link between the Policy Review and the wider PLP, as there was scant evidence of this taking place. Although there were shadow cabinet members involved with the Policy Review, there was a paucity of evidence to suggest that this filtered out to other shadow ministers or the wider PLP. Moreover, the arrows intentionally do not show a two-way communication between the respective policymaking centres. Of course, there were discussions, debates and arguments between individual members of each centre, but there was little evidence to suggest the Policy Review hierarchy's views influenced the leadership. Diagram 2 also highlights the hierarchical nature of the policymaking process in relation to One Nation in the sense that Ed Miliband always made the final decision. Lastly, while diagram 2 simplifies the situation, it broadly captures the fundamental position of each centre in relation to One Nation and the resulting confusion it caused amongst members of the PLP. It illuminates the disconnection over the purpose of One Nation that fundamentally undermined the One Nation idea.

With the failure of the Labour party to own and utilise the idea of One Nation, the Conservative party took its opportunity to re-capture it. The morning after the Conservatives' general election victory, David Cameron (2015a), outside Downing Street, said "we will govern as a party of One Nation, one United Kingdom. That means ensuring this recovery reaches all parts of our country from north to south, from east to west, and indeed it means rebalancing our economy, building that northern powerhouse." As the days and months passed, it became clear this was not a one off statement made in the aftermath of victory. In May, the Government published its Queen's Speech. In its introduction, Cameron (2015b: 5) wrote, "this Queen's Speech [is] a clear programme for working people, social justice, and bringing our country together – put simply, a One Nation Queen's Speech from a One Nation Government". He explicitly equated the Government's policy programme with the rhetoric of One Nation, especially and crucially around social justice. In June, Cameron also delivered a speech on opportunity where he explained that "whether you are middle income or low paid or not in work at all, whether you live in a leafy suburb or an inner-city community, this government wants to extend opportunity, and what in the election campaign I called a good life, for all. That for me is the 'One Nation' ideal" (Cameron 2015c). By July, One Nation was prominent in the Government's economic sphere, with George Osborne (2015) delivering a 'One Nation budget' in the summer which was from "a One Nation government...that takes the necessary steps and follows a sensible path for the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom". This speech was followed up with the publication of a policy paper entitled, 'Towards a One Nation economy' a month later in August. Although it was a specific departmental document which outlined a ten point plan for boosting rural productivity, it nevertheless displayed a commitment to the One Nation narrative by the Conservatives and a determination to apply it to all areas of Government policy. These immediate moves from the Prime Minister shows that the Conservatives had worried and feared Labour's evocation of One Nation. They were mindful of the potency of the One Nation argument.

These moves were recognised by Ed Miliband, now a backbench MP, in early June 2015. During a parliamentary debate on the Queen’s Speech, he gave his first speech as a backbench MP. The subject matter focused on the economy, inequality and a One Nation government. He cited Disraeli, expressed admiration for the spirit of One Nation and concentrated his remarks on inequality, social mobility and how it affected the economy. He argued that “the debate about inequality is that, internationally and across the political spectrum, there is growing recognition that these gaps are not just bad for the poor, as we always used to believe, but bad for all of us” (Miliband 2015). In line with this, he welcomed the Government’s “One Nation rhetoric”, but urged them to follow through. He explained that “tests on inequality, low pay and a compassionate social security system are appropriate tests for a Government claiming the mantle of One Nation” and he concluded that the opposition would hold the Government to account on its “own tests: One Nation in spirit and deed” (Miliband 2015). This intervention was clearly prompted by the Conservatives reclaiming the One Nation territory, but also, perhaps, by the realisation of a missed opportunity and a regret that he failed to pursue that narrative. Even if Miliband holds no regret, Dame Margaret Beckett (2016: 9), in her inquiry into why Labour lost the 2015 general election, cited that there was a “need for a clear and consistent vision and political narrative”. She continued in the report that “we should spell out the vision in language which is as clear, simple and inspiring as we can make it - ‘campaign in poetry’” (Beckett 2016: 30). Even a backbencher, in 2013, lamented what he saw as a lack of vision articulating the feeling that “we need an inspiring, visionary, positive plan for the future”. In effect, Dame Margaret Beckett’s conclusion was that under Ed Miliband the Labour party lacked a clear consistent vision which could then be communicated effectively to the public. The fact that the Conservatives, after winning their first majority government in nearly 20 years, moved swiftly to recapture the One Nation mantle serves only to emphasise the scale of the Labour party’s missed opportunity.

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