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Miliband's mistake on migration

Luke Martell

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Ed Miliband has made a mistake in the way he's tackled the sensitive topic of immigration.

The media coverage of Miliband's speech on 22 June was about Labour admitting they had got it wrong on migration from Central and Eastern Europe. But the language of 'admitting' made something sound like a fact that is not. Research shows migrants from these areas did not lower wages or cause unemployment under New Labour¹.

In fact migrants work, pay tax, contribute to economic growth and support public services and the ageing population. They are less likely to claim benefits or use public services than British citizens, and more likely to set up a business. Miliband's speech was made on factually flawed grounds, yet he went ahead with it.

Patrick Macfarlane² raises the issue of low pay and immigration. Critics of Miliband's speech like Owen Jones³, Alan Travis⁴ and myself⁵ have argued that migration does not decrease wages overall, there is good evidence for this, and Owen Jones openly raised the issue of low wages.

But insofar as low wages drop when there is immigration, it is employers that cut pay, exploiting newcomers to get the cheapest labour they can. The bosses cut the wages yet immigrants get the blame, not just from the Conservative press but also from the Labour Party. The solution, a Labour solution, is to curb the power of employers to drive down pay by having stronger trade unions and a living wage. It's wrong to penalize the victims, migrant workers, as if they were the architects of the situation.

Of course Miliband has to appeal to the fears of working class voters. But the facts on this are also mixed. An Oxford Study on attitudes to migration⁶ shows that more people are concerned about permanent than temporary migrants and illegal than legal migrants. They are less opposed to immigrants who are legal and temporary, the group that Miliband said Labour should have clamped down on.

Miliband didn't question inhumane Tory proposals to break up or deport UK-migrant families on less than average incomes. He could have talked about protecting the family and the poor to make the case against this. But Yvette Cooper has endorsed these harsh plans. He did not argue that the government should be encouraging international students to our universities rather than turning them away, another current issue. The latter is bad for higher education, one of Britain's proudest industries, and bad for the economy.

Social democrats should be internationally compassionate but the Labour leader did not address the needs of migrants. They are often pursuing a better life, leaving adverse circumstances that make this difficult. Otherwise why would they leave their homes, families and communities? Labour could be investigating what we should do to meet migrants' needs. Immigration brings the benefits of cultural diversity yet migrants experience racism and xenophobia, something that is ramped up by commentaries that

blame outsiders for problems that have other explanations. These human issues were not explored in Miliband's speech.

Insofar as the public do fear immigration in an era of precarity the role of politicians is not just to accommodate to the electorate but also be leaders and shape the debate, as Obama has done on this issue. Winning votes from the far-right by anti-immigration rhetoric runs the risk of affirming their intolerant ideology and losing the votes of liberal electors. A politician representing liberalism and the left should be pushing attitudes in the direction of fairness and tolerance not encouraging beliefs that are the opposite.

There are problems of housing shortages, low wages and unemployment. Miliband talked about responsible capitalism, labour standards and enforcing the minimum wage. But there are other social democratic and labour explanations that can be made for these. Council housing has been sold off since the Thatcher years, trade unions weakened by anti-union legislation, and poverty and inequality have increased in the UK. This is why the British working class face problems with accommodation, pay and employment.

A Labour approach should be about stronger unions, a living wage and state housing. Yet Miliband abandoned these social democratic points and explained the problems in terms of insiders and outsiders. What a party leader says has an effect; outsiders will suffer as a result. Miliband has said he will speak on migration again. The chance to frame the debate in a more social democratic and Labour way should be taken up.

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¹ <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2011/09/27/labour-are-apologising-for-their-record-on-immigration-in-office-they-are-wrong-to-do-so/>

² <http://shiftinggrounds.org/2012/06/immigration-and-low-paid-jobs-the-facts/>

³ <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/06/22/ed-miliband-and-britains-anti-immigrant-backlash/>

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/jun/22/miliband-immigration-shift-backward?newsfeed=true>

⁵ <http://shiftinggrounds.org/2012/06/miliband-could-be-social-democratic-on-migration/>

⁶ <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/understanding-uk-public-opinion/executive-summary>