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Way to Blue

Maurice Glasman's Blue Labour creed has quickly established itself as a key guiding force on Ed Miliband's leadership and is dominating Labour's internal debate. It's been a rapid rise to guru-status but as the inevitable backlash begins, he explains all to **Mary Riddell**.



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Lord Glasman lives the dream. Before our interview, he sends word that I am to expect some "debris". His dollhouse-sized, two-bedroomed flat above a Hackney clothing shop is, it turns out, being torn apart to provide some extra space for a family with four children.

Even with an extra storey, the Glasman home will be a modest abode befitting those who, in his definition of Labour people, "work by their hands and brain to feed their families and pay their mortgages." The apartment, with sweet peas growing up an urban balcony, is the perfect showcase for Blue Labour's philosophy.

Once Maurice Glasman promoted his credo without fanfare, as a driving force of London Citizens and a reader in political theory at the Metropolitan University. Then came the unexpected peerage and Glasman's elevation to guru, leading policy adviser and Ed Miliband's magus.

Although Glasman says modestly that his role is "wildly exaggerated", his influence on the party and the leader has been little short of seismic. The Blue Labour creed of faith, flag and family (Glasman accepts the three-F tag but does not use it) could equally well bear a triple-H branding (history, hearth and heritage) or a three R label of roots, reciprocity and relationships. Some see this blend of patriotism, conservatism and aversion to worship of the market as a critique of the arid modernism of New Labour.

Some view it as a full-fledged programme for democratic renewal, and yet others despise it as racist, misogynistic and a nostalgic byway down which Labour might yet clog dance to oblivion.

Beyond dispute is the influence of Lord Glasman of Stoke Newington and Stamford Hill, whose ideas – debated across

the political spectrum – are integral to Ed Miliband’s defining mission to create a politics of the common good. Despite his wish to promote “love”, a word he uses liberally, over rancour, Glasman is not afraid to be acerbic.

Gordon Brown displayed “a mix of high moralism and low cynicism”, while Tony Blair, who recently disparaged Blue Labour, “had a slightly demented view of modernisation. That’s putting it mildly. I’m trying to be diplomatic. He had no love at all for the inherited institution.”

Blue Labour, born out of the ashes of the financial crash in 2008 and nurtured by Glasman and Jon Cruddas, along with the academic, Jonathan Rutherford, and Ed Miliband’s close friend, Marc Stears, was Glasman’s entry point to parliamentary politics. “I walked into a set of very damaged relationships. Blair and Brown were virtually indistinguishable, but you would have thought that massive ideological differences separated them. It was a form of genuine madness.”

Even so, he has nothing but praise for some Blairites, notably Tessa Jowell, Jim Murphy and James Purnell (“a very thoughtful, very sweet and relational person.”) Then there were the Miliband brothers. Closer at first to David, he became “very attracted personally to Ed. Ed really came through for the living wage [a signal Glasman campaign]. There was a real connection between me and Ed.”

Does he not think that the reported bitterness between the Milibands risks adversely affecting Labour? “Yes. We’ve got to really think about the party. There was a Labour family argument in Blair/Brown that got played out in a single family [by] David/Ed ... I think Ed has got great energy and intuition. He hasn’t yet fully grasped how good he is.”

Is that partly because of the shadow over him? “I always give people a year to sort out any trauma. I think Ed is now beginning to find his energy and move on. He’s shown real openness to Jim [Murphy]. I know he talks to James [Purnell] and has good relations with the best of David’s people. Ed ... doesn’t trust the market to deliver justice and power and he doesn’t trust the state either. He’s basically in the right place.”

Should David come back to the front bench and help his brother? “That is for David to call ... but Ed’s the leader, and we have to show him love and support ... David’s got to do that, and David will do that because he loves ... his brother. The party, David as well, has got completely to support Ed into growing into the leader he can be.”

Although he stresses “the incredible work David’s done in raising money and supporting the [community-based] Movement for Change,” Glasman has not always sounded so admiring. What, for example, did he mean when he described the older Miliband as “non-relational”?

“Put very bluntly, David could have won the [leadership] election if he’d made a serious offer to the unions about partnership. He could have won that election with a constructive offer to all areas of the party to work together. He didn’t do it, and Ed did, and Ed won. David has tremendous qualities, but so has James Purnell and Jim Murphy, so has Tessa, so has Hazel [Blears], so have many people in the party who aren’t its leader. That’s the nature of politics.”

On migration, a subject to which the leader is currently giving much thought, Glasman has previously accused New Labour of lying about the extent of immigration.

Now he goes further, arguing – in terms more radical than the Conservative front bench would dare use – that Labour should renegotiate the rules on European workers and freeze inward migration for EU and non-EU citizens, except where employers or universities make a case for a specific, skilled individual.

Labour, in his view, should not abolish the Tory immigration cap if it wins the next election. “There’s no sense of abolition,” he says, suggesting instead going further and adding that the Labour government promoted “a multiculturalism position that enshrined differences ... Both legal and illegal immigration was used as an unofficial wages policy.” Now he thinks the time has come to turn the tide. “We’ve got to re-interrogate our relationship with the EU on the movement of labour. The EU has gone from being a sort of pig farm subsidised bloc ... to the free movement of labour and capital. It’s legalistic, it’s administrative, and it’s no good. So I think we’ve got to renegotiate with the EU.”

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His call is to restrict immigration to a few necessary entrants, such as highly-skilled leaders, especially in vocational skills. “We might, for example, bring in German masters, as we did in the 15th and 16th centuries to renew guilds.” But exemptions should be made on a case-by-case basis? “Yes. We should absolutely do that ... Britain is not an outpost of the UN. We have to put the people in this country first.”

And if that means stopping immigration virtually completely for a period, then so be it? “Yes. I would add that we should be more generous and friendly in receiving those [few] who are needed. To be more generous, we have to draw the line.”

As an advocate of the toughest curbs yet mooted on immigration, presumably he has some sympathy with Iain Duncan Smith’s controversial call for British jobs for British workers. “Completely. The people who live here are the highest priority. We’ve got to listen and be with them. They’re in the right place – it’s us who’s not.”

This is not, as Glasman explains at length, a xenophobic or divisive stance. As a veteran community organiser who works with all groups and races, he believes that integration and non-exploitation demand stable communities. Nonetheless, the views of a figure so close to the Labour leadership may startle many in and outside the party. Glasman, however, is used to fending off criticism.

The charge of misogyny in Blue Labour dismays him. “There’s a massive level of misunderstanding and unpleasantness, but that’s politics,” he says. Even so, I say, talk of patriarchy and patrimony have implanted the idea that Blue Labourites think the country was a better place when men went off to the mill or factory and women stayed at home.

“A woman’s life ... involves intense relationships of care with parents, children and partners ... The argument we’re putting forward is that it’s all about the quality of relationships and the material support that can be given at moments when care for others is predominant.” While no-one would argue against better back-up, does he not think that men should be shouldering more of the caring role?

But men, in Glasman’s argument, are also going through a crisis of identity, leaving too many de-skilled, violent and oppressed. Is he in favour of tax breaks for married couples? “I am sympathetic to that, but I also have friends who aren’t married. What we have to do is support people staying together, particularly where there are children.”

Some have also viewed askance the running metaphor he uses in his latest book of Labour as a family descended from working class, salt-of-the earth dad and middle class mum,



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who is a pro-Anglican, pro-science product of Fabian summer schools – in other words, an embodiment of those influences Glasman dislikes. He was aware of the difficulty, he says. “But if I’d done it the other way round, everyone would say I’d put the woman in the doormat role.”

To think him anti-women would be unfair. As he points out, he comes from a matriarchal clan, and his life was shaped by strong women, such as his mother and his teachers. While the leading Blue Labour thinkers are all male, he says Labour women such as Tessa Jowell and Hazel Blears have been “intently part” of a debate in which women are “absolutely central.”

So what about nostalgia? Tony Blair has criticised what Glasman calls the “cross-class prospectus” of Blue Labour in stinging terms, warning that echoing the Baldwin and Major idyll of old maids cycling to communion would ruin Labour’s chances. “I don’t think Tony Blair has read or seriously engaged with [our arguments] ... Nostalgia is a wicked thing because it sanitises the past – as wicked as a certain kind of cruel modernism that sees no benefit in the past. The question is what kind of country we want to leave to our children.”

While acknowledging the early “brilliance of Blair” he denounces New Labour as “almost Maoist” in its approach to modernisation. On managerialism, modernity and the market, Blair ultimately served the interests of the rich and the status quo. Or, put more personally: “All of New Labour left me cold.”

As a crusader for the working man, how does Glasman see the unions and the trouble they may cause for Mr Miliband? They should, he says, reform themselves and become “actively vocational, promoting good work, not defending bad work.” As so often, his paradigm is the “German social market” and “equal governance by bosses and workers ... The most successful economy in Europe still has workers with jobs. We have to do that.” As for Mr Miliband’s strategy on looming strikes, “Ed should never support losing actions just for the sake of it.”

Much as Glasman might wish for a broader Labour power base, the top echelons of the party are largely made up of Oxford-educated PPEs creamed off from special advisers. “That’s got to be a very bad thing,” he says. “Ed and David Miliband are talking about change and leadership

development.” But don’t they epitomise the problem? “They do, but they have the awareness that [things] must change.”

How, I wonder, does Glasman get on with Ed Balls? “I haven’t really met him,” he says. This is hardly plausible I say, since they virtually work out of the same office. “This is not an evasive answer. Whenever we bump into one another, we say we must meet. To be in politics, you have to believe absolutely in redemption. Ed Balls is seen as the architect of endogenous growth and the whole Brown economic theory.

“So is Ed Balls capable of grasping a new type of economic policy that is going to honour working people and challenge the domination of the City? Do you know, I think he can ... The redemption of Ed Balls is going to play a big role. I believe in the redemption of Ed Balls.”

Although Glasman finishes on a more upbeat note – “What I love about the two Eds is that they’re not accepting the City story. There’s enormous pressure on them to say the crash was all the fault of the state” – it is clear that the salvation of Mr Balls is only a work in progress. Nor is he the only prodigal in the “Labour family.”

Prime contenders for that slot are the Fabians who, despite a tradition that is “very important to Labour” have much to repent. Despite conceding that no modern Fabians cleave to eugenics and the old Soviet Union, Glasman argues that “the eugenics and Stalinism thing is not dead, because there’s still a commitment to the knowledge and expertise of a superior and enlightened group that is going to make society more equal.

“That’s not the whole story of the Fabians, but it’s at the root of the goading I do to say to the Fabians: ‘Have more love for people, and engage with them in a democratic and relational politics, not an aims-and-outcomes, anti-poverty politics.’”

On foreign policy, Blue Labour has seemed more silent. Would Glasman have invaded Libya? “I would always support democratic resistance to dictators.” So was he for the Iraq war? “I stayed quiet. I really hated Saddam Hussein, but I wasn’t keen on Donald Rumsfeld either. I gave thanks it wasn’t my call.” Labour, he thinks, should be founding a “Labour Commonwealth”, as well as “training up Chinese workers” to forge “free, democratic trades unions” back home.

But though a fervent supporter of Jewish tradition, his strongest words are reserved for Israel. The country, he says, should not be “demonised” above other regional powers. “[But] I don’t like Israel. There are terrible things going on. The Jewish settler movement is as bad as Islamic jihadist supremacists. What I see with jihadists and settlers is nationalist domination, and yuck is my general verdict.”

At home, many sections of the Labour “family” may balk at Glasman’s tough love. None the less, his communitarian, if not his economic, prescriptions are a dominant strand in Ed Miliband’s attempt to remake his party. Even his battle with the Murdoch empire, undertaken soon after Glasman and I meet, was embarked on in the name of the people. Many less partial pundits than Glasman believe that Blue Labour will be at the heart of the Miliband prospectus.

Opposition gurus, it is true, sometimes have the lifespan of a fruitfly. But if few are as controversial as Glasman, few are as heartfelt, as influential and as committed to rebuilding Labour and putting Ed Miliband into Number 10.

In the domestic, as in the political sphere, Glasman is focused on reconstruction. As we sit on his balcony, builders put the final touches to the new, improved House of Glasman. Soon the “debris” of which Lord Glasman warned me will be forgotten. He must hope that his remaking of the Labour edifice runs as smoothly. ■