What's the story?

Jon Cruddas admits to Mary Riddell that simply translating his views into party policy would spell electoral disaster for Labour. But Ed Miliband's policy chief is clear that "opposition politics is about story-telling"; Labour's rethink must produce "a radical alternative which is not simply about saying nothing and trying to get over the line."

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Jon Cruddas did not plan to go to Labour Party conference. Instead he was looking forward to a US golfing tour with a group of old friends until his appointment as co-ordinator of the party's policy review put paid to any thoughts of escape. "I've foregone one of the golf trips of a lifetime," he says, before adding dutifully that he would much rather be in Manchester.

His initial eagerness to stay away was not, he says, a question of disillusion. "No, not really. My connection with Labour is quite visceral and tribal, so it can be a source of frustration as well as passionate belief. It's incumbent on us all now to come up with new ideas."

With Labour 11 points ahead in the polls, it seems conceivable, if not likely, that the party's familiar pattern of a spell in government followed by internal strife and years in the wilderness could be broken at last. Were that to happen, then the success or failure of an Ed Miliband government would depend, in large part, on the policies being evolved by Cruddas.

His first step on taking over was to boil down Liam Byrne's sprawling review, covering more than 20 areas, into three sub-committees – all chaired by Miliband – on the economy, politics and society. While Cruddas praises the work done by Byrne, his methods are very different.

As befits a man recruited for his eloquence and vision rather than for an overload of technocratic zeal, Cruddas spent his summer roofing and plastering the house he is building by a beach on the west coast of Ireland. He took none of the worthy political tomes favoured by his colleagues (though it would be surprising if Cruddas, a bibliophile, had not read them all already), packing only books on home improvements of which a study called *The House Beautiful* was a highlight. His research (think Frank Lloyd Wright rather than plumbing manuals) bore, in his view, a link to his day job.

Assembling a set of policies and an election manifesto "is about getting the footings in the ground, getting solid foundations and getting the design and the architecture right." It is fair to say that, in terms of glorious edifices, Labour's policy review is still several storeys short of Chatsworth House. To appoint Cruddas, a maverick who shuns promotion, as the architect of 'Rebuilding Britain', was – he concedes – a risky move on Ed Miliband's part. "That's a fair description. It was a signal that it [the review] is quite a high wire act. I'm not by instinct a trimmer." Nor, having voted for David Miliband as leader, was he even an early fan of younger brother. "No, but I've been impressed by his resilience. He's pulling towards him people who might have been more equivocal, and I'll put my hands up to being one of them."

It is easy to see why Miliband gambled on Cruddas. A seaman's son with a PhD in economic philosophy, the MP for Dagenham is a both a flagbearer of the left and an admirer of conservative values. "I have mates who are BNP and UKIP and Tory. I don't surround myself with Labour members who have the same views as me." Profoundly as he disagrees with his BNP friends, he grasps what drives them. "Of course I do. I can understand a lot of their concerns."

His work with the grassroots has identified what he sees as the vacuum in which Labour can flourish again. "David Cameron's modernisation programme is literally collapsing because of the dominance of the brutal economic liberals at the expense of much more interesting conservative and social liberal traditions. That means there are spaces for Labour to reclaim traditions in its own history which are socially liberal and conservative – wanting to preserve communities and solidarity and institutions."

While his endeavours are focused on an outright Labour victory ("I've never texted a Liberal Democrat") Cruddas does not rule out the prospect of coalition. His own touchstone is the Blue Labour creed (he dislikes the label but broadly favours the message of faith, flag and family) that has become a dominant theme in the party's renewal. The living wage and the community organising that Miliband hopes will restore trust in politics – and in him – are consistent with new conservative thinking, as are the leader's own efforts to tackle predatory capitalism, 'rip-off Britain' and to preserve the nation's high streets.

Some in the party are, however, uneasy that Blue Labour, with its nostalgic undertones, is an unwise replacement for the modernising drive of New Labour. Others appear to worry lest too much focus is placed on the grassroots vote and too little on wooing the middle classes. As David Miliband and Douglas Alexander wrote, after witnessing the Democratic convention, Labour will not swing the election on working class votes alone. Does Cruddas think their view bespoke anxiety on their part? "I think it bespoke [the fact that] you cannot retreat to a base. You have to retain a wide and deep coalition. I've never liked the idea of slicing and dicing the electorate and micro-policies that address specific cohorts of voters, [such as] Mondeo Man. You have to speak in bigger, primary colours about the nature of the country.

"That's what Bill Clinton was doing [in his speech to the Democrats] – speaking in quite a raw and emotional way and telling the story about the choices in front of the country. That was quite a good echo of what we'll be trying to do at this conference. What David was saying, I guess was: Don't make this a numbers game restricted to different segments rather than creating wider platforms and telling deeper stories. That's what I took from it, and I agree totally with that. "New Labour got preoccupied with swing voters and marginal constituencies and small policy nuggets, rather than family and community and nationhood, which is where the Labour Party always is when it wins."

Cruddas is delighted that Michael Sandel, Harvard professor, Reith lecturer and "probably the biggest political philosopher on the planet," will be at conference to warn about the moral limits of markets. "Last year people said Ed Miliband was on his own, but there is a bigger orbit of ideas around the notion of virtue in the public realm, the sense that we have duties and obligations to one another. That's what the Olympic spirit is all about. My point is that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. You'll see these ideas gradually distilled into concrete stories of everyday life."

The forthcoming examples he cites are pension "rip-offs," such as excessive management fees, and the escalating cost of motor insurance. These may strike critics as rather slight, given the continuing lack of detail over a Labour manifesto. Cruddas cautions against expecting too much illumination. "I don't think it's a watershed conference. We've got to show we're going to be putting some footings in the ground. It will be about people and the country and where we want to go. Sure, there will be illustrative policies, but it's more the trajectory and where we're heading – those big choices for the country. That's what Clinton did really." There will, he warns, be few instant revelations. "The litmus test is not necessarily going to be the [leader's] conference speech. There will be ideas floated and new policies revealed, but the test is building the bigger picture over the next year."

One problem, I suggest, is that – for all Cruddas's personal skills as an orator and listener – Labour is perceived as the party that doesn't "speak human" (a criticism borne out by the latest YouGov/Fabian polling). "I do accept that. A recurring theme in our conversations is how we can develop a language that goes with the grain of people's concerns. The texture of Ed's contributions are changing quite dramatically. He's now talking about people, places and stories rather than just silos of policy. I think Ed is beginning to calibrate an authentic language."

Pre-distribution, I suggest, is not the most persuasive doorstep buzzword. "I agree. I take your point. But it's not impossible for us to operate on a whole series of different levels." Despite his enthusiasm for marrying the romantic

with a comprehensible offer to voters, Cruddas is, on his own admission, not only not a details man but also "barely numerate." It would be foolish, none the less, to underestimate either his election-winning instincts or the policies now taking shape. On education, for example, Lord Adonis, presented him with an inscribed copy of his book, *Education, Education, Education*, as his submission to the policy review. High praise from Cruddas ("It's brilliant") suggests that the Adonis prescription of an academy expansion may presage, in turn, a Labour continuation of the Gove reforms.

On immigration, Cruddas has voiced personal concerns since taken up by Miliband. He is glad that the leader has started to acknowledge "people's sense of vulnerability and the sheer velocity of changes in certain communities. We'd got the economics pretty wrong.

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"Arguably we had too light a touch on the labour market and on the delivery of good quality housing and other [services] in those communities most altered by migration patterns." Labour, in his view, also erred on numbers. Asked if you can expect struggling communities to absorb huge flows of migrants, he says: "You can't. In terms of numbers, we can't accept the macroeconomic benefits without the obligations that go with it … The points-based system was an acknowledgement that it has to be managed … within certain boundaries."

Given the lack of money for public services and housing, will the points system have to get even tougher? "We're looking at all of this. These issues are in the mix." He also floats the idea of keeping a closer eye on the effects of migration by "changing the census from a ten-year thing to an annual [headcount] – and a partial amnesty for illegal immigrants of long-standing residence."

These suggestions, he stresses, are not party policy "but positions I've advocated in the past." While he implies that nothing should be off the table, he has no wish "simply to translate my views into party policy." Because that would lose Labour the election? "Arguably, yes. Exactly. I am more of a facilitator." The role of the middle man is, he hints, sometimes tricky one. He is aware, he says, of "fault lines" and "crosswinds," possibly over whether an over-arching national story is sufficient bedrock for a government-in-waiting. "Others would say: 'Oh no, it's about banks [and so on], and some of it is about the minutiae of policy development. But opposition politics is really about story-telling. I feel it's a duty for all elements of the Labour party to pull together in the national interest and … to reclaim our own history."

Ed Balls, I suggest, may take a less starry-eyed view. "I like Ed Balls. He's a big political character, and he doesn't hedge. He's not afraid to get stuck in. He might not be impressed with some of what became Blue Labour, but I think we can work through that. It's small beer compared to the bigger things we would agree on."

While he dismisses as "rubbish" rumours of rifts between Miliband and Balls, he does not deny some strain. "Look, is this an argument for having more insignificant people in your shadow cabinet? What I would read as creative energy, others would read as factional or political disagreement. You pay your money and you take your choice. I quite like the idea that there are big people like Balls, whom you might not agree with. But he's in there, and I would prefer him on my team to any other team.

"I see this stuff about tensions between Balls and Miliband, and I think we've just got to get real. We've got to have a process that can build people's different contributions into a manifesto – and build a system that can reconcile differences. Balls is good. It's right that he bats for what he believes. I like that. I don't agree with him on some things. But we should be able to handle that or we shouldn't be in this game."

Is there a danger that minor disagreements among the Labour leadership might lead to fudged policy and incremental change? "I agree. It is. That's why I use the illustration of small targets." His theory is drawn from the Australian election of 2001 when Labour, sure of victory, promised little in order to be a "small target" for Conservative attacks on their economic credibility.

Come election day, the party was annihilated by a Conservative manifesto built around one fissile immigration story that caught the nation's imagination. "I want a radical alternative which is not simply about saying nothing and trying to get over the line. Lynton Crosby [the strategist who helped propel the Australian Conservatives to victory] will probably be advising David Cameron, and he'll know that playbook."

Of a referendum on EU membership, which he has backed, he says: "I am not going to disinvent the positions I took. I abide by the [view] of shadow cabinet that this is not the right time for an EU referendum. However, we have to consider how we rebuild a case for Europe. At some stage this issue must stop festering, and that means recognising that the people are going to have to be invited into this conversation."

On a third Heathrow runway, which he has opposed, Labour is split. How do they reconcile that position? "We're going to have to, aren't we? And we will. It will be a lively conversation that we've got to have."

While offering no ultimatum, Mr Cruddas makes clear that he will not preside over a feeble manifesto. "No. It's not in my instinct. The notion of a strategy of small differences is anathema to me. The Tories would trump us. We have to be bold and radical, and we'll fail if we aren't. There is no safety first option. That doesn't mean we're left wing. We have to become slightly more conservative, and we have to be bold."

Suppose the tensions in the party prevent such a course? "Then I'll have failed. I hadn't planned for this job, and I feel a sense of duty to the party. It would be on my head." Such thoughts of doom are far from Cruddas's mind as he heads to the conference he planned to miss. "I have laid down my golf clubs for my party," he says. This week will start to show whether the sacrifice was worth it. **F**