

The exile

Is David Miliband the most charismatic leader we never had? He tells *Christa D'Souza* about life-changing moves, family and his future. Portraits by *Max Becherer*

David Miliband says he is extremely embarrassed. In the haze of a 4am start, he has come out with a jacket that does not match his trousers. He is confident though, he tells me, that it is a much better-fitting jacket than the one he was wearing yesterday because this one, by his great mate Oswald Boateng, has been given a few “extra twiddles”. It does indeed fit him perfectly, though this is partly because he is thin and tall and basically has the body of a catalogue model. “You *do* have to be thin and tall to wear Oswald Boateng’s clothes,” he agrees. “Luckily you don’t have to be as beautiful as him to wear them. So yes, Oswald – he saved me from Marks & Spencer about five or six years ago...” It is 7.30am, and we are taking a break at a service stop on the road between Islamabad and Lahore. The full heat of the day has not yet hit and the dusty motorway which cuts through the wheat plains of the Punjab, Pakistan’s agricultural heartland, is almost empty. There are about five cars in our convoy, including an open-backed van filled with armed guards, and the male staff at the till in the service

station eye us with surly curiosity as we try to buy water with American dollars. Already fuelled by a bacon sandwich and a Thermos of coffee provided by the British High Commission (his hosts during this three-day whirlwind trip), Miliband, former foreign secretary and 14 months into his Manhattan-based post as CEO and president of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), is on buoyant form. Hands thrust in his pockets, rocking back on his heels like a precocious sixth-former, he wonders aloud if all the drivers are properly “caffeinated” and how the seating for the rest of the car journey – five hours there, five hours back – is going to go. A member of his team tells him his car is pretty empty on the way back. “Well, you could each take turns to keep me entertained, then!” he says brightly, before gesturing to me to hop round the other side before we start the next leg.

In his capacity as head of a humanitarian organisation Miliband has already visited Ebola-ridden areas of Liberia and Sierra Leone (“Don’t worry, 38 days ago – not that I’m counting!”), west Africa being one of the charity’s key emergency hotspots along with Syria, Iraq, South Sudan and the Central African Republic. This is >



David Miliband outside
FG Girls Secondary School
No 12 in Islamabad,
wearing a suit by his friend
Ozwald Boateng



his tenth visit to Pakistan, but it is the first wearing his NGO hat rather than his ministerial one. “In government you’ve got the big picture,” Miliband says. “With an NGO, the fulfilment comes in seeing you are making a difference one life at a time. And I’m trying to bridge the two.

“One of the attractions of the job,” he goes on, “is though it is incredibly important to tackle poverty in stable states, we are focused on tackling poverty and threats to life and limb in *unstable* states. But while on the one hand it is satisfying to be life-saving, on the other you do have this sense of... marginality.”

On tape Miliband, 49, sounds just like his brother, Ed, with that flat, adenoidal voice. In person he brings to mind Dominic Cooper crossed with Basil Fawlty. Or perhaps it’s Basil Fawlty crossed with Tim Henman. “Hah! Djokovic apparently looks too much like me, too... Dominic Cooper? I don’t think I know who he is.” Certainly if success in politics were based purely on appearance, it would have been David, rather than his brother, who would have got the gig as Labour leader. And one can see why Hillary Clinton (his US counterpart when he was foreign secretary) wrote in her memoir that he “caused me to gulp and smile simultaneously” at their first meeting, and why she gushed in a recent interview with *American Vogue* “... he is so vibrant, vital, attractive, smart... He’s a really good guy. And he’s so young!”

One can see, too, why rumours swirl around – not just back home, but also here among the chattering classes of Pakistan – that he plans to make a political comeback. Looks aside, his aura brims with steely, statesman-like charm, unlike his comparatively hapless-seeming brother. David Miliband as the next prime minister? Is that something, as his brother mutates into the twenty-first century’s equivalent of Michael Foot, and Ukip continues to undermine the Coalition, that might be on the cards – if not at this election, then the next? He’d get my vote, I sally shamelessly... “Ha ha, well, that’s very kind of you to say so,” he says, and then deftly extricates himself from answering the question. “Look, it was great that you came out here, so much better than doing the interview in some office... Got your seatbelt on, by the way? It seems a minor limitation of one’s liberty, somehow; I’ve become so inured to it by now.”

In Pakistan the IRC, which has its headquarters in a sprawling, heavily guarded suburban house in Islamabad, employs around 700 staff – only six of whom, Miliband proudly points out, are Western. “People should know we are not this alien incubus,” he says. “Let’s dispel the idea of the heroic Western aid worker sweeping in and sweeping out. We are the antithesis of that.” Miliband is here to meet the staff, obviously, but also to sign off on an agreement between the IRC and the Pakistani government on a \$168 million literacy project, funded by the United States. (The IRC employs 12,000 staff in 40 countries and has an annual budget of around \$460 million to be spent on emergency aid and post-conflict development. Altogether, the humanitarian aid industry is worth about \$18 billion – \$1 billion *less*, as he points out a lot over the next three days, than the price Facebook initially offered to buy Whatsapp.)

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Of course, Miliband’s status as a former UK minister has fringe benefits for the IRC; as one of his staff members observes, what other NGO head would get to have lunch with Nawaz Sharif, prime minister of Pakistan, at short notice? Miliband and I first met yesterday under a marquee in the IRC compound’s garden. It was filled with a group of children and young adults from a refugee camp in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, set up to house some of the million people in the country’s tribal areas who have been driven from their homes by armed conflict and human-rights abuses. A grand tea had been set out for the refugee children before they got back on the bus to go “home” to the tented refugee camp. It was both heartwarming and excruciating to watch their wary reactions to the big silver domes of crustless sandwiches and vol-au-vents served by waiters with white gloves – and to this tall, handsome Western man, with his palm stiffly planted on his left collarbone, who insisted on talking to the

girls’ tables first. Emerald eyes lined in kohl peered beneath sequined hijabs, the shyer ones visibly shrinking away as he pulled up a chair, sat on it with legs akimbo and asked what conditions were like in the camp, and what they all wanted to do when they grew up. “Yes, wasn’t that great, them saying they wanted to be doctors and lawyers,” Miliband says afterwards, “and weren’t they articulate?”

The disquieting thing about David Miliband, aside from the darkening gaze and marionette-like rictus he pulls when someone talks while he’s talking, or when the development jargon irritates him (“NFI? I mean, who’s going to know what that means?” he all but snaps at an aide), is the fact that he appears such a young 49-year-old, with his plush, badger-streaked hair and football-player body. To think that he was only 42 when he was made foreign secretary, the youngest to be appointed for three decades. James P Rubin – a former US diplomat and journalist who met Miliband while serving in the State Department during the Clinton administration, and who has been a friend and admirer ever since – remembers the moment he was made a minister. “I met with all his speechwriters and his aides and then suddenly, it was just the two of us in his grand new office, adorned with all this classical furniture, and I looked at him and I said, ‘*Foreign secretary?*’ It was just such an august room and so steeped in the history of the British Empire, and for a youngish American to see a youngish Brit in it... I couldn’t help saying, ‘We should be jumping on the tables and sofas!’ We had a good laugh about that.”

Neither can one ignore the soap opera Miliband has so unwillingly starred in over the past four years. How he must have suffered back in September 2010, having the Labour leadership whipped away like that. How exasperating must it have felt, being an opposition backbencher while one’s arguably less qualified younger brother held the floor? On the other hand, what a relief, too, it must feel to be 3,000 miles away from the British tabloids, away from the hell of having his every move scrutinised, his every sentence interpreted as a subliminal dig at his brother in the wake of that humiliating, galling, biblical defeat. “Oh, it’s never hell,” he says airily as we enter the bustling outskirts of Lahore. “But you’re certainly much more anonymous in New York. You’ve got the occasional British tourist, of course, and then you’ve got people who watch BBC World, but in a city of 8 million people, yes, I’m pretty anonymous.”

Anonymous or not, if the point in hiring Miliband was to raise the IRC's profile – for though it boasts board members such as Henry Kissinger, Bill Clinton and Kofi Annan, it is a poor relation, in a way, of Save the Children with its \$2 billion budget, and forever getting mixed up with the International Red Cross – things are panning out very well. Already he has appeared on the sofas of primetime current-affairs hosts Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher in America, and, last November, threw a glitzy fundraiser at the Waldorf-Astoria with surprise guest Sting (the evening raised a record \$4.5 million).

“Well that was essentially my wife's idea,” he says, unscrewing the Thermos and offering me a cup. “She said, ‘Look, why don't you write to Sting and say come to the dinner?’ So I did, and he said he'd love to come...” It takes a nanosecond to realise the battered polystyrene cup he's pouring into has a hole in the bottom. “There you go, the best-laid plans,” he murmurs as we both frantically mop the seat with paper napkins.

Here in Pakistan, meanwhile, Miliband is treated as a veritable superstar, endlessly plied with selfie requests (the most enthusiastic, it has to be said, from women) and trailed by a gaggle of photographers from the moment he gets out of the car. Interestingly, he begrudges none of it and indeed seems to positively enjoy having his photograph taken. Interestingly, too, not one person on the ground here can remember the name of his IRC predecessor, George Rupp, an eminent theologian and former president of Columbia University, who doubled the size of the IRC under his tenure. “Well, I can remember his name,” says Miliband, a little crossly. “I'm standing on his shoulders – although we are all standing on Einstein's shoulders, which is closing the circle somewhat...” (He refers to the IRC's foundations in 1933 by Albert Einstein, intended to help Germans escape from Hitler's regime; both of Miliband's parents, who were Polish Jews, were refugees.)

Our first stop is the grand marble residence of Shahbaz Sharif, brother of the prime minister and chief minister of Punjab, the country's most flourishing province. Although the charity's HQ back in New York has insisted on a social-media blackout, there are maybe 50 photographers jostling for a picture of Miliband by the time we reach our second stop, Arfa Tower,

Lahore's gleaming, soaring IT centre, where a former Cambridge professor takes Miliband through super-sophisticated systems to track dengue fever. By the time we reach the campus of Lahore University, he is all over Twitter, Facebook and the local press. “Way down at the bottom we get mentioned,” wryly notes Hassan Zulfiqar, a young, US-educated director of communications at IRC who has managed to get the latest editions of the local papers.

Born in London in 1965 and brought up in Primrose Hill, David Wright Miliband is the elder son of the late Marxist academic Ralph Miliband and his former LSE student Marion Kozak. Both brothers, from very early on, were encouraged by Ralph and Marion (as the boys called their parents) to contribute to the highbrow political discussions held round the kitchen table. Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone and the ANC activist Joe Slovo were all regular visitors to their home, and as a pupil at

“Let's dispel the idea of the heroic Western aid worker sweeping in. We are the antithesis of that”

Haverstock Comprehensive, David was enthusiastically pamphleteering for the Labour Party by the age of 13. Despite going on to get a first-class degree at Oxford in PPE – and later, while working as Tony Blair's head of policy, earning the nickname “Brains” from Alastair Campbell – he insists he wasn't a particular swot at school. In fact, his big passion while growing up was sport. This elicited “a hint of, not desperation, but concern” in his ultra-intellectual parents. “They were worried by how obsessively I'd read the sports pages... I guess I did better when I left school. [At Oxford] I learnt about how to work, the remorseless discipline of thinking, the backing up of facts. It was a very rigorous education.”

At Oxford he had a reputation for being both ferociously disciplined academically and admirably restrained on the romantic front (his only university girlfriend was his future Labour Party colleague Ruth Kelly).

He met his wife, Louise Shackelton, a violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra, on a flight from London to

Rome in 1995, he says, “when I was working for Tony and we were in opposition, and government was just a gleam in our eye.” Was it a *coup de foudre*? He muses about the moment he offered to put her violin case in the overhead locker. “Well, I don't know if it was that exactly, but it was a blessing and kind of fated, because I wasn't even meant to be on that plane.”

It has been a long old day and our convoy is now on its way back to Islamabad. He has just met with his old colleague Mohammad Sarwar, the multi-millionaire businessman who was Westminster's first Muslim MP and renounced his British citizenship last year to accept the position of the governor of Punjab. Their conversation had to be off the record, he insists, but he laughs when, as we pull away from the sprawling Mughal residence, I mention the way Sarwar made a joke about shaking hands with the future British prime minister. So, come on then, he's still young, is he thinking of returning to politics? Both Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson have been quoted as saying they very much hope he is. “Ummm... I don't know, is the answer. It was obviously a big move to come to the States. I had a very good run. Obviously I still care about the country, but I've come here to make a success of this job. Whenever anyone asks me when I decided I wanted to go into politics, I always say: what do you mean, when did I decide? I *still* haven't decided! Evidently it's not all written down on a sheet of paper... It feels like I'm in the right place at the right time...” Miliband himself may refuse to categorically rule out a return to politics, but many believe that he was fortunate not to have won the contest back in 2010.

“I don't think that the Labour Party did necessarily choose the wrong Miliband,” offers long-time Labour-watcher Andy McSmith of *The Independent*. “While I watched them both running, it was clear that Ed Miliband actually wanted the job while David was behaving like someone who had been called upon to do this job, and whilst it must have been extremely irritating and humiliating to lose to his younger brother and exasperating to see the Labour Party take the wrong direction as a result, there must have been a still small voice in his head thinking, ‘Thank God I got out of that.’ Running a party in opposition is just an awful job.”

“For him, the UK is finished,” says Meghnad Desai, the British economist and Labour peer, and a famously vocal supporter. “He is smarter and much more >

capable than Ed and it is a great pity that we chose the wrong brother. But I think he will go further as a result. As I said to him at his farewell party last year: forget about politics, you're Nobel Peace Prize league. He could head Nato if he wanted to. I imagine he's quite pleased at all the negative press his brother is now enduring," he adds mischievously.

It has been nearly two years since Miliband joined the charity – after refusing a job in the shadow cabinet from his brother – a move that meant resigning his South Shields seat and moving with his wife and their two adopted sons, Isaac and Jacob, from Camden to New York's Upper West Side. Louise was born in Yorkshire but has a dual citizenship after moving to America in her teens. "Lots of people said, if you don't live in Brooklyn you're not with the trend," he says, "but we thought if we were moving to New York we might as well get the full, um, New York experience. When the leaves are down you can see the Hudson River, which is quite nice..." They have, he says, settled into a very agreeable rhythm. They have a family breakfast every morning at 6.30 sharp – "Which is bleeding early, I can tell you!" – and then he does the school run. "Well, they scoot. I walk. It's about one mile and my one bit of exercise, so even through the polar vortex we didn't get into a Chevy Suburban."

Though confessing to not being into music "at all" he finds himself enjoying it vicariously through Louise. He likes Italian food, she prefers Japanese. His favourite tittle is London Pride ("Not much of that in New York, ha ha!"), he prefers cats to dogs, and he never, ever drinks on planes. ("It's not going to turn into one of those knee-jerk-reaction questionnaires, is it?" he groans, understandably.) For bedtime reading he says he is 50 pages into a book called *Sweet Madness*. *Sweet Madness*? The third book in Heather Snow's *Veiled Seduction* series? Surely not. And no, confirms an email which comes hurtling though from IRC's publicist at the New York headquarters, it is not; it is *Tigers in Red Weather* by Liza Klausmann. "The phrase 'sweet madness' must appear in the first 50 pages, which is what DM has read," explains Ollie Money, Miliband's spokesman since his Westminster days, now transferred to the IRC in New York.

Miliband has already given a very personal account of the agonising rounds of IVF he and Louise had to endure before adopting both their sons – now aged 10 and seven – in America as newborns; how

they were both present at Isaac's birth and how David does not want his children to meet their birth parents unless they choose to themselves at 18. Being a parent, he admits, "is the absolutely hardest thing I have ever done in my life by a country mile," largely because he is not, by his own admission, known for his patience. One of the reasons he thinks the sitcom *Modern Family* is so great, for example, is that "it is only 22 minutes long". But it is clear he is a devoted father, looking rather horrified when I ask whether he and Louise have contemplated the idea of boarding school for their sons. "I'd imagine if you were adopted there would have to be attachment issues already there," he says thoughtfully.

"I remember my dad saying the greatest thing you can ever do is be a parent," he goes on. "I can't imagine not being a parent; the commitment you make is absolute. It's almost part of your DNA to be a parent. Look at the way they structure your lives... Have we got a babysitter? Are we going to

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be able to make the move? Was I away the weekend before, and if so can I be away next weekend as well? That sort of thing..." He tells me that his mother ("a remarkable, strong, wonderful person, and long may it last") will be visiting in the holidays and how yes, the boys are close to their cousins (it takes him a few seconds to understand who I mean when I say "cousins"), but one cannot help wondering how the Miliband brothers now navigate extended-family events. Those present at David's speech straight after unexpectedly losing the leadership contest in September 2010 might remember Louise's eyes brimming with tears. According to at least one friend of the couple's whom I speak to, she took it much worse than he did: "Look at how protective Roger Federer's wife Mirka is. It's the same sort of thing."

Then there was the not-very-funny joke Ed made about their mother voting for Diane Abbott – who also ran in the Labour leadership contest – in order not to fan the fraternal flames. When I ask

David about this, he denies that anybody ever said such a thing, making very clear that the very idea of his mother ever saying anything like that is preposterous. The brothers had been, after all, incredibly close. At one point, both in the early stages of their relationships and political careers, Ed and David lived on different floors of the same house in Primrose Hill, sharing a fax machine. Three years after the contest, in November 2013, Ed told Kirsty Young on *Desert Island Discs* that the relationship between the pair was still "healing" and admitted in August last year on LBC radio, "It was really tough taking on my brother. It's the toughest thing I've done." David, though, has been quieter on the subject.

The question I pose to him is, on a simply human level, doesn't he wince at reading all the dreadful press his brother is getting? Isn't it true, to varying degrees, that it's fine to be appalling about one's own family, but if an outsider weighs in on one's own flesh and blood, *beware*? "I can't say anything, because anything I say plays into the whole narrative," he tells me wearily. "And I made an absolute commitment to myself not to play into the story, so I can't even accept the premise of your question..."

"It's not good for him and it's not good for me for this to become a story," he says as he gestures for me to switch off the tape recorder, forgoing the chance to make a statement of wholehearted support for his brother that one might reasonably expect.

Eight hours of driving later, the convoy stops at a service station for "dinner", a Pakistani take on KFC, serving white-bread sandwiches, glutinous, lukewarm pizza and ice cream – all of which tastes delicious to the whole IRC party, a by-now weary crew. Above us, a television blares out a message from Imran Khan, who has set up camp with his thousands of supporters on Islamabad's Constitution Avenue as a protest against Nawaz Sharif's government. Drivers, security and IRC members alike crowd around two tables. No standing on ceremony here. Miliband, who is sitting at one of them, looks suddenly very young and quite ashen under the fluorescent light. He generates a forcefield around himself which signals that he doesn't want to engage.

Despite his generally easy manner, Miliband's patience obviously gets tested by a number of things. Red tape; extraneous noise while he is talking; time-wasting.

At a meeting the previous day in Islamabad at the Pakistani Humanitarian Forum, to which the heads of several local NGOs had been invited, he became noticeably fidgety when the host invited each speaker around the table to introduce themselves. “Yes, we’ve done that already,” he said with that icy grimace. “I know everybody’s name, I think, and where they are from, I’ve read all my briefings...”

The final day starts with a briefing on the Pakistan Reading Project, an initiative to improve the reading skills of 3 million children in Pakistan. It’s then on, as quickly as our convoy can make it, to a primary school in Islamabad for the unveiling of a mobile library. Again, Miliband is surrounded by photographers from the moment he steps out of the car, and a presentation, complete with national costume and a marching band, is performed for him under the hot sun. The USAID crew – America’s overseas development arm – are here, too, all straight out of casting for *Homeland* with their crew cuts and square jaws, and perhaps a little miffed that the cameras train so obsessively on Miliband (or “Mr Secretary” as he is still referred to in the States).

He has to be physically torn away from the scene by Sana Brosnan, IRC’s senior advocacy and policy officer, in order to make it to his next appointment at Pakistan’s education ministry; he is late as it is. This is swiftly followed by lunch with Richard Olson, the US ambassador to Pakistan. Then on to “mocktails” (although alcohol is freely available on the black market, at anything even vaguely public it is not allowed) hosted by Mehnaz Aziz, the glamorous wife of prominent Pakistani politician Daniyal Aziz. Before his flight at 3.40am back to New York via Abu Dhabi, Miliband also has to fit in a jolly private dinner for 70 at the home of Professor John Shumaker, head of the Reading Project, and a meeting with Imran Khan, the thorn, as it were, in the Pakistani prime minister’s side. “Yes, well,” he says guardedly, “I just think if you’d been visiting from another

government... You’ve got to be open about listening to all sides.”

At her party, Mehnaz, an impressive philanthropist, has gone all out. Unlike at the American embassy, where tuna-salad sandwiches were served, her event is being set up in the shaded courtyard by uniformed staff. Meanwhile her guest of honour, David Miliband, is extremely happy and obliging to have his picture taken by *Vogue* in something other than a suit and is carrying a neat pile of “mufti”



Miliband in the garden of Mehnaz Aziz, founding director of the charity Children’s Global Network Pakistan, in Islamabad

for this express purpose: a pair of pristine brown suede shoes, jeans and a checked shirt from Bonobos, a label he’d never heard of until the catalogue popped through his letterbox. “I don’t know whether they’d be happy or horrified for the namecheck, ha ha,” he says, while we stand in the parquet-floored lobby of the Aziz residence, he with hands thrust in those pockets, rocking back on those heels.

Presently the guests start arriving: leading female parliamentarians, economists, environmentalists. Everyone assembles in Mehnaz’s elegantly appointed drawing room to hear Miliband speak. I sit next to

an extremely beautiful editor from the national newspaper *Dawn*, who whispers admiringly, “I didn’t realise he was so tall! He’s too good-looking not to return to parliament.” Unlike his brother, David Miliband has the aura of a statesman, as opposed to that of a politician – and you can feel it right here in this room, the sway he holds over this impromptu gathering of influential, super switched-on elites.

Perhaps, for now, he can do more from New York, away from the wretched backbiting of electoral politics, flying off to the world’s hotspots, actually “changing one life at a time” as he puts it again and again. Perhaps the humanitarian world is a better launching pad than British politics for his obvious global aspirations. Could there be an element of atonement at play, too? (After all, as a loyal member of the Labour government, he voted for the war in Iraq – a decision which helped create many of the disasters the IRC is supposed to be tackling right now.) One has also got to figure in his salary (around \$350,000 a year, supplemented by the £1 million he has already earned since 2010 on the lecture circuit, on the board of various companies and in his former capacity as vice-chairman of Sunderland AFC, the football team in his old constituency). Perhaps he also gets to keep more pleasant company than at Westminster, something he commented on during that interminably long road

trip between Islamabad and Lahore.

“People in New York have been very genuine,” he volunteered. “You know how people in London say, ‘Oh you must come for dinner’ and don’t always mean it? Well, there’s a sincerity in New York which I’m struck by. But I mean, we’ve got this fantastic network of friends [in London], people we are incredibly close to, and you worry a lot about not losing those roots and links and commitments, and you want to nurture them, and I don’t want to cast Britain in a negative light at *all* because absence makes the heart grow fonder, don’t you think?” ■