o win the next general election, Labour must defy history, address some awkward numbers and overcome persistent weaknesses in the reputation of the party and its leader. Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, the history. David Cameron leads the ninth government to come to power from opposition in the past 80 years; and Ed Miliband is the ninth opposition leader to seek to lead his party back to office after a single parliament out of power (Table 1 shows, the record is not encouraging). Only once, in February 1974, has a new government been thrown out at the following election. Edward Heath, the Conservative prime minister, effectively threw power away. He had been in office less than four years and had a perfectly viable majority in the House of Commons, but he had provoked a bitter dispute with the miners. Their strike had left Britain short of energy, every home suffered powercuts, and industry was forced to cut back to a three-day week. Heath decided he needed a fresh mandate from the electorate. The question he posed was: “Who governs, parliament or the unions?” The electorate essentially replied, “We’re not sure, but not you.” Conservative support slipped to 39 per cent, its lowest since 1929.

As those figures show, no opposition has gone on to win power without at some point achieving a lead of at least 20 per cent; and, as the story of the 1987-92 parliament shows, even a 21 per cent lead does not guarantee victory. (That was, however, a special case: in March 1990, Margaret Thatcher was presiding over the introduction of the poll tax. By 1992 the Tories had got rid of both an unpopular premier and a hated policy). At the time of writing, the biggest Labour lead recorded by any opinion poll during its current period of opposition was 16 per cent, recorded by TNS last September. My own judgement is that Labour’s biggest lead in this parliament is around 12 per cent; higher leads in individual polls have been outliers. Either way, Labour has fallen well short of the 20 per cent that every successful opposition party in recent decades has achieved.

Second, the arithmetic. Labour won 258 seats in 2010. To win the next election outright, it will need 326. (This assumes that the next election will be fought on the same boundaries as last time. Labour’s task would have been harder had the Conservatives succeeded in cutting the number of MPs and redrawing the boundaries according to new rules). So Labour must gain 68 seats.

Even so, Labour failed to secure an overall majority. Its vote fell too, in fact it won even fewer votes than the Tories. But it managed, just, to become the largest party in the House of Commons, and Harold Wilson returned as prime minister. In short, Heath blew it. Had he held his nerve and not called an election, he might well have won the following election. If we discount the special circumstances of the February 1974 election, there has not been a single occasion since 1930 when a new government has been thrown out at the next election. And even if we leave that election in, there is not a single time in more than 80 years when an opposition party has returned to power at the first attempt without an overall majority. If Miliband does head a majority government after 2015, Labour’s victory will be the first of its kind in modern times.

The opinion polls provide equally salutary precedents. Table 2 shows the peak leads of opposition parties over the past half-century (omitting the short parliaments of 1964-66 and March-October 1974).

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As parties matter less to voters, personal performance matters more. New MPs are able to attract approval for the way they serve their communities. Then, four or five years later, they can convert this approval into extra votes – not, usually, in vast numbers, but enough to make a difference in some seats. In terms of change, it is this second election when the bonus votes are most likely to hold their bonus but not, normally, add further to it.

The same may well happen in 2015. In virtually all of Labour’s target seats, Conservatives will be fighting as first-time incumbents. To illustrate the point, imagine the battle for the imaginary Conservative marginal seat of Arfon and Dundee East respectively. They are worth targeting, but Labour would be unwise to assume victory.

### TABLE 5: Labour’s vote share in 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great Britain</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
<th>Seat</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
<th>Incumbent Labour</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seats gained by Labour in 1997, new MP seeking re-election</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-4.1</td>
<td>-5.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour seats before 1997, Labour MP standing again</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Labour MP standing down in 2001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As of the seats currently held by the Liberal Democrats, 14 gains look a stretch to me. Labour will almost certainly gain some, but most Liberal Democrat MPs will be able to rely on a personal vote to provide some, if not total, insulation from the national swing against their party. Were I a Labour strategist, I would target all 14 but be content on election night of eight or nine won back. Table 4 lists the 14 seats.

All this means that Labour will probably need to take 60 seats from the Conservatives to secure an overall majority at the next general election. The table opposite shows the 60 top Conservative-Labour marginals.

### TABLE 6: Top 60 Conservative-Labour marginals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North East</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
<th>Seat</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
<th>Incumbent Labour</th>
<th>Coa %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleethorpes</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>Hove</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Canock Chase</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockton South</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>Hastings and Rye</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Wavertree</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East of England</td>
<td></td>
<td>Milton Keynes South</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>Coa %</td>
<td>Seat</td>
<td>Coa %</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Coa %</td>
<td>Incumbent Labour</td>
<td>Coa %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thurnick</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>South West</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancashire</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Wavenny</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macclesfield</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Banbury</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Shower</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>Plymouth Sutton and Devonport</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlisle</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Ipswich</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Bristow</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>Grimsby</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaver Vale</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Stevenage</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Amber Valley</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Kingswood</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrington</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Watford</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Swindon South</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bury North</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>Norwest North</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Corby</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Somerset North East</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackpool South</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Northampton North</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Chester</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Wales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wirral West</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Huyton</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Loughborough</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Cardiff North</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pendle</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Brentford and Isleworth</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>High Peak</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossendale and Darwen</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>Enfield North</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Vale of Glamorgan</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Croydon Central</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York West</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Warwickshire North</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dewsbury</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Harewood</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudesham</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Ealing Central and Acton</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Wolverhampton South West</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keighley</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>South East</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Halesowen and Rowley Regis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elmet and Rothwell</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Brighton Kemptown</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Worcester</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Think back to 2001. Labour had gained more than 140 seats in 1997. After Tony Blair’s first term, individual MPs as well as the party nationally faced the verdict of voters. The table opposite shows what happened to Labour’s share of the vote.

Nationally, there was a two per cent swing from Labour to Conservative. But in Labour marginals there was a slight swing to Labour. That is why Labour lost hardly any seats, and secured almost as big a landslide as in 1997.

These figures suggest that incumbency brings a bonus, generally of 1,000-2,000 votes. When sitting MPs are ousted, their bonus disappears and the new MPs have the chance to establish themselves locally. The decline in strong party loyalties in recent decades has helped this process.
CAMPAIGN FOR A LABOUR MAJORITY

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Parliament’s midterm has been the lack of net movement between left and right. Few voters who support the Conservatives, even in the mid-1990s, polls and by-elections recorded big shifts from the Conservatives to New Labour – just as Thatcher won in 1979 on the back of significant mid-term movements from Labour to the Conservatives. Of course, things could change between now and 2015. The 54-40 division between left and right might change in either direction. But if I were a betting man, I would expect the split to be fairly similar at the next general election. This suggests that Labour has three specific tasks if it is to make a 54-40 split work in its favour:

• Win the ‘ground war’ by identifying Labour supporters in the key marginals and making sure they turn out to vote. This is one thing that Barack Obama achieved in the United States in both 2008 and 2012.

• Hold on to the Liberal Democrat-to-Labour switchers in the Conservative-Labour marginals (but not the Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginals, where continued tactical voting would help reduce the overall number of Conservative seats and so make it that bit easier for Labour to become the largest party).

• Encourage disaffected Tories who have switched to UKIP to stay with UKIP. The more the right-of-centre vote is divided, the easier it is for Labour to unseat Conservative MPs with small majorities.

The first task, winning the ground war, is essentially a matter of organisation and resources – not least identifying every Labour supporter in every key constituency, getting to know them and understanding their concerns. And the more of them that cast postal votes in advance, the better. An extra leaflet, phone call or even candidate visit 10 days before polling day will not be enough.

The other two tasks are political. They must be tackled with care. Labour cannot say out loud: ‘Vote Liberal Democrat in this seat to keep out the Tories’, or ‘Don’t discount the UKIP candidate’. Nigel Farage is a sensitive man with lots of good ideas, he deserves your support. Rather, Labour must learn from the central failing that caused its defeat in 1992 – an election fought on too many economic conditions that should have seen the Tories removed from office.

Then, the Tories’ central message was that Neil Kinnock was a dangerous man who would lead Britain down the road to ruin. The Conservative poster, showing a pair of boxing gloves and the huge slogan, ‘Labour’s double whammy: higher taxes, higher prices’, caught the mood and amplified it. The Tories won, and with the highest popular vote that any British party has ever achieved.

Five years later, the Tories tried the same trick and it failed utterly. It depicted Blair as ‘Demon Eyes’, with a suitably menacing picture. It failed because it was only the depiction as hideous. Blair had reassured voters that their jobs, homes, pay and savings would be safe under Labour.

One does not need a crystal ball to know that the Conservatives will try and try again to portray their leader as a great danger in 2015. They want to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of former Labour voters who now back Labour – and to corral UKIP supporters into returning home to the Tories. The more the Conservatives can terrify voters into fearing a Miliband-led government the closer they will come to achieving both objectives.

By the same token, Labour’s main political (as distinct from organisational) challenge is to reassure both groups of voters. At other times, generating excitement might be a more attractive strategy; but, in these uncertain times, there are few opportunities to generate a positive buzz by promising to spend extra money on popular causes. Before persuading voters that better times are around the corner, the party needs to reassure them that there are no fresh horrors on the road ahead. The next election will be more about avoiding purgatory than entering paradise.

Getting the policy programme right is vital. Without the right measures, any party will deservelessly be trashed during the election campaign. But policies are not enough. The judgements that swing voters make are about the brand image of each party and the perceived character of each leader. Are they up to the job? Are they on my side? Will they keep their promises? Can I trust them not to screw up the economy? Political scientists call these ‘valence’ factors. Labour’s key task of provoking reassurance is a classic valence policy.

How does Labour currently stand? Fresh YouGov research for Progress suggests a mixed picture at best. When YouGov recently asked people a forced choice question – would they prefer a Labour government led by Ed Miliband or a Conservative government led by David Cameron? – the two options are level pegging: Labour 41 per cent, Conservative 40 per cent. Not only is this gap far narrower than Labour’s normal voting intention lead, it compares unfavourably with past oppositions. In March 2008, the same point in the last parliament, a Cameron-led Tory government was preferred to a Gordon Brown-led Labour government by 12 points, 47-35 per cent. In the general election two years later, the Conservatives secured a seven-point lead over Labour and failed to win an outright majority. In December 1996, less than six months before the 1997 election, a Blair-led Labour government was preferred over a John Major-led Tory government by as much as 35 points (60-25 per cent). Labour did, of course, win by a landslide, but the gap in votes was just 13 per cent.

One reason why the Tories do so much better on the ‘forced choice’ question just now compared with normal voting intention is that most UKIP supporters would prefer a Conservative to a Labour government. This suggests that the Tories may be able to squeeze UKIP’s support during the 2015 general election campaign.

Part of Labour’s problem is that, while millions of voters think its heart is in the right place, they do not think its run is right. It is an old problem – in 1992, the election came down to the rival images of a ‘nice but dim’ Labour party versus a ‘mean but smart’ Conservative party. Given that choice, most voters would have trusted smart but dimly nice, and dim. Naturally, every party wishes to be seen as nice and smart. Hence Labour’s need, decade after decade, to demonstrate its competence – and...
On one issue – standing up for Britain’s interests on Europe and immigration – the Conservatives have a smaller lead than Labour might have feared. This brings us to the way voters view the party leaders themselves.

To explore these broad images further, we asked people to consider what they expected to happen if (a) Labour won the election outright, and (b) if the Conservatives won outright. We asked about a mixture of character issues and policy issues (see Table 9).

These figures contain one piece of good news for Labour, but three pieces of bad news. The bad news is that Labour leaves the Conservatives on nine of the 12 measures. One is particularly significant. The charge that Labour is in touch with the trade unions has far less power than the charge that the Conservatives favour the rich.

Now for the bad news:

• Given the unpopularity of the government, and Labour’s lack of a serious voting intention lead, one would expect Labour to be well ahead on most measures.

But on three the lead is uncomfortably small. The economy, learning from past mistakes, and having people who are up to the job of running Britain.

In as far as Labour’s figures look good, this is because so many people think badly of the Tories, rather than because of wide public enthusiasm for Labour. No opposition could be happy with the fact that, when the economy is flattening, just one person in three thinks it would take the right decisions to secure greater prosperity. On just two measures do the optimists about Labour’s prospective performance outnumber the pessimists, and then by only a modest five points: being ‘on the side of people like you’ (43-38 per cent) and delivering good value services (41-36 per cent). On all other measures more people think a Labour government would fail rather than succeed.

There is one issue on which the Conservatives hold a large lead, and it could be decisive in a tough election campaign. By two to one, voters think the Tories have the courage to take tough and unpopular decisions. By three to two, voters think Labour lacks that courage. Once again, this echoes what happened in 1992, and Labour’s continuing vulnerability to the charge that it is ‘nice but dim’. For a party whose greatest campaigning challenge is to appear reassuring, this should be profoundly troubling.

On one issue – standing up for Britain’s interests on Europe and immigration – the Conservatives have a smaller lead than Labour might have feared.

CAMPAIGN FOR A LABOUR MAJORITY

Peter Kellner is president of YouGov

Peersmsists outnumber optimists with regard to both parties, Labour by 14 points and the Tories by 10. But once again, one needs to remember the fact that Labour has a significant overall voting intention lead; so for the Tories to be ahead on any issue, however narrowly, should concern Cameron and worry Miliband.

This brings us to the way voters view the party leaders themselves.

YouGov regularly tracks their reputations by asking which of eight attributes apply to each. Table 10 compares the figures for Miliband and Cameron for January 2011, after both had established themselves in their current positions, with this March.

It is clear that the Cameron ‘brand’ has been tarnished over the past two years. He is seen as far less decisive and charismatic than he was after his first eight months as prime minister. The number who do not think he was in touch with ordinary people was already low in January 2011, at 13 per cent; it is now a negligible seven per cent. Even Conservative voters are sceptical: just 22 per cent of them credit Cameron with being in touch. Miliband’s attacks on Cameron, including the exchanges at prime minister’s questions, that Labour’s leader has won increasingly often, have plainly had a significant impact.

However, Cameron’s decline has not been matched by any improvement in the Miliband ‘brand’. In January 2011, his low ratings could be attributed to the fact that he had been leader for just over three months and millions of voters had not yet made up their mind about him. Only 36 per cent credited him with any positive attributes. More than two years later, that figure has crept up to 41 per cent. The ‘don’t knows’ are down, but the number saying he lacks any of them is up. His average score is unchanged at 12 per cent. Overall, the fact that Miliband has closed the gap with Cameron has everything to do with the prime minister’s mounting unpopularity (with his average score down from 21 per cent to 15 per cent) and little to do with Miliband’s own appeal.

This analysis has shown how high the mountain is that Labour must climb in order to win the next general election outright. It does not show that the peak is beyond reach. To scale it, Labour must do six things (including the three tasks identified earlier):

• Hold on to the great majority of the voters who have switched from the Liberal Democrats since 2010;
• Convince voters that the Conservatives deserve to shoulder more blame than Labour for Britain’s economic woes;
• Assure voters that it has learned from the mistakes it made last time;
• Reassure Tories who have defected to UKIP that they have little to fear from a Labour government – and so need not be driven by fear to return to the Conservatives;
• Win the ‘ground war’, with better information than the Conservatives about individual voters, more effective ways of communicating with Labour’s actual and potential supporters, and more successful ways of ensuring that they actually turn out to vote; and
• Finally, Miliband must convince more voters that he would be a competent prime minister who is able to take tough decisions.

If the party achieves those objectives, it will win the next election. If it can achieve some but not all of them, expect a close result.

Meanwhile, the central fact remains that no successful opposition in the past 50 years has gone on to regain power with such a weak image and without achieving much bigger voting-intention leads at some point in the parliament. Do these historic comparisons matter? Perhaps the fact of the coalition has changed the terms of trade, and rendered past comparisons irrelevant. Certainly a slump in Liberal Democrat support and a surge in UKIP’s vote could both help Labour and damage the Conservatives.

However, it would be a worthwhile achievement for Miliband to defy history and lead Labour to outright victory with an overall majority in the new House of Commons. Were he to do it, he would deserve enormous credit.

There is another possibility. Miliband might do in 2015 what Cameron did in 2010, and win enough support to become prime minister, but enough to govern alone and unencumbered. Not only must Labour design strategy to maximise its appeal over the next two years, it should give careful thought to what it would do should it end up as the largest party but short of an overall majority.

It would be a remarkable achievement for Miliband to defy history and lead Labour to outright victory with an overall majority in the new House of Commons. Were he to do it, he would deserve enormous credit.