

After Ed Miliband's eloquent performance at Labour's manifesto launch, David Cameron was under pressure to reassert his leadership credentials when he revealed his own. He needed to be good, and he was. The remaining question is whether or not he was too good to be true.

On the face of it, Cameron seems to possess the ideal political skill-set. He is a quick-witted debater, but also excels in the delivery of set-piece speeches. The [format for the televised leadership debates](#) is an unsatisfactory mixture of the two. He can't speak for long enough to establish an argument, and he can't bully his opponents with sustained put-downs. So, apart from anything else, the speech at his own manifesto launch shows that he was right to sidestep a series of televised encounters this time.

Cameron spoke with considerable authority, and apparent sincerity. The problem lay not in the style, but rather the content.

In compiling the manifesto, Cameron and his advisers were faced with the familiar Conservative task of consolidating the party's core support while reaching out into the middle ground. In this election this is even more difficult than usual. Reach too far to the middle ground and you risk losing supposedly loyal Tory voters to UKIP. Lean too far to the right, and you can forget the middle ground.

To the Tory team, extending the right-to-buy policy to allow long-standing housing association tenants to buy their homes at a discount must have seemed like a perfect solution to this dubious dilemma. On the one hand, it has obvious appeal for aspirational families who "do the right thing", but can't be trusted to vote the right way in the absence of a material incentive. On the other, it tickles Tory tummies by reminding the core voters of Margaret Thatcher's [celebrated electoral gambit of 1979](#), when she promised to liberate council-house tenants.

This masterstroke is just part of a bid to reach out to the "working people" who have been love-bombed by Labour since the last election. If they won't benefit from right to buy, they might appreciate a bit of help with childcare costs, so Caring Cameron will trump [Labour's offer](#) and give them 30 free hours of childcare a week.

And whatever their housing arrangements, they are unlikely to baulk at the tax cuts the Conservatives are offering. Those on middle incomes will be cheered by the [raising of the threshold](#) at which higher-rate tax kicks in. Recipients of the minimum wage working 30 hours per week will be delighted to learn that they will escape income tax entirely.

In normal times the Tory manifesto would add up to a very plausible package. But these times are far from normal. Although Cameron devoted most of his speech to the future, the immediate past looms large over this election. The past, apparently, proves that Labour can't be trusted with the economy (or anything else). Cameron is trying to convince the voters that they can look forward to the future because the government has carried us out of "Labour's Great Recession". At the same time, he warns that there is still plenty of hard work to do and only the Conservatives are equipped for the task.

The line that Britain is great again and the warning that Labour would ruin it has worked in the past, of course. This time, though, it might be more difficult to sell. The voters are much more sceptical about politicians in general.

More seriously, the Conservative manifesto leaves the party open to the accusation that it, rather than Labour, presents the real threat to recovery. After all, the headline promises will cost money; and although Cameron said little about the NHS or inheritance tax, the Conservatives have also made expensive pledges in these fields.

The impression, already [pointed out by Nick Robinson](#), is that the Conservatives think they can get away with reckless spending pledges because [Labour's credibility is so low](#)

. If so, they are likely to prove too complacent by half. In particular, they are leaving themselves open to demands for a detailed inventory of the cuts they intend to make in unprotected public services.

Second, even if the party's programme withstands pre-election scrutiny and it finds itself in government after May 7, it will have a tough time asking "working people" to make additional sacrifices. In fact, the relentless cheeriness of the Conservative mood music invites the voter to expect tangible benefits to start flowing profusely on May 8.

Conservative manifesto launch: Cameron shines, but dark clouds are on the horizon

Written by The Conversation

The Conservative manifesto, and Cameron's speech, represent a bold bid to drag those infernal floating voters to the Tory shore. However, only those voters who are already disposed to back the Conservatives are likely to be reeled in. The rest will keep on waiting for something to happen which will make their minds up for them; and, on current form, they are going to be waiting in vain.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/conservative-manifesto-launch-cameron-shines-but-dark-clouds-are-on-the-horizon-40184>