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DIRECTION FOR THE
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We're all in this together:

- Towards the political practice of a Plural Left

By Mark Perryman

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Compass publications are intended to create real debate and discussion around the key issues facing the democratic left - however the views expressed in this publication are not a statement of Compass policy.



We're all in this together:

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Introduction

A sizeable progressive constituency is defined by their lack of a definitive party loyalty. Voting Labour in some constituencies, Lib, Dem or Green in others, across Scotland and Wales more often than not for the SNP or Plaid, in a handful of other places Respect or perhaps an independent left or community candidate. Meanwhile if no obvious progressive candidate is standing millions more of former Labour voters aren't bothering to vote at all.

After 2010 the single narrative that defined 1979-1997 that there was an alternative, a Labour government, in all likelihood won't have the compelling appeal which sustained Labour through the hard times of 18 years of Thatcher and Major.

Both present and future demand therefore a plural left. Progressive and practical, shaped by all its participants, not simply the sum of its disparate parts. Since the start of the year Compass has been grappling with this task, now is the time for all who share the ambition to join in with its fulfilment.

Mark Perryman is the Editor of *Breaking Up Britain : Four Nations after a Union*.

Loaves Labour Lost

The collapse of Labour's vote in the 4 June local and Euro elections was only to be expected, though the scale of the decline was shocking all the same. The global economic meltdown has shaken to the core the remaining public faith in Gordon Brown's capacity to govern. Any boost in his personal credibility has proved to be short-lived. More than anything he is the victim of a celebrity-driven political

discourse created for him by Tony Blair for which he is spectacularly ill-suited. If your face or soundbite doesn't fit then thanks to this degradation of politics recovery in the polls is all but impossible.

Brown's lack of a winning personality might have just about seen him through, there is scarcely any evidence of widespread popular enthusiasm for Cameron. But the expenses scandal eliminated the likelihood of that. There was shock at Tory grandees dipping into the public purse to fund duck houses and moat cleaning. However it was the news of government minister after government minister, supposedly representatives of the common man and woman, fiddling the figures for all that they were worth which destroyed what remaining moral capital this government once had.

A Tale of Three Parties

New Labour has shifted the party to a middle ground where joined by Cameron's Blair-lite brand of conservatism and Nick Clegg's Orange book liberalism the three parties' policies are virtually indistinguishable.

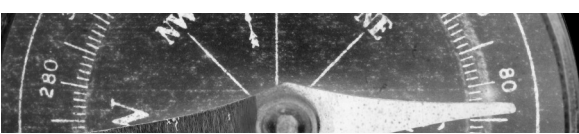
Yet Labour's identity as a governing party remains framed by one fateful decision more than any other: No inquiry, private or public is required to reveal that Blair took this country to war on a lie. A shameful act which has shaped the public's cynicism about politics in general, this government in particular. The expenses scandal simply tipped this ever-resent public mistrust into explosive popular anger.

The disconnection from politics that these processes produced has created record low voting figures. People vote by staying at home, raging at the scandalous behaviour of their MPs on the TV. Labour's support has collapsed via plummeting membership, a breakdown in good relations with the trade unions, and voter abstentionism. Having depended on millionaire generosity and corporate sponsorship it now finds itself losing these

too. Transparency has made the buying of influence less attractive and in any case the loyalty of rich backers and big business stretches only so far as backing the winning side.

The electorate which once more or less voted Labour now has a greater diversity and volatility than at any time in recent history. In Scotland the SNP are in government at Holyrood and establishing themselves as credible challengers to Labour in what were previously its Central Belt heartlands. In Wales the Tories are doing considerably better; yet Plaid Cymru's vote remains solid, and governing in coalition with Labour has proved itself an alternative that many previous Labour voters are willing to trust. In England the Green Party has enjoyed rising support with councillors and MEPs elected in record numbers however it has yet to achieve the kind of breakthrough that might have been expected as Labour's fortunes collapsed and concern over climate change rockets.

These are challenges to Labour hegemony all progressives would broadly welcome. But Labour's forward march to the right has had an uglier outcome too. A populist right has emerged that seeks to damn politics in the name of xenophobia and racism, any sentiment of equality and diversity is rubbished as 'political correctness gone mad', with Muslim communities singled out for demonisation and criminalisation. In the press Richard Littlejohn, Kelvin McKenzie and Jeremy Clarkson provide a daily commentary to help shape this populist agenda. And increasingly UKIP, the English Democrats and the BNP provide for those who identify with this populism a party to vote for. This is the worst of all of new Labour's sorry achievements. As it deserted the ideological terrain it jettisoned the tools with which principles and ideals are constructed, if not always carried out in practice. As a result a crisis in working-class representation is now threatening to engulf the body politic. This affords the BNP the opportunity to pose as old Labour with racist answers to real



problems. No previous government has been able to create the conditions for a fascist party to get elected. Neither in the 1930s were BUF candidates elected nor in the 1970s a single NF councillor. Yet Blairist-Brownite Labour has materially contributed to a situation where the BNP can achieve the kind of breakthrough their fascist forerunners, Oswald Mosley and John Tyndall, could only dream of.

The global economic meltdown. The expenses scandal. Voter mistrust of all parties. Challenges to Labour hegemony of the progressive vote. The rise of the populist and far right. These five factors will shape both the contest of, and the fallout from, the General Election. In their different ways each demands a pluralist dynamic as the core organising principle of the left, taking many different forms and leading to a variety of practical, campaigning and electoral outcomes. But in every case encouraging conversations of difference and coalitions of intent.

Finding our ways

In March, with the global economic crisis gathering pace and Labour's faltering electoral fortunes becoming more obvious two leading figures in Compass, John Harris and Neal Lawson, started to map out a new kind of politics. "The creation of a politics that transcends tribal party lines. No party has a monopoly of wisdom. Meaningful and lasting change happens only when people join in the widest possible movements." What John and Neal are describing is an alternative modernisation model for labourism. Blair's achievement was to modernise old Labour with a brand of politics that is intensely conservative. Dismissive of social movements, giving up on the transformation that feminism and black politics demands, hardly ever engaging with green ideas until climate change made such an engagement impossible to ignore, distrustful of decentralisation because it threatened the control Blair demanded over all that he governed.

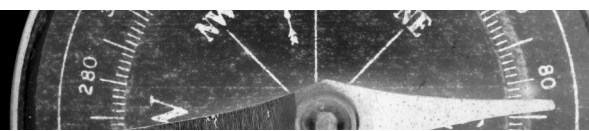
The type of alternative modernisation being proposed builds instead on pluralism as a core organising principle of the left. A shift which all progressives should readily welcome. Following Labour's disastrous showing in the June local and Euro elections Compass figures Jon Cruddas MP and Jonathan Rutherford returned once more to this theme, outlining their support for "a politics made out of alliances between old and new political actors. A search for new kinds of democratic political structures and cultures, which can re-connect institutions of political power with social movements and political constituencies."

These sentiments are being echoed by others. Green Party leader Caroline Lucas has responded positively to the idea of co-operation. "I believe we ought to work together. Not by merging our distinct identities into a popular front, but by accepting and respecting our differences as well as our common vision. Not so much a Big Tent, as a camp-site of smaller tents." Respect Party leader Salma Yaqoob has also joined in this evolving conversation of co-operation. "We all have our loyalties and allegiances and it is futile to demand from each other that we renounce them as a pre-condition for unity. On the contrary, we need to find new ways to exert pressure on the political establishment, and forge new alliances that bring together a progressive coalition that can start to shift the political centre of gravity to the left." While John Hilary of War on Want has suggested "A new pluralism based on an acceptance of difference, not a demand for consensus." And in the magazine *Red Pepper* left academic Pat Devine makes a suggestion that many on the left but not members of any political party see as plain common-sense "one way forward is to work towards the formation of a loose-knit electoral alliance united in opposition to the neoliberal mainstream and dedicated to campaigning for electoral reform and a green new deal."

Different responses, same idea. The ideals and values that seek to preserve the best

of a social-democracy effectively dumped by Blairist-Brownite Labour. A politics shaped by the politics of protest and the dynamics of direct-action. A new economics that has the preservation of the environment in the face of the gravest challenge to the survival of the planet any of our generation has ever imagined at its core. A reform programme that ensures our institutions are both representative and accountable. Parties and movements capable of responding to the crisis in working-class representation not by accommodating to the racism of the BNP but by challenging it with policies that serve the interests of all communities regardless of faith or colour. The constituency of support for such a politics is both seriously under-represented in the Westminster Parties and yet present across sections of Labour and the Liberal Democrats' membership, found in the Green and Respect parties, while in Scotland and Wales the SNP and Plaid Cymru are beginning to pursue such politics in the devolved Scots Parliament and Welsh Assembly. But most significantly of all there is a huge floating, unaligned constituency of support frustrated by an unfair voting system seeking out candidates who would best represent their shared idealism. Just for starters in Brighton Pavilion the Green's Caroline Lucas would attract such votes. In Birmingham Hall Green Respect's Salma Yaqoob. In Dagenham Labour MP Jon Cruddas. In Wales Plaid Cymru's Adam Price while across Scotland in most constituencies the SNP. And who wouldn't want Vince Cable returned to Parliament and continuing to outline the most sustained critique of the economic system that has got us into this mess from any party?

Labour is simply no longer the solitary pole of voter loyalty for progressives that for most since its foundation and eclipse of the old Liberal Party it undoubtedly was. This is the achievement and consequence of an illegal war and the deadly embrace of, rather than divorce from, the Thatcherite legacy. At the same time the minor parties that now challenge



Labour on the left are too small to win more than a handful of seats at best. Yet such victories will each help produce a better future for us all whatever party we belong to or support, it is something we can all share in. And in Scotland and Wales whatever our differing views of the nationalist parties' final aim, independence, in the here and now of devolution they are helping to shape the kind of policies Labour voters across Britain had once expected that their government at Westminster would be introducing. The urgent need is to construct a politics that provides a space for ideals that we all share to produce practical and effective outcomes. And if such a space is to be taken at all seriously this must connect to an agency of change which seeks out the best-placed representatives of these ideals to attract the broadest possible support, and win. It is what progressive voters want and expect. The failure to recognise and respond to this is in large measure a product of the deficiencies of a party system we should be challenging not endorsing.

Dig Deep for the Minors

Except for a few Far Left diehards, throughout the hard times of Thatcherism 1979-1997 when Maggie declared 'there is no alternative' the compelling narrative was that there was one, a Labour government. 13 years of grave disappointment later and with a likely Tory victory, possibly a landslide, within twelve months the painful truth is that the belief that Labour represents the best we can hope for no longer has the near universal appeal it once had.

After the Iraq War Labour lost voters to the Liberal-Democrats. Devolution has helped catapult the SNP into government in Scotland. While in Wales Labour and Plaid Cymru govern as a coalition. The Green Party has over a hundred councilors, two MEPs and two Greater London Assembly members. The Respect Party has an MP and a base of councilors in East London and North Birmingham. In Kidderminster a pro-NHS campaigner has been elected MP. In Blaenau Gwent, a

previously rock solid Labour seat, a Peoples Voice MP has been elected. In Coventry and Lewisham Socialist Party councilors have been elected. In Barrow, Preston, Wigan, Oxford, Wellingborough and elsewhere independent left candidates have won council seats. And many millions of Labour supporters and voters, joined now by tens of thousands of former members, have simply deserted Labour and find themselves with no party or candidate that they can vote for.

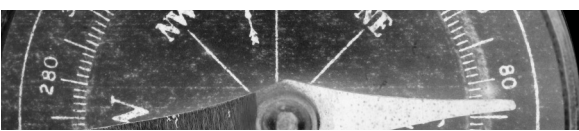
The nature of the progressive challenge on Labour's left flank varies widely, it is not in any sense uniform. Some Liberal-Democrats are social democratic in inclination, more left-wing than Labour on every meaningful indicator of their politics. While others, particularly those seeking to win on the back of disaffected Tory votes prefer to tack to the right. In Scotland and Wales support for independence remains well below the support for SNP and Plaid. Many voters are unconvinced of the case for separation but nevertheless enthusiasts for keeping as much control over social and economic matters in Scotland and Wales. The civic nationalism of the SNP and Plaid is a form of social democracy that growing numbers of Labour voters prefer to the party they had previously sent to represent them at Westminster.

The Greens recognise more than any other single party the absolute urgency of taking action to deal with climate change. Yet the solutions will not be found by electing one or two Green Party MPs in 2010. However welcome that development, which should be celebrated unreservedly, it won't be enough, especially if Cameron is sitting on top of a huge parliamentary majority. We simply cannot afford to wait until 2014 or 2015 in the hope that those one or two Green MPs become a group of four or five. By then it will be almost too late to reverse the planet's headlong rush towards climate catastrophe. An environmental pluralism would mean supporting Green Party candidates where they both have a realistic chance of winning and their opponents have a far inferior record on climate change. At the same time it

requires that the Green Party abandons a blanket approach to electoralism which prioritises saved deposits at the cost of electing environmentalist MPs from other parties. Where the Greens stand no chance of winning they should seek out those who offer both a chance of victory and a willingness to work with Green MPs in a future parliament to deliver the kind of action climate change urgently demands.

Respect has three or four target seats. Working with the Green Party they hope to come to local agreements where they are clearly the lead challenger for their candidates to stand aside and in return will campaign for a Green vote in their target seats. The two parties are not interchangeable. But they have more than enough in common to celebrate each other's successes. Which demands they work for one another's successes too. In that process they would hope to learn from each other, appreciate their differences, and shaped by these to help create a common agenda for social and environmental justice.

In a pioneering move Respect has already put such a process of electoral co-operation into practice. In the Euro elections in the North-West Constituency Respect had built up over a long period a good relationship with the Green Party. Like other small parties Respect could have simply chosen to stand, to promote their party and policies, but they recognised not only a strong left, anti-racist Green Party candidate but also the very real threat of the BNP's Nick Griffin being elected. They took a decision which remains unusual for small parties competing for votes. Not only would they not contest the seat but they would actively support and campaign for what many would see as their rival, the Green Party. In the event Griffin squeezed in by a few thousand votes but the decision Respect took was absolutely right and in similar circumstances others should do the same. The decision and activism it helped generate materially contributed to how close we came to keeping Griffin out and elect in his place a Green MEP. Most



importantly for those committed to constructing a plural left based on the needs of cooperation not the impediments of competition by such decisions and actions members of one party learned to work together with those in another party with whom they share so much, and differ on some, to the benefit of both parties and most crucially their voters. Such are the practicalities of pluralism.

Perhaps the most significant break-up of Labour's lost millions of voters has occurred at a local level. This has been where the BNP has sought to position itself as old labour plus racism. To see South Yorkshire, once dubbed a 'Socialist Republic' with the NUM at the core of community life provide significant support for the BNP is a measure of the absolute collapse of Labour loyalties. But elsewhere community activists have turned their campaign activism into a winning electoral formula, refusing to be taken for granted any more by Labour MPs and Councillors who they feel no longer represent them or their communities. This remains localised. There is no single model but all engaged in it deserve support and engagement instead of either being ignored or offered a set of demands to fit a pre-existing formula of political organisation.

Lib-Dems, nationalist parties, Greens, Respect, local campaigners, each will attract significant support from those who once voted Labour. At the same time many Labour MPs have rebelled against Blairist-Brownite policies. In parliament these Labour rebels amount to the biggest block of opposition the Labour government has had to face. Not enough to stop the war; to prevent the replacement of Trident, ID cards or creeping privatisation but that is hardly those MPs fault. In a mature democracy it should be possible for those MPs to call for the support of other party's candidates who they know would add to the ranks of their opposition. But to do so would only cause their expulsion from the Labour Party. We cannot make that demand of

them but what we can seek to construct together is a coalition of co-operation across parties where that mutual support emerges as a core, implicit value in all that we do. And as a result help prevent at election time the descent into a reckless party chauvinism, my party right or wrong. An old politics pluralists refuse any longer to indulge.

Some leftists would prefer instead a new Workers Party to demolish the entire edifice of all that they feel Labour has betrayed. This is a go-it-alone politics of never mind the consequences. Coalitions with those who don't match up to one particular version of the socialist truth are discarded. Instead there is a single claim to political identity, working class politics. Representation however has to be earned, it is never enough simply to declare it as a political principle. Slogans confused with principles, the scattergun politics of self-righteous denunciation of others devoid of any sense of self-awareness of their own weaknesses, no compromise as the beginning, middle and end of any political conversation. Together these spell the fast track to the jaws of defeat and irrelevancy, a path those of us at the beginnings of another journey towards a plural left have absolutely no intention of following.

Ragtag armies, Rainbow Coalitions and the politics of possibility

A plural left must be more than simply the sum of its parts. The core values will be social-democratic; the common good as something to cherish in its own right, putting people first as the point of those services, a nation that cares for all not just for those who can best afford it. Ideals that were destroyed by the Thatcherites in the cause of free marketisation and hardly revived either by new Labour's forward march to the right.

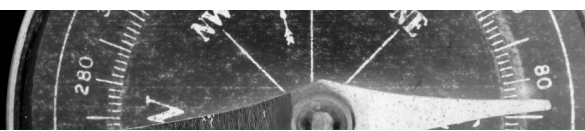
A plural left will seek to move those values back into the mainstream where they belong. We do nobody any favours if they remain on the margins, tossed about as debating points yet disconnected from the everyday and everybody. Nor will a

rainbow coalition which thrives on its differences but is hardly able to converse with anyone beyond its patchwork of colour be of much use either. We need to construct a progressive majority for change not a militant minority of resistance.

The Labour Left will be deluding itself if it believes that after 13 years of Blair-Brown, defeat in 2010 and then a fierce internal battle, one more heave will vanquish this sorry legacy and elect a new leadership with the road to recovery beckoning. Of course this contest of ideas, and personalities is important but a generation of disappointment and the fracturing of the progressive vote have changed decisively where the core of any coalition will be located. Inside, and outside Labour, in the Lib-Dems, the Greens, the nationalists and across these parties too. An electoral movement that matters when you're in the ballot box choosing who to vote for. Yet outside of it a cultural and social movement not crushed by broken manifesto commitments or whipped into line by party discipline either. Popular participation will be the key. We the people, the ones party politicians should be in fear of holding on to their seats when they find they're against us. Inspired to lead when they're with us. A left populism that connects to a popular progressive mood. Blair and Brown's gravest achievement has been the privatisation of idealism. A sense that nothing will ever change so what's the point of trying, we're left to tear up our party cards, retreat to the sofa of lost communities and rage at a world we thought was going to be so different to the one they've left us with. This is the starting point for a plural left, the defining characteristic of our success, or failure, will be a revival of a popular politics not the retreat into the comfortable certainty of reaching to the converted.

Uneven Development

The single biggest obstacle to a plural left remains systemic. Proportional Representation helps to ensure that every



vote counts, it reduces significantly the safe seats which the expenses scandal has now revealed as modern versions of rotten boroughs. It means that everyone can vote for the party they believe in rather than their least-worst choice. A Parliament would be elected with a great variety of views represented not simply the big party machines. Labour has introduced PR for every new institution it has created since 1997, the Scottish Parliament, Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies, the Greater London Assembly. What is good enough for Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and London is plainly good enough for Westminster thank you very much. Labour has in its power right now to let the people decide. To include a referendum question on PR on the 2010 General Election ballot paper. It should do so immediately, and in the process expose the Tory sham 'politics of change' for what it is, the old Westminster politics of politicians know best.

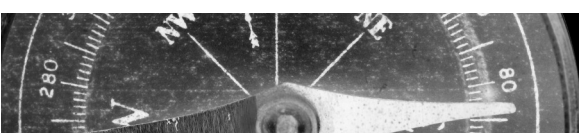
But we can't simply wait. Electoral systems however fair, or unfair, don't determine attitudes and cultures, ideas do. A pluralism involving big parties and small parties, some united behind pluralism, some a minority arguing for pluralism from within their parties, reaching out to the majority who share these ideals but who belong to no party. This demands a coalition of uneven development. There will be no single model, no central control, no diktat of what will and will not work. Instead we will come together around our existing ideals, and invent some new ones too. Where we disagree we will say so but as disappointed friends not as deadly enemies. We will support each other wherever we can and where we can't we will resist the temptation to revert to type, chasing after cheap votes at each others expense.

What this describes won't be a conventional campaign finishing in a march to Hyde Park and grandstanding speeches. Instead out of economic crisis, the horror of the duck house and moat-cleaning, the threat of environmental catastrophe, we will be crafting a cultural revolution of

how progressives do politics. If we build it, we will change for the better, and most important of all, the world will too.

Mark Perryman is the Editor of Breaking-Up Britain : Four Nations after a Union and previously Imagined Nation : England After Britain.

During the 1980s Mark was a member of the Marxism Today Editorial Board. In 1994 he co-founded the self-styled 'sporting outfitters of intellectual distinction' Philosophy Football, with the aim of changing the face of left political culture, and sell some T-shirts.



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Compass is the democratic left pressure group,
whose goal is to debate
and develop the ideas for a more equal
and democratic world, then
campaign and organise to help ensure
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