



# What is the Progressive Alliance?

Sue Goss

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Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

After the vote for Brexit, interest in the idea of a 'progressive alliance' accelerated. It became The Progressive Alliance during the Richmond Park by-election campaign almost a year ago, when some progressive parties and thousands of progressive voters worked together to see the defeat of Zac Goldsmith. Compass wanted to lay deep intellectual, cultural and organisational foundations for this alliance-building approach. But time was cut short when the Prime Minister called the snap general election. Like everyone else, Compass wasn't ready for it, but decided to seize the moment and do all we could to stop a Tory landslide. Out of nothing we ran a national campaign that saw dozens of local deals, a huge mobilisation of people and social media in target seats and millions of people voting tactically. It helped stop the Tories and could have seen a progressive government if Labour and the Lib Dems had done more. But Compass has always seen the Progressive Alliance as more than transactional electoral politics: part of a cultural revolution of our politics to build the ideas and forces that could set us on the path to a good society. So now we start to lay the foundations again with this publication on *What is the Progressive Alliance?*

The story of the Progressive Alliance campaign can be found in in Barry Langford's book [All Together Now](#) and there are more publications on the [Compass](#) website explaining the case for the Progressive Alliance as it relates to some of the progressive parties.

# WHAT IS THE PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE?

The progressive alliance is the coming together of UK citizens who want a fairer, more caring, more sustainable future. We are not just a tactical alliance - we aim to create a deep and enduring network of millions of people who want to change politics, and through it society, for the better. We come from different political parties from the centre to the left – and many of us are not members of political parties and have not been politically active before. We share a desire for a future that is better for everyone. But we are also conscious that the way we conduct ourselves and our politics – our behaviours, attitudes and assumptions - create the society we have. So if we want a society that is tolerant, inclusive, collaborative and creative, then that is how we need to be as we strive to achieve it. At one level the present situation seems dismal and dangerous. Our planet, which should be a source of plenty and well-being for all, is threatened by a growing environmental crisis, riven by wars and deformed by monstrous inequality. While the wealthy accumulate more and more, for many it is harder and harder to get by with job insecurity, low pay, benefit cuts, rising housing costs, growing debts. As austerity bites, our social safeguards of welfare, free education and healthcare are being stripped away. Instead of social change, we see a fearful, defensive response – Brexit, Donald Trump, populist anti-immigration sentiment, the closing of borders and the resurgence of far-right politics. In the UK we have an unfair voting system, an outrageously biased tabloid press and the growth of rumour and prejudice on the internet. We should not be naïve: we are up against powerful interests.

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At the same time, however, the possibilities for change have never been greater. People across the globe are questioning a system that makes it so hard for ordinary people to thrive.

The waste of consuming more and more is being challenged. We can organise and communicate through social media without relying on multi-national media organisations. New conversations are opening up, and so a different dialogue becomes possible.

To make change happen, we need to change. If we think and act differently, we can change how others think and behave. But it's not just about waiting for others to follow our lead. We need to organise. We need to use all the sources of democratic power and social influence – local government, community action and all the institutions of the public domain. We need both flair and pragmatism. We need to take advantage of every chance we get – not waiting for the perfect manifesto or the perfect government in waiting. We need to use our votes cleverly. We need to combine.

# CHANGING POLITICS

In a truly effective democracy, every citizen should feel they have the opportunity to make their vote count and have their voice heard. In our current electoral system, none of that is possible. Huge majorities in safe seats mean that most people's votes don't count. Elections are fought in marginal constituencies, on issues that only matter to a few swing voters. Votes for smaller parties scattered across many constituencies are wasted while votes accumulated in a few places can be deadly. Elections can be won on less than 30% of the eligible vote.

***We need a fairer electoral system that enables our democratic preferences to be reflected accurately***

A first-past-the-post electoral system means that centre-left political parties spend as much energy attacking and undermining each other as they do attacking parties of the right. It means that instead of making the fundamental case for change, we get hung up on the issues that divide us. The way elections are reported makes things worse. Politics is reduced to sound-bites and slogans. Our democracy faces some of the greatest challenges of our history, and yet we are ill-informed and patronised. Journalists 'follow the story' instead of asking the questions that would help us to explore issues. Politicians feel constrained to give brisk, certain responses as if they really did have all the answers.

We need a fairer electoral system that enables our democratic preferences to be reflected accurately, and a political debate that doesn't talk down to us, or force politicians to be combative and simplistic.

But we also need to change the way political parties on the centre and left behave. Although there is much we agree about, we differ about some important things. In the past this has led us to denounce each other and split into smaller and smaller factions, fighting amongst ourselves. Now, given the scale of 21st century problems, we see the futility of focussing on differences that constrain our collective ability to act.

# WHO ARE WE?

The progressive alliance was developed in 2017, organised by Compass, a non-aligned left of centre pressure group. Two things came together; first a long term goal of building the culture and organisation for a more collaborative form of politics; and second an immediate imperative of stopping a Tory landslide at the June 2017 election. While in the short term we have been known for proposing electoral deals and tactical voting, we are serious about creating time and space to develop the relationships, culture and ideas that foster deeper and more meaningful relationships between people and parties.

***We now have 60,000 supporters and local groups across the country.***

We now have 60,000 supporters and local groups across the country. We come from diverse backgrounds – we are not easy to label, and we are not quick to label others. Some of us are socialists, lifelong Labour Party members or libertarians. Some of us are passionate environmentalists and Green Party activists. Some of us are social liberals and draw attention to human rights and democratic issues. Some began their politics through feminism, LGBT activism, anti-racism. Some are working for greater autonomy for Wales or independence for Scotland. Many of us have moved allegiance from one political party to another – and back again. Most of us vote tactically if we have to. Many of us are active trades unionists, or community activists or local facilitators. We are academics, we work in media, technology, in the arts, in public services, in the private sector. We are students, retired, full-time carers.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PROGRESSIVE?

There are three dictionary definitions of progressive: “moving forward” or “proceeding step by step” or “advocating progress or reform”. All three can be applied.

For us, progressive means believing that the future can be better than the present. Unequal societies confiscate resources from the poorest, and then argue that the poor are undeserving and would be dangerous if given power. It is in the interests of those who already have power and wealth to argue that there is no point in trying to make things better – that human nature is fundamentally selfish. Equal societies trust that given shared responsibility, we can create ways of governing that encourage everyone to be creative, resourceful and generous. We believe that social change is possible and practical. But we don't believe it is easy, or obvious.

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Historically, 'progressive' often meant embracing technological change in an uncritical way, but during the last fifty years we have learnt how much of what seemed like progress created long term damage to the planet, and to our health. So our idea of progress is to improve our quality of life and health and well-being, not simply to promote untrammelled economic growth. Progressive applies not just to material wealth but to human rights and scope for self-determination and involvement in the decisions that affect our lives. It is international, and implies a commitment to secure for the poorest people on the planet the safety and well-being that most of us enjoy.

We don't believe that the future is pre-determined or inevitable – but to change it, we face difficult choices. New technologies offer remarkable opportunities for a future way of life, but they could also be used to reinforce the unfair distribution of resources and life chances. Societies will need to make careful judgements and be very clear about our values and what makes life meaningful.

The dilemmas we face mean we need to seek the greatest possible consensus, and learn from many traditions. The concept of 'progressive' is not counterposed against other political traditions which have overlapping visions and goals, but against those forms of political behaviour that threaten inclusivity, openness and exchange.

For us, being a progressive means we start by believing the best in people - their ability to do amazing things, their compassion and spirit of collaboration. We know that how we behave will shape the future we create, so we strive to practise a politics of humility, empathy, generosity, tolerance and humour.

# 21ST CENTURY POLITICS

The rapid development of technology and social media offers ways of communicating with each other, and organising, that we never had before. We no longer need complicated hierarchies and bureaucracies to organise economically and politically – millions of people can consult and hold conversations with one another without anyone being the boss. Ideas and resources can be crowd-sourced, suggestions can be tested, action can be planned, without having to organise pyramids of meetings. And while political parties are trying to adjust, they are behind the curve, and we have yet to really fully learn what new technology can help us do. Used wisely, it can help us create 'horizontal' networks that engage and involve far more people than conventional party structures – and it can enable us to work together across organisational boundaries, in local communities as well as at a national level. Already, some communities are networked, so that people who need help or advice from neighbours can reach out - and campaign activity can be organised overnight.

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We need to explore how we can use new technology to set up political networks, ideas banks, open space and world café events and shared learning spaces – which bring ordinary people into the centre of discussion and solution finding. From Frome's Flatpack Democracy to Transition Towns, from Momentum to Citizens UK, these new spaces are being opened up.

# NOT JUST SLOGANS

We are not trying simply to come up with slogans and manifestos. We are engaged in the serious task of building a society that can protect our environment and create economic and social wellbeing for all our citizens. This is urgent work. Of course the building blocks of a better society are understood – better healthcare, better education, free social care, enough good and affordable housing, job security, shorter working hours, better work, secure pensions, human rights and intellectual freedom – and we know we need to change energy consumption, air quality, species protection – but we don't yet share a practical plan to achieve those things in the current global economy in ways that will win majority support.

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Closed tribal politics are dangerous, since this encourages people to huddle together only with others they already agree with. Weak arguments are not challenged, and blindspots are not identified. Parties often sustain a cosy self-reinforcing set of assumptions and refuse to accept the disconfirming evidence. A confident left-of-centre politics invites discomfort - testing, challenging and forging better solutions than the lazy ones of the past.

No political party has a monopoly on wisdom. There are probably areas where Labour has the best policies and others where the ideas of the Greens or the Liberal Democrats or SNP or Plaid Cymru might work better. We actively want to bring people with different views and different political affiliations together – because that is how we learn and shift our assumptions. Instead of specializing, we need to cross fertilise.

We recognise just how hard this will be. Our different parties have for many years been battling with each other to win votes. That will

continue. We have long memories of defeats and betrayals, which make us suspicious of each other and cynical about each other's motives. Party loyalties are still strong, and we don't want to undermine them. But we are discovering that in practice, at local level, supporters of different political parties can enjoy working and exploring ideas together. And at national level, MPs and peers from different parties are working together pragmatically on a range of issues. We are finding ways to be curious about each other's views, without feeling the need to 'convert' one another, and to accept differences without letting them become divisions. We are learning to 'sit with' the discomfort of strongly held opposing views, without storming out.

Our different political parties have built up knowledge and understanding of important social and economic issues, while academics and experts have studied social problems for decades – we don't want to discard this knowledge and rely on political 'gut instinct' or soundbites crafted for a 24-hour news media. Nor do ideas like 'false consciousness' with all the dangerous implications that "the Party knows best" have any place in modern politics. The reality is that most of us hold a complex set of views which don't fit neatly with any 'party line'. Party policies are themselves a set of compromises between different perspectives. We tend to think that most people are wise and have come to their views through a long and careful process of thought. We are curious about that process.

We recognise that different traditions and experiences bring us to politics with very different mental maps and ways of seeing – and we see this as valuable, rather than problematic. But it does mean we need conversations that can explore honestly the different lives of affluent and deprived, young and old, city and country, women and men, BAME and white, Leavers and Remainers. The people who feel excluded from power often feel excluded from and within political organisations and raise issues around identity and power inside these organisations that often make others feel uncomfortable. We need to face these squarely, and understand them. We need to talk and, more importantly, we need to listen.

That doesn't mean there will always be agreement, but we can treat each other with respect. By drawing on the creative discomfort that comes when people from different traditions work together, we can find new answers.

We aim to create a 'logic of equivalence'<sup>1</sup>, which links different movements whilst respecting their distinctive identities, so we can weave together our stories to explore the parallels between them. In this way, through sharing in the experience of others, we become aware of how the current neoliberal-dominated world constrains and diminishes us all.

## WHY NOW?

It is tempting to think that the revitalised Labour Party can win the next election and change society by introducing socialist policies at Westminster. We welcome the revival of Labour's fortune, and the new space to discuss radical and reforming ideas. But we don't believe Labour can succeed alone.

Labour did well in 2017, compared to its dismal showing in previous years, and it is easy to fool ourselves into thinking that another 2 or 3% of the vote could enable Labour to win if it just does more of the same again. But politics and electorates are now so volatile that only the nimble and the connected thrive.

And even if Labour could squeeze a few more voters, it is likely to find itself in office, but not in power. To counter the forces of the establishment against radical reform we need a powerful settled intent from millions of people, with very different lives and backgrounds. To change our society is going to take all of us working together.

In recent years the traditional class loyalties have been melting away, with many people wanting something different, without knowing what that is. Voting patterns now are based on a range of factors – age, gender, home ownership, education, nationality. Voters no longer see an automatic alignment between their own interests and any particular party – they begin to look for a story that includes them, and move tactically between parties in response to different and sometimes conflicting messages.

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While Labour spoke, for the first time, to young people and seemed to be championing their cause, there is no reason to believe that their votes will necessarily stick. The year before the

2017 General Election, research for the Fabian Society suggested that only 5 million voters now consider themselves as 'loyal Labour voters'.<sup>2</sup> In those circumstances Labour would do well to remember that switch voters can switch again. Many supporters of other parties 'lent' their votes to Labour and might not do so in other circumstances.

The Progressive Alliance worked hard in the 2017 election to secure the maximum vote for progressive parties, and were successful in creating local alliances that led to over 20 progressive candidates winning seats that would otherwise have been won by the Tories. But we could have done far more if the mainstream political parties had joined in. Indeed, there could now be a Labour-led Progressive Alliance government if progressive candidates had won just a few more of the seats where the wasted progressive vote outstripped the Tory majority. Local parties and local people were far ahead of their party leaderships. At local level, parties see the importance of working together, as Labour candidates promised support for proportional representation and Liberal Democrats vowed to stand aside in local council seats for Greens. The Green Party has understood the value of combining our efforts, and has been generous and farsighted in standing down candidates and supporting collective efforts. Other parties should follow suit.

## SO WHAT NEXT?

Societies are transformed when the majority of people begin to think and act differently. The task is to win strong, sustained public support for a different, better UK. We need to persuade a majority of people in this country that change is desirable and feasible. The legacy of communist states created a belief that there is no alternative to capitalism. The tragedy is that there are different economic models adopted by liberal democracies in other countries which are more egalitarian and sustainable than the neo-liberal model followed slavishly by the right in the UK – such as Scandinavian and northern European models – but these ideas, which are commonplace there, are seen as outrageously radical here. Other countries show how it is indeed possible, for example, to set up sovereign wealth funds to invest in a future for all, or to end carbon energy reliance.

We need to create a better understanding of the pragmatic and practical alternatives to the neo-liberal and economic nationalist models that have been dominant for too long. The loosening of old assumptions, the creation of a different story, building alliances, finding practical ways to demonstrate how things could be different – are all part of the change process – and are created in communities and localities and not just at a national level.

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The election was a brilliant time to showcase the benefits of collaboration. But elections are infrequent and they can create more heat than light. While we will work to ensure that progressive votes and campaigns are maximised in the context of an electoral system that is manifestly unjust, it is the culture, organisational structure, vision and ideas that we must now focus on.

# STARTING WITH VALUES

For that reason, we don't set out a manifesto, or a set of policies – we expect instead to create the spaces for the right conversations that can lead to those policies. Instead, we begin with some core shared beliefs:

- An ethical commitment to the most vulnerable, exploited and oppressed in society
- A belief that all humans have the strength, capacity and wisdom to play a part in shaping society and have a right to share in its benefits
- A commitment to protect the planet for future generations and for the wider world of creatures that inhabit it
- A conviction that inequality harms us all – and that a more equal society in which everyone is treated with dignity and respect would enable us all to thrive
- A recognition that all of us are smarter than any one of us and a better future will only be created collectively and democratically.

The reality is that the choices we face force us to move beyond a simple choice between socialism, the environment or liberal values. All the difficulties we face involve balancing these values and demand a new way of thinking – if we want a socialist, green and liberal future, then it must be created through dialogue and conversation between socialists, greens and liberals.

# WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO?

We will act in ways that give our values the best chance of success. Hence we build from these values to a story of how life could be different – and we live that through a different way of doing politics. That means:

- Running campaigns and, where appropriate, voting tactically in elections
- Campaigning together to change the electoral system
- Working together to plan and deliver political education that can change public assumptions and mindsets
- Working at a local level, campaigning together where there is agreement
- Creating space at all levels for dialogue and discussion to find 21st century solutions to social and environmental problems
- Bringing together politicians from different parties to explore ideas and actions and work out how to change political behaviour
- Acknowledging the complexity of the problems we face and listening respectfully to other viewpoints.

We want this paper to be the beginning of a conversation. We want to hear from both supporters and critics – if our arguments are weak, help us strengthen them. If we have left out important issues – make the case. We want to stimulate a debate about what it means to be progressive in the modern age, and how we can persuade others. Join us.

# NOTES

- 1 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Verso 1985
- 2 Andrew Harrop: Stuck: How Labour is too weak to win and too strong to die Fabian Society, 2017 p4

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