



# **The Progressive Alliance: Why Labour Needs It**

Jeremy Gilbert

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The progressive alliance, or indeed alliances, is based on a series of local and national agreements to cooperate to secure the most progressive outcome at and after the next general election. For this to happen support for such alliances must be built within and across all the progressive parties, as well as deep within civil and economic society. This is one of a series of publications exploring why the progressive parties and wider social movements should support such an alliance-building approach.

# *Labour is in perhaps its worst position in the polls since becoming a serious contender for government in the 1920s.*

We have entirely lost the bloc of Scottish MPs who were once our most reliable parliamentary ballast. The Tories have returned to the position of electoral dominance they enjoyed in the 1980s. The boundary changes which are about to deprive us of another 40 seats will skew the electoral system even more in their favour than it was then. We are threatened by UKIP in the very regions that were once considered Labour heartlands, where they may not take seats from us, but can still deprive us of majorities in constituencies where the Tories place second. The Lib Dems are resurgent and taking votes from us in areas that voted heavily for Remain.

If Brexit and the deteriorating economic situation render the government's position untenable within the next 3 years, then UKIP will have the Sun, the Daily Mail and the Express - between them attracting more regular website users than the BBC - campaigning for them as the natural alternative to the Tories. Labour will have the Mirror. If this is how things go, or simply if Brexit really happens, then Scotland will almost certainly leave the UK. Under these circumstances, nothing short of a miracle is going to produce a parliamentary majority for Labour.

That is the reality of Labour's present situation. And here is the reality of our history. The Labour Party has existed for over a century, but has only once - only one time - come from opposition to win a convincing parliamentary majority. That was in 1997. In order to secure that victory, we had to win over the Sun, the Express and many powerful players in the City of London. In order to win their support, we had to commit to implementing a programme which would never challenge their interests.

And so we spent 13 years implementing a programme which never challenged the power of the City or of News International or of the financial-

media elite in whose networks they are key nodes . This is why we did nothing to rebuild the manufacturing base in the North or the Midlands. This is why we did nothing to address the growing anxieties of those living with the legacy of decades of de-industrialisation and of Thatcher's attacks on all forms of working-class organisation.

To have given those communities a real stake in 21st century Britain, it would have been necessary to take a less relaxed view of rampant inequality than New Labour had promised to. It would have been necessary to build robust democratic institutions in localities and workplaces, of a kind which the right-wing press and the corporate elite have always hated and feared. It would have been necessary to challenge the drip-drip-drip of daily tabloid xenophobia with a convincing narrative explaining why the world was changing and who was really benefiting from it. This would have meant explaining to people that it was financial deregulation, the globalisation of capital and the deregulation of labour markets that was shutting down factories and changing the composition of communities - not the greed and dishonesty of 'migrants', 'bogus asylum seekers' (the favourite phrase used by the tabloids in the early 2000s), refugees or the EU.

Blair tried to tell people a different tale. According to his account, there was literally no alternative to globalisation and labour-market deregulation; it was up to the individual to equip themselves to respond to the demands of the global market. The role of government was simply to ensure that they understood what those demands were. But that story never rang true with anyone, except the elites whose world-view it represented. A narrative in which certain people making certain decisions was the reason why things were changing was always going to be more persuasive to most of the electorate. If we had wanted to counter the xenophobic version of this story then we would have had to tell our own version, explaining that the decisions being taken in Washington, at Davos, on Wall Street and in the City, were the cause of the changes that the public were experiencing, and being honest about what was motivating those decisions: the relentless pursuit of profit by the 1%.

But promising never to tell such a story to the British public was part of the price we had paid for electoral victory in 1997. And without us being able to,

***the only narrative that many of the public heard was the one that Paul Dacre and Rupert Murdoch wanted them to hear. In 2016, we found out how that story ends. It ends in the chaos of Brexit.***

It ends with the real threat hanging over us that a significant section of the voting public might be drifting towards support for actual fascism, or something like it. So what are we to do?

There are certainly many in the parliamentary party and the press who would like us to return to the 1990s strategy. This is entirely understandable. That was - and this bears repeating - the only time we have ever won a convincing parliamentary majority from opposition (yes, we won in 1945 - but Labour had been part of the wartime coalition government since 1940).

But of course, that wouldn't work.

***This is not 1997. In 1997 the SNP held a handful of seats, UKIP was a tiny sect, and the idea of the Greens achieving any parliamentary representation seemed a pipe dream to most UK citizens.***

***Labour could ignore not just some, but almost all, of its traditional base, focussing all of its energy on winning over swing voters in Tory-held marginals, safe in the knowledge that its existing voters had nowhere else to go.***

Indeed, even the popular press had nowhere much else to go, once the Tories had completely exhausted themselves after 18 years in government. The Party as a whole was so desperate not to lose again that it was willing to make a pact with Blairism just for a taste of electoral victory. But the terms of that victory were such that although the party was in office, it had no power to change anything fundamental. Meanwhile, 60 consecutive quarters of growth based on the sugar-rush economics of financial deregulation meant that distributional conflicts could be papered over – for a while at least. Enough people had enough access to enough cheap credit that they didn't notice real wages declining, pensions being flushed down the toilet and the ongoing privatisation of much of the public sector. Nobody worried about the people in the post-industrial regions who never got invited to the party - they had no-one to vote for anyway.

None of this holds true today, and the implications for Labour are obvious. A repeat of the New Labour manoeuvre now would not win us back a single seat in Scotland. It would see us lose seats to the Greens in Bristol and Norwich, and possibly in many other university towns. It would open the way to UKIP replacing Labour as the party of the post-industrial regions. Don't think that can't happen. Just across the channel, Le Pen's Front National has already replaced the once-mighty French Communist Party as the natural representative of miners, steel-workers, dockers and their grandchildren.

Those of us advocating a Progressive Alliance strategy for Labour are, first and foremost, responding to this stark reality.

***There is simply no realistic possibility of Labour winning a parliamentary majority within the foreseeable future.***

The only time we have ever done it, it was at the price of a decisive shift to the right which ultimately proved disastrous for the party and the country. Do we want to carry on in our comfort zone forever, accepting somewhere deep in our hearts that we are only ever destined to lose or to disappoint, that this is an incorrigibly right-wing country that we can never really change, lead or inspire? Is that really the best we can do?

## THE PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE PROPOSAL

The initial proposition of the Progressive Alliance strategy is simple. There are literally dozens of Tory-held parliamentary seats wherein the combined vote for Labour, Green, Liberal Democrat and Plaid is significantly larger than the Conservative vote. There are many key target seats for Labour where the Lib Dem vote is significantly higher than the Tory majority. There are also many constituencies where Labour has no hope of ever taking the seat but in which the Labour vote is higher than the Tory majority over the Lib Dems. Under these circumstances it makes perfect sense to try to work towards local agreements which make it more likely that sitting Conservative MPs could be beaten.

Let's be completely clear what is being proposed here. Many critics of the Progressive Alliance concept actually seem to think that it would somehow lose Labour seats, as if we were suggesting that Labour should for some reason ritually sacrifice seats which it could otherwise win, simply in order to garner favour with Liberal Democrats. This misunderstands both the proposal and the basic facts of British electoral geography.

***The fact is that there are dozens of constituencies in Britain in which Labour has absolutely no hope of winning and in most of which it has never won, even in 1997.***

The only places where we are suggesting Labour should not seriously contest are in unwinnable Tory-held seats where there is a good chance of the Liberal Democrats, or Plaid, or even the Greens winning, if we do not take votes away from them. All we are suggesting is that we stop simultaneously wasting our scarce resources and splitting the anti-Tory vote in such constituencies, concentrating our energies on the ones that we could actually win.



How exactly such arrangements would be managed is an open question - there are countless examples from around the world and many from our own history. My own view is that local parties should simply be given autonomy to respond to their own local conditions as they see fit, and that the role of the party nationally should be limited to brokering arrangements for those constituencies whose CLPs may decide not to field a candidate in their constituency. In a situation such as the recent Richmond Park by-election, where many local members did not wish to run a Labour candidate, the CLP members would be given a free vote and the party nationally would take on the role of negotiating with the other party (in this case the Liberal Democrats) in order to secure a promise to give Labour a free run in a specifically named target constituency elsewhere at the next election, in exchange for Labour's complicity in the Liberal Democrat target. Such an arrangement would leave local Labour members free to insist on contesting elections in unwinnable seats where there were compelling local reasons to do so, whatever those reasons may be. But it would also enable local members to make the decision not to waste time on an unwinnable seat and to seek out an arrangement that would benefit the party nationally while making the Tories more vulnerable locally.

What exactly a government elected under such arrangements would do is also an open question. At the least it would enact legislation to bring in proportional representation for the House of Commons, and possibly simply call another election under those arrangements. If you are one of those people who thinks that we don't need PR in this country well, okay - there is not much point reading further. If you think that it's basically fine that we have an electoral system in which UKIP can get 15% of the vote and only get one MP out of 650, then there is no need to read any more. If you are happy living in a country in which Tories can continue to carry on with the wholesale destruction of the welfare state on the basis of a mandate from about a quarter of the electorate, then I don't think that anything else I'm going to say will persuade you. Maybe you will be persuaded by the fact that first-past-the-post now works against Labour – given that the party will need 3 million more votes than the Tories to get a majority of 1 at the next election. But if you hold onto the dream of strong Labour governments in which an undemocratic electoral

system guarantees us control of the state – despite the historical record and the mathematical evidence that such occurrences are now almost impossible - then nothing will persuade you.

Whether a Progressive Alliance government would in fact seek to enact a full legislative agenda beyond legislating for PR is another question. In fact it is a separate question to the one I am mainly concerned with here. It would be a matter for discussion and for open debate further down the line. What I am mainly concerned with here is the arguments for and against the Progressive Alliance as the strategy intended primarily just to deprive the Tories of their parliamentary majority.

Of course, there is also a wider and slightly more complex argument to make in favour of the idea of a Progressive Alliance. This is particularly important for all of us who identify not just as Labour, but as members of the Labour left. We are committed not just to seeing our party win elections, but to trying to get governments elected which might actually enact progressive policies.

***By 'progressive' I mean policies which actually shift the balance of power in British society away from the wealthy elite and towards the people.***

We on the Left of Labour know better than anyone that a political party is not a homogeneous unit. We know that there are people in our own party with whom we profoundly disagree on matters of both principle and policy. From this perspective, is it also surely clear that there are social democratic and social-liberal tendencies within the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and the nationalist parties which are much closer to us in their aims and values than are many on the right of our own party.

One of the main objections which is always made to the very idea of a Progressive Alliance is that

there are reactionary and aggressively neoliberal tendencies within those other parties. Well, there are in Labour as well. This is not a reason for us to have nothing to do with other parties - in fact it is the single most obvious reason why we should be trying to find and support allies inside them who share many of our ideas and aspirations.

At its most ambitious, the concept of a Progressive Alliance is based on the idea that progressives in all parties, be they Labour or otherwise, should try to co-operate to promote a radical political agenda. This idea is a simple one, really - the idea that we should not let tribal party loyalties get in the way of us finding allies wherever we can. This is not a new idea. The welfare state as we know it only came into existence because the coalition that supported it reached from the militant coalfields of South Wales to the wood-panelled rooms in which liberal grandees such as Keynes and Beveridge spent their lives. What forms of co-operation might be possible today between radicals in different parties, and against reactionaries in all parties, is a crucial question. But it is a question for another day. My main concern here is the issue of why Labour members and supporters might entertain the idea of local electoral agreements with other parties, the largest of which is the Liberal Democrats.

## WHAT HAVE THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS EVER DONE FOR US?

By far the most common objection to any such suggestion, at least from left-wing Labour members, is that the Liberal Democrats 'are not progressive', are 'just as bad as the Tories' or 'cannot be trusted'. The first thing to say about these objections is that they fundamentally miss the point of the Progressive Alliance proposal. The point of the idea is not to validate and celebrate the progressiveness of the Liberal Democrats. I really don't care if the Liberal Democrats are not 'properly progressive', not a real left-wing party or even desperately untrustworthy. What I care about is beating the Tories. I don't want to be best friends with the Lib Dems - I just want to get rid of the Conservative Party's parliamentary majority, and do so without dragging Labour so far to the right as to become unrecognisable to most of its membership (which is what Blair did).

The objection which usually comes back when I make this point to comrades on the Labour left is that 'the Liberal Democrats are just as bad as the Tories'. Just stop for a moment and reflect on this statement. It sounds good, but it is about as logical as the collected sayings of Donald Trump. It is as stupid as saying that David Willets is as bad as Nigel Farage just because neither of them is a revolutionary socialist, or saying that there is no difference between bourgeois liberal democracy and fascism.

But here's the real kicker - even if it were true, this would make no sense as an objection. Even if it were true that underneath all the cosmetic differences the Lib Dems, the Tories, and UKIP are all just one undifferentiated mass of right-wing reaction - so what? Wouldn't it still make sense to try to divide them, to split them apart, to use them against each other in order to weaken their position? Even if the Lib Dems are as bad as the Tories - how is it better for Labour to let the Tories retain their parliamentary majority instead of forcing them to share it with the untrustworthy Lib Dems? Again it is necessary to repeat here - the Progressive Alliance proposal does not suggest that Labour should concede a single seat that it could actually win - it merely proposes that we try to work with other parties to make sure that the Tories lose as many of their seats as possible.

## BUT..THE COALITION!...

At this point in the argument, left-wing opponents of the Progressive Alliance strategy normally start to make clear what the real nature of their objection is. And what that argument basically amounts to is: we can't do any deals with the Lib Dems because... the coalition!

Let's be clear - this simply is not a logical argument. The coalition was objectionable. It would have been better if the Lib Dems had refused to do any kind of deal with the Tories. It would have been better if they had not bought into the austerity agenda which, amongst others, senior civil servants were keen to lock them into in 2010. But we should not forget this - during the negotiations which followed the 2010 election, the Labour negotiating team made no serious attempts to put together a viable coalition proposal. Labour left the Lib Dems at the altar with only one possible alternative suitor.

And if you think that what the coalition did is actually as bad as what the Tories would have done with a clear parliamentary majority, then you might want to pay closer attention to the actuality of our recent history.

For example - yes, that government raised university tuition fees, which the Liberal Democrat manifesto had promised not to do. I protested the move along with thousands of others. But the coalition also introduced a repayment model which meant that, unlike under New Labour, students didn't have to pay anything up front or repay anything until they were earning something close to the national average, and only had to pay back on a sliding scale based on income. It is highly unlikely, in fact, that either the Tories or Labour would have made that concession to traditional social democratic objectives if they had won the 2010 election outright. If you don't believe me, then just look at what Lord Browne recommended for the future of higher education (including fully marketised differential fees) in the report he wrote for the last Labour government in 2010: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf).

The Liberal Democrats didn't do in government what we on the Labour left would have done. But they didn't do what the Tories or many Blairites would have done either. The idea that we can never work

with them because they crossed some imaginary line by co-operating with the Conservatives is naive at best, and generally seems to be motivated by a childish desire for revenge more than any cool assessment of the political realities that we face.

The Liberal Democrats are what they are. They are not conservatives but centrist liberals, mild social democrats and social liberals. The Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats formed coalitions with the Tories in the 1930s and the 2010s, but they also supported minority Labour governments in the 1920s and the 1970s. In fact Labour would have been in government for even less of its history than it has been without their support on those occasions. Indeed, the Labour Party only came into existence as an effective force in British electoral politics as a result of the anti-conservative alliance and pact of 1906, which saw Labour and Liberal candidates stand down in each other's favour in key seats. And yes - the Lib Dems might go into coalition with the Conservatives again. But they are far more likely to do so if the Tories win more seats than us or if Labour walks away from them again.

## THE POLITICS OF CLASS

An objection one often hears to the idea of a Progressive Alliance is that doing deals with liberals constitutes 'crossing class lines'. This Trotskyist phrase may sound anachronistic to many in the Britain of 2017, but it raises an important question as to what the actual social interests represented by different parties and potential coalitions might be. But from this point of view, again, the idea that the Labour Party somehow expresses the pristine, unadulterated interests of the united proletariat, while the Liberal Democrats represent only the treacherous petty bourgeoisie, is ludicrous.

For one thing, it is very clear that

***the Labour Party includes significant elements which are far more closely tied to key sections of capital than are the Liberal Democrats or any of their factions.***

There are unions with close links to industries such as nuclear power, just as there are intimate cultural, ideological and monetary ties between the Blairites and key players in the finance and PR industries. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats do not represent or have the backing of any significant section of the capitalist class, having their main social base among well-paid professionals and the more socially liberal and egalitarian sections of the commercial middle classes. This is why, even from a strictly Marxist perspective, it is a nonsense to say that they are simply the same as the Tories, who are closely tied to corporate capital and have their base in the most reactionary sections of the middle class.

Now, one objection I have heard to this argument recently is that this is all true, but it is all the more reason for the Labour left to pursue a policy of trying to force out the right-wing elements from the party while determinedly refusing to work with all other parties. But again, this is an argument which makes little sense even from a classical Marxist perspective. In fact, in strictly Marxian terms, it must be clear

from any sober assessment of contemporary British society that the British working class is currently too weak, disorganised and demoralised to have any hope of mobilising autonomously against its enemies for the foreseeable future. Without some form of coalition with the more progressive sections of the middle classes at least, there is no hope of defending what remains of the social democratic settlement or challenging the Right's desire to turn Britain into the world's biggest offshore tax haven.

## WHAT IS LABOUR FOR?

Many who oppose the Progressive Alliance strategy do so because they see it as somehow threatening Labour's identity. They assume that anyone who wants Labour to work with other parties must somehow want Labour to be less like Labour and more like those other parties. In particular they assume that the only reason for wanting to pursue such a project would be to drag Labour towards the political centre-ground and away from a clear left-wing identity and objective.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Many of us who support the Progressive Alliance idea do so precisely because we want Labour to retain a clear identity as the party of organised labour, the public sector, the most progressive sections of the business community, and all who aspire to a genuine transformation of the unequal and oppressive social relations which define our society. But we are realistic in recognising that it cannot be this and also be the party of Middle England, and also the party of working class social conservatism, and all of the other things which various pundits would like Labour to be.

The New Labour experience has shown what happens when Labour tries to be the party of everyone - it ends up being the party of no-one, except the financial and media elites.

We want Labour to retain a strong radical identity while being realistic about the fact that in the Britain of 2017, a party with a strong radical identity has no hope of winning an election without co-operating with other potentially sympathetic parties.

Above all, we do not wish Labour to return to the banal centrism of the New Labour, but we also do not wish to remain a party of permanent opposition. In the current political situation, it often appears that these two options are the only ones available to us. The whole point of the Progressive Alliance proposal is to get beyond this dilemma. Our aim is not to drag Labour to the right, but to allow it to lead a progressive coalition from the left.



## **BUT THE LIBERALS DON'T LIKE US...**

Of course, this all rests on the assumption that other parties, in particular the Liberal Democrats, *would* be willing to work as part of a coalition which was led by a radical Labour Party. Again, the very fact that this could not be taken for granted is often presented as some sort of decisive proof that the Progressive Alliance could not work. It is not proof of that - it is only proof that in many ways, enacting the Progressive Alliance idea would be difficult. Well, I've got news for you: life is hard. Politics is never easy. Changing the world for the better is particularly difficult.

More than anything, politics is always about building coalitions and it is always about leadership.

Any successful political project, from left or right, must put together a large enough coalition of different interest groups to be viable and must also seek to lead that coalition in the direction that it wants to go.

The challenge for Labour under these circumstances is to develop a compelling case as to why various social groups outside of its core base should accept its leadership as part of a broad coalition of interests.

Labour has to do this whether it is trying to govern alone or as part of a progressive alliance. It would surely be far easier and more persuasive to be able to say to Greens and Liberal Democrats and progressive nationalists 'join our coalition, accept our leadership, but retain your identity as Green or Lib Dem or nationalist' than to keep saying 'become Labour or get lost'. We have enough work to do mobilising the millions of the poorest voters who do not vote at all, and who should be our natural supporters, without having to waste energy trying to capture the progressive middle-class voters from whom the Greens and Lib Dems draw most of their support.

Indeed, this is surely one of the most urgent arguments to be made in favour of the Progressive Alliance today. We stand on the brink of an existential crisis for the Left and for the organised working class. Many of the poorest and most disenfranchised voters are already on the verge of throwing in their lot with UKIP, or worse. We have an enormous challenge ahead of us if we are to have any hope of re-building bridges between those voters and Labour's current core vote, the public-

sector workers, cosmopolitan poor and committed trade-unionists of our major urban centres. The Progressive Alliance strategy would allow us to concentrate on this objective without having to waste time in constituencies like Richmond Park, where the best plausible outcome for us would indeed be a large-scale Liberal Democrat recovery, if only to weaken the Tories' local hegemony.

## **BUT THERE ISN'T A NATURAL ANTI-TORY ALLIANCE...**

A related objection to the Progressive Alliance idea made, amongst others, [by Martin Kettle](#), is that it mistakenly imagines there to be a natural divide in British politics between Tory and non-Tory. Kettle points out that in many places, Lib Dems define themselves more as anti-Labour than anti-Tory, and this is indeed a phenomenon which has been true in some localities since the 1920s. He points out also, correctly, that there are figures on the left of the Tory Party who are effectively to the left of some senior Blairites, and that as such the idea of a simple fault line dividing Tories from non-Tories is mistaken.

There are two responses to make to this. One is that, as I have already mentioned, there certainly will be localities in which the Progressive Alliance couldn't work, depending on circumstances such as who the individual MPs and candidates actually were. But this really doesn't matter. The electoral facts are such that it would only have to work in a few constituencies to completely change the political complexion of parliament.

At the same time, Kettle is quite mistaken to assume that advocates of the Progressive Alliance believe the dividing line between Tory and non-Tory to be natural and spontaneous, simply waiting to be exploited. In fact we make no such assumption. The Progressive Alliance strategy does not assume that there is already a natural divide between Tories and non-Tories. Rather, it proposes to create a strong division between Tories and UKIP on the one hand, and all other parties on the other. It proposes to offer leadership to a coalition of interests all of which would be defined by their opposition to the right-wing consensus promoted by those parties and their allies in the press.

Having said this, it is clear that there is a stark dividing line within British politics, which is defined by this most powerful and least accountable of forces in the whole political arena: the right-wing press. There is every reason for all of the parties whose positions and values do not receive adequate sympathetic coverage from the popular press to try to co-ordinate against their common enemy, whatever the differences may be both inside and between those parties. Labour is never going to be able to win a mandate for a progressive programme without directly confronting tabloid lies on doorsteps up and down the country. Don't you think we will have a better chance of succeeding in this task if members

and supporters of other parties are also engaged in it with us, and in their communities?

We are fully aware that such a coalition does not yet exist and that building it would prove challenging. This is not a reason not to try to build it. Yet time and again, critics point out to us that the Progressive Alliance does not yet exist as if that were some kind of arguments against trying to create it. I ask those critics now to stop and reflect - if that's the best argument you've got, then you should be aware that it is informed by wholly circular logic, and amounts to an argument against ever trying to make anything happen anywhere that isn't happening already.

## WHAT ABOUT THE GREENS?

So far I've mainly discussed the arguments around working, in some instances, with the Liberal Democrats. But what about the Greens? Here, the objection made from the Left is normally quite different to those made against working with the Liberal Democrats, because most left-wing Labour members accept that most Greens share much of our ideological outlook. Certainly their most prominent politician, Caroline Lucas, is a libertarian socialist with whom many Labour members would probably feel more commonality than the vast majority of the PLP. (And if you are one of those Labour right-wingers who thinks the Greens are just an irrelevant bunch of hippies then I'm not quite sure why you're still reading this, but it isn't going to persuade you).

One suggestion I have heard from individuals for whom I have immense respect goes as follows. Given that the Greens are basically a democratic socialist party with a particular set of interests and agendas, there is no need for them to exist as a separate party. What they should do is simply cease to exist as a separate party, affiliating to Labour just as the Co-operative Party does.

This argument has merit, but I think it overlooks the deep cultural and historical differences between Greens and Labour, and the compelling reasons that many people have for identifying with one party or the other. Speaking personally, there are many reasons why I might be expected to join the Greens. I'm a middle-class professional who has a strong personal, intellectual and political identification with the cultural legacy of 60s radicalism. My philosophical work involves fundamental critiques of the individualist values informing contemporary capitalist culture, on a level which has never much interested most Labour politicians, but would be considered pretty normal for a Green. I buy the Green argument that the climate crisis demands of us a very radical re-thinking of our values and our way of life. I took part in anti-roads protests in the 1990s and spent a lot of time at raves.

But those were not the defining political experiences of my life, as they were for many people that I knew. For me, that was the period I spent living on a hideously deprived council estate in West Lancashire in the first half of the 1980s (the Blakehall estate in Digmoor, Skelmersdale). At the same time my dad, with whom I spent every weekend, was

living in St Helens, a Merseyside town undergoing the closure of its mines and its factories, like so many other towns during that period. Witnessing first-hand the wholesale destruction of a 'traditional' working class community, and the desperate struggles to defend it by the brave women and men that I met there, left an indelible impression on me. I've been Labour ever since, and I think I always will be.

But I don't think I could expect others with different experiences to feel the same, and I understand why Labour feels perpetually alien to them. Labour's rather stuffy traditions, its historic debt to various strands of Christianity, its tendency to move slowly as times change, are all quite hard to take if you don't share a certain identification with its traditions. By contrast, the countercultural legacy of the Greens is an important one which deserves a political voice, and which would be very hard to merge into the more conservative traditions of the Labour Party. At the same time,

***Labour is never going to make the case for addressing climate change its central message, for complex social, cultural and political reasons that we all understand.***

And yet, objectively, that argument is surely so important that we all need there to be some people who dedicate themselves to making it as publicly and as determinedly as possible. And even for many who once did count themselves Labour, remember that after the 1980s, Labour became the party of Trident missiles, the Iraq War, 90 days detention, low taxes, privatisation and much else that any progressive will find untenable. We can hardly blame those who have sought a political home elsewhere.

For all these reasons, I am glad that a distinctive Green party exists, even though I don't want to join it.

I know that many Labour members feel similarly. It's a complicated situation. But there is no reason why we cannot pursue a politics which is as complex as our feelings about this matter and the situations to which they respond. Co-operation without merger is the healthiest response, I would suggest.

## AND WHAT ABOUT THE NATIONALISTS?

What do the proposals for a Progressive Alliance imply for Labour in Scotland, above all for our relations with the SNP?

Frankly, I don't think the answer here is complicated. We have already seen what happens when a Labour leadership rules out all possibility of co-operation with the SNP in government, as Miliband did in 2015. All this achieved was to reinforce the press narrative according to which the SNP in government would constitute some kind of unspecified existential threat to English voters. Instead all the Labour Party has to do is to be honest - we would prefer voters to elect Scottish Labour MPs and will assist Scottish Labour in putting forward a distinctive programme, but if they elect SNP MPs instead then we will work with them on any areas of policy with which we agree, and we acknowledge that there are many areas of agreement. It's not rocket science.

A deal around Home Rule might stem the tide towards independence – but it might not. My own view is that an embrace of true UK federalism, including a re-branding of the Labour Party in England as English Labour (no, not because I want to imitate the EDL - but just because it makes no sense to have Scottish Labour, Welsh Labour, and... Labour) would help Labour win votes in both Scotland and England. But in the end, Scotland will decide its own fate. Whatever happens there, good relations with the SNP will either work within the Union or to help make Scotland a progressive force on our borders. Pretending that the SNP - who are basically a mainstream European social democratic party - must be our sworn enemies just makes no logical sense at all. As for those who complain that the SNP are bourgeois nationalists and are not a proper workers' party representing the internationalist proletariat, well, guess what - neither is Labour, and it never has been, and it is never going to be.

As for Plaid Cymru - there seems to be almost no reason for Labour and them to run candidates against one another. Their main areas of strength are in traditionally otherwise Conservative constituencies, and they are committed to a programme which any 21st century socialist should approve of.

## **IF NOT US, WHO? IF NOT NOW, WHEN?**

For those who still may be sceptical about the value of the Progressive Alliance idea, here are some final thoughts. There is no question that on its own, the Progressive Alliance strategy would be unlikely to deliver radical political change. Nobody thinks it's a magic bullet. Unless it is accompanied by a mass mobilisation of street-level campaigners, it would be easily portrayed by the right-wing press as a coalition of losers and a series of shady deals between professional politicians.

But by exactly the same token, the mass mobilisation which many on the Left seem to be waiting for, is clearly never going to happen unless something dramatic changes the tone and nature of British political culture. Our mobilisations for Stoke and Copeland were impressive, but Copeland was the worst by-election result in Labour's history and Stoke should have been a landslide, but instead saw the Tory vote-share increase there. Surely this is proof enough that simply acquiring a mass membership isn't enough and isn't working.

I have heard it said that the Progressive Alliance would 'confuse' our natural supporters amongst the working class. I think the opposite. I think it would show them that we were finally serious about changing British politics and making it work for them, rather than staying in the comfortable rut of parliamentary tribalism. It would show that we were serious about formulating a plan for victory without compromising Labour's identity as the party of the public and the poor.

***The Progressive Alliance is not a short cut to rethinking what socialism means in society today and the hard decisions Labour is going to have to make to re-invent itself again.***



***Rather, it is a  
necessary but  
insufficient step  
in the process of  
Labour's renewal.***

Look around you. Corbyn's election as Labour leader has galvanised hundreds of thousands to join the party. Unfortunately that is pretty much all it has galvanised. We are still waiting for a big idea and a big event to catalyse the formation and mobilisation of a broader political movement. Corbynism has rallied the Left and built up our resources. But we are still waiting for a spark to light the fire. Labour finally calling an end to its failed electoral strategy of the past 110 years could just be that spark. Even if it weren't, at least it would show millions of frustrated voters and non-voters that we live in the same world they do - a world in which party loyalties are less important than policies and programmes; a world in which the failures of the past four decades cry out for acknowledgement and redress.

Do you honestly believe that some miracle is going to occur which will provide an alternative route to power for Labour in the foreseeable future? Even if the economy collapses under the weight of Brexit, don't you think it will be UKIP who benefit from this, unless there is a co-ordinated response involving every potentially progressive organisation and party in the country? Do you really think we can stand up to May, Murdoch and the Mail, to the City, the CBI and consumer-industrial complex all alone?

This is going to happen sooner or later. Labour is never going to be back on 44% in the opinion polls. The electorate is too fragmented for that, and above all Labour's electoral base is too fractured for it ever to happen again (as the Fabian Society's recent report makes clear - <http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Stuck-Fabian-Society-analysis-paper.pdf>). Sooner or later Labour will have to work out a way to make itself the leading element of a non-Tory coalition, rather than going it alone and always either losing or disappointing. The question is not if this will happen, but when, and under what conditions.

Would you rather it happen now, while the Left retains the leadership of the party, or in five or ten years time, when the Right is back in control? Would you rather have a Progressive Alliance, or an alliance of revanchist Blairites, Cameronites and 'Orange Book' Liberal Democrats? Because if we do not seize the initiative now, then the latter is what we are going to get, soon enough.