

PROGRESSIVE PRAGMATISM

**How can we work
together and what do
we do next?**

James Matthewson

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About the author:

James Matthewson has worked as a Parliamentary staffer, managing the communications of the Chair of the Labour Party. In addition to his career, he has been a Labour Party candidate in both internal and external elections and has held various executive positions in constituencies in his native North East. In 2020 he left his employment with the House of Commons and is now working in the charitable sector.

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About Compass and this project

Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call [45° Change](#). The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

Introduction/Prologue

Before I begin, there are some essential facts that must first be acknowledged. I am a member of the Labour Party, I consider myself to be a Democratic Socialist, a progressive and a trade unionist. I was a member of Momentum and have campaigned internally for democratisation of the Labour Party and have faithfully and dutifully voted for Momentum-directed candidates and slates in internal party elections.

My earliest political inspirations included Ernesto Che Guevara, Thomas Sankara and Tony Benn. I campaigned passionately for the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader in 2015 and more aggressively in 2016 during the subsequent coup to remove him. I have organised communications for the ex-Chairman of the Labour Party throughout the Left's predominant control of the Labour Party's leadership and democratic processes. During this time, I have rarely had a disagreement of political opinion with him or with any Westminster or party HQ colleagues. During my own campaigns for election, both internally and externally, I have stood on factional left-wing platforms and vocally supported radical and transformative political agendas, often bull-headedly and to the detriment of unity, cohesion and compromise.

This information is important, as it is nearly always the case that when somebody such as myself speaks out about issues such as these, they are (but shouldn't be) controversial. Their loyalty, ideological purity, respectability and left-wing credentials will be besmirched and thrown into doubt.

I wish this was not the case, but it is. However, I would like it to be noted from the outset that my criticisms and pleas for a change in approach and operation all come from a place that passionately desires to see progressive political movements succeed in their mission to end the many injustices of the world and to make society a fairer place.

It is often said that loyalty is the currency of politics and in my experience, this is largely correct. Loyalty still holds a place in my heart where inflexible ideology no longer does. That's why this publication is uncomfortable to write, uncomfortable but essential; like a visit to the dentist. I care about the people I have campaigned alongside and I know in my heart of hearts that even the worst offenders of factionalism and rigid political dogma in progressive circles, do so with the intention of trying to help others and to improve the world.

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What happened?

As the 2017 General Election approached, the original excitement I longed for made a temporary reappearance. As members of all persuasions felt that victory against the Tories was a real possibility, the last week of the campaign developed a real energy and sense of unity that made me believe for the first time; we really can all work together.

But it wasn't just inside the Labour Party where progressives proved that they could, at least in some places, work together. Whilst the outperforming of expectations was no doubt the result of a dynamic and energised Labour campaign, it is also important to acknowledge the effectiveness of the so-called Progressive Alliance (PA), coordinated by Compass which saw the Greens and some Liberal Democrats stand aside for the progressive candidate from the party – mostly Labour – with the best prospect of winning that particular constituency. The evidence shows that the PA made a measurable and material, albeit not decisive, difference on the outcome of the election. And this impact could have been so much greater if only there had been more alliances arranged – sixty-two seats held or gained by the Tories could have been won by a progressive candidate if there had been an across-the-board pact amongst centre-Left parties.¹

This, however, was not to be, nor was continued harmony in the Labour Party. Despite eradicating the Conservatives' majority, it was clear that they were going to cling to power and parliamentary politics was now going to be an endurance marathon. What would last longer? The fraying factions holding together the Labour opposition or the delicate supply and demand deal between Theresa May, Arlene Foster and her DUP colleagues? By the time we arrived at the finish line in 2019, Theresa May had been replaced by Boris Johnson, Brexit divisions had deepened and the momentary unity of the Labour Party's coalition of factions was a distant memory. I saw first-hand the damage the 2019 General Election campaign did to the already under-strain relationships at the heart of the Labour Party and more worryingly, what it did to the mental health and well-being of campaign and party staff, themselves constantly being attacked by different factions for, supposedly, being involved with other factions.

We had come a long way since 2015 and there was a real atmosphere of this being the last-stand of the Left. If we lost this, we lost it together, we shared responsibility and the millions in poverty and misery, the millions impacted by unethical foreign policy around the world would haunt our collective conscience forever more. The conversations I had in the lead up to the 2019 election defeat confounded my growing internal belief. It didn't matter to Mrs Jones at number 43 if you were a Trot or a Blairite, what she cared about was what she already knew

about you. Despite promoting policies I was passionate about, despite using language I was proud to use, despite being ideological pure, none of it mattered to Mrs Jones because she didn't want morally and ethically pure leadership. She wanted action and didn't believe she could get that from a political party she had seen tear itself apart publicly for nearly five years. The Tories didn't need to make the case of being the good guys, they just made the case of being the more competent or the 'best of a bad bunch'.

As the exit poll was announced, like many, I was physically and emotionally exhausted and felt like somebody had kicked me in the gut. I went from feeling unsure of a definitive result to coming within 800 votes of losing my job, on a recount. As I wallowed in the injustice of this defeat, I realised that Mrs Jones and many others like her had made their voices heard. I had tried to explain to her and hundreds of others the detailed intricacies of ethical foreign policy and the economic models used to redistribute wealth and the importance of tearing down an entire system she had been born in, lived in and would eventually die in. I was a 26-year-old standing on her doorstep telling her that the entire world she knew and loved needed to change. Meanwhile the Conservative Party had told her they were going to listen to her, not tell her that everything she knew was wrong. There really was no comparison, it was simple. That's when I realised it didn't matter what I believed, what I was fighting for or why I was doing it, all that mattered was how I did it.

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It wasn't the policies; it was the practicalities. By demanding ideological purity and employing an inflexibility on certain political views or opinions, we had consigned ourselves to irrelevance and the message had been received by voters. If they themselves didn't share our specific views on everything, they had no business voting for us. As a result, the UK's hope of a progressive government crumbled before our very eyes. Over the coming months many people voiced their opinions on this and as my own realisation set in, I thought we may eventually see an acceptance of views that were outside of the dogmatic strain of Leftism that had

dominated the party for several years. However, I was wrong and many voices were criticised for being 'treacherous', these people were 'never real socialists'. But I knew that wasn't the case. I knew that none of my beliefs had changed, just my approach.

I wanted to be a pragmatic socialist, one that acknowledged how things

worked and operated within the system that I wanted to see change. Suddenly I had developed an understanding and admiration of figures I had previously despised such as Hilary Clinton and even (god forbid) Alastair Campbell. Announcing my new found respect for these pragmatists would alienate many of my friends and colleagues on the Left of the Labour Party. It would be impossible not to upset and disappoint those closest to me and that's when I realised; that was part of the problem.

Feeling unable to openly discuss these alternative approaches was incredibly unhealthy, when did I become scared to voice my opinion? An atmosphere of fear and intolerance had taken hold of the Left and it was detrimental to the survival of our movement. Blind faith had replaced healthy debate and we had become what we initially opposed. I knew that I was out of sync with this when I could no longer admit to reading Gordon Brown's latest book for fear of being branded 'right-wing'. I couldn't work out what had changed, I had no motivation to campaign for 'the Left' in the Labour leadership election that was now underway. I couldn't unsee what I had seen. I felt a sense of realisation and relief. I didn't want to destroy capitalism, I wanted to curb its excesses. I wanted to control corporate greed and ensure everyone had the right to access strong welfare support, universal free health care and state-owned housing, paid for through a fair and balanced taxation system. If certain people believed that made me right wing, then so be it. I came to the realisation that a balance of beliefs was essential; I didn't want to live in a world of only socialists. I wanted the beliefs of right wingers and the beliefs of left wingers to be kept in check and to be challenged, scrutinised and improved at every opportunity and from every angle. Whilst I was a socialist through and through and would happily make the argument for socialist policies, I couldn't ignore the existence of many people with conservative views, both socially and economically, that are equally entitled to political representation. I also acknowledged how foolish it was to label anybody who was not on the hard Left as being 'right wing' or 'conservative'.

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Putting behind me the never-ending factionalism and partisanship gave me a new perspective and rather than slavishly devote myself to someone else's political doctrine I was going to be a pragmatist,

someone who wants to change the world and uses every tool at my disposal to do so. Rather than waste time on petty rivalries and tribalism, I would seek out the good in people and work with ideological opponents to achieve meaningful change. I have seen the impact the desire for policy purity has had on many progressive political parties' inability to win the popular debate. Many who demand this all or nothing approach to implementing progressive policies view the concept of electoral victory or success as a shameful and soulless pursuit. My involvement in politics and the thing that helped me to hold fast despite the many negative experiences has always been my faith in the ability politics has to change peoples' lives. But the lynchpin of that ability is electoral success and to talk about that openly in the presence of some self-proclaimed Lefties in the Labour Party would lead to scorn and ridicule and yet more accusations of capitalist careerism or sociopathic tendencies.

I believe it's a crisis of culture that needs to be dealt with

This inability to accept any minor infringement of a very rigid world view isn't exclusive to the Left, but because I care about progressive politics, its present and its future, I believe it's a crisis of culture that needs to be dealt with. A pattern of replication spanning decades and involving many different generations has made the Left very easy to parody, this can be seen in

popular culture with characters such as 'Wolfie' from the much-loved 80's TV show Citizen Smith cementing the public's preconception of what it means to be left-wing. That immature, argumentative, rigid and inflexible style that many have come to associate (rightly or wrongly) with the Left has created an image problem and this creates a toxic barrier when it comes to convincing people of your beliefs and your values. Playing the game and learning to box smart is not something anyone should be ashamed to do.

A Progressive Charter

Instead progressive political parties and movements must urgently start working together, wherever possible, to bring real and meaningful change to the world around us and to try and eliminate the scourge of factionalism and measure our success with achievements instead of the petty wounds we have inflicted on each other.

This is why I would like to make the case for what I call, Progressive Pragmatism. These ideas are not new but they are needed now, more than ever. Whilst it can be very challenging to make the case for unity and compromise to ardent tribalists and factionalists, I think several key steps and commitments would help like-minded progressives clear the hurdles that I have seen prevent the beginning of promising discussions in the past. The idea of a Progressive Alliance is not one I have supported in the past, believing instead that the largest

progressive party in an election should instead hold dominion over others, after it all it would be assumed that they would have the best chance of success. However, it seems to be clear now, especially in particular seats, that the only viable way to defeat the Conservatives is by coordinating the efforts of centre-Left parties and concentrating their supporters' votes towards the most electable progressive candidate. Cooperation shouldn't be a dirty word, and if we really want to create the better world we say we do then we need to be pragmatic as well as ambitious.

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I have also seen on too many occasions the core values of candidates selected by certain parties brought into question by their voting record. Of course, the party membership has certain mechanisms to hold these individuals to account but there is no higher power weighing their actions against progressive values. Obviously, there are many barriers to such schemes working but I fundamentally believe that people being open to and accepting Progressive Pragmatism would make the idea of progressive partnerships and alliances a real possibility.

I have laid out in three easy steps how such a Charter could be structured and, with the essential support of progressive politicians in the UK, could be brought into being.

Step One: Building Trust

Trust must be established across a movement of people with wide-ranging views. It goes without saying that this is something easier said than done, but I believe there are examples throughout history of movements creating lasting coalitions based on the mutual desire to see change. This would need to be achieved through the outlining of clear, concise and mutually agreeable objectives. Those parties, organisations and progressive stakeholders must make progress with this step themselves in order to begin step two, free of the many complications that could arise if unity to the larger progressive cause shatters and splits.

Step Two: Agreement of Terms

The agreement of terms and the specific circumstances of any alliance or partnership would need to be established from the start and would need to be clear to those entering into negotiations. This should ideally be reviewed on a seat-by-seat and election-by-election basis. If this is to extend to local authority level it must be mapped out with fair concessions given by each progressive investor. Parity must be given to each stakeholder. This stage is based around negotiation and this must be designed to fit the democratic processes within each party/organisation.

Step Three: Commitment

The idea of a Progressive Charter is borne out of the need for trust and the establishment of a mutual goal, objective and achievement. In too many political movements certain words or terminologies are used to describe those of certain political views. I have lost count of how many 'socialists' I have met with differing views on some of the most basic political beliefs. To ensure the success of a progressive partnership, there must be an agreed understanding of what all parties and stakeholders are striving to achieve. By outlining, in a documented pledge, the beliefs of those candidates who become signatories, this will commit those political representatives to champion progressive values and policies. The creation of such a charter would undoubtedly be one of the biggest hurdles in this project, but by keeping it as a creed or set of values, rather than specific policy positions, the actions of individuals could be measured and managed accordingly. The charter could be presented in commandment-style fashion, with Women's Rights, LGBT+ Rights, Gender Rights etc. each given a commitment e.g. the LGBT+ 'commandment' could read; "As a Labour candidate committed to the progressive partnership/alliance, I will prioritise the promotion of and give my support to furthering LGBT+ rights and ensuring the protections of LGBT+ people at home and abroad in legislation if elected".

A Progressive Alliance is just one of many ideas that could improve the chances of progressive politics in the UK. But above all, the importance of progressive pragmatism cannot be understated. I fear that without realising the errors of our ways and the damaging impact of factionalism we are doomed to a future governed by Conservative representatives. We have a responsibility to millions of people who want to live in a more progressive world but don't subscribe to one particular way of thinking. The silent majority will decide our future and instead of shouting at them, we must be willing to listen, to compromise and to make the case for progressive politics in a progressive age.

Endnotes

1. Langford, B, 2017, *All Together Now: The Progressive Alliance and the 2017 General Election*, Biteback Publishing

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