1997 THEN AND NOW

The progressive alliance that was and the one that could be

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Compass

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Compass is a 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 those with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call 45° Change. Our practical focus is a Progressive Alliance, the coalition of values, policies, parties, activists and voters which can form a new government to break the log jam of old politics and usher in a new politics for a new society.

Preface

Compass continues to publish research and analysis that tests and develops the idea of a progressive alliance – how we see it, why it's necessary and how it might work. Other publications include *We Divide, They Conquer* and *All You Need to Know About a Progressive Alliance*.

This report by Liberal Democrat, historian, writer and advisor Duncan Brack on the 25th anniversary of the 1997 General Election looks back at the last 'progressive alliance', forged by Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown after 18 years of Tory rule. What can we learn from then, and what is different now? We have been here before.

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The progressive alliance then

May 2022's local elections showed that there is an anti-Conservative majority in the UK – but not a Labour-supporting majority. The Liberal Democrats and Greens gained significant numbers of councillors; Labour leader Keir Starmer and the Liberal Democrats' Ed Davey denied accusations of electoral cooperation. But in trying to overturn the Conservative majority at the next general election, the parties should learn from the last time there was national-level cooperation against an entrenched right-wing government: the 1997 General Election.

Discussions around the possibility of a 'progressive alliance' at the next election tend to focus on one question: should the non-Conservative parties aim to agree an electoral pact, through which they stand just one anti-Tory candidate in each constituency? That is a key question, but there is another one just as important: exactly what is the arrangement for?

For each question, we can learn lessons from the 1997 election and the run-up to it.[1] By the mid-1990s, the Conservatives had won four general elections in a row; the defenestration of Margaret Thatcher in late 1990 probably saved them – narrowly – the 1992 election. But in September that year, 'Black Wednesday', which saw the pound forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, largely destroyed the Conservatives' reputation for economic competence, and the party then started to tear itself apart over British accession to the Maastricht Treaty of European Union in 1992–93. Incidents of sleaze and corruption amongst Conservative politicians became steadily more common, and the party performed increasingly badly in by-elections and local elections, against both Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

But everyone expected the Conservatives to recover by the time of the election due at the latest in 1997; an opposition victory was by no means assured. Politicians on the centre-left had been scarred by the experience of 1992, when their expectations of a narrow victory had turned into a sudden and surprise loss. Nothing should be left to doubt next time. So, after Tony Blair's election as Labour leader in 1994, he and Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown began a series of talks about political and electoral cooperation, at Ashdown's instigation.

They explored the possibility of an electoral pact, where Labour and the Liberal Democrats would field common candidates. Blair suggested this – at least for seats in south-west England, where the Lib Dems were particularly strong – in talks with Ashdown in November 1995. But as Ashdown retorted, this was 'totally impossible'. He added, 'We would waste a lot of time dividing our parties if we tried to do it. It

1 I have written about this at more length in *The Alternative, the 2016 book co-edited by Liberal Democrat Chris Bowers, Green MP Caroline Lucas and Labour MP Lisa Nandy.*

would also look like a grubby plan designed to gain power and votes for ourselves, instead of one based round principles and what was best for the country.' The Liberal Party had been through a process of seat allocation with the SDP in the Alliance of the 1980s, and it was a divisive, time-consuming and exhausting exercise even between two parties with very few policy differences.

Furthermore, too close a relationship between the two parties seemed likely to shore up the Conservative vote, as softer Tory voters might be deterred from voting Lib Dem if it would so clearly result in a Labour prime minister. As the election approached, polling in Liberal Democrat target seats showed that while those who had voted Conservative in 1992 were open to the proposition that the Liberal Democrats could participate in government with Labour should the Conservatives lose, they strongly disliked the idea that the Liberal Democrats should actively campaign for a Labour–Liberal Democrat coalition, and any hint of this would drive voters back to the Tories.

The outcome of these findings was unwelcome news to Ashdown, who had floated the idea of campaigning together to get rid of the Tories, even to the extent of appearing at joint rallies with Blair. But the polling evidence was so clear that he had to face facts; and the situation was reminiscent of what had happened in the last week of the 1992 campaign, when it was felt that speculation about the possibility of a hung parliament had driven voters back to the Tories. (The same thing happened in 2015, with the prospect of a Labour–SNP coalition the bogeyman on that occasion.)

Covert cooperation, however, was another matter. In the last few months before the election in 1997, Labour and the Lib Dems shared information on their target seats, and ensured that resources were not devoted to seats where one of them was the main challenger to the Conservatives. During the campaign they fed information to the *Mirror*, which on the eve of polling day published a list of 22 seats where, if Labour voters backed the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives would be defeated. In the event, the Liberal Democrats won 20 of them.

The parties also collaborated, in a fairly low-key way, during the election. Blair and Ashdown stayed in touch both before and during the campaign, discussed using a common language to attack the Tories, generally avoided criticising each other's parties, and focused on much the same issues in campaigning – health, education and crime (they would probably have done this anyway; these were the leading issues). The fact that the two parties' policies were different – Labour had promised to stick to Tory spending plans, the Liberal Democrats planned to raise income tax to invest in education – also helped, marking out a distinctive case for the Liberal Democrats and making it clear that cooperation did not mean a Labour takeover.

Tactical voting

In the end, the 1997 General Election saw the Conservatives suffer their worst result in a century and a half, losing a quarter of their vote and half their seats. Their losses were exaggerated by tactical voting. As the psephologists John Curtice and Michael Steed concluded, 'The scale and impact of tactical voting in the 1997 election was unprecedented.' They estimated that Labour gained between 15 and 21 seats, and the Liberal Democrats between 10 and 14, as a result of tactical switching to defeat Tory MPs.

In a close election, tactical voting on this scale would have made a major difference to the outcome. But of course, the 1997 result was not close: Labour won 419 seats, and had an overall majority over all other parties of 179. This ended any prospect of a coalition. In its place, a Joint Consultative Committee was created between the two parties to discuss issues where there was already agreement in principle, such as devolution or first-stage reform of the House of Lords (this was later extended to European issues). It is difficult to judge what, if anything, the Committee achieved, and it was largely abandoned by Charles Kennedy in the run-up to the 2001 election. But that is another story.

Could such an arrangement be repeated for the next election, in 2023 or 2024? In principle, yes. As in 1997, there are relatively few Labour–Lib Dem battlegrounds, and plenty of seats where the Liberal Democrats are more convincing challengers to the Conservatives than Labour. The Chesham & Amersham and North Shropshire by-elections show that tactical voting is well understood by the electorate. I do not know whether there was any actual agreement between the two parties' leaderships on where to allocate their resources during 2021, but the fact that Labour's campaigns in those two seats and the Lib Dems' campaigns in Batley & Spen and Old Bexley & Sidcup were not particularly high-profile undoubtedly helped.

General elections, of course, are not by-elections, and the tactical voting message is more difficult to communicate across 632 seats. But it can be done, as 1997 shows. It is likely to be more effective if it is also promoted by different sources from outside the parties, as with the *Mirror*'s piece in 1997. Lib Dem and Labour gains in the local elections in 2022 and likely 2023 should help to make it clear who the main challenger is to the Tories in particular areas. This is another lesson from 1997, where tactical voting was more widespread in areas where the Liberal Democrats had done well in local government over the preceding five years.

Electoral pacts

Nevertheless, tactical voting is a chancy thing. In 1997 Lib Dem voters proved more willing to switch to Labour than Labour voters were to the Liberal Democrats, and there were many seats where the Labour vote rose even where they were in a hopeless third place (the collapse in the Conservative vote was big enough to deliver some of them to the Liberal Democrats anyway). So, is there an argument for an electoral pact involving candidate withdrawal?

A survey released by Best for Britain in October 2020 was used to support the case for such an approach.[2] On average, polling suggested that if the Liberal Democrats did not stand a candidate, most of their vote would switch to Labour or the Greens: Labour's vote share would rise by over 40 per cent and the Conservative vote would go up by 19 per cent. If Labour did not stand a candidate, on average the Liberal Democrat vote would rise by almost 40 per cent, and the Green vote by 30 per cent, while the Conservative vote would increase by 24 per cent.

However, the survey only asked for the views of those intending to vote Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green in the first place; it did not ask how Conservative voters would respond. Polling from the 1990s suggests that in fact any such electoral pact could potentially shore up the Tory vote, encouraging wavering Conservatives to rally round the flag in the face of the opposition parties ganging up on their own. Even if it did not cause people directly to switch their votes, it could encourage lukewarm Tories to turn out who might otherwise have stayed at home.

Furthermore, we know that in many places Conservative voters are more willing to switch to the Liberal Democrats than to Labour, so the absence of a Lib Dem candidate may harm the non-Conservative cause. North Shropshire showed that in spades, where the Liberal Democrats came from third place to first. In the Batley & Spen by-election, the Lib Dem candidate attracted 1,254 votes. This was almost four times the size of Labour's majority and could – in theory – have cost Labour the seat had it been larger. But I'm willing to guess that any Lib Dem voter in the constituency who was prepared to vote tactically to keep the Tories out did so anyway (the Lib Dem vote fell by over a quarter from its 2019 level). Remaining Liberal Democrat voters were probably those who would never have supported Labour under any circumstance (for example, out of unhappiness with the local Labour council – Liberal Democrat campaigning focused on their areas of local strength) or wavering Tories who, in the absence of a Liberal Democrat alternative, might well have stuck with their original party and boosted the Tory vote.

2 'Myths-Busted: Lib Dem Voters Twice as Likely to Back Labour Before Voting Conservative', Best for Britain, 30 October 2021, https://www.bestforbritain.org/mythbustedlibdemlabour.

Most importantly, voters are not ordered battalions who political generals can march around at will; they have minds and preferences of their own. That is not to say they will not respond to clear signals – the hints dropped by Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs about the different efforts their parties were putting into the various by-elections last year certainly helped – but you cannot just add up the non-Tory votes in any one constituency and assume that they would all transfer to a single non-Tory candidate, and at the same time that the Conservative vote would stay the same. It doesn't work like that.

An alliance with purpose

So, my conclusion is that the opposition parties should not try to negotiate an electoral pact – though of course if individual local parties decide not to stand a candidate they should go ahead. I accept there are arguments either way – but whichever your choice, there is another element to the debate that is often ignored: whether the arrangement is an electoral pact or encouragement for tactical voting, what is it for?

Getting rid of the Tories, of course – but what then? Is it just to put a Labour government in power, maybe with support from the Liberal Democrats or SNP? Or is there a common agenda that can be put forward, which gives voters the feeling that there is a positive reason for casting their vote for a candidate who is not their first preference, not just the negative reason of voting against the Tories?

The negative motive is a powerful one, of course – but I would argue that the likelihood of success is greater if voters can see at least some elements of a common agenda with which they agree, so that even if they do not vote for their top-choice candidate, they will get something they want. On top of that, if they can see parties cooperating to criticise the government, it's a good sign of their potential for collaboration after the election. And this applies whatever you think about electoral pacts versus tactical voting: it reinforces the argument in either scenario.

Once again, we can draw lessons from the run-up to 1997. Instead of electoral pacts, Paddy Ashdown expressed his preference for setting out a small number of key positions on which Labour and the Liberal Democrats agreed and making it clear that they would cooperate on them in the next government. This would enable the parties to retain their distinctiveness in other areas while at the same time promoting an atmosphere of cooperation which should encourage tactical voting. Many of the discussions between Blair and Ashdown during 1995 and 1996 explored these possibilities.

Discreet cooperation began to develop between the two parliamentary

parties. The Labour and Liberal Democrat Chief Whips developed regular contacts, tried to avoid major rows between their own parties and on occasion coordinated their MPs' attacks on the Tories, helping to reinforce the impression that the government was an increasingly beleaguered minority. Blair and Ashdown also sometimes coordinated their assaults on the government at Prime Minister's Questions. Talks between small groups helped each side understand each other's positions and explore the possibilities for cooperation in Parliament short of a coalition should the Conservatives lose power.

Cook–Maclennan and a common platform

This paved the way for joint work on policy in the form of a series of talks on constitutional reform, led by Robin Cook for Labour and Robert Maclennan for the Liberal Democrats.

Starting in March 1996, a year later the group reached agreement on a package of proposals including incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law, freedom of information legislation, devolution to Scotland and Wales (and elections by proportional representation to their parliaments), an elected authority for London, removal of the hereditary peers from the House of Lords, proportional representation for the European elections, and a referendum on voting reform for Westminster elections, comprising a choice between the existing first-past-the-post system and a proportional alternative, to be agreed by a commission on voting systems. Most of this had been Liberal Democrat policy for years (or was a watered-down version of it), but some was new for Labour. Blair saw it as part of his programme of modernising the Labour Party, and the position of the constitutional modernisers within Labour, such as Cook, was thus strengthened.

The Cook–Maclennan process was public. What was discussed in secret was something much more dramatic, what Ashdown called 'the big thing': an agreement to fight the election on a common platform on at least two or three major issues. Ashdown went so far as to draft successive versions of a 'Partnership for Britain's Future', covering constitutional reform along the Cook–Maclennan lines, cleaning up politics (in the face of corruption and dishonest conduct amongst Tory MPs), the reform of welfare systems and economic policy reform, including investing in education, awarding independence to the Bank of England, and adherence to the criteria for entry into the single European currency. From July 1996 Blair and Ashdown started to talk about Liberal Democrat participation in a Labour government.

In the end, the 'big thing' was too big a step. What worried Ashdown and his colleagues was Blair's refusal to commit firmly to the introduction of

proportional representation for Westminster elections – the absolute bottom line for the Liberal Democrats, who could not be expected to tie themselves to a much bigger partner without being able to survive its eventual fall. Ashdown's diaries record in painstaking detail a long series of meetings in which Blair was first educated about what PR meant and the different systems through which it could be introduced, and then prevaricated, hinting at his own possible conversion to it (or maybe to something weaker, such as the Alternative Vote) but stressing the opposition he would face in the Parliamentary Labour Party.

In the end, policy cooperation extended only as far as the Cook–Maclennan agreement. That in itself had an impressive outcome: every one of the proposals it put forward was implemented by the Labour government (with the exception, of course, of a referendum on the voting system, and also the compromise that allowed 92 hereditary peers to remain in the Lords).

The progressive alliance now

Could similar activities take place now? In principle, yes, and preferably not just between Labour and the Liberal Democrats; the Greens, at least, could be included too. There is an obvious agenda in the shape of constitutional reform. This includes not only the unfinished business from the Cook–Maclennan agreement – proportional representation, even more essential now – but also the measures necessary to stop the flagrant abuse of power, corruption and authoritarianism that we have seen in recent years. The British constitution operates on the principle that those in positions of power are basically decent and honourable. We know now how dangerous an assumption that is.

There could be other topics on a reform and cooperation agenda: perhaps the need to build resilience against future pandemics, including the necessity to expand capacity in the NHS; the climate emergency and the necessary policy measures to achieve net zero; or reform of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. But I don't think discussions need to go this wide. There is some benefit, as demonstrated in 1997, of cooperating parties still being seen to be different, which helps to widen rather than narrow their appeal. But agreement on the basic rules of the game – how politics and government are conducted in this country – seem to me to be a good topic on which a multi-party agreement could be reached.

It is important, however, not to assume that the 1997 model can be applied without modification. The 1997 'progressive alliance' was a product of its time. It was led from the top by Blair and Ashdown. It was an era in which many centre-left politicians knew each other well; figures such as Roy Jenkins spanned the parties and gave heft to the discussions.

Now the context is different. Liberal Democrats rightly remember that Labour reneged on the PR deal after 1997. Many Labour activists have not yet forgiven the Liberal Democrat role in the 2010–15 coalition. Getting over the past is critical to any ownership of the future. Another difference is that Starmer and Davey are not Blair and Ashdown – though they have dropped encouraging hints about cross-party voting and allocating resources to seats where they can best make an impact.

The 1997 election predated social media and the widespread use of the internet. Parties then were less fragmented and more disciplined – particularly New Labour, with its strict command-and-control model aimed at delivering success from the centre.

Now, the political scene is more fractured and dispersed. The last quarter of a century has seen a massive shift in the use of technology; its impact on political thinking and organisation has been profound. Back then, the *Mirror* could publish one double-spread sheet identifying where Labour voters could vote Liberal Democrat to defeat the Tories. Today there are a multitude of tactical voting sites and campaign organisations.

The party system itself has also changed dramatically. In the 1997 election, non-Conservative parties other than Labour and the Liberal Democrats (not including Northern Ireland) attracted just 3 per cent of the vote, against 60 per cent for those two combined. Today, the SNP and the Greens, not to mention other parties, poll far more strongly, giving the Tories more chances to recycle their 'coalition of chaos' attack.

As in 1997, the Conservatives are imploding – but they may not be by the time of the next election. Like 1997, they have won four general elections in a row (at least, they emerged each time as the largest party), but the most recent, 2019, saw their biggest majority – the reverse of what happened 30 years ago when the 1992 election returned only a slim majority for John Major. This time, non-Conservatives face a much steeper electoral mountain to climb. Labour would need to win 125 seats for a majority of just one, and because first-past-the-post now skews the results so strongly to the Tories, they need a poll lead of 12 percentage points to win that narrow majority. The 56 Scottish seats they won in 1997 are almost all gone and look unlikely to return. But non-Conservative parties combined only need to win 40 seats to deny the Tories their majority. Many of those, realistically, can only be won by the Liberal Democrats.

Conclusion

There are clear lessons to be learned from 1997, but they need to be applied against this understanding of today's very different circumstances. Any level of cooperation between non-Conservative parties will need to be more fluid and organic than it was in 1997, built from the bottom up as well as the top down – hence the Compass focus on local groups and building trust and relationships over the long term. This could feature a wide range of approaches – including, possibly, local electoral agreements but, more importantly, cooperation in local campaigns and policy discussions, building a common understanding and appreciation of parties' positions and potential solutions to the challenges the UK faces in the mid-2020s.

Whatever the form a progressive alliance takes, whether it's an electoral pact or encouragement for tactical voting, the parties that form it need to give an indication to the electorate of what will be the result if they vote for it: a positive agenda of reform, not merely the negative case for getting rid of the Tories. Of course, they can point to their own election manifestos – but since it is highly unlikely that any non-Conservative government can win a majority on its own, there is a strong argument for setting out elements of a common agenda for reform. If a set of proposals can be agreed, the parties could argue for them not just during the election but in the years before, creating the case for a different and better system of government and politics, and one that gives a premium to cooperation, not endless confrontation. Which is, surely, what a progressive alliance – however it works – is all about.

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