THE PROGRESSIVE PUZZLE

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Compass

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About the Author

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About Compass

Compass is the pressure group for a Good Society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We mobilise the progressive majority of ideas, parties and movements 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 resource and policy we call 45 Degree Change.

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Introduction: Progress Stalled

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Last autumn, the ‘Global Progressive Alliance’ in London brought together world leaders including Keir Starmer, Anthony Albanese and Mark Carney. In April 2026, a ‘Global Progressive Mobilisation’ was hosted in Barcelona by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, with world leaders including Lula, Claudia Scheinbaum and Cyril Ramaphosa speaking.

Clearly the word ‘progressive’ retains its allure. But what do any of them mean by using it? A newly merged Green/Labour party, *Progressief Nederland* (English: Progressive Netherlands), describes itself as "pro-fair, pro-green, pro-social, pro-progress". But when many use the word it’s unclear what they mean, and many have lost faith that progress is even possible in a world of climate disaster, polarisation and toxic politics.

In this paper I discuss what being progressive could mean and why progressives need to renew their confidence that progress is possible, desirable and necessary through political programmes that connect present action to longer-term goals.

There are no fair winds for those who don’t know where they are going. I argue that, in recent years, progressives have lost their sense of direction and found themselves embattled, clinging to a shrinking centre-ground This has coincided with a narrowing of ambition and an emotional hollowing out that has left many parties cool, technocratic, and uninspiring, lacking both a compelling explanation of the present and any plausible roadmap for the future; instead, they have defaulted to short-termism, incumbency bias, low energy and directionless pragmatism. Meanwhile, as seen from Greece to Chile and Colombia, the occasional victories of more radical left parties unravelled when faced with the difficulties of power with high octane rhetoric evaporating in contact with uncomfortable reality.

Instead of hope, three fears have become widespread: fear of the future, as the progressive default of optimism has been replaced by a default of pessimism, an assumption that things will probably get worse; fear of the people, as trust in the public’s common sense has often been replaced by an assumption that the public are gullible, prejudiced and blind to their own interests; and fear of power, as progressive confidence in using the powers of the state to achieve public goals has been crowded out by an impulse to distrust, challenge and constrain power of any kind. Each of these fears may be rational, and healthy in moderation; but taken too far they become profoundly disabling. That’s why I argue that progressive renewal depends on connecting a picture of what’s possible a generation from now with sharp attention to current anxieties and needs. That’s the heart of the progressive puzzle: how to win the future without losing the present.

What is Progressivism?

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We need to start by recovering the core of the progressive ideal. For 200 years people across the world shared a dream that would have been unthinkable in any other era: that the world could break free from hierarchy, kings and emperors, grinding toil and poverty, and the myriad forms of oppression. That everyone could be healthier, better educated, safer, free to say what they believed, to worship as they wished, to love who they wanted: a richer idea of what it is to be human.

The progressive current of politics wove together many related ideas. One was a claim that progress is immanent in the world, which tends to become more prosperous, ethical, freer, better educated, healthier, and more aware. The expansion of shared knowledge, or what today we call collective intelligence, inevitably brought by progress was meant to overcome inequalities of sex, race and class. Many different causal mechanisms could be invoked – from evolutionary dynamics to the cumulative growth of science and technology. But it's hard to be a progressive without a sense that history is on your side, at least in the long run.

Next came the idea that the underlying dynamics of progress should be used to create societies that are fairer, more decent, less harmful to their environments, less predatory and exploitative, shaping capitalism rather than seeing it as a fact of nature. Within this view, politics becomes of vital importance. With it too came the idea that true progress must involve deepening human cooperation, which required an end to hoarding, since hoarding power leads to violence and hoarding wealth leads to waste and suffering.

Underpinning all of these, and providing confidence that change is possible, was the sense that, although human nature isn't infinitely changeable – our desires for belonging, love and self-interest are not about to disappear – it is more plastic than fixed. For this reason, we should believe in our untapped potential, and recognise that the same people can cooperate and kill, be good parents or criminals, patriots and revolutionaries, racist, sexist and violent in one generation but not in the next.

True conservatives by contrast believe that progress is a fantasy. That decay and decline are more natural. That human nature doesn't change. That inequality is unavoidable. That most humans are innately limited and stupid, and that expectations should be kept low. That cooperation in international affairs is a fool's game in a world where might is right.

What happened?

Seen in the long view over the last 150 years almost every aspect of the progressive dream has been realised, at least in part. Extreme poverty is dramatically lower; life expectancy is dramatically higher; nutrition is better and both infant mortality and murder rates are far lower.

Democracy and freedom are far more common; universal education is the norm; inequalities between men and women are far smaller (though not eliminated).

Underlying many of these trends is the remarkable arithmetic of progress. The 'great acceleration' that began in the UK in the 18th century sped up improvements in living for the first time in human history: GDP, population numbers, life expectancy, knowledge, urbanisation all shot up, as did the costs of progress, including pollution, carbon emissions, tropical forest loss and global temperatures. The picture isn't straightforward. There have been innumerable setbacks, reverses and periods of atrophy. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are now going backwards after a period of advance. Democracy is in severe recession globally and the numbers in extreme poverty could rise over the next two decades. This comes alongside social regression in the rights of women and the legality of gay sex to name just two.

But compare the 2020s to the 1920s - or for that matter the 1520s - and it's hard to hold to the traditional conservative view that there is no pattern, that history is cyclical, or that we are condemned to decline by comparison with past golden ages. Even ecology is not a simple story of decay and collapse. Many countries, including the UK and France, have seen dramatic reforestation, rewilding, sharp falls in carbon emissions, and big improvements in air and water quality.

Most of these gains were the result of political action that made widespread use of advances in science and technology. Universal education, health services, sewage systems and welfare combined with science and economic growth to transform billions of lives.

Yet only a minority in the rich countries now believe in the reality of progress. In one comprehensive survey barely 6% of Americans, and 4% of Germans and Brits, believed that all things considered the world was getting better, not worse. In France, 81% thought things were getting worse and only 3% that they were getting better.

The ideas of progress that animated so many in the 19th and 20th centuries now look partial and problematic, distorted by the dominant ideas of the era that favoured industry, scale, bureaucracy, standardisation, empire and a predatory view of nature. As a result, scepticism about progress has become the norm, taking extreme form in groups like Extinction Rebellion which predict imminent ecological apocalypse.

This scepticism reflects more than anxiety about climate. It's also partly explained by patterns of subjective status perception, and in particular the relative decline of Europe and the US compared to India, China and Africa. This is alongside the relative decline of manufacturing jobs or men's relative decline compared to women in education, jobs and

health (despite the persistence of their many structural advantages). It's close to an iron law that groups which experience relative status decline become convinced that progress is a mirage. This is also why people in the arts, and academics in the humanities and social sciences, are more likely to be 'progress sceptics' than their equivalents in science or engineering; their scepticism is in part a logical response to their sense of declining status.

But seen in the longest view, humans are part of an evolutionary dynamic that has taken the world to ever more complex life forms and ever more advanced intelligence, with much of that dynamic over the last few centuries involving a co-evolution of humans and machines, from steam engines to planes, telephones to AI. Each of these leaps of 'symbio-genesis' was difficult and sometimes traumatic. But they are an essential feature of the world we live in, and they are likely to continue. In this sense, genuine conservatism rests on a profound misreading of the world.

None of this makes everyday politics easier. Every progressive politician has to deal with the cards they are given, the circumstances they inherit, the struggles and resentments of their citizens, the path dependence of their societies, which may be in periods of retreat rather than advance. But without connecting present choices to the bigger picture, which is so often obscured by current events, politics risks becoming shallow, trapped in an eternal present.

Why progress stalled - in the public mind and in progressive politics

In recent years, many progressives gave up on progress. They decided it was too difficult; too implausible; that the best we could hope for was to defend past gains and protect institutions from assault by the Right. They became small 'c' conservatives opting for centrism and caution, aspiring to be competent managers rather than makers of change. Why? There are many reasons for this shrinking of ambition, the most obvious of which include stagnant growth and take-home pay. But there are many others. They include a brutal media environment in which any vision or hope is met with a tsunami of cynicism and scepticism; the failures of communism which sapped the left's confidence in its own visions of the future; awareness of climate catastrophe closing off any sense that the future could be better; technological utopianism, particularly from Silicon Valley, sucking oxygen from political utopianism; the plateauing of social progress in the parts of the world that used to think of themselves as the frontiers; decades of intellectual bludgeoning from the right and a retreat to critique or commentary amongst the leading intellectuals of the left.

The dynamics of recognition have also played their part. Progressives

assumed progress in equality of recognition as well as equality of reward. But in the last quarter century new inequalities of recognition have become obvious. At the extreme there's the imbalance between celebrity culture on the one hand and isolation and deaths of despair on the other. There are the imbalances of body and beauty, made far more prominent by social media. There are the imbalances of voice, as social media appear to give everyone a say, while none of the organisations with power, whether corporations or governments, actually listen.

And there's the broader trend of rising status rewards for knowledge workers, and declining recognition for many roles which once had more dignity and respect. A striking moment came in the pandemic when the US government ranked which jobs were essential and which were not. Around half of all jobs on minimum pay were deemed essential (nurses, care workers, retail, delivery), while only a tiny fraction of the highest paid were: a remarkable delinking of reward and value. The result is an unhealthy combination of social isolation, blocked opportunities, and distrust of institutions and science, that feeds fatalistic negativity and loss of confidence in progress.

But while the diagnoses are not so difficult, the prescriptions are rarer. Debate now tends to be ultra-incremental (like the work of many think tanks, keen to meet immediate needs); overly driven by opinion polls (which, taken too far, is often fatal for political movements); ultra-vague, like many recent philosophical commentaries (e.g. Michael Sandel) or the work of radical left figures such as Kohei Saito who promotes degrowth without even hinting at how it might work in practice; or much stronger on literary eloquence than strategic insight (like the writers in forums like the LRB, most broadsheet newspapers and magazines).

The enemies working against progress now

The progressives' difficulties have been sharpened by their opponents' ability to steal, adapt or borrow so many ideas they once opposed.

Conservatism was once the simple mirror of progressive ideas: committed to the status quo, hierarchy, religion, nation, the traditional family, and sceptical about either the reality or desirability of progress. But conservatism has repeatedly mutated. It learnt to accommodate liberalism and, later, social democracy and welfare states. In another current, it lurched into the revolutionary fervour of fascism, Nazism and autocratic populism. In recent decades it has drifted towards the equally revolutionary beliefs of the neocons (focused on global action) and neoliberals (focused on the economy). It has spawned today's MAGA movement. Its 'Tea Party' predecessors focused on culture and protectionism, and the far flung fringes that now include the dark enlightenment, accelerationism, QAnon, Tommy Robinson, and many who are increasingly comfortable portraying democracy as an unfortunate wrong turn. Conservatism also encompasses the extreme

anti-humanism of figures like Nick Land, or the weird views of Elon Musk and the marketing professor Gad Saad, who present empathy as the prime cause of societal suicide. It has mutated all the way to the genuinely anti-progress views of Reform's James Orr and Danny Kruger, who lament extensively about the modern world, from enlightenment to changed gender roles.

Their arguments are a reminder that every major step forward of social evolution brought a reaction, every revolution sparked counterrevolution, and every reformation sparked counter-reformation. 1815 brought the restoration of monarchy to France. The revolts of 1848 fuelled a vicious reaction as Europe's monarchs and Emperors crushed the radicals. May 1968 led to the crushing victories of De Gaulle and Nixon. But the radicals of 1848 triumphed in the end when most of their demands later became law and many of the ideas of the '*soixante-huitards*' became mainstream a few decades later. Every shift in social norms prompts some negative reactions: 'two steps forwards, one step back', as Lenin put it. But progress still happens, even if it's more often a zigzag than as a straight line, a drunkard's walk rather than a forward march, with periods of stasis followed by sudden accelerations.

This should give us confidence that the enemies of progress in the late 2020s and 2030s can be beaten. These enemies aim to usher in a plutocratic state, with no clear boundaries between politicians, big business, billionaires and commercial media. They want a passive and pacified public, distracted by social media, deceived by misinformation and easy to manipulate, while a plutocratic elite fills its pockets. This is the pattern in the US, Russia, Turkey and elsewhere;unsurprisingly, these regimes gravitate to each other as allies.

These kleptomaniacs do their best to undermine grassroots civil society, free media, the arts, and an independent judiciary. Their corruption is flagrant - extreme by the standards of the recent past - as they use power to reward their cronies, both individually through government contracts, and as a class through tax cuts. Their actions are also amplified by hostile states, particularly Russia, that fund political parties, sow division, murder dissidents and invade its neighbours. And whereas previous conservatives tended to favour law and order, stability and continuity, this group have become enemies of order, promoting conflict, street violence, and chaos. Its interests are so obviously at odds with those of the majority that they are in some ways useful enemies. They crystallise what we progressives stand for and why our values are worth defending.

What progressives got wrong

Progressives got many of the big calls right over the last 200 years. Their opinions look more convincing in retrospect than those of their main opponents – from monarchists to fascists, autocrats to theocrats.

But they also got many things wrong: the totalitarians jettisoned freedom and democracy in the name of progress. Others went equally astray in an opposite direction, wanting democracy for everything, eternally voting on every issue, which turned out to be a grim cul-de-sac, possible for short periods but never for long.

Other errors arise from the unavoidable problem of being vanguards: by definition, progressive activists are out of sync with the wider public, whose values they aim to shift (which is why empathy and nuance rather than strident dogmatism are so important: it's good to lead, but not from such a distance that people can't keep up). Some mistakes involved a failure to see tensions and trade-offs. Progressives too often thought of progress as singular – that all good things come together. But you can believe in a long arc of progress and still recognise that progress in health, prosperity and ethical awareness will often conflict, and that the task of politics is to navigate these tensions, not ignore them. These become all too apparent if you take planetary boundaries seriously and recognise the harm caused by a carbon-based industrial civilisation.

Similarly, progressives often assumed that there was a natural alignment between progress at different levels, from the local to the national and the global. But the ways in which progress affects our own lives, families, communities, nations, and the world are equally complex and, again, often misaligned. What's good for my neighbourhood may not be good for my city, and what's good for my nation may not be good for the world.

Progressive ideas can move from benign to malign if stretched too far: pure equality, pure democracy, pure accountability all go badly wrong in an impure, messy and contradictory world. The same is true of well-intentioned habits, such as 'what about-ism?', that responds to any proposal with the complaint that it misses some other consideration (e.g. answering any criticism of Russia or other countries by saying 'But what about …' some evil committed by the US). Another well-meaning yet problematic tendency is seeing all victims as heroes, where the more victimised they are the more heroic they become (which not surprisingly encourages everyone to define themselves as a victim, including the likes of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin).

There's also the over-reach of identity politics, which defines people only by their identities and differences, rather than their similarities. This often fails to tap into people's feelings of pride and patriotism, thus allowing the conservative right to 'own' the flag. This is a particularly pressing issue because any political movement that doesn't profoundly love the community and nation it seeks to lead will always be met with suspicion. Furthermore, as Amartya Sen has argued, if you define yourself too much by your race, sex, nation or religion, you 'miniaturise' yourself: progressives should want us all to contain multitudes. There's the impulse to overemphasise rights, which divides the world

into those claiming their rights and those with duties to them, which has the unhealthy side-effect of empowering lawyers over more organic political processes of negotiation. And there are the vices of magical thinking – a vice shared among all parts of the political spectrum. A common example of this magical thinking is the hope that money can be created without limit– an idea which revives itself with each generation (MMT is its current form) before being destroyed by reality. Another example is the pretense that all spending is an investment, which is deeply appealing but misleading; some is, not all.

Other problems arise from the ambiguities of progressive thought. Is it progressive to believe in the free movement of people around the world or to believe that people coming into a nation or culture should adopt its language and norms? Should communities be free to decide how open their borders should be? Is it progressive to favour global military intervention to protect citizens from their own states (the 'responsibility to protect' idea of the 2000s) or is this a recipe for new kinds of imperialism? Is tough policing progressive or conservative when poor communities are the main victims of crime? To what extent should current generations be blamed and asked to pay reparation for actions taken by people long dead? What should be the precise definitions of sex and gender and their associated rights? Should non-human nature have rights? And what should we think of those on the green left who believe the world would be better without progress, returning to a pre industrial world of small villages, without technology, cities or states, or that indigenous knowledge is inherently superior to modern knowledge? All political movements suffer comparable challenges. All risk failing to see reality as it is, succumbing to wishful thinking. What matters is whether they can mitigate these risks with sharp attention to the facts of the world.

The problem of the state and the yin/yang solution

The biggest problems of progressive politics have involved the role of the state. This may be inevitable, as they have so often seen the state as the main vehicle for their hopes. Progressives in the mid-19th century were often still quasi-anarchists, suspicious of bureaucracy in all its forms, which was associated with empire and autocracy. The English socialist tradition (of George Orwell and many others) was communitarian, tolerant, concerned with fraternity, sorority and mutuality, and suspicious of government in all its forms, while Marx thought the state would simply wither away.

But by the end of the 19th century, left-wing parties had made learned to accommodate bureaucracy: social democrats used the methods of the Prussian or British state, Lenin used the ideas of Frederick Taylor. So progressive politics in practice became interwoven with a large administrative state, which was seen as the best vehicle for reshaping society.

This was understandable at the time. How else to deliver large scale welfare, healthcare, education or regional development? And many of the most striking advances in human welfare, such as declining infant mortality or murder rates, did indeed come from using these big bureaucracies. Even capitalism turned out to depend on a big state, with the most successful market economies typically having the state control a third to a half of all economic output.

But this co-dependence on the administrative state led to a longer term failure to fully grasp the nature of the state and how easily it could come to stand against the people. Marxists had critiqued the bourgeois state as a tool of capital (which it often is), but offered little theory on how a progressive state could avoid also becoming a tool for narrow interests (as often happened).

As a result, progressive power became associated with cold administration and centralised planning. At one extreme (which included a third of the world at one point), one-party states blocked argument and dissent in the name of progress. But even the moderate, democratic traditions of the left found that their embrace of the state caused problems. Progressives rightly saw that the hoarding of power and wealth leads to violence and misery, but failed to see how dangerous it is for any state to hoard power and wealth, even if it believes it is acting in the interests of the people. They failed to see how the relatively privileged servants of the state could come to be resented. And they failed to understand that bureaucracies always tend to value process over outcomes, accreting more and more well-intentioned rules and procedures, unless these are rigorously and regularly culled (this is the important truth behind the 'abundance' arguments, though these always risk reverting to a cruder view which sees all regulation as bad, a perspective which never ends well). So, too often, progressives became the advocates of procedure, compliance, managerialism, clipboards, paperwork and digital sludge which, unsurprisingly, fellow citizens usually experience as soul-destroying.

Now we understand better that bureaucracy works best in moderation and that the industrial-age models of top-down administration, of 'pulling levers', simply don't work well in the much more interconnected systems of the 21st century; collaboration is much more likely to achieve results in everything from environment to public health to economic growth. We understand that the forms of state to which progressive politics has attached itself are seen as anti-life: literally in their approach to the natural world, but also metaphorically, through the overreliance on machines that reduce people to numbers. The greening of progressive ideas in this sense is about far more than ecology: it's part of a shift from mechanical to more biological ways of thinking. In these newer views, a national state can still play a very active role, running utilities, providing transport and guiding technology. It can also have a very direct relationship with citizens: see India's Aadhaar, Brazil's Pix payment system and Drex digital currency,

Mexico's army of officials visiting households, and China and Korea's personalised anti-poverty strategies. All are examples of states using the power of 21st century technology to interact much more directly with the citizen. But they sit alongside policies and programmes that make the most of networks, rather than relying solely on top-down pyramids.

Earlier progressives rightly saw science as a motor for progress and recognised the gains to be won from mass education. But we now understand intelligence in a much broader sense: it also applies to the workings of the economy, to everyday social life, to how everything thinks. Systems that can generate, mobilise, use and share intelligence outperform ones that cannot. Socialists implicitly assumed that technocrats and experts could do this for the people who would essentially remain passive. But right-wing critics like Friedrich Hayek were correct to see that markets and dynamic civil societies may be much smarter at spotting needs or generating solutions than technocrats.

This is why any 21st century progressive politics has to see collective intelligence as a crucial frame for renewing progressive ideas: governing in ways that make the most of all the forms of intelligence available, from data and evidence to citizen insight and algorithms. Also crucial is sharing this intelligence as widely as possible, and using it to connect systemic issues to practical action on everyday issues ('no problem too big, no task too small' as New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani puts it).

This is part of a broader approach to state reform, ensuring that power can be used for the common good, achieving what I call 'strength without weight': the ability of the state to act and solve problems without the weight of unnecessary bureaucracy and process. Such a programme of reform also requires new energy to create the new public institutions we so badly need, making the most of fresh options for organisational design, including use of stacks, platforms and meshes that should be part of the common sense of progressive movements in the late 2020s.

Civil society and democratic renewal

Progressive politics has always been about much more than state action. It was typically fuelled from the bottom: by social movements, campaigns, activism, innovation and experiment, which were often far from formal power. This is where progress becomes human, warm, practical and motivating. The role of politics is then to translate the energy of social movements into the formal tools of states: laws, programmes, entitlements and agencies. Trade unions, cooperatives, associations, clubs and mutuals all campaigned to turn their values into stronger, more universal forms through state action, and today's cauldron of innovation which stretches from radical ecology to hackers, regenerative design to patient power in health, also depends on having

governments as an ally.

We can think of these as like a yin and yang, a particle and a wave, a machine and a movement. These two sides of the progressive movement are always necessarily in tension with each other. One is direct, emotional, civic, idealistic and local. The other tends to be cool, impersonal, pragmatic, and focused on process. But each depends on the other, and a crucial skill needed in progressive governments is an ability to tap into civic energy in all its forms, to learn from the most promising social innovations - the million points of light that keep society alive - and to keep the state porous.

This yin and yang also applies to policy. In an era of social atomisation and isolation, the fostering of social solidarity, trust and mutual aid is no longer something that can just be relied on: it has to be deliberately fostered and encouraged through state action. Society depends on government just as much as government depends on society. Without careful attention – particularly helping young people to learn the habits of cooperation - the nexus of isolation, digital addiction, extremism, misogyny and hate risks getting worse.

There is strong evidence that people's trust in government depends very much on whether they feel they have a say in its decisions. This is one reason why the old idea of a government simply 'delivering' results to a grateful but passive population doesn't work anymore. Instead democracy needs to be reshaped in ways that make it easier for the people to share in decision-making, rather than being mere observers. Fortunately, there are now many building blocks for a reformed democracy, from citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting to online platforms, as well as many options for reshaping electoral systems to better reflect more fractured electorates. There are hundreds of live examples of democratic innovation and plenty of experience as to what works and why; none are panaceas, but each has its place. Increasingly, too, AI can help groups deliberate, remember, understand trade-offs, and explore potential consensus and win-wins, by providing a cognitive infrastructure wholly missing from traditional councils, boards and parliaments.

Many of these emphasise collective decision-making and action, whereas previous generations of democratic innovations were mainly about ramping up accountability and scrutiny. Their potential for helping social change should be obvious. To take just one example, in the highly individualistic USA, large majorities favour dramatically more equal income distributions than currently exist. If their intelligence could be tapped using these democratic innovations, the extraordinary waste of the billionaire class might be unimaginable.

Meanwhile, at a global level, necessity – and the survival needs of 8 billion people - mean that new forms of collective intelligence and learning will be more vital than ever. These far transcend not just

19th century ideas of might and empire (that have returned with a vengeance) but also 20th century ideas of 'rules-based international orders' (with initiatives like the Global Citizens Assembly offering an alternative to rule by ageing autocrats).

No progressive movements have yet set out a roadmap for modernising democracy over the next few decades to move us beyond the 19th century forms of parliaments, parties and periodic elections, and towards a 21st century version of 'rule by the people' that makes the most of collective intelligence. Perhaps this is because, as beneficiaries of the old system, many elected representatives struggle to see just how inadequate it is. Yet opening up more to the public – as parties have done in the past with open primaries and public engagement – is increasingly a necessity: parties that don't trust the public are unlikely to be trusted in return.

Proposals for a Progressive Future

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What the centre-left has lacked, through more than a decade of defeats and half-victories, is a coherent, forward-facing programme that speaks to the dilemmas of the present and future rather than the battles of the last century. Many have worked on some of the possible elements. In what follows I briefly sketch some possible directions, covering fourteen policy areas, each connecting an immediate challenge to a longer-term vision.

I. Promoting Truth as a Priority

It may seem eccentric to begin a policy programme with truth. But a society that cannot sustain shared standards of truth - shared methods of establishing what is real and what is fabricated - has no reliable foundation for anything else. The progressive tradition, rooted as it is in Enlightenment confidence, has always understood this at some level. The commitment to mass education, public science, and international bodies like the IPCC, all flow from a conviction that knowing more together is the precondition of doing better together.

The problem is that this commitment has not kept pace with the scale of the threat. Citizens now spend many hours each day on platforms whose governance is, in most countries, essentially absent from progressive programmes. The cognitive consequences are measurable and alarming: declining IQ scores, falling PISA results, a documented erosion in the capacity to reason and to learn. The internet has not made us smarter; in many respects it has made us considerably less so.

Classical liberalism has been part of the problem here in its near absolute commitment to freedom of expression, which has mutated, in practice, into a freedom to lie industrially and at scale. The Welsh Senedd has recognised this in its recent legislation on political lying. But no progressive parties have yet advocated spreading the 'rights to truth' that are normal in some fields, such as finance to consumer advertising. As a result, it has become easy for toxic forces – hostile states, far right parties, billionaires – to spread lies and confusion. Progressives should be unashamed champions of cognitive infrastructure: robust science education, of media literacy, of laws that penalise deliberate disinformation, and of concerted resistance to the 'cognitive warfare' conducted by authoritarian states. The right has, strangely, made itself the defender of the right to deceive. Progressives should be happy to contest that ground.

II. The Nation State, rebuilt

Reports of the nation state's death, fashionable in the 1990s, have proved premature. The national level remains the primary site of political aspiration, democratic accountability, and collective identity. This is uncomfortable for a strand of progressive politics that has sometimes treated internationalism as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, democratic sovereignty. The most successful

progressive governments of the past hundred years - from Attlee's Britain to Roosevelt's America - were robustly, unashamedly patriotic.

What is needed is not nationalism's tendency to raise walls, but statecraft's capacity to build capability. In Britain, as in several comparable democracies, state capacity has seriously atrophied– nowhere more visibly than in industrial policy and technology governance. This matters for everything from migration management to energy security, from cybersecurity to the sustainability of welfare systems designed for a demographic landscape that no longer exists. It matters crucially for helping young people navigate a fast-changing labour market– a task which doesn't fit inherited structures for education, training and jobs. Digital sovereignty (e.g. data held domestically, procurement favouring national providers, serious accountability for new concentrations of platform power) is not a nostalgic fantasy. It is a practical necessity, even if its implementation is complex and dependent on states having the deep skills to judge what is feasible.

III. Growth - but transformed

The left has long been split between those who see growth as the engine of social progress and those who regard it as the engine of ecological destruction. Both are right, which is why the binary is unhelpful. The distinction that matters is between growth in things of genuine value - knowledge, care, clean energy, the built environment - and growth that is merely destructive or predatory: financialization, planned obsolescence, the extraction of rent.

A progressive economics cultivates the former and systematically discourages the latter. It welcomes an economy that uses declining quantities of energy and materials while producing more shared knowledge. It distinguishes between the bees, who create value, and the locusts, who take it, and it works on roadmaps that reduce the toxic aspects of contemporary capitalism towards a fairer more regenerative economy, with care for the very different details in sectors as varied as energy and health, transport and food. Tax design, industrial policy, competition law: all should be oriented around these directions. Anti-growth politics, meanwhile, is not radical but reactionary. Stagnation means no new ideas, no new abundance, and an eternity of zero-sum distributional conflict.

IV. The Basics guaranteed

Progressive politics has always rested on the promise that certain essentials– a home, warmth, food, safety, clean air, the prospect of a decent livelihood– should not be subject to the lottery of the market. When governments fail to deliver on this, people do not merely vote against them: they lose faith in the project of collective action itself.

Housing, currently, represents the most conspicuous failure in this regard across much of the developed world. But there are also pressures to ensure affordability for many of the other essentials of life: floors of guaranteed, affordable provision, alongside fair minimum wages.

Here, some of the dilemmas are not new. Some recently elected progressives like Zohran Mamdani offer very traditional social democratic tax and spend policies (taxing higher to subsidise transport and housing), albeit with very contemporary messaging, and within the remit of his City Hall being unable to borrow-to-spend. Any commitment to guaranteeing the essentials requires a strong tax base and is yet another reason why a strategic approach to tax (encompassing digital, AI, carbon, wealth and land) is so vital.

But not everything concerns tax and spending. What is too rarely acknowledged is how much of the economy that underpins the essentials - the provision of care, of food, of informal support - happens outside the formal market altogether. The ONS has estimated the value of this unpaid economy in Britain at roughly £1.7 trillion, approaching 60 per cent of GDP. Recognising this is not merely a statistical curiosity; it opens entirely different ways of thinking about what economic policy is for, and who it should serve.

V. Spreading Capital

Capitalism without capitalists is, as a matter of political economy, unstable. Concentrated ownership generates concentrated grievance. The progressive tradition has long recognised this, from the Meidner plan in 1970s Sweden to the Child Trust Fund in Britain (which was partially imitated by the US Congress with its 'Money Accounts for Growth and Advancement'), to Australia's Superannuation system. Yet despite these experiments, wealth concentration has continued to intensify. New mechanisms are needed. Personal Growth Accounts, funded through wealth taxes or levies on equity values above a threshold, would give individuals a stake in the capital economy, rather than merely a wage relationship to it, alongside new sovereign funds. As AI accelerates productivity growth, the question of who owns the gains becomes urgent. New variants of pooled, collectively owned capital will prove essential to the long-term vision of an economy in which rising asset values are shared, rather than captured as windfalls for a small minority.

VI. Small Business Is Not the Enemy

The left's historical ambivalence towards markets and enterprise has proved electorally costly and intellectually incoherent. Much of the modern economy consists of the self-employed, the micro-business, the freelancer: taxi drivers and software engineers, builders and graphic designers. These people have been squeezed, systematically, by

oligopoly capitalism - by Amazon and the platform economy - and by the continuing socialisation of financial risk, while its rewards remain largely private.

Progressives would do well to champion the productive, real economy entrepreneur against the extractive power of finance. India's Open Networks for Digital Commerce offer one model of how public infrastructure can empower small traders, rather than expose them to the predations of dominant platforms. Most centre-left governments, however, continue to staff their treasuries with bankers and to instinctively favour the interests of finance over those of the productive economy. This is not merely a political failure; it is a failure of imagination.

VII. Climate: from commitment to delivery

The green transition is one of the most significant achievements of progressive politics in recent decades: the persuasion of most of the world's governments to commit, at least in principle, to decarbonisation. The challenge now is delivery - specifically, the management of transition costs in ways that do not produce a politics of reaction among those who bear them disproportionately.

There is, here, an underexploited political opportunity. A net zero strategy that visibly creates skilled employment, revalues the maintenance and repair skills that a throwaway consumer economy has marginalised, and distributes the gains equitably, is a genuinely popular programme. Recent backlashes against climate policy are real, but they are primarily backlashes against the distribution of transition costs - not against the underlying goal. Progressives should hold the line while improving the offer.

VIII. Public Services: renewal, not defence

The implicit contract at the heart of progressive governance - decent public services in exchange for fair taxation - requires both parties to hold up their end. Taxpayers cannot be expected to fund complacency. The left's instinct to defend existing provision against reform undermines public services in the long run.

There is real scope for ambition. The concept of agentic public services - a 'companion state' that helps citizens navigate the complexity of modern life, from health decisions to pension planning - represents something genuinely new.

There are also new options for local civic infrastructure: parks, libraries, transport, public spaces. These were among the great achievements of municipal progressivism, and they have been badly eroded. Their restoration and renewal - and the creation of new digital commons to replace the local media hollowed out by platform

capitalism - should be an explicit programme, not an afterthought.

IX. Entitlement and Contribution: restoring the balance

The welfare state requires both moral and fiscal renewal. The moral case is straightforward: all research confirms that people - including young children - understand fairness as dual, encompassing both need and desert. Progressives have, for a generation, emphasised needs and entitlements while neglecting contributions and responsibilities. The electorate has noticed. Solidarity depends on fair contribution as well as provision.

The fiscal challenge is equally pressing. Ageing populations, rising care needs, and the likelihood of ongoing economic disruption require not just adequate revenue but a serious long-term strategy for taxation - covering land, wealth, data, and algorithmic profits. Targeted basic income schemes - not the universal variant, which attempts a single solution to radically varied circumstances - will likely form part of any credible response. So, critically, will a welfare system updated for the realities of contemporary need: loneliness, mental illness, complex disability, the precarious rhythms of a changed labour market.

X. The Long View: future generations and demography

We live, structurally, in an era of democratic short-termism. Governments that govern for five-year electoral cycles are constitutionally unsuited to managing challenges that unfold across generations. Climate change is the most widely acknowledged of these; demography is perhaps the least adequately addressed. Birthrates in many wealthy democracies have fallen to levels that, if sustained, threaten severe intergenerational conflict, declining innovation, and fiscal crises in welfare systems designed around very different assumptions. The right has made pro-natalist noise without achieving results - Hungary's experience, spending some 6 per cent of GDP on fertility incentives while achieving a birthrate lower than its neighbours, should be instructive. Progressives need a different approach: one that supports relationship-forming, active parenting, and affordable childcare, as well as support (e.g. for IVF) for parents who struggle to have children, while also managing, sensibly, the realities of an ageing population.

Institutional innovation matters here too. Future Generations Commissioners - already established in Wales and at EU level - and constitutional provisions of the kind Italy has adopted, committing government to consider the interests of those not yet born, represent a serious attempt to address the structural bias towards the present. Progressives should champion and extend these mechanisms.

XI. Technology: shaped and guided

Artificial intelligence is shaping the most consequential redistribution of power since the internet, and, quite possibly, since industrialisation. It is beginning to transform productivity, but is also already concentrating economic and political power in ways that are profoundly inimical to progressive values. Furthermore, it has the additional capacity to deceive, distract, and amplify the worst tendencies of political culture.

Governing AI is not a single policy problem or a simple question of more or less regulation. It is better understood as a matrix of challenges - regulatory, industrial, fiscal, diplomatic - each requiring genuine expertise and each interacting with the others. Most governments are nowhere near possessing the in-house capability this demands. Building it should be an urgent priority. The alternative - a politics divided between technological winners and losers, with the losers eventually exacting their revenge by cutting the whole edifice down - is in nobody's interest, including the winners. AI also offers the potential for a productivity leap that progressives, if they have any ambitions at all for public services and living standards, should actively want.

XII. Waste: an underrated radicalism

Waste - of materials, of energy, of human potential, of public money - is one of the great unacknowledged scandals of the contemporary world. It keeps people poorer than they need to be. It poisons political culture by allowing conservatives to pose as the party of efficiency while presiding over monumental inefficiencies, and while treating the squandering of resources by the ultra-wealthy as simply the system working as intended.

Progressives have been too quick to cede this territory, implicitly accepting the charge that they are the defenders of red tape, bureaucratic inertia, and the status quo. The charge is not without foundation in some cases, which is why it sticks. A serious progressive politics would be relentlessly hostile to waste in all its forms - including in the delivery of public services, where the tolerance of inefficiency is a form of political self-sabotage.

XIII. Tolerance: as foundational

There has always been a puritanical tendency within progressive politics - a zeal for the correct line that, however well-intentioned, reproduces in miniature the intolerance it claims to oppose. This tendency needs to be named and resisted. The best of the progressive tradition is curious, capacious, and fundamentally at ease with complexity and difference. It is what made the great cities of the modern world possible: their messiness, their creativity, their capacity to absorb people from radically different backgrounds and find, eventually, a happy common life. And it's what made progressives, at their best, advocates of joy

(a tradition maintained by Demos Helsinki who promote designing 'practical paths toward societies that are fair, sustainable, and joyful').

The long-term trajectory of human societies - with many reversals and no guarantees - has been towards greater empathy, wider moral circles, and a reduced tolerance for the casual cruelties of earlier eras. Progressives should be the champions of this trajectory, not the enforcers of a new orthodoxy. Tolerance is not a concession to the other side. It is the precondition for future progress.

XIV. Against violence, everywhere

For two centuries one of the main appeals of progressive politics was to protect people from arbitrary violence at the hands of aristocrats and landlords, governments, bosses and husbands. Zero tolerance of violence should remain a central theme, and it's one that links the home and the world as we are, once again, in an age of war. Pacifism - always more of a sensibility than a strategy - is not a credible response to territorial aggression in Europe or to authoritarian states engaged in systematic psychological subversion of open societies. Governments everywhere need not just to defend themselves in the militaristic sense but to build societal resilience against hybrid warfare: cyber-attacks, disinformation, the weaponisation of dependency.

At the same time, the progressive goal of global institutions which punish and deter aggression retains its validity. We have the United Nations, the World Bank, the WHO - all flawed, contested, and indispensable. There are vast governance gaps: in space, in the oceans, in AI, in cyber conflict, in autonomous weapons. No progressive programme is complete without an appetite for the patient, unglamorous work of filling them. The core progressive insight– that cooperation at ever-larger scales is both possible and necessary– has never been more urgent.

Conclusion: Grounds for optimism in the poetry, prose and plumbing of progress

Progressive ideas are, at their root, quite simple: the claim that, thanks to expanding collective intelligence, and political systems that can share the benefits of this intelligence, there is both the potential for, and desirability of:

- More prosperity – a better quality of life
- More equality – an end to stark divides by sex, race and class
- More understanding of and intelligence about the world we are in
- More freedom to develop, explore potential, and create
- More cooperation, and higher moral and ethical standards
- More security – protection from risks of all kinds

By contrast, true conservatives believe these to be neither desirable nor feasible, while cynics and fatalists believe that although they might be desirable, they are not feasible.

In the late 2020s, at a time of worsening climate change, wars, polarisation and stark inequalities it is easy to be pessimistic. But any cursory familiarity with history confirms that people never judge correctly whether to be pessimistic or optimistic. Almost everyone is wrong, both because of the complexity of the world and because we tend to extrapolate too much from the recent past.

One illustration: fifty years ago, the idea of wicked problems became fashionable. These were intractable problems that were impossible to solve. Yet in retrospect most of them were solved or at least outgrown. The problem of overpopulation has now been succeeded by the problem of population decline. The problems of stagflation, which seemed endemic, were resolved. Crime levels fell for many decades as did extreme poverty. If nothing else this should make us wary of casual pessimism.

Looking to the future it is implausible that the deeper cause of progress – the discovery and spread of new knowledge, and collective intelligence in its widest sense – will stop. The liberal assumption that current models of representative democracy, capitalism and a rules-based world order represent the summit of human evolution, is just as implausible as the counterview,which promises a return to feudalism, great power competition and autocracy. And it is implausible that the big existential challenges of our time – climate change, falling birthrates and ubiquitous AI – will not call forth novel creative responses.

Indeed, history suggests that it is precisely these stresses and strains which force a leap to new models of social organisation, often shaped by the fundamental question of progressive politics: how to spread the benefits of progress fairly. This is one of many reasons why it's so vital to reverse the 'crisis of imagination' that has so dulled progressive politics at a time when so many of the assumptions of the previous era – around economics and fiscal policy, trade and geopolitics – no longer hold.

Yet in many countries majorities expect their children to be worse off than themselves. They have lost faith in progress. Many radical activists, rightly focused on the threats of climate change, believe the best we can do is avert disaster.

But it's not just a historical perspective that sees these views as at best partial. Any global perspective does too. The available measures show that globally this could be the one of the best eras in human history, as well as the most prosperous, the freest and the healthiest (and, if we can believe the available data, probably the happiest). This can come as a shock to left-wing thinkers and activists in northern Europe or North America, and even more to conservatives who are convinced the world is condemned to decline and decay. But it makes sense in the bigger sweep of history, as millions in China, India and across Africa are freed from empire, grinding poverty and oppression. It also explains why many nations have grand ambitions: communist China to achieve the 'Chinese Dream', a great rejuvenation; India by its centenary in 2047 to reach a $30 trillion GDP, transitioning to renewable energy for net-zero emissions, and global leadership in manufacturing and technology; the monarchical UAE, by its centenary in 2071, to be the 'best country in the world'. It's easy to be cynical, yet each has achieved extraordinary change over the last generation.

Climate catastrophe could override all of these hopes. But a more global view should give us confidence that the core ideas of progressive thought remain relevant, and can flower in surprising places, as they have in this decade from Nepal and Madagascar to South Korea and Taiwan.

Cities will play a decisive role in this next phase. Many big cities are already forging a new political economy. They shaped modern capitalism in the distant past - with guilds, trading networks, civic ideals, municipal utilities, public housing and much more. Yet in the 20th century nation states became the primary shapers of capitalism and societies through regulations, laws, public companies and welfare states. Now, however, cities tend to be stronger economically and fiscally; their cultures are more socially progressive, tolerant and ecological; they have more knowledge-based economies than surrounding areas; and more in common with other cities than wider nations. This helps explain the success of figures like Ann Hidalgo, Andy Burnham, Zohran Mamdani and many others, as well as new agendas around housing, food, net zero, and clean air. The successful ones are good at creating broad-based coalitions, rejecting the factionalism and managerialism that has done much harm in recent years. And all have shown how to overcome the fears – of the future, the people, and of power - that I mentioned earlier, which have incapacitated too many progressives.

Many centre-left political parties in the past rebuilt themselves and regained public trust, and this is, paradoxically, even more possible in

a more volatile political environment. But renewal has to be thorough: it always requires new leadership, new ideas and new ways of engaging with the public. And it always has to connect the poetry (the stories and phrases that inspire), the prose (of practical policies and programmes) and the plumbing (the institutions, tools and methods necessary for impact).

I work in an engineering department and respect the way that engineers combine bold, radical imagination with rigorous attention to practicalities. Progressive politics has unfortunately moved in an opposite direction with too little imagination and too little concern for implementation. Solving the progressive puzzle requires both.

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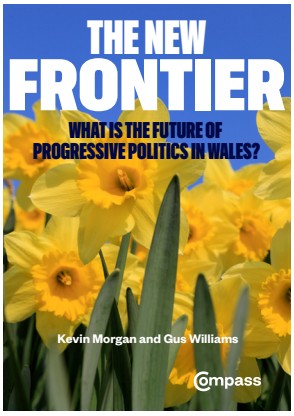
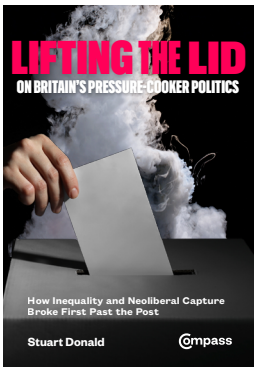


The New Frontier: What is the Future of Progressive Politics in Wales?

May 2026 is almost certain to deliver the most seismic shift Welsh politics has seen since devolution in 1999: Labour no longer being the largest party in the Senedd.

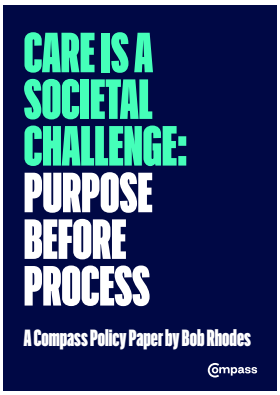
The New Frontier brings together two experts in ideas and business – Kevin Morgan (Professor of Governance and Development, Cardiff University) and Gus Williams (CEO, Chambers Wales & Member of the Welsh Industrial Development Advisory Board) – to discuss the policies and political infrastructure that progressives in Wales need to build to ensure that the moment is not spurned.



Lifting the Lid on Britain's Pressure Cooker Politics: How Inequality and Neoliberal Capture Broke First Past the Post

For too long, Britain's ills have been treated like an inevitability. We have no idea how we got here and if we only put our mind to it we can figure it out.

Drawing upon 40 years of data on regional deprivation and voting trends, Lifting the Lid draws together Margaret Thatcher's accentuated Parliamentary majorities in the 1980s, neoliberalism's direct part in creating this country's extensive regional inequalities, the Brexit vote and now the level of support we are seeing for the right-wing populists in Reform.



Care is a Societal Challenge: Purpose Before Process

This paper, authored by Bob Rhodes, provides the argument for systemic overhaul in the care sector, including oversight moved to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and impetus primarily placed in Local Authority Social Services Departments.

It is a considered, radical alternative for an issue that needs urgent attention.

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