

The Progressive Alliance:
Why the Liberal Democrats Need It
updated edition

Paul Pettinger

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The views and opinions expressed in this pamphlet are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent those of the Social Liberal Forum.

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Contents

Introduction	4
Electoral Reform	6
Liberal Voters Are Left-Leaning	7
Progressive Alliances Work	8
Remembering 1906, 1945 and 1997	9
The Coalition	11
The Liberal Democrats in the Post-Coalition Era	13
Labour's Positioning	14
The Future	15
Footnotes	17
About the Author	19

INTRODUCTION

What follows is a pamphlet I wrote in March this year in support of the Progressive Alliance campaign.¹ It was originally published by Compass (the cross-party think tank that runs the Progressive Alliance), who are very happy for the Social Liberal Forum to republish it. It formed one of a series of papers from people in different political parties, about why their fellow party members should back the Progressive Alliance (PA).

The aim was to galvanise support from those who already backed — or were curious about — the PA concept, as part of wider efforts at the next general election. We were quickly overtaken by events when the snap general election was called in early April. Despite not having sufficient time to do much of the necessary groundwork, the PA still managed to play an active part in the election, and helped to prove the concept.

Partly in reciprocation for the Greens not standing against Sarah Olney in the Richmond by-election in December 2016, local Lib Dems did not stand against Caroline Lucas in Brighton Pavilion in June 2017. Even though we didn't stand down for them in other Green target seats, they stood down for us in a dozen seats (and in other seats to the advantage of Labour). Overall, alliances of some kind were constructed in over 40 seats.² The main anti-Conservative challenger in these seats enjoyed bigger swings in their favour than those in others, which undoubtedly helped the Tories lose their majority. From a Lib Dem perspective, the PA has a convincing claim in helping us win two of our 12 seats – Westmorland and Lonsdale, and Oxford West and Abingdon.

Tim Farron was returned with a majority of just 777 votes (1.5%). The Greens did not stand in his seat, when in 2015 the Green candidate obtained 3.5% of the vote. It is likely that PA campaigners helped the Lib Dems side step the banana skin of our Leader ignominiously losing their seat. The particularly active Progressive Alliance campaign in Oxford West and Abingdon also undoubtedly helped get Layla Moran over the winning line, who took the seat from the Cons by 816 votes.

The Election became heavily polarised and something I did not foresee was that a lot of existing pro-EU Lib Dem supporters would switch to Labour during the Election campaign.³ It remains to be seen how long Labour can sustain being a vehicle for a group of largely pro-EU voters and still support a hard Brexit (especially when crunch votes on Brexit in Parliament are set to take place), but it reaffirms a need for the Lib Dems to 'pick a side'. As I warned in my paper, the Liberal Democrats failed to communicate that they were members of the progressive bloc (it instead affirmed that it would neither work with Labour or Con, which was rebranded equidistance). This made the aggressive squeeze we faced from the main parties all the tighter, and led to us getting pushed further to the side-lines.

The PA campaign had to be hastily fast-forwarded as soon as the Election was called. Much was achieved, but there is a lot more that could be. From a Lib Dem perspective, there is still untapped potential in local constituencies to better use an endorsement from the Greens and other PA campaigners (credible left wing voices) to better squeeze Labour voters. There are more seats (and clusters of seats) where we may be able to negotiate better and more effective non-aggression pacts

with Labour, and where more Green local parties may stand their candidates down. There is also more that can be done to flesh out PA campaigner's shared aims and policy objectives.

The next Election is more likely to be framed as 'getting the Tories out' as at any time since in 1997. The very large majority of our target seats outside of Scotland are still held by the Conservatives.⁴ We have a new Leader in Vince Cable who backed anti-Conservative tactical voting this year in South West London seats and throughout coalition was one of the few senior Lib Dems to keep channels open with people in Labour. We remain well placed to contribute to and gain from a Progressive Alliance. However, we should not take any of it for granted.

It is vital that we build on goodwill, friendships and trust that have been developed, as part of a long-term campaign against tribalism, in support of forging a society that is more sustainable, compassionate and equal. We need to reciprocate, especially with the Greens and, as in 1995 (when we openly ruled out working with the Conservatives), we need to make clear in the minds of voters that we are again part of the Progressive bloc.

Paul Pettinger
September 2017

ELECTORAL REFORM

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One of the most straightforward reasons Liberal Democrats should support and invest in a progressive alliance is that it presents the quickest route to electoral reform. Getting equal votes – and an electoral system where voters will enjoy more meaningful choice – would have to be part of the foundation of a progressive alliance. It can't work without it.

Many Lib Dems still lament that despite the 1997 Labour Party manifesto committing Labour to holding a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons, no referendum was held (let us ignore for the moment things Liberal Democrats promised and did not deliver on). This complaint detracts from an important precedent: all meaningful electoral reform that has been achieved over recent generations has occurred with either the support of or through the Labour Party.

Reforms by Labour include introducing proportional representation for European elections in Northern Ireland in 1979, Northern Irish Assembly elections in 1998, Scottish Parliamentary and Welsh Assembly elections in 1999, European elections in Britain in 1999, and London Assembly elections in 2000. Liberal Democrats achieved proportional representation for local elections in Scotland in 2007 in coalition with Labour at Holyrood.

In contrast, all the Conservatives have ever conceded in that time was a referendum on the Alternative Vote, which is not a proportional electoral system. It is another majoritarian system that sometimes produces even less proportional outcomes than the first-past-the-post system. The referendum was a distraction. Nick Clegg was generous to have described it as a 'miserable little compromise'.

Ensuring equal votes should be a basic prerequisite in any democracy. Liberal Democrats should be unashamedly in favour of proportional representation. But so are many in Labour and in the Scottish National Party (SNP), despite both parties profiting from the first-past-the-post system.

Labour leaders have used proportional representation as a bargaining tool, but ensuring democratic equality does not go against the values and instincts of Labour. For many people in Labour it is an essential expression of them. Many – and a growing number – also recognise a need to embrace greater pluralism, both internally for cohesion between Labour factions, and externally because the party-political landscape has become so diverse.

LIBERAL VOTERS ARE LEFT-LEANING

A second reason why Liberal Democrats should support a progressive alliance is that progressive alliances are not fixed to suit a small group of politicians, but are guided by the dynamics of multi-party politics and the priorities of liberal-minded voters.

Parties in multi-party political systems tend to assemble into two competing blocs on the national stage. One argument Nick Clegg gave for Liberal Democrats accepting coalition with the Conservatives was that coalitions tend to be more common in the kind of multi-party political systems that Liberal Democrats support. But a crucial lesson he failed to observe from those same multi-party political systems is that though parties still compete for votes with other members of their bloc (and may draw and lose support to parties in a different bloc), liberal parties rarely support different blocs in alternation.

As Lib Dem blogger and political science PhD student Nick Barlow explained in 2015, where the main parties of the left and right are not close together and cannot form governments with each other, liberal parties must 'pick a side' between left or right.⁵ Last spring in 'Why centrism doesn't work for minor parties' I argued that this is a fundamental strategic question Liberal Democrats have to answer.⁶

To do otherwise, and to aspire to alternate between supporting different governments of the left or right, leaves liberal parties open to an aggressive squeeze by other parties (as demonstrated during Liberal Democrat history). Aligning leftwards in the mid-1990s was an important factor in many of the Lib Dem gains in the 1997 election. Moving to the centre under Nick Clegg was supposed to yield some electoral dividend for the Liberal Democrats, but is one reason why by May 2015 the former Liberal Democrat vote had fragmented so dramatically.⁷

One of the strategic functions of a Liberal Party is not to get pulled apart by the orbit of other parties, and to accentuate and advance a liberal dynamic in party politics. The Liberal Democrats should seek to make the bloc it aligns with more liberal (just as other parties will want to advance their core concerns and philosophy). To best advance liberal politics Liberal Democrats should align leftwards (again) because that suits the orientation of most voters with a liberal outlook.

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Long sensed by many liberal campaigners, this has been objectively demonstrated in recent years by liberal polymath and former Cambridge MP Professor David Howarth. His analysis of British Election Study data (the gold standard of UK polling data) in 2014 – revealed in the radical Liberal publication *Liberator* – found:

*'there are very few voters in the quadrant of those who are both liberal-minded and opposed to redistribution. Nearly ten times more voters sit in the liberal-minded centre-left than on the liberal-minded economic libertarian wing.'*⁸

Further investigation of British Election Study data in 2015 on the economic views of voters with a broadly liberal outlook found 'about a fifth put themselves right of centre

on whether the government should redistribute incomes, about a fifth are centrists and three fifths are left of centre'.⁹

Some Lib Dems think that the prospect of the party-political landscape realigning around the question of Europe could present an alternative to a progressive alliance. But it offers no escape for liberals needing to find accommodation with the left. Any successful party or bloc for Remain would still operate as the main party or parties of the left because that is where the centre ground of Remain voters lean (see here the general inclination towards the economic left by Remain voters' party-political preferences¹⁰). Despite the Conservative prime minister campaigning for Remain, a clear majority of Conservative voters supported Leave, whereas a larger proportion of Labour voters supported Remain, as did even larger proportions of SNP and Green voters.

The left leaning nature of voters with a liberal outlook has two especially important implications. One is that the rejuvenating Liberal Democrats pose a renewed threat to other prospective Progressive Alliance members (we are coming after some of your votes). Rather than cannibalising each other, it increases the need for accommodation between the parties to be found. Second, if electoral reform could be achieved through some other route, *the Progressive Alliance reflects the kind of bloc that successful Liberal Democrats would likely operate within anyway.*

British Liberals are the old left of UK politics. They have a long tradition of standing up for those on the economic and geographic periphery. The Liberal Democrats are infused with aspects of Green politics. Seeking to forge a cohesive bloc of anti-Conservative parties grounded towards the liberal centre-left, and which holds particular concern for the 'Celtic fringe' and Green politics, should not prove alien to Lib Dems. It aligns with our historic and prospective voter base.

PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCES WORK

The third reason Liberal Democrats should invest in the Progressive Alliance is because historical precedent shows us it can work, not just in theory (progressive parties won most votes in 13 of the last 16 general elections), but in practice. Progressive Alliance campaigners are part of a long and successful tradition of anti-Conservative alliance building in British politics.

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During the 20th century progressives enjoyed some major victories, the standout ones being 1906, 1945 and 1997. Though overlooked, all three owe a degree of their success to cross-party working, and present useful lessons, as I set out below. More generally, however, anti-Conservatives have been divided, and the 20th century is a story of Conservative domination. To avoid a repetition, and to challenge such hegemony, we must collaborate.

REMEMBERING 1906, 1945 AND 1997

Despite major advances during the 20th century, many were delayed, constrained or pushed back in Britain by an often ruthless and pragmatic ruling Conservative Party. Conservative prime ministers led governments where the Conservatives were the largest or (as much more commonly the case) sole governing party for 57 years of the century. The Conservatives further provided the bulk of the MPs (and so were the driving force) behind governments led by leaders from other parties for a further ten years during the century (the six years of the 1916–1922 Lloyd George ministries and four years of the 1931–35 national governments led by Ramsay MacDonald). The century was dominated by the Conservatives exercising executive power. Progressives underperformed badly.

In the 1906 and 1997 general elections, however, right wing parties had their worst and second worst general election showings ever. In 1906, the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists fell to 157 MPs, despite having received over 43% of votes cast.

An important part of the rout lay with the covert electoral pact between Herbert Gladstone and Ramsay MacDonald, which sought to ensure Labour and the Liberals did not stand against each other where doing so might help a Conservative candidate win (24 of the 29 Labour Representation Committee MPs elected in 1906 stood in seats where a Liberal did not stand). The pact continued at a local level in many constituencies in the 1910 elections. The Liberals lost their majority in 1910, but were kept in power by Irish Nationalists. The radical Liberal governments formed in this period were bolstered by arrangements with Labour and Nationalists and made major achievements. They laid the foundations of the welfare state (introducing the Old Age Pension and National Insurance for waged earners), clipped the powers of the House of Lords (making passing radical legislation in future easier) and were due – before the intervention of the First World War – to implement redistributive Land Value Taxation and Irish Home Rule.

No similar pacts operated in 1945, but a significant intellectual cross-pollination was realised. Liberals were reduced to a rump in the Commons (which would have been prevented through a change to a fair electoral system). However, the work of Liberal peers Lord Keynes and Lord Beveridge (later Liberal leader in the Lords) provided much thinking that underpinned prestigious social and economic policies of the Attlee ministries, and that of the post-war consensus. The era demonstrates the potential for intellectual cohesiveness between progressives from different traditions.

Coordination between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the run up to 1997 was more collaborative and subtle than in 1906, and is often overlooked because of Labour's landslide victory, better Lib Dem targeting and the extent of Tory unpopularity. There are important lessons from 1997. One reason for the scale of Conservative losses in 1997 came as a surprise to many: the increase in tactical voting in marginal seats. For example, the Con to Lib Dem swing in seats that the Lib Dems gained usually far exceeded the 5.2% Con to Lib Dem uniform national swing. Overall, psephologists Professor John Curtice and Michael Steed calculated that in 1997 tactical voting won Labour an extra 15 to 21 seats, and the Lib Dems 10 to 14 seats.

In recent years, senior politicians from that era have been more open (in published diaries and other testimonies) about the level of coordination that existed between Labour and the Lib Dems to take better advantage of anti-Conservative sentiment and encourage tactical voting. It was achieved in a range of ways, but helped most by the parties signalling to voters – albeit often indirectly – that they were willing to work together.

Many forget that in 1995 the Liberal Democrats aligned more closely with Labour than the Tories by formally ruling out working with the Conservatives in the event of a hung Parliament.¹¹ The ability of the two parties to work together towards common aims was demonstrated further in 1996–1997 when Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan negotiated a public agreement that the two parties would support a package of constitutional reforms. The package included incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law; implementing freedom of information legislation; devolving powers to Scotland, Wales and London; and removing hereditary peers from the Lords. Some of these changes would have likely been implemented by Labour anyway, but Liberal Democrats should compare the fruitfulness of the Cook–Maclennan accord with the meagre constitutional reforms actually achieved in government by the 2010–2015 Coalition.

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In 1997, a supposed agenda for a Labour and Lib Dem coalition government was purposefully leaked to a Sunday newspaper. Both parties stood down in the constituency of Tatton in favour of the independent anti-corruption candidate Martin Bell, again publicly signalling their willingness to work together to tackle Tory sleaze. Behind the scenes, Labour figures went as far as helping the Lib Dem tactical vote operation by convincing the Mirror to publish, on the day before poll, a list of Lib Dem target seats where Labour voters could ensure sitting Conservatives were defeated if they voted Lib Dem. The article was then cited by local Lib Dem campaigners in last minute squeeze leaflets to Labour supporters.

The coordination between the two parties went far beyond just a non-aggression pact or public flirting. Between 1992 and 1997 the Lib Dems and Labour moved closer together. This made it easier for Liberal Democrats in target seats to gain soft Conservative leaning voters because the prospect of the Lib Dems propping up Labour became less worrisome for many of these voters. At the same time, Labour found it could squeeze even more former Lib Dem voters in its marginal seats against the Tories. The Lib Dems and Labour began operating in a way that was mutually beneficial – together, as a more effective progressive bloc.

After 1997 relations between the Lib Dems and Labour declined. The Labour leadership entertained more authoritarian impulses and, whatever we may feel about them, the New Labour ministries were not as radical as those formed after the 1906 and 1945 elections. However, Labour and the Lib Dems continued to operate as a left-wing bloc for the 2001 and 2005 elections, and to some extent at the 2010 election.

During this period, Labour–Lib Dem coalitions were formed in Wales (2001–2003) and in Scotland (1999–2007). Liberal Democrats should contrast the 2010–2015 Coalition with the comparative success of the eight years of coalition with Labour in Scotland. In Scotland, the Lib Dems worked with a party more attune to the liberal voter base. They maintained their level of support over successive Scottish parliamentary elections, delivering a range of key manifesto pledges, including (as mentioned earlier) the adoption of its favoured single transferable vote system of proportional representation for Scottish local elections.

Progressives sceptical about a progressive alliance should be reminded that the Lib Dem implosion at the 2015 election was largely to the advantage of the Conservatives

Progressives sceptical about a progressive alliance should be reminded that the Lib Dem implosion at the 2015 election was largely to the advantage of the Conservatives (rather than Labour, as some on the left assumed). This was partly because most Lib Dem seats had been won previously from leading a coalition of largely anti-Conservative voters to victory. Strategic advances that still remained from Labour and the Lib Dems aligning more closely from 1997 onwards were swept away in 2015. The extra seats won in 1997 by tactical voting would make a significant difference now.

THE COALITION

I have been asked to address the Liberal Democrats entering coalition with Conservatives. Progressive parties have much to do to build trust and cohesiveness with one another. One outcome of parties improving relations and aligning more closely should be Liberal Democrats again making clear – as was resolved in 1995 – that we will not prop up the Conservatives. In this spirit, progressives in other parties should recognise the limited options that Liberal Democrats faced in May 2010.

In May 2010 confidence in Gordon Brown from within his own party and the country was lacking. The New Labour project had become tired and lacked fresh thinking. I voted against the Liberal Democrats entering coalition with the Conservatives at the Lib Dem Special Conference arranged in May 2010 (party rules required the coalition to be approved by its Conference). I believed the coalition would be detrimental for both party and country. However, forming a government with Labour was not a realistic option given the electoral arithmetic. The combined number of Labour and Lib Dems MPs did not form a majority in the Commons. Their total was one less than the combined number of Conservative and DUP MPs. Any kind of joint working between Labour and the Lib Dems would have required very strict discipline, along with the support of other minor parties, and the prospect of this happening was effectively blackballed before and during Lib Dem and Labour negotiations with a succession of Labour MPs – including John Reid, David Blunkett and Diane Abbott – publicly opposing a joint arrangement. There was no similar chorus of public discontent and disunity from Conservatives.

Many Lib Dems were anxious about the sharp increase in the cost of borrowing that the Greek government experienced during April and May 2010 – though the positions of Greece and the UK were very different – and some held misguided fears that the UK government could soon endure a similar experience. Many Lib Dems (some with the prompting of senior civil servants) in May 2010 thought that entering coalition – and so guaranteeing the UK had a strong government – was in the national interest. Events in May 2010 conspired to forge a Lib Dem and Conservative working arrangement as the more practical outcome, and for many Lib Dems, coalition then appeared the best arrangement in a difficult situation.

Without wishing to over-romanticise the liberal tradition that the official Liberal Party and later Liberal Democrats came to embody, 2010 was the first time that the official Liberal Party or Lib Dems entered into a formal working arrangement with the Conservatives at Westminster outside war time or the national governments of the 1930s. By contrast, the official Liberal Party supported Labour on three occasions during the 20th century.¹² By historical standards, entering coalition with the Conservatives in 2010 was relatively unusual. That the Lib Dems also had their most right-wing leader in living memory proved unfortunate.

Though the Lib Dems had been operating as a left-wing party since the mid-1990s, its positioning was sometimes inferred. The subtlety helped a group of so called Orange Book Liberal Democrats to forge a new more right-wing identity for the Lib Dems, especially once many of its leading advocates were further empowered from entering government.¹³

Though many on the left were shocked and angered by the Lib Dems entering coalition with the Conservatives, Lib Dem poll ratings did not immediately collapse. Instead they imploded over the following six months as the Lib Dems were seen to capitulate on a range of key centre-left positions. In a host of policy areas, government policy was not presented as an inevitable consequence of coalition, but instead as now the Lib Dem position.

Before the 2010 general election, the party and its leader had campaigned against Conservative plans for early cuts in public spending, but by summer 2010 Nick Clegg claimed there was no alternative to austerity.¹⁴ Through the 2000s the party criticised inequality that persisted under New Labour, but in coalition defended a rise in VAT and decrease in the top rate of income tax brought in by the June 2010 Budget. Despite the Lib Dems making tuition fees a signature policy over three elections in a row, and in spring 2010 parliamentary candidates pledging en masse that they would never vote to increase them, a group of Orange Book Lib Dems continued to try and find a way of usurping the commitment. Most definingly, by December 2010 Lib Dem MPs were whipped to vote for fees in England to be tripled. This flew in the face of the 'say goodbye to broken promises' platform that Nick Clegg had stood on in May 2010.¹⁵ The Clegg leadership promptly began repositioning the party as centrist and as aspiring to alternate between supporting governments of the left or right.

The Lib Dems that voters got had not been on the ballot paper. Some Lib Dems were overeager in their desire to present to the public a united and therefore secure government. In some cases, however, a clique of right leaning Lib Dems exploited the temporary freedom from mainstream Lib Dem thought that coalition with the Conservatives brought them. They did precious little to prevent what was always a

risky undertaking for the party and country from besmirching the Party's reputation and – in many respects – betraying the trust of former Lib Dem voters.

Lib Dems should recognise that coalition with the Conservatives could never have been a long-term arrangement.

Lib Dems should recognise that coalition with the Conservatives could never have been a long-term arrangement. The party should have changed direction before the electorate made that a certainty in May 2015. Lib Dems failed to display the necessary will to change. Instead a group of Lib Dems in senior positions managed (often through a mixture of deference, patronage and bamboozlement) to ensure other interests and preferences were subordinated to theirs. For a party born from a desire to stop the abuse of power, this period should present some awkward lessons for the future. More generally, for Progressive Alliance campaigners it highlights the importance for parties that work together to all demonstrate how they are delivering, not for their leaders, but their voters.

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN THE POST-COALITION ERA

One reason progressives in other parties should look at ways to work with Lib Dems, despite the Coalition, is that the Liberal Democrats are still left leaning and have not been permanently realigned. Achievements Lib Dems are most proud about from serving in government are generally ones that most progressives also welcome. These include introducing same sex marriage and the pupil premium, expanding apprenticeships, introducing the auto enrolment contributory pension scheme, scrapping ID cards and increasing the income tax threshold. In contrast, many of those Coalition policies that progressives found most controversial – and which Orange Book Liberal Democrats championed in opposition to Lib Dem policy – have been found wanting.

the Liberal Democrats are still left leaning

The Coalition's marketisation of key public services, such as in health (despite the Coalition Agreement ruling out NHS reorganisation) and schools, has not led to greater efficiency. As standard Keynesian analysis predicted, the Coalition did not ensure solvency, but stagnation – as Mark Carney noted in December 2016, the UK is experiencing its first lost decade since the 1860s.¹⁶ Orange Book Liberal Democrats have not won big arguments that have led to Lib Dems being intellectually reoriented. Most social liberals did not take the advice of Nick Clegg's head of strategy to leave and join Labour.¹⁷

The political blog Lib Dem Voice (LDV) periodically carries out surveys of Lib Dem members. Though completed by a self-selecting sample, they are the only mass surveys of certified Lib Dem members where results are made freely available. Despite some left-wing attrition during the Coalition years, LDV surveys continued to find Lib Dem membership skewed towards the left. When in October 2014 LDV last surveyed members' views on whether they favoured working with Labour or

Conservatives, 51% preferred a post-2015 general election alliance with Labour, and only 18% preferred a continuing pact of some kind with the Tories.¹⁸ In that survey 10% self-defined as centre-right, 25% as centrist and 49% as centre-left.¹⁹

The Lib Dems are changing quite quickly. In July 2015 the party elected a new leader, Tim Farron, who did not serve in the Coalition and who voted against the Coalition Government on issues such as increasing tuition fees and introducing the bedroom tax. More than one-third (40%) of the party's current members have joined since the EU referendum. Most new members are horrified at the nativism driving Tory ambitions for a Brexit Britain.

LDV carried out another poll in September 2016, before the Lib Dem Conference, asking members: 'Do you think that Labour, SNP, Greens, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats should work together to oppose the Conservative government in a type of progressive alliance?' Although there is a great deal more work and bridge building to do in support of a progressive alliance, and Lib Dem members were cautious about the nature of cross-party working, 54.5% of respondents said 'yes'.

Despite the Lib Dems' low point at the 2015 election, the party is still well positioned to contribute to an anti-Conservative challenge. Of the Lib Dems' 54 second places in England and Wales in the May 2015 general election, the Lib Dems were second to the Tories in 45 of them. In many of these 45, Labour and the Greens were placed behind the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

Liberal Democrats remain the best placed progressive challengers to the Conservatives in many rural and suburban parts of the country. The left leaning and rejuvenating Liberal Democrats provide a headache for other progressive parties. Rather than chasing many of the same voters and cannibalising one another, it is crucial that accommodation between progressives should be found. If we don't we will gift the Conservatives the opportunity to unpick what remains of the post-war economic, European and human rights settlement, and inflict their vision for a xenophobic tax haven UK.

LABOUR'S POSITIONING

Labour is currently the biggest progressive party, and its position has major implications for the standing of the rest of the bloc. One of two big impediments to cohesiveness within the bloc is Labour's lack of unity, which is trashing its credibility with many voters. Liberal Democrats would be damaged were they to align more closely with Labour right now. They would be punished, not rewarded, in most marginal seats. The other big impediment, particularly (though not just) from a Lib Dem perspective, is Labour's position on Europe.

British Election Study data from 2016 suggests, the way people voted in the EU referendum is already a more important part of the political identity of the average voter than party-political affiliation.²⁰ Europe is a generation defining issue that is not going away any time soon. As analysis from 2016 by the political scientist Eric Kaufmann highlights, the EU referendum has played to a personality dimension and

divided voters between those who generally support an ordered society and those who generally support an open society.²¹ The EU referendum has served to re-accentuate the liberal– authoritarian axis in British politics.

Europe is more difficult for Labour than other progressive parties, as the issue cuts more deeply into its traditional voter base. However, just as Lib Dems should ‘pick a side’ and rule out supporting the economic right, so Labour should ‘pick a side’ and not cross the open–closed society divide.

Most of Labour’s 2015 voters – including in seats that supported Leave – support Remain. At the moment Labour is supporting authoritarians in their endeavours for Brexit Britain and losing votes for it. As Professor John Curtice noted in March, Labour’s attempts to stave off UKIP are only losing the party votes to the Lib Dems.²²

Brexit is such a divisive issue that attempting to please Leave and Remain voters is not going to work. Just as the Lib Dems were squeezed from the left and right when they were repositioned as centrist under Nick Clegg, so Labour risks being squeezed by other parties if it doesn’t take a side. It should seek greater accommodation with most of its voters and the rest of the progressive bloc on Europe. Finding common ground with the Lib Dems on electoral reform, as well as Europe, will make Labour obvious allies for Lib Dems over the Conservatives.

THE FUTURE

History does not repeat itself but it often rhymes. To dismiss the merits of a Progressive Alliance is complacent, not just in rejecting pressing strategic challenges of today, but also in overlooking the historical precedent of progressives’ greatest successes. It is vital that Progressive Alliance campaigners should not let tribalist and conservative elements in our respective parties divert our generation’s attention from these lessons. We should pursue the most meaningful and realistic road to influence and victory. *If the 20th century taught us anything, it is that when progressives work together we achieve major successes.* We will underperform, or more likely fail, if we do not.

If the 20th century taught us anything, it is that when progressives work together we achieve major successes

Progressives have much to do to build trust, relationships and cohesion within the bloc. As in the run up to 1997, progressive parties should align more closely to one another and the Lib Dems should rule out supporting the Conservatives altogether.

May 2015 highlights ongoing risks of doing nothing. In 2015 the Conservatives exploited to much effect distrust of the SNP and a perceived discord between the SNP and Labour, to scare lots of English voters into voting Conservative in key seats. The experiences of 1997 and 2015 expose as fallacious the argument that Liberal Democrats must move rightwards to beat the Conservatives. The 1997 general election result showed that when swing voters are provided with a credible

and cohesive progressive bloc and there is better coordination of anti-Conservative voters more all-important first places can be obtained.

As 1906 showed, if progressives can get as far as making electoral pacts where parties stand down candidates (though in future organised in more openly collaborative and transparent ways than in 1906) they can be devastatingly effective. Such pacts need only be a one-time affair. Introducing proportional representation will remove the incentive for standing down candidates and tactical voting, and provide voters with far greater choice in future.

Lib Dems have already gained an MP, thanks to the historic decision of the Green Party of England and Wales to stand down in favour of the Lib Dems at the recent Richmond Park byelection. This, combined with calls from leading Labour figures for Labour also to stand down, helped recreate the conditions where Lib Dems were again able to take the seat by leading an anti-Conservative majority to victory.²³ We take this for granted at our peril. Progressives in other parties have taken personal risks in supporting us in Richmond. Gaining the seat has given the Lib Dems a valuable boost in credibility. Trust has been re-invested in us, and we should be generous and reciprocate. We also have much to offer to Britain's successful tradition of anti-Conservative alliance building. Liberalism is an emancipatory philosophy. Liberals have been fighting the Conservatives for longer than Labour, Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the two Green parties²⁴ and the Women's Equality Party have. The Lib Dems remain well positioned to take seats from the Conservatives.

We should seek to break the cycle of periodic cooperation that otherwise allows for long periods of Conservative domination.

More generally, if progressives are to avoid the Conservatives being as successful in the 21st century as they were in the 20th century, it is vital that they learn the lessons of history. We should seek to break the cycle of periodic cooperation that otherwise allows for long periods of Conservative domination. This will provide the firmest foundations for forging a diverse, inclusive and sustainable society that is more secure, compassionate and equal over years and decades to come.

Footnotes

- ¹ *Progressive Alliance* website, <http://www.progressivealliance.org.uk/>.
- ² [‘Map of Progressive Alliance candidates in the 2017 UK general election’](#), *Google Maps* (June 2017).
- ³ Jonathan Sankey, [‘CHART: How did Remain voters who had voted in the 2015 general election vote in 2017?’](#), *British Election Study*, July 2017.
- ⁴ [‘Liberal Democrat election battleground seats’](#), *ElectionPolling.co.uk*, June 2017.
- ⁵ N Barlow, [‘European liberal parties don’t alternate between governments of left and right anymore’](#), *What You Can Get Away With* blog post, 5 July 2015.
- ⁶ P Pettinger, [‘Why Centrism Doesn’t Work for Minor Parties. SLF Long Reads Number 4’](#) (Social Liberal Forum, London, April 2016).
- ⁷ M Baxter, [‘Electoral calculus: Voter transfers, 2015 UK general election’](#), *Daily Telegraph* website, 2015.
- ⁸ D Howarth, [‘Nobody to see here, move along’](#), *Liberator*, 368, September 2014, pp. 6-7.
- ⁹ D Howarth and M Pack, [‘The 20% strategy: Building a Core Vote for the Liberal Democrats’](#), 2nd edn, (Cambridge, 2016).
- ¹⁰ [‘CHART: How Britain Voted – Remain/Leave voters by 2015 GE vote for parties’](#), *Lord Ashcroft polls*, June 2016.
- ¹¹ A Leaman, [‘Ending Equidistance’](#), *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, Vol. 19, Summer 1998, pp. 3-10.
- ¹² After the 1923 general election, Labour (which had fewer MPs than the Conservatives) formed a government for the first time, with tacit Liberal support; the Liberals supported another minority Labour Government in 1929; while during 1977-1978 the then Labour Government enjoyed support from the Liberals via an official pact (the first such official bi-party agreement at Westminster since the Second World War).
- ¹³ [‘The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism’](#), *Wikipedia* (last edited 25 June 2016).
- ¹⁴ [‘Lib Dems will not back early cuts, says Nick Clegg’](#), *BBC News*, 13 March 2010.
- ¹⁵ [‘Liberal Democrats: say goodbye to broken promises’](#), Liberal Democrats Party Election Broadcast on the eve of their 2010 election manifesto launch, *YouTube*, 13 April 2010.
- ¹⁶ C Giles, [‘UK suffering “first lost decade since 1860s” says Carney’](#), *Financial Times*, 5 December 2016.
- ¹⁷ R Reeves, [‘Social Liberals Should Join Labour’](#), *Guardian*, 19 September 2008.
- ¹⁸ S Tall, [‘Hung Parliament: What Lib Dem Members Think Will Happen... and What You Want to Happen’](#), *Lib Dem Voice*, 6 October 2014.
- ¹⁹ S Tall, [‘Economic Liberals or Social Liberals? Pragmatists or Ideologues? How Lib Dem Members Describe Their Own Political Identity’](#), *Lib Dem Voice*, 20 October 2014.
- ²⁰ [‘Brexit Britain: British Election Study insights from the post-EU referendum wave of the BES internet panel’](#), *British Election Study*, 6 October 2016.
- ²¹ E Kaufmann, [‘It’s NOT the Economy, Stupid: Brexit as a Story of Personal Values’](#), *London School of Economics, British Politics and Policy* blog, 7 July 2016.

²² J Curtice, [‘Remain Voters Must Now be Labour’s Top Priority - Stoke and Copeland Prove It’](#), *Guardian*, 24 February 2017.

²³ C Lewis, L Nandy and J Reynolds, [‘Lewis, Nandy and Reynolds: Let’s Make This a Referendum on Goldsmith, not Heathrow’](#), *Labour List*, 26 October 2016.

²⁴ The Scottish Green Party and Green Party of England and Wales are separate parties.

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