

# Who's progressive now?

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# Chapter 1: Progressive politics

## **Introduction – whatever happened to the ‘Progressive Consensus’?**

During the last five years, Gordon Brown and his retinue of younger advisers have been on a quest – to define a political project that will in turn define his premiership. It has proved to be an arid task. Smith Institute seminars in 11 Downing Street have cast around in vain for a purpose that could be described coherently, let alone one that could be said to define the Brown vision.

In the end, the task has been abandoned. Three events in the space of three weeks signalled the emptiness of Labour’s intellectual larder.

First - the new Prime Minister’s barren conference speech in Brighton in September revealed that the preceding groundwork of seminars, symposia and speeches had offered up nothing usable.

Next, the cancellation of the expected election, which was explained as allowing the Prime Minister another two years to set out his vision, was in fact a recognition that there was no vision to set out that would survive the scrutiny of an election campaign.

Then came the intellectual surrender of the following week, in which Conservative reforms to inheritance tax set the agenda for what was, in effect, the first Budget of the Brown premiership. With no new idea that did not come from the Opposition, Alistair Darling’s statement signalled the end of the new regime’s ambition to forge an agenda of its own.

The legacy of Brown’s quest is a single phrase – one in which the hopes of the new administration were invested. “The Progressive Consensus” is a phrase that has been used so often by Gordon Brown and his team during the last five years that it has the familiarity of a cliché. Clichés, however, have their meaning dulled by overuse. The remarkable thing about the Progressive Consensus is that it never had any discernible meaning in the first place. Though used hundreds of times by Gordon Brown, Ed Balls, Douglas Alexander, Ed Miliband and other members of the inner circle during the last five years – including 12 times in the then Chancellor’s 2004 Party Conference speech alone - in not a single instance has anything amounting to a definition or description of the meaning of the ‘progressive consensus’ been offered.

For the Brown circle, the Progressive Consensus is a husk. A remnant of an aborted intellectual project – the project to find meaning for the phrase.

This paper argues that a dispassionate assessment of the term ‘progressive’ would now associate it with the Conservative Party, rather than the Labour Party.

## Six dimensions of progress

We contend that in contemporary British politics, the party of idealism, social justice, impatience with the *status quo* and optimism for the future is now the Conservatives.

By contrast, the Labour Party has become a party whose political timidity and defensive apologetics for the problems that challenge us, now act as a block to progress.

It might seem paradoxical to claim the label 'progressive' for a party of the political right. It is true that as a term, 'progressive' has more often been applied to parties of the left.

We argue that it is time for a new assessment. If the term 'progressive' is simply to be used as an alternative word for left-wing, then it is not worth even the efforts the Brownites once devoted to seeking to clothe themselves in it. If the adjective 'progressive' is an interesting one, it is because it has content and meaning that bear analysis.

Throughout the history of British politics, the Conservative Party has regularly been the progressive party – the party of reform, the party that confronted vested interests and championed the disempowered, the party that was oriented towards the future rather than to yearning for the past, the party that was impatient rather than complacent, the party that was ambitious for what it could achieve for the country, rather than defensive in its management of decline. That was the disposition of the Party of Peel in embracing Free Trade; of Shaftesbury in improving the conditions of the industrial working class; of Wilberforce in routing slavery; of Churchill in turning the Party against appeasement and towards confronting the evil of Nazi Germany; of Mrs Thatcher in challenging the trades unions and liberating the British economy.

To justify the claim that, once again, the Conservative Party is the progressive party in British politics, it is necessary to consider what that term implies.

We suggest that there are six dimensions which, taken together, convey the essence of the term 'progressive'.

First, and most literally, a progressive believes in progress. An idealism that the world can be a better place in the future than it is now, or has been in the past. A belief that the world can become better by advancing, rather than looking backwards to an imagined golden age.

Second, a hostility to uniformity and a respect for diversity. With this outlook comes a determination to defend rights and offer protection for those individuals or minorities who might otherwise be tyrannised by majorities.

Third, an active concern for the least fortunate. This combines an imperative to improve their position now and a determination to act to prevent people in the future from suffering the same circumstances.

Fourth, an antipathy to unmerited hierarchies. This leads to an active agenda of dismantling structures that keep people in their place and limit the fulfilment of their aspirations.

Fifth, a concern for social, as well as economic, goals. Progressive politics holds non-material values, as well as economic prosperity, in esteem.

Sixth, a sense of responsibility for the future. The notion that we have duties beyond our own lifespan, to leave the world an improved, rather than a despoiled, place for our successors – socially, environmentally and economically.

We also believe that these progressive values are a virtual statement of the values that are driving the Conservative Party under David Cameron.

We also believe that any stated aspiration of the Labour Party under Gordon Brown to be progressive is incompatible with an increasingly outdated faith in the effectiveness of central state control combined with a timidity in challenging the demands of traditional stakeholders.

In the rest of this pamphlet we expand on this analysis to justify our contention that it is the Conservatives rather than Labour who can most properly lay claim to the mantle of progress, and do so by assessing each party's stance on each of these dimensions.

## Chapter 2: How progressive has Labour been?

### Introduction

In politics, labels can be liabilities. From the beginning, New Labour was determined to drop the label 'socialist' attached to the party, in favour of words that were more encompassing and less electorally corrosive. So while Michael Foot in 1983 spoke of the need for a "programme of socialist reconstruction", and Neil Kinnock referred to Labour as offering "democratic socialism in action", Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have preferred less obviously ideological language.

Tony Blair's own foreword to the 1997 manifesto was a statement not of socialist principles, but of progressive aims:

*"We are a broad-based movement for progress and justice ... [our values are] the equal worth of all, with no one cast aside; fairness and justice within strong communities"*.

And on taking office as Prime Minister Gordon Brown declared "*our party has always been the party of progressive change*".

In fact, even while retaining a passing reference to 'democratic socialism' in the Labour Party constitution, the Tony Blair replacement of Clause IV established the progressive, rather than socialist, aspirations of the Party even more starkly:

*"A just society, which judges its strength by the condition of the weak as much as the strong, which nurtures families, promotes equality of opportunity and delivers people from the tyranny of poverty, prejudice and the abuse of power"*.

Conservatives tend to be instinctively uncomfortable with the distillation of a rich political tradition and outlook into a single clause in a constitution. And most Conservatives would emphasise a more positive imperative to speak of the power of trusting people, families and communities. But that said, there is nothing exclusively left-wing about the aims that the clause embodies. Helping the weak as much as the strong, nurturing families and delivering people from poverty, prejudice and the abuse of power motivate Conservatives as much as Labour or Liberal politicians.

So the test of a party's progressive values lies – in government - in the extent to which they succeed in applying them and making a difference to the world. After ten years we are in a good position to review the record of Labour in office as a progressive force. We do so against the six dimensions of 'progressive' that we introduced in Chapter 1.

## 1. Belief in progress

A progressive party believes in progress – that things can be better than they are today. Much of the branding of the Brown/Blair project has emphasised such an outlook – indeed the very term *New Labour* clearly associates the party with modernity. Early initiatives such as the Millennium Exhibition at the Dome - in which Ministers made direct comparisons with previous celebrations of progress, the Great Exhibition and the Festival of Britain – to say nothing of the exploration of the theme of ‘cool Britannia’ - hinted at a view of the task in hand as one of, at least in part, modernisation.

Labour’s initial legislative programme – comprising independence for the Bank of England, devolution for Scotland and Wales, a directly-elected Mayor for London, reform of the House of Lords, a minimum wage, the creation of a Department for International Development, a Freedom of Information Act – crystallised the idealism of those days when the Government thought it could change Britain, or at least some of the institutions that shaped her.

And yet, if that first Queen’s Speech conveyed confidence in Labour’s assessment of its own ability to shape the future, there was even then a cautious eye fixed on the past. The very label ‘New Labour’ was more a nervous commentary on the past than a relaxed expression of confidence in the future. It was an attempt to reassure the electorate that the record and ideology of Labour past no longer represented what Labour present had to offer.

The New Labour proposition was essentially derivative rather than idealistic – combining the most electorally popular aspects of Thatcherism (private ownership, a concern to keep a lid on inflation, taxes held down) with the most popular aspects of the post-war settlement (a generous welfare state, state-run healthcare and comprehensive education).

From transport to the environment, from trade and industry to local government, the demeanour of the government has been incremental and conservative rather than ambitious and radical.

Policy goals of genuine novelty and – whatever their merits - significance such as Britain’s membership of the Euro (to which the Government remains committed in principle); an integrated transport system; “thinking the unthinkable” on welfare reform; English regional assemblies have, for all intents and purposes, been abandoned as too risky.

What can be discerned as the ambitions of the Brown administration look even more limited. Most commentators regarded Mr Brown’s first Queen’s Speech as being almost devoid of ambitious proposals, and taken together, no-one could say that it represented a progressive view that his premiership – whether it lasts two years or ten – has set out to pursue an agenda that could transform Britain.

## 2. Respect for diversity

A progressive perspective is instinctively hostile to uniformity and conformity. It prefers a diverse society in which difference is celebrated rather than suppressed.

In some respects, Labour in government has surprised observers in its readiness to strike out boldly in this direction. One of the more interesting Parliamentary exchanges of the last year took place during John Prescott's last Question Time as Deputy Prime Minister. In response to a Labour backbencher, he declared himself glad to have belonged to a Government which had made radical changes to the law concerning gay rights. It was significant that a 69 year old Labour politician from a Northern, working class, trade union background should so readily associate himself with changes which would have flown in the face of public opinion even a generation ago. With measures such as the legislation to repeal Section 28 and to establish Civil Partnerships, Labour has at least kept pace with, if not actually led, rapidly changing public opinion on an issue in which Conservatives, until more recently, have been slower to embrace.

Yet if Labour in government can boast of concrete achievements and an effective record in advancing this particular aspect of diversity, there have been areas in which they have presented an illiberal face. For example, attempts to pass the Religious Hatred Bill, which would have placed unjustifiable restrictions on free speech, were resisted by concerned liberals in all parties – and ultimately the Bill was amended in the House of Lords. This is emblematic of a more general paradox: in advancing an agenda of equalities and diversity, the Government has often stood accused of enforcing its intentions in an inflexible, doctrinaire way. Other measures, such as legislation passed to restrict the right to assemble and demonstrate, cannot even be called paradoxical: they are in clear conflict with liberal principles.

A truly progressive belief in the value of diversity over uniformity is not only about advancing and protecting the rights of those whom a majority might disadvantage. It takes the view that people and organisations are more successful when given the freedom to act on their own initiative than when ordered from above.

In this sense, Labour's record in office has been the opposite of progressive. Labour, under both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, has tended to impose uniformity over diversity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the public services. In education, health and local government, the Government has not only imposed an extensive system of targets which schools, NHS bodies and local councils are required to achieve, but has typically specified *how* it expects local institutions to operate. In other words, Labour has adopted a policy of specifying process as well as outcomes.

In the NHS, one of Labour's first acts in 1997 was to abolish GP fund holding – which allowed primary care practitioners to innovate and tailor their services to the needs of patients. The Government has imposed more than 100 central targets on the NHS since it came to office. Although the Government has now conceded that the regime of central targets may have gone too far – Alan Johnson has promised “fewer top-down targets” –

it remains committed to the model of control through targets: 37 central targets were included in this year's Comprehensive Spending Review.

Similarly in schools, the abolition of Grant Maintained schools – which, being independent of local authority control, were free to set their own priorities – was another act of an incoming government fixated on restricting diversity in the schools system.

As with the NHS, centrally-imposed targets uniformly applied became the principal levers by which the government managed the schools system. While the Academy programme, announced by David Blunkett in 2000 represented a return to a more diverse approach, the enthusiasm of the new Brown regime for the concept is uncertain. Moves have already been made to subject academies to greater local authority control, to tie them to the National Curriculum, and to slow down the creation of new academies.

In local government, the top down, centralising approach has been evident from the beginning. Council tax capping powers have been retained – and used. The structure of councils was forcibly changed with the committee system required by central government to be abolished. Comprehensive Performance Assessment specified in detail not just the required outcomes of local councils, but how they were required to manage their functions and services.

A more detailed account of New Labour's centralising tendencies can be found in *Total Politics: Labour's Command State*. Published in 2003 by one of the authors of this pamphlet, it was an attempt to anatomise the centralising force of Tony Blair's government. If anything, Gordon Brown's fixation with centrally-imposed solutions is more pronounced than that of Tony Blair.

A control freak can never be a progressive.

### **3. Antipathy to unmerited hierarchy**

No progressive expects people to know their place. On the contrary, the dismantling of economic and social structures that have held people back unfairly has long been a powerful motivation of a progressive temperament.

A progressive is a meritocrat, not a protectionist. Social and economic mobility depends on two factors – people being able to exercise and enjoy the rewards of their ability in an industry; and the eradication of institutions and practices that confer power and rewards on those for reasons other than merit.

Yet social mobility in Britain today is lower than it was a generation ago – and lower than in most other European countries. The former Health Secretary, Alan Milburn said earlier this year, "*I cannot envisage a child growing up as I did – on a reasonably disadvantaged council estate – and ending up in the Cabinet 20 years hence*" - something he described as "*an honest and probably shameful answer*" and "*a matter of huge regret*".

The current Health Secretary, Alan Johnson has said *“It is actually getting harder for people ... to leave the income group, professional body or social circle of their parents”*.

Not all of the blame for the decline in social mobility rests with Labour. But what is clear after ten years is that there has been no decisive move towards a more socially mobile Britain.

In government, Labour’s centralising instincts have usually trumped any meritocratic leanings. Instead of creating a more open Britain, the Government has exercised the power of the central state to create a new nomenklatura scarcely more open and accessible than the elites of the past.

In the House of Commons, Alan Milburn linked this centralising approach by government with the lack of social mobility:

*“If we think that it is only wealth that is unevenly distributed in society, social mobility will not advance. That is not the case. It is also a matter of power. If Britain is to get moving again socially, people need ... to enjoy greater control and have a bigger say in how they run their lives. In my experience the cloud of despondency that hangs over some of the poorest communities will only ever be dispelled if we allow individual citizens and local communities to share more directly and evenly in how those communities are run”*.

One of the defining features of the Labour years has been an explosion in the number of public bodies with power and influence over the lives of ordinary Britons, but which are run without meaningful participation by the people whose lives they affect. Since 1997, 752 new quangos have been set up. Public bodies now employ 1.4 million people and are governed by 21,000 public appointees.

The scrutiny of insiders by democratic forces has been weakened. The House of Commons has been sidelined as a source of scrutiny, and the accountability of most non-departmental public bodies to the public is limited.

#### **4. Active concern for the least fortunate**

Central to any progressive agenda must be a serious attempt to improve the condition of the least fortunate in society, and, as importantly, so to reform the institutions and policies of the country that fewer people in future will fall into such a condition in the first place.

The present Labour government has made a point of making big statements on the subject of poverty. None come bigger than Tony Blair’s promise to “end child poverty forever”.

And it is true that Labour had used its time in Opposition to think about how to fight poverty. The party had established a Social Justice Commission to advise it.

Early in the new government's term of office, it began to implement some of the Commission's recommendations, including a National Minimum Wage and a system of tax credits.

The Government's ambitions were crystallised into a target. Child poverty would be reduced by half by 2010, and eliminated altogether by 2020. But a target requires a measure, and poverty is primarily measured by this Government as the number of people living on a household income of below 60% of the national median.

Against its own measure, Labour in office has made progress – there are 600,000 fewer children below the 60% poverty line than in 1998/9. However, this leaves the overall number of children in poverty still above the Government's target. And the most recent figures show that child poverty is rising – by 100,000 in the last year even on the Government's preferred definition – and commentators, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, expect the Government to miss its 2010 target by a wide margin.

While the target completely to eradicate child poverty is obviously ambitious, the preferred definition of poverty appears to have been chosen to maximise the government's ability to meet it. The 60% of median income cut-off line falls at the highest point of the income distribution curve. Thus by targeting those whose incomes fall just below the poverty threshold, an apparently dramatic reduction in the numbers of people in poverty can be achieved – with minimal difference being made to the actual income they enjoy.

There are other flaws in the Government's approach to fighting poverty. The target has nothing to say about the severity or the persistence of poverty. As Save the Children UK have said:

*“If the Government is not measuring severe poverty, it cannot target its policies to those most in need”.*

Indeed, if we consider people in severe poverty – defined as those living on incomes below 40% of the national median – there are 600,000 more people in severe poverty today than when Labour came to power.

Moreover, the poorest people in Britain are becoming poorer, relative to the rest of the country. The most recent government figures show that the average income of the poorest 20% of households fell in real terms last year from £182 per week (before housing costs) to £181, whilst the average real income of the top 20% rose from £722 a week to £733. According to the Government's own Social Exclusion Action Plan, the bottom 5% of incomes have increased by 1% per year between 1996/97 and 2004/5, compared with rises of between 2 and 3% for the rest of the population. In other words, during the last ten years the poorest have fallen further and further behind the mainstream of society.

Among people at the bottom, there has been a depressing persistence of poverty. Someone who has spent five years in low income has no more than a 10% chance of escaping during the following year. Indeed the Department of Work and Pensions has noted that there has been “*little change in the persistence of poverty over the last 10 years*”.

The problem is particularly accentuated amongst young people. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation unemployment among adults under 25 – which has never fallen below 10% since 1997 - is now three times the rate among adults aged 25+, and is rising again in the most recent year. 1.3 million young people are not in education, employment or training.

However genuine its original ambitions, there is a clear sense that the Labour’s agenda on social exclusion is running out of steam. In his foreword to the Government’s most recent Social Exclusion Action Plan, Tony Blair conceded “we need a radical revision of our methods for tackling social exclusion”.

Alan Milburn has drawn attention to the key problem with the Government’s approach – its reliance on financial transfers to attempt to solve the problems of poverty and social exclusion.

He observed “*Social inequality is best tackled and mobility best advanced if we tackle the root causes, not the symptoms. That must mean moving beyond simply correcting low wages and family poverty after the event, towards policies that spread opportunity and help people realise their own aspirations for progress*”.

Labour’s progressive ambitions in helping the most vulnerable have become held back by the high-level nature of its poverty policies – relying on tax credits and the national minimum wage – when the problems that afflict the poorest in society are increasingly multi-faceted, diverse, and, above all, personal rather than statistical.

## **5. Values beyond materialism**

Douglas Alexander, one of the new Prime Minister’s key lieutenants, emphasised that progressive values require “*holding non-material values in esteem*”.

It is paradoxical, for a party aiming to follow a progressive agenda, how utilitarian new Labour has often been in office.

As we discussed above, Labour’s central view of poverty – revolving around its 60% target – is narrowly and specifically financial. In turn, attempts to make progress have been largely limited to the benefits system – with financial transfers seen as the principal means to alleviate poverty.

A major policy gulf has opened up between the parties which pivots on this issue of material versus non-material approach to poverty. The Labour view is best expressed by Polly Toynbee when, in her critique of Iain Duncan Smith's *Breakdown Britain* report, she argues that financial poverty is the primary cause of the aspects of social breakdown that Duncan Smith identifies – addictions, family breakdown, educational failure, indebtedness and worklessness. Increasing the income of those in poverty is the surest way to tackle these social problems that are described as “symptoms” of financial poverty.

As we see in Chapter 3, the increasingly clear Conservative view is that poverty cannot be viewed in exclusively material terms. In many cases, people are poor as a result of experiencing a debilitating event in their lives – such as becoming addicted to drugs, or having dropped out of education. The five aspects of poverty that Iain Duncan Smith has identified are “pathways to poverty” that must be tackled in themselves as a pre-condition to eradicating poverty.

There is an irony that it should be Labour that thinks of poverty in mostly financial terms whereas it is the Conservatives – who have often been accused, however unfairly, of taking a narrowly economic perspective - that take a more complex and non-material approach to tackling social breakdown.

Indeed attempts by Conservatives to explore the contribution of family stability to the true well-being of individuals and society have typically been resisted by New Labour politicians as being intrusive and inappropriate.

But it is not only in the conception of the problem of, and solutions to, poverty and social breakdown that Labour has shown itself drawn to a technocratic, utilitarian approach rather than one that deals in vision and principle. *‘What’s right is what works’* was one of Tony Blair’s characteristic aphorisms, and a rather chilling distillation of the New Labour morality.

From the beginning, it has proved difficult for New Labour to convey convincingly a vision based on resonant principle rather than a claim to managerial competence. When the Millennium Exhibition needed to be filled with themes and contents expressing the Government’s vision for Britain as she moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the result was a collection of vacuous themes and embarrassingly trite exhibits.

So it is, perhaps, not surprising that Gordon Brown’s party conference speech and first Queen’s Speech should have left people hungry for a ‘vision’. Tony Blair’s ability to weave memorable rhetorical performances out of a tentative set of policy directions has perhaps disguised the extent to which an absence of the ‘vision thing’ is actually typical of New Labour, rather than a new problem for Gordon Brown.

As the General Secretary of the Fabian Society, Sunder Katwala has said, *“Three election victories have vindicated the argument that the ‘vision thing’ is a risk Labour cannot afford”*.

He goes on to conclude:

*“Brown cannot achieve the ‘progressive consensus’ he seeks if he is only prepared to say things with which nobody could disagree. Such a catch-all consensus will lack progressive content”.*

## **6. Responsibility for the future**

*“In the long-run we are all dead.”* JM Keynes’ famous refrain was not an invitation to irresponsibility, but a reminder that people may reasonably expect to enjoy the benefits of their labours within their own lifetimes.

It was a sentiment that was felt keenly in the run up to the 1945 election, with the working population wanting a better life for themselves following years of wartime sacrifice.

The Old Labour emphasis on ‘jam today’ did not lend itself to a natural sympathy for environmental concerns, which often imply short term sacrifices to prevent long term damage. This is especially true of climate change, the ultimate in long-term environmental concerns.

Labour’s traditional powerbase in the smokestack industries – especially coal – also contributed to a political outlook that was deepest red but not at all green. It was, in fact, Margaret Thatcher who did more than any other political leader at home or abroad to put climate change on the agenda, with her landmark 1989 speech to the United Nations General Assembly.

Things began to change when Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party. Environmental issues were embraced, and much of the environmental movement was won over by New Labour’s 1997 manifesto pledge to make a 20% cut in UK carbon dioxide emissions by 2010.

It was a key moment in the creation of a progressive, rather than a socialist, platform – one which promised action in the present for the good of future generations. What followed, however, was a record of cynicism on the part of the Government, and deep disappointment on the part of the environmental movement.

New Labour’s signature environmental policy was the introduction, in 2000, of the Climate Change Levy – a tax on energy use by businesses and other organisations. The then Chancellor, Gordon Brown, promised that it would be revenue neutral, making a corresponding 0.3% reduction in Employers’ National Insurance Contributions. But, the very next year, the rate was increased by 1%, wiping out the reduction – and exposing the so-called green tax for what it was – a stealth tax.

At the same time, the reduction in UK carbon dioxide emissions – established under the Conservatives – stopped or even went into reverse. No progress has been made on the 2010 target, which is sure to be missed by a wide margin. Britain's 2012 Kyoto target in regard to a basket of greenhouse gases will only be achieved (if at all) thanks to a one off refit of industrial plant which had been emitting large quantities of nitrous oxide, a potent greenhouse gas.

The main reason for Labour's failure to make progress on climate change is the low priority they attached to it in Government. For instance, Gordon Brown did not make a single major speech on the environment until David Cameron became leader of the Conservative Party.

However, neglect is not the only explanation. Several of the Government's well-intentioned green measures have been sabotaged by New Labour's love of uniformity and central control. For instance, the Renewables Obligation – the main measure aimed at promoting renewable energy, applies a one-size-fits-all incentive to all forms of renewable power, regardless of their stage of commercial development. This has channelled excessive subsidies to already profitable technologies such as onshore wind turbines, while starving a much wider variety of less developed but promising technologies – such as those capable of harnessing Britain's abundant offshore wind, wave and tidal resources – of the investment they need.

Another example is the Energy Efficiency Commitment – the main measure aimed at reducing the needless waste of energy in British homes. This has raised hundreds of millions of pounds to help fund the promotion of energy efficiency, but the only people allowed access are the energy supply companies – precisely the organisations with the least interest in helping people reduce their energy consumption.

With that kind of closed shop mentality it is little wonder that Labour has failed to make progress on carbon emissions. Perhaps the greatest failure of all has been in regard to the United States, where the Bush administration has failed to take the lead in global efforts to combat climate change. With the British Government standing shoulder to shoulder with America in the war against terrorism, there was surely an opportunity to persuade America to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the fight against global warming. In this carelessly lost opportunity alone, New Labour has compromised any claim to its self-awarded progressive credentials.

The Government's lack of responsibility for the future does not end with the environment. In economic matters too they have demonstrated a remarkable shortsightedness. For instance, Gordon Brown's raid on pension funds, has done enormous damage – both to pensions and to the investment markets in which pension fund play such an important role. As Chancellor, Brown also presided over a boom in consumer debt, the consequences of which are now coming home to roost.

Such matters of fiscal prudence may not be regarded as core progressive issues, but they do underline irresponsibility on the part of a Government which, to be truly progressive, should have regard for the good of future generations as well as the present one.

# Chapter 3: Progressive Conservatism

## Introduction

In the last chapter we asked just how progressive ten years of Blair and Brown have really been, assessing New Labour's record against six dimensions of progress. In this chapter we weigh up the prospects for a Conservative Government under David Cameron, using the same dimensions.

This is not, of course, a direct comparison. The Conservatives are not yet in office and hence there is no record against which to make a judgement. However, two years into his leadership, it is possible to say whether or not David Cameron has demonstrated a clear commitment to the progressive ideals we described in chapter one.

It is also possible to indicate, in broad terms, what further commitments might be expected, under each of the six dimensions, by those looking to the Conservatives for the progress that New Labour has failed to deliver.

### 1. Belief in progress

Does the Conservative Party believe in progress? It has to be admitted that there is a tradition of conservative pessimism, based on a gloomy view of human nature and a distrust of utopian ideologies. This is not without reason, as from the French revolution onwards some of the bloodiest regimes in history have been motivated by a fanatical belief in the perfectability of mankind.

However, there is also a tradition of conservative optimism, exemplified by such leaders as Benjamin Disraeli and Ronald Reagan. Other great conservative figures such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, while not best known for their sunny personalities, have demonstrated drive and determination in office, taking on enormous challenges in the belief that change for the better is always possible.

In rhetoric and demeanour, David Cameron clearly falls within the optimistic tradition. Though not afraid to point out the problems facing our nation, his message is that they can be overcome. Moreover, the direction of travel he advocates is forward looking. His speeches emphasise innovation and reform, rather than a return to historical policies. This aversion to 'bring-backery' has, on occasion, provoked internal dissent; but the overall impact has been to orientate British Conservatism towards the future – as needs to be the case for any living tradition.

While it is important for Conservatives to believe that things can get better, this is not the same as saying that "things can *only* get better" – to quote the New Labour campaign anthem. The distinction springs from what it is that gives each party cause for optimism. For New Labour the progressive force is the state; but for Cameron's Conservatives it is society. In offering hope that the problems facing our country can be overcome, David Cameron is less likely to talk about what a Conservative Government would do, than to highlight what is already being done by charities, social enterprises and other voluntary

organisations. The essence of his optimism is that the solutions we seek already exist and are already succeeding. What they lack, however, is a Government that is willing and able to give them the chance to succeed on a wider scale.

In ten years, the current Government has tested to destruction the idea that, given sufficient resources, the state can guarantee progress. The fact that it hasn't is partly due to the inherent limitations of the centralised state, but also due to the arrogance of Ministers who really did think that things could only get better – and therefore could not see the accumulation of evidence to the contrary. By the time the evidence became undeniable it was already too late, there was no plan B.

Clearly, it would be a mistake to replace hubristic statism with hubristic pluralism. In allowing others to provide services previously provided by the state alone, it is inevitable that mistakes will be made – something we must be open about and prepared for. Above all, a Conservative Government must be willing to accept the risk that some innovations will fail as the price for allowing other innovations to succeed and proliferate. On this, progress depends.

## **2. Respect for diversity**

Politically, it is difficult for the Conservative Party to talk about diversity if, in itself, it presents a uniform face to the world – one that appears exclusively white, male, privileged and southern. In exhorting the party to “be the change” it seeks to bring about, David Cameron has recognised the problem.

He has also made a point of doing something about it – principally through his efforts to ensure a wider range of Conservative candidates in winnable constituencies. In this respect, the ‘A-list’ of priority candidates has, despite the controversy surrounding it, succeeded in achieving a stronger representation of female and ethnic minority candidates.

Some commentators, such as Tim Montgomerie of the Conservative Home website, argue that this sort of diversity does not go far enough. He argues that the cost of looking for and fighting a seat is prohibitive to people on modest incomes, but who could bring valuable life experiences to the Conservative ranks – particularly people living in and working to improve disadvantaged communities.

That said, there can little doubt that the Conservative benches after the next election will be more representative of the full diversity of the nation than ever before.

Aside from candidate selection, David Cameron has made other efforts to pull the Conservative Party closer to the diverse communities that make up the country. In particular, in giving due attention to issues such as immigration, Cameron has been careful to respect the justified sensitivities of minority ethnic groups. This was recognised by Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, who praised the Conservative leader for “de-racialising” the immigration issue.

All of this represents real progress for the Conservative Party, however progress for marginalized sections of society won't come so much from the co-option of a few of their number into the ruling establishment, but in devolving power from the centre to all of Britain's communities. Britain is one of the most centralised countries in the western world, and it should be obvious that our restrictive, one-size-fits-all power structures are robbing local communities of choice, autonomy and self-respect.

This is where the Conservative agenda of diversity in public service delivery meets the various other diversity agendas. In this respect, the Conservatives have already made significant commitments to localism – for instance in supporting the Sustainable Communities Bill; and also to opening up key public services to a wider range of providers – for instance, David Cameron's plan to allow parents to form co-operatives to set up or take over schools serving their communities.

The test for the Conservatives now is to turn this openness to diversity into detailed and far reaching manifesto commitments. Note that in this respect, it is not good enough merely to allow voluntary and private sector organisation to bid to provide services (as Labour has done in a few limited cases). The structures through which services are commissioned also need to be diversified and decentralised so that they encourage rather than inhibit new service providers.

### **3. Antipathy to unmerited hierarchy**

David Cameron's opponents have made a great deal of his social background, insinuating that he can only ever be the representative of a privileged elite. In doing so they perpetuate an outdated view of the establishment – as if were still a matter of aristocratic connections and gentlemen's clubs. The real ruling elite in today's Britain is very different – and New Labour is right at the centre of it, spinning a web of cosy relationships with public sector appointees, private sector contractors, media moguls and their various go-betweens in the PR and lobbying industries. It is here that real power is to be found and abused.

The overarching solution to this problem is in the diffusion of power from central government to people and their local communities – a theme of David Cameron's leadership that we've already described. As important as this is to ensuring long-term change, Conservatives must also consider how the unmerited hierarchy of the patronage state can be directly targeted.

The appointments process would not be open to abuse if the positions concerned didn't exist in the first place – or at least were not in the gift of Government. With its instinctive dislike of waste and bureaucracy, the Conservative Party can better be relied upon to abolish any unelected body that is not needed anyway and to democratise those that are.

A further issue of public concern is the growing gap in wealth between the super-rich and rest of the country. Conservatives have always believed that merit should be rewarded, and that great merit should be greatly rewarded.

Progressives of all parties should continue to uphold this principle, not least because economic progress depends upon it. However, where huge gains are made as a result of a lack of democratic or competitive accountability, such rewards are clearly unmerited. Rather than levy punitive taxes on all high incomes regardless of merit, the progressive approach would be to deal with the root causes of unmerited wealth by reforming the competitive and governmental structures responsible for the problem.

#### **4. Active concern for the least fortunate**

The Conservative Party also faces a test of progressive good intent at the other end of the income scale.

Not that many years ago, senior Conservatives argued that poverty in the UK was a thing of the past. It is an argument that can only be sustained if one sets the poverty line at a level of bare subsistence and then leaves it there, making no adjustment for the increasing wealth enjoyed by the nation as a whole or the minimum living standards that individuals and families must attain if they are to take their place within the mainstream of society. Such indifference to the prospect of millions of one's fellow citizens falling further and further behind the rest of the country is incompatible with a progressive outlook. Indeed, it is incompatible with the best traditions of the Conservative Party.

David Cameron has certainly recognised the reality of relative poverty and social exclusion and he has committed the Conservative Party to the goal of eradicating child poverty. But rather than simply signing up to the Government's policies on the issue – which have made disappointingly slow progress – the Conservative Party is developing a deeper understanding of the subject than New Labour has ever manifested.

In particular, Conservatives realise that when Government policy revolves around a simplistically defined poverty line, resources tend to be targeted at households just below the threshold in order to push them just above it – not making much difference to real lives, but making a bigger difference to the official poverty count. As a result the plight of those a long way below the poverty line, whose numbers are still increasing, is overlooked.

Conservatives also understand that while measures of relative income are important, they are not sufficient – and that, in fact, income levels are not well correlated with other important indicators of deprivation such as asset ownership, life expectancy, quality of living environment and access to public services. On many of these measures the gap between the poor and the mainstream of society is growing.

Finally, Conservatives understand that while benefits can narrow the gap in terms of income *level*, they create a new divide in terms of income *source*. Benefit dependency has to be seen as a profound form of social exclusion of those who could and should be able to earn a decent standard of living, but are denied the opportunity to do so.

Despite criticism from one set of critics for recognising the reality of relative poverty, and from another for challenging the effectiveness and relevance of the Government's policies, it is vital that David Cameron and his team stay the course. The Conservative Party is not just catching up in regard to a truly progressive approach to poverty, it is beginning to lead the way.

## **5. Values beyond materialism**

Though taken out of context, Margaret Thatcher's declaration that there is "no such thing as society" was widely quoted as proof that Conservatives only care about material values. The fact that the then Prime Minister was making exactly the opposite point was lost in a fog of misrepresentation.

The ease with which Conservative values are misrepresented is something that David Cameron has responded to with a deliberate focus on social and environmental concerns. Initially, this was derided as Tory cynicism eating itself, as if the Party's identity consisted of *not* addressing such concerns; but as the progressive Conservative vision has taken shape, such criticism has become difficult to sustain. The consistency and relentlessness of Cameron's message has forced the critics to engage with what he has to say instead of questioning why he's saying it.

In this respect, the six Conservative policy groups, instigated by David Cameron in the first weeks of his leadership, have played a vital role. In particular, the Social Justice Policy Group, chaired by Iain Duncan Smith, has served as a living refutation that there is no heart or substance to the Conservative social agenda. Far from merely taking part in the national debate on the state of our society, Duncan Smith and his colleagues have succeeded in changing the terms of that debate, calmly making the case that economic disadvantage is intimately bound up with family breakdown and other aspects of social disintegration.

It would have been easy for David Cameron to ignore the evidence presented and to follow Labour's lead in seeking to tackle deprivation as if it were a purely material phenomenon. In particular, he could have steered clear of controversial matters such as the role of marriage. Instead, backed up by the facts, he has gone much further than any previous Conservative leader in holding up marriage as a progressive force in society. This is in stark contrast to his Labour opponents, who seem incapable of conceiving of any progressive force that doesn't involve the state spending money under their direction.

In advocating social solutions to social problems, some accuse David Cameron of blaming poverty on the poor. In fact, he is blaming poverty on a system that too often excludes the least fortunate from the incentives and institutions that help people achieve success and stability in their lives. To see disadvantaged Britain as a starting point for solutions, not just problems, is ultimately the more optimistic, and therefore progressive, view of society.

## 6. Responsibility for the future

Short-termism was an accusation that was often made against Margaret Thatcher by her Labour opponents. What they were actually attacking was her rejection of central economic planning – a doctrine which might seem bizarre now, but which was still a political force in the 1970s and 80s. For instance, in 1975 Gordon Brown thought it sane to argue that *“the market can no longer be seen as the efficient allocator of resources and indeed the productive resources within our economy have outstripped the capacity of the market.”*

Though Gordon Brown has since reconciled himself to a market economy, he has used all the levers still available to a Chancellor and Prime Minister to exercise maximum central control over the economy. Whether in terms of taxation, borrowing, expenditure or pensions, the irresponsible decisions he has taken will have repercussions for generations to come.

Our political system is ill-equipped to hold politicians to account over these long-term issues – hence most ministers show little sign of thinking much beyond the next election. However, there is one area of policy that is beginning to challenge the inherent short-sightedness of contemporary politics and that is the environment. In particular, the issue of climate change has a policy making timescale that is marked off in decades rather than years. Therefore, to progressives, climate change is not just of huge importance in itself, but also in catalysing a truly forward-thinking political culture.

Until recently, and despite Margaret Thatcher’s early engagement with the climate change agenda, the Conservative Party’s profile on the environment has been low in the water. By the time of the 2005 election, public perceptions of the party on this issue were less favourable than in any other policy area. Uniquely among the major issues, not even a majority of Conservative voters said that the Conservatives had the best policies.

Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that David Cameron made the environment one of his key priorities. High profile events like his visit to the Arctic Circle were regarded with cynicism in some quarters, but their success in re-establishing the conservationist credentials of the Conservative Party has had a number of significant impacts:

First of all, in forcing the Government to take environmental issues more seriously. For instance, an unprecedented joint campaign by the opposition parties, in which the Conservative Party to a leading role, shamed the Government into adopting the Climate Change Bill, albeit in watered down form.

Secondly, Conservatives are better able to point to a strong environmental record in local government (where Conservative councils lead the way in recycling) – and, indeed, to a strong historical record in national government, where most of the key environmental reforms of the twentieth century were made by Conservative administrations.

Thirdly there is a real appetite in the media, and on the part of the public, to hear what Conservatives have to propose on climate change. An excellent start was made in December 2007 with the announcing of detailed proposals to decentralise Britain's energy infrastructure to enable householders to generate their own electricity. What was especially promising about the proposals was an emphasis on fundamental reforms to the long-term policy framework, rather than tokenistic, bolt-on measures like Gordon Brown's various fake green taxes.

The Left has always tried to present conservative and progressive ideals as if they were opposites. However, it is conservative thinkers who have always stressed responsibility for the future as key principle – and none better than Edmund Burke:

*“One of the first principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it should act as if they were the entire masters, hazarding to leave to those who come after them a ruin instead of an habitation.”*

Burke cannot have had in mind the environmental concerns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the extraordinary resonance of his words confirms the contemporary relevance of the deepest conservative instincts. Conservatives today should stop cringing before the slanders of their enemies and instead stand up to claim the progressive banner as their own.







