

# Redefining the political landscape: here's how a Progressive Alliance could work

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Talks of a Progressive Alliance emerged as soon as the snap election was called. With Theresa May polling well ahead of the rest, an alliance seems to be the only alternative to the Conservative Party's governing style. [Alan Wager](#) explains what history can teach us about the strategic purpose of such an agreement, how it would work in terms of parties and their leaders, and whether voters would support it.



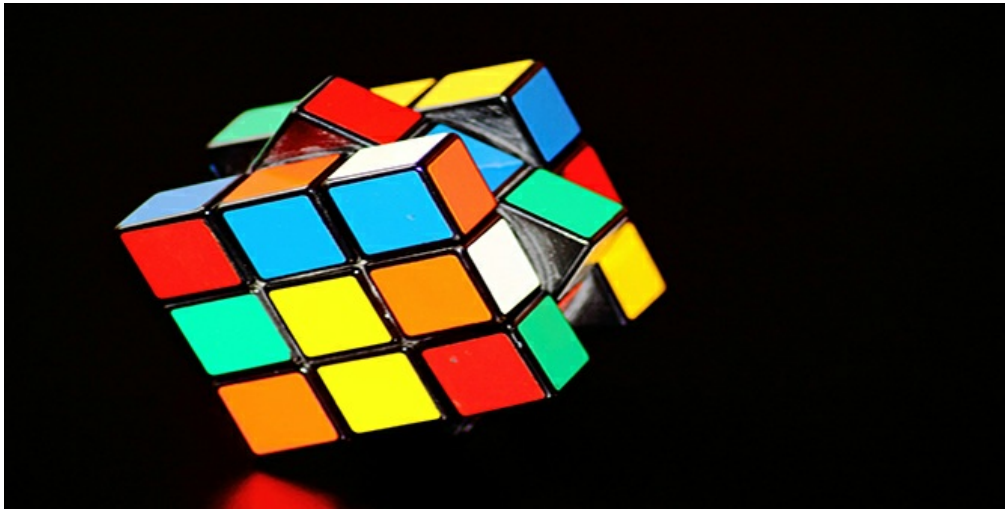
You would be hard stretched to argue a Brit Theresa May called a general election to escape the potential threat of a Progressive Alliance. Beyond isolated *ad hoc* arrangements and the efforts of burgeoning crowdfunding organisations like More United, it is clear there will be little attempt to forge cross-party connections prior to the nation-wide vote on 8 June. However, it is possible the general election, and the powerful voter-led 'realignment on the right' it may facilitate, could crystallise many of the most persuasive and urgent arguments in favour of an electoral pact on the centre-left.

Electoral co-operation of this kind between parties has a longer history in British politics than folk memory would suggest. There are enough historical portents for us to have some understanding of why parties – their leaders, their central organisations, and their grassroots members – may be motivated to pursue, or oppose, an electoral agreement with their competitors. We also have some idea of what voters might think about them. This leads to three key questions that, if answered, could assuage the doubts of those who have legitimate concerns about how a Progressive Alliance might work, and what it could achieve:

## What is the strategic purpose?

There have been useful efforts attempting to approximate how the moving parts of a Progressive Agreement [would translate into vote and seat shares](#), with parties working in combination. But this could be missing the point. If the purpose of any alliance is a realignment of the left, this would not be a static process. The last time the electoral fortunes of the centre-left were talked about in as existential terms as today was 25 years ago, in 1992, following the Conservatives' fourth straight election victory. Then, as now, ginger groups popped up supporting a 'Lib-Lab' agreement. It was only following Blair's accession to the leadership in 1994 that these ideas were given credence at the top of the Labour Party. For Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's Chief of Staff, the rationale for an agreement with the Liberal Democrats was clear:

'We wanted to eat them ... I don't know what they wanted really. I guess they wanted to carry on, because of course electoral reform made little sense unless they wanted to carry on as a minority party. Our idea was to form a great, big progressive party so you wouldn't have needed electoral reform. Indeed, it might have been a setback.'



This is illustrative of the fact Powell did not see realignment pursued through co-operation as an alternative to forming a winning electoral coalition, but as a key part of that process. Discussions between Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown were not the result of New Labour's modernising project. They were a key, symbolic cog in New Labour's opposition strategy.

Nick Cohen [argued](#) in *The Observer* that 'the Progressive Alliance ducks hard questions about what it means to be a "progressive", and does not think hard enough about whether this woolly label can unite a winning coalition'. But that is not inherently true. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Paddy Ashdown recently [wrote](#) that 'at this point we're quite like we were in 1992 when Tony Blair and I started working together ... we have to do something quite similar to what Blair and I did'.

### **Which parties, and which leaders?**

Any Progressive Alliance would likely be more herbivorous and mutually beneficial than the carnivorous venture Powell described – not least as it would need to be more Green. That said, the key plank would be the Labour Party, and they would have to be electorally stronger than they are today. There was a key paradox at the heart of previous attempts to forge co-operation of this kind: a mutually beneficial agreement could only work with a strong Labour Party, but Labour only reached out for co-operation with other parties when at its weakest. This is not the case today. The structural impediments to a Labour majority mean a resurgent Labour Party can no longer plausibly claim to be aiming for a single party government.

Any discussion of a comprehensive or expansive inter-party agreement of this kind are likely to remain moot under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. But the voices in favour of agreements with other parties are getting louder, stronger and more coherent. Lisa Nandy is repeatedly discussed as a potential soft-left leadership candidate that could appeal to ex-Corbyn voters. Last year, with Caroline Lucas and ex Lib Dem candidate Chris Bowers, she edited *The Alternative*, a book calling for an agreement between parties with chapters written, among others, Tim Farron. Clive Lewis and Jon Cruddas are prominent advocate working with Compass, a think-tank that has made its *raison d'être* the promotion of centre-left co-operation, of which Chuka Umunna used to be a part. If Vince Cable returns to parliament, he will be a vocal and prominent advocate within the Liberal Democrats.

This is important as, historically, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to cross-party co-operation is the lack of broad-based agreement at the top of parties, and amongst party members. David Steel felt a key strategic strength as leader of the Liberal Party was that he was widely known to be in favour of co-operation with other parties when campaigning for the leadership. This gave his greater room for manoeuvre when in office to pursue co-operation: first the Lib-Lab pact, which sustained the Labour Party in office between 1977-78, prior to Margaret Thatcher's premiership, and then the forging and deepening of the SDP-Liberal Alliance.

## Will voters support a Progressive Alliance?

Theresa May's message of a 'coalition of chaos' speaks not just to the make-up of any hypothetical coalition but also the fact that, despite operating as Home Secretary in a stable coalition government for 5 years, coalitions are still thought to be chimerical to British voters. But there is [cross-national evidence](#) that co-operation prior to elections, rather than after the electoral event, can help counter some of these problems – increasing turnout for parties as a clear choice not just of alternative parties, but alternative governments, is presented to voters.

One of the key problems with the constituency-level agreements being increasingly touted on a case-by-case is that they do not engage with how British voters perceive electoral choices in Britain. Astute observers of the Mayoral Races in Teesside and the West of England pointed to them as evidence against co-operation – voter preferences were not shared on 'progressive' lines. In fact, it provides perhaps the best evidence explicit and overt co-operation, rather than a 'nudge and a wink', is needed if politicians want voters from other parties to lend their votes. Opponents of a Progressive Alliance, and even supporters such as Paddy Ashdown, are wary of 'top-down' approach. But the messaging and signalling of party leadership matters, just as it always has in British politics.

In response to a chastening defeat in 1945 and a radical Attlee government, Winston Churchill sought to forge the counter opposite to the Progressive Alliance discussed today: a Conservative-Liberal 'United Front' against Labour, based on an electoral pact between parties and a deal on electoral reform. The former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, then a key member of Churchill's shadow cabinet, was a Conservative 'moderniser' in favour of a Lib-Con pact. He saw there was 'a great difference between the mere non-intervention of a Liberal and the active support of the Liberal party'. Local agreements needed to be supplemented by a national campaign. While Macmillan was aware that 'anything that savoured of a 'political deal' from expediency rather than principles, would be badly received by the public', both Macmillan and Churchill felt the opposite could be sold: co-operation on the basis of an existing, latent demand that could only be achieved by like-minded parties working cooperatively.

As a result, a Progressive Alliance does not necessarily mean preaching to the converted. It would need to subvert the charges of chaos and incoherence, used in 2015 and again today, that will not go away by 2022 simply by being avoided. It would need to be seen not as a convenient sticking plaster, but as a bind that could unite and make coherent currently disparate forces. It would need to be conceived as part of a process of redefining the political landscape, with a renewed constitutional settlement allowing claim to be a national coalition. Perhaps above all else, it would need to sell itself principally as what many of its advocates believe it to be: the only nationwide alternative, capable of making different governing choices to the Conservative Party.

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