

Our Past and Present Reality

Jeremy Gilbert - for Compass, March 2017 Edited for our discussion....

These notes below will be up-dated before the May weekend and they will be supplemented by notes on the French Presidential election and other relevant developments – each set of notes used maybe for several ‘Long Revolution...’ sessions

“Although the Labour Party has existed for over a century, only once has it come from opposition to win a convincing parliamentary majority. The only time ... (winning) a convincing mandate from opposition was in 1997....

In order to secure that victory, (it) had to win over the press and many powerful corporate allies, by promising to implement a programme which would never challenge their interests. And so once in government, the Labour Party did just that... letting the inequality gap grow and the industrial regions rust.... because anything else would have been too expensive, and would have challenged the agenda of the City... And now we can all see where that has led: Brexit.

Let’s be clear what that means today. Labour has lost Scotland. The Tories are dominant and UKIP or a successor organization pins (the Party) back in a swathe of seats. The boundary review is going to deprive Labour of another 40 seats. There is simply no hope of a parliamentary majority for Labour under these circumstances.

Those of us advocating a Progressive Alliance strategy for Labour, which is the argument in the new publication for *Compass* that I’ve authored ... are responding to this stark reality. The initial proposition of the Progressive Alliance strategy is simple. There are literally dozens of Tory-held parliamentary seats wherein the combined vote for Labour, Green, Liberal Democrat and Plaid is significantly larger than the Conservative vote. There are many key target seats for Labour where the Lib Dem / Green / Plaid vote is significantly higher than the Tory majority. There are also many constituencies where Labour has no hope of ever taking the seat. In many of those, the Labour vote is higher than the Tory majority over one of those other parties.

Under these circumstances, it makes sense to try to work towards local agreements which would see Labour and other parties of the left and centre stand down in each other’s favour. This would only be in situations where those standing down have no hope of winning. It would only be in places where local party members supported the idea

Indeed, the Labour Party only came into existence as an effective force in British electoral politics as a result of the anti-conservative alliance and pact of 1906, which saw Labour and Liberal candidates stand down in each other’s favour in key seats. So what we are proposing is nothing new, but in the fact the most normal way for Labour to achieve progressive goals.

An objection which one often hears to the idea of a Progressive Alliance is that doing deals with Liberals or even Greens amounts to ‘crossing class lines’. Even in strict Marxian terms, this is daft. The Labour Party is hardly a pure workers party... in strictly Marxian terms, it must be clear that the British working class is currently too weak, disorganised and demoralised to have any hope of mobilising autonomously Without some form of coalition there is no hope of defending what remains of the social democratic settlement or challenging the right’s desire to turn Britain into the world’s biggest offshore tax haven.

Supporters of the Progressive Alliance idea want Labour to retain a clear identity as the party of organised labour and the public sector. But we are realistic about the fact that in the Britain of 2017, a party with a strong radical identity has no hope of winning an election without co-operating with other potentially sympathetic parties.

Our aim is not to drag Labour to the right, but to allow it to lead a progressive coalition from the left. In fact this has almost always been the only way that Labour has been able to operate as a successful, reforming electoral force. The sooner we remember that fact, the better.”

Jeremy Gilbert is Professor of Cultural and Political Theory at the University of East London and a member of the Compass Management Committee