

The New Pluralist Imperative in Britain

Demographic Change and Progressive Political Strategy
in the United Kingdom

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The “Demographic Change and Progressive Political Strategy” series of papers is a joint project organized under the auspices of the Global Progress and Progressive Studies programs and the Center for American Progress. The research project was launched following the inaugural Global Progress conference held in October 2009 in Madrid, Spain.

The preparatory paper for that conference, “The European Paradox,” sought to analyze why the fortunes of European progressive parties had declined following the previous autumn’s sudden financial collapse and the global economic recession that ensued. The starting premise was that progressives should, in principle, have had two strengths going for them:

- Modernizing trends were shifting the demographic terrain in their political favor.
- The intellectual and policy bankruptcy of conservatism, which had now proven itself devoid of creative ideas of how to shape the global economic system for the common good.

Despite these latent advantages, we surmised that progressives in Europe were struggling for three primary reasons. First, it was increasingly hard to differentiate themselves from conservative opponents who seemed to be wholeheartedly adopting social democratic policies and language in response to the economic crisis. Second, the nominally progressive majority within their electorate was being split between competing progressive movements. Third, their traditional working-class base was increasingly being seduced by a politics of identity rather than economic arguments.

In response, we argued that if progressives could define their long-term economic agenda more clearly—and thus differentiate themselves from conservatives—as well as establish broader and more inclusive electoral coalitions, and organize more effectively among their core constituencies to convey their message, then they should be able to resolve this paradox.

The research papers in this series each evaluate these demographic and ideological trends in greater national detail and present ideas for how progressives might shape a more effective political strategy.

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Introduction and summary

Recent election results and the current situation in the country

The most recent parliamentary election was in May 2010. The top line results were Labour 29 percent (down 6.2 percent on the 2005 election), Conservatives 36.1 percent (up 3.7 percent), and the Liberal Democrats 23 percent (up 1 percent). In terms of seats that equated to the Conservatives taking 306 seats (up 97), Labour 258 (down by 91), and the Liberal Democrats on 57 (down by 6.) The Conservatives were 17 seats short of an overall majority, leaving the United Kingdom with its first “hung parliament” since the late 1970s.

In the aftermath of the election the Conservatives went into coalition with the Liberal Democrats—the first such coalition since 1945. This agreement radically changed the context for center-left progressive forces in the U.K. Up until the coalition agreement, the Liberal Democrats were seen by many as broadly a centrist progressive party more inclined toward Labour.

There was an arithmetical logic to a coalition with the Conservatives. Yet there were other options short of formal coalition on a largely Conservative policy platform that could have been pursued by the Liberal Democrats but were not. In a sense that temporarily leaves the British center-left as almost exclusively the Labour party, with some dissident and disaffected Liberal Democrats (though with no high profile defections as yet) and the Greens, which secured their first parliamentary seat in the 2010 election but seem to be fairly static in terms of further growth.

Recent polls suggest that the politics of coalition have taken their toll on the Liberal Democrats. Levels of support range from 8 percent to 15 percent for the party, clustering more toward the former than the latter figure. A third of their election support has gone to Labour in some polls. According to Ipsos Mori, the approval rating of Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, has gone from +53 percent during the election campaign in April 2010 to -23 percent at the end of January 2011.

The issue for the Liberal Democrats is how to reverse this precipitate fall in support. Should the economy recover and the U.K.'s fiscal deficit narrow, then at least an "it-hurt-but-it-worked" narrative may be available to them. Even then the break in the bond of trust over their reversal of policies, such as supporting a steep rise in higher education tuition fee-shaving having campaigned on the basis of eliminating them, may be too great.

After all, "no more broken promises" was their election campaign. They then proceeded to break election promises with haste and gusto. There was some evidence in a recent parliamentary by-election that a portion of the Conservative vote could come to the rescue, and that will limit the damage to their parliamentary standing—especially if a referendum on a preferential voting system, the alternative vote, is passed. Yet there are a lot of "ifs" and "buts" in this recovery scenario. If any of them are absent then a reversal strategy may be necessary.

Moreover, it is the Conservatives who are more often the main challengers in Liberal Democrat seats than Labour. This means there may be no salvation for the Liberal Democrats in such situations without a degree of repositioning to the left. There has to be a very large suspicion that some sort of reversal strategy may be necessary, especially given the nature of their competitive dynamic with the Conservative party in many of the seats the party holds.

For that to happen, in all likelihood they will either require a Labour party shift to the left or a change of their own party leadership, or probably a mixture of both. Their current position seems to suggest a squeeze from the left and the right, which is likely to increase the chances of a majority Labour or Conservative government after the next election. The U.K.'s flirtation with genuine three-party politics may be brief unless the Liberal Democrats can perform some form of elegant reversal.

For Labour to maintain its recent bump in the polls, it needs to address the economic credibility issue. The economic crisis has taken its toll upon Labour. As the government in office at the time of the global financial crisis, it inevitably sustained a political hit. According to Ipsos Mori, Labour led by a 38-to-13 percent margin on economic competence as the global financial crisis was beginning in September 2007. A recent ComRes poll shows that 36 percent believe Labour would manage the economy better than the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, but 54 percent disagree.

The Conservatives were able to reframe the economic issue into a concern about deficit reduction. In June 2009, Ipsos MORI found that 40 percent of respondents agreed that “There is a real need to cut spending on public services in order to pay off the very high national debt we now have.” In November, that had increased to 56 percent.

Quite simply, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has been very successful in moving the center to their advantage which creates a fundamental issue for Labour—one which remains unaddressed.

In the pages that follow, this paper will examine the various economic, demographic and geographic dynamics that will determine whether a new progressive political coalition can be forged in the United Kingdom in the coming decade. The answer, it will be argued, will turn on whether progressives can take advantage of these changing dynamics, particularly the changing class and racial makeup of the U.K., as they attempt a delicate balancing act between commitments to stability, economic opportunity, and ethical concerns among different groups of voters.

Shifting coalitions

Race and immigration

In 2008, 16.2 percent of the U.K. population was nonwhite British, with 11 percent of the population foreign born (up from 6 percent in 1981.) There is considerable diversity within the United Kingdom's ethnic minority population, with no single group dominating: Indians account for 2.1 percent of the population, Pakistanis 1.7 percent, Black Africans 1.4 percent, Black Caribbean 1.1 percent, and "other white/white Irish" are 5.2 percent.

A number of ethnic groups have a young age distribution and so are likely to grow as a proportion of the population over the coming years. These groups include mixed race Britons, Pakistani Britons, Bangladeshis, Black Africans, and "other black" ethnic minority groups. The political consequences of these demographic changes are difficult to model currently because:

- We don't have accurate data on the scale and pace of these changes, not least because levels of net immigration are changeable due to economic conditions and immigration laws.
- There is very little data on the geographical distribution of these changes.
- Past political preferences are not necessarily a certain guide to future preferences as we move from first generation immigrants to second- and third-generation Britons.

The Office of National Statistics has shied away from the controversy of population projections by ethnicity, but there are two academic analyses that have attempted to build a model of change: David Coleman of the University of Oxford, and Phil Rees at the University of Leeds. Table 1 below is reproduced from the latter's "Ethnic population projections for the UK and local areas, 2001-2051."¹

TABLE 1

The minority population in the United Kingdom will increase rapidly

Comparisons with the U.K. ethnic group projections of Coleman (2010) for 12 groups

Ethnic Groups (millions population)	2001	Coleman 2031	Coleman 2056	UPTAP-ER 2031	UPTAP-ER 2051
White British	51.47	51.69	44.99	54.7	54.52
Other white	2.92	4.78	8.34	4.55	4.87
Mixed	0.69	2.23	4.21	1.61	2.06
Asian Bangladeshi	0.29	0.84	1.36	0.51	0.63
Asian Indian	1.07	2.82	4.6	1.84	2.18
Asian Pakistani	0.76	2.13	3.59	1.45	1.83
Asian other	0.25	0.84	1.38	0.48	0.57
Black African	0.5	2.08	3.76	0.93	1.04
Black Caribbean	0.57	0.73	0.79	0.69	0.71
Black other	0.1	0.18	0.24	0.18	0.22
Chinese	0.25	1.33	2.37	0.47	0.53
Other	0.24	1.41	2.56	0.52	0.56
BAME	4.73	14.59	24.86	8.68	10.32
% BAME	8	20.53	31.8	12.77	14.81

Source: Pia Wohland, Phil Rees, Paul Norman, Peter Boden, Martyna Jasinska, Ethnic population projections for the UK and local areas, 2001-2051. P.133. <http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/index.php?id=712>

Table 1 compares the University of Leeds model with that of Coleman and shows enormous variation. Nonetheless, by 2031 it does not seem unreasonable to project that the Black, Asian, and minority ethnic, or BAME, population could be somewhere in the region of double that of 2001—8.68 million in 2031 versus 4.73 million in 2001—and the nonwhite British population could be around the 20 percent mark compared to 13 percent in 2001.

However, spatially the distribution of ethnic minority populations will also change according to dynamic modeling by the University of Leeds:

“Ethnic minorities will shift out of the most deprived local authorities and will move into the least deprived local authorities... the percentage of the mixed-group population in the most deprived quintile of [local authorities] reduces from 26 percent to 19 percent, while the percentage in the least deprived quintile increases from 22 percent to 29 percent. The corresponding shifts for Asian groups are from 25 percent to 18 percent for the most deprived quintile and from 9 percent to 20

percent for the least deprived quintile. For Black groups the most deprived quintile sees a decrease from 54 percent to 39 percent while the least deprived quintile sees an increase from 7 percent to 19 percent.”²

What this means in practice is that the ethnic minority vote becomes more important in terms of *both* volume and spatial distribution as it deconcentrates. What we don’t have is a model of changing voting behavior as ethnic groups become more affluent and move to more affluent areas. But it is worth noting the latest voting figures available for ethnic groups from 2005.³ (see Table 2)

TABLE 2
Minorities tend to support Labour

How different minority groups vote

	All BAME	Caribbean	African	Indian	Bangladeshi	Pakistani	Mixed/ other
Conservative	10	3	2	11	9	11	13
Labour	58	80	79	56	41	50	47
Liberal Democrat	16	5	11	14	16	25	22
Other	4	2	1	1	21	8	5
Refused to say	12	11	7	17	13	7	12

Source: Roger Mortimore and Kully Kaur-Ballagan, Ethnic minority voters and non-voters at the British General Election 2005. p.4. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Publications/ethnic-minority-voters-and-non-voters.pdf>

What is interesting here is that the most economically upscale of these groups, the Indians, do not have the lowest propensity to vote Labour, with 56 percent still voting for the party. Labour’s performance is weakest amongst the fastest-growing groups—Bangladeshis Pakistanis, and mixed-race Britons—but the Conservative vote is low across the board.

What is clear is that immigration has become a major issue of concern in the United Kingdom. What impact an increasingly diverse society will have on the toxicity of immigration as an issue remains to be seen. Two forces pull in opposite directions in this area—increasing tolerance and acceptance in a more diverse society versus negative reactions to this social change.

In 1997, 5 percent cited immigration as one of the main issues facing Britain. By 2006, 40 percent saw it as one of the main issues. A YouGov poll in 2009 found that 52 percent of the voters that Labour had lost since 2005 saw immigration as one of the most important issues facing Britain. But these attitudes are not driven in significant part by racially discriminatory attitudes as only 15 percent believe that employers should “favor white applicants over non-white applicants.”

The complex mix of cultural, social, and economic issues poses a deep challenge for progressive causes. Labour’s coalition has increasingly blended traditional communities where concern about immigration is greatest and educated professionals where liberal views are most pronounced. Holding both elements together in a viable electoral coalition requires smart and creative political strategies.

Class and education

Britain is a professionalizing society, with the change concentrated mainly among females. Between 1991 and 2005 the proportion of women in “classes I and II,” which roughly correspond to the so-called AB group of professionals and senior managers, increased from 30 percent to 40 percent of the population. The equivalent growth for men was 39 percent to 43 percent. Overall, the Work Foundation estimates that the number of “knowledge workers” defined (not completely satisfactorily) as managerial, professional, and associate professional occupational classes will increase from 41 percent in 2004 to 45 percent in 2015.⁴

Accompanying this demographic change has been a decoupling of class and party identification. Labour’s vote is now almost completely “post class.” U.K. polling organizations tend to use the National Readership Survey as a proxy for socio-demographic groups. While this is unsatisfactory in a number of ways—not least because significant sub-groups such as small business owners are not identified—it provides a good enough assessment for changes in class voting over time. Table 3 on page 8 details the classifications and the proportions of the population that are included in each group.⁵

In 1992, Labour’s vote was 11 percent AB, 17 percent C1 (low-level white collar), 31 percent C2 (skilled manual) and 42 percent of its vote was in classes DE (unskilled manual, laborer, and pensioner). By 2005, the proportions were: 27 percent AB, 29 percent C1, 18 percent C2, and 25 percent DE. This trend toward a swelling of professional classes as a proportion of Labour’s vote continued in 2010. By 2005, Labour’s vote had become almost a snapshot of the U.K. population—in this sense the party’s support is now “classless.”

But it is not only the composition of a party’s support that matters. It is, of course, also the overall level. Table 4 from Ipsos MORI shows the support for the major U.K. parties and how it has changed over time amongst AB, C1, C2, and DE voters.⁶

TABLE 3
How the U.K. population is distributed by class

Distribution of the U.K. population by class, 2010

		Percent of population (NRS 2010)
A	Higher managerial, administrative, and professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional	22
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional	29
C2	Skilled manual workers	21
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	8

Source: National Readership Survey.

TABLE 4
How party support by class has changed over time

Party support by class, 1974-2010

	Oct-74	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Middle Class (ABC1)									
Conservative	56	59	55	54	54	39	38	37	39
Labour	19	24	16	18	22	34	34	39	27
Lib/Alliance/LD	21	15	28	26	21	20	22	26	26
Con lead	37	35	39	36	32	5	4	6	12
Skilled working class (C2)									
Conservative	26	41	40	40	39	27	29	33	37
Labour	49	41	32	36	40	50	49	40	29
Lib/Alliance/LD	20	15	26	22	17	16	15	19	22
Con lead	-23	0	8	4	-1	-23	-20	-7	8
Semi/unskilled working class (DE)									
Conservative	22	34	33	30	31	21	24	25	31
Labour	57	49	41	48	49	59	55	48	40
Lib/Alliance/LD	16	13	24	20	16	13	13	18	17
Con lead	-35	-15	-8	-18	-18	-38	-31	-23	-9

Source: Ipsos MORI

What this shows is that the Conservative lead among professional and middle classes has declined from 37 percent to 12 percent from 1974-2010. In 2001, they only led by 4 percent among this group, yet a 23 percent deficit in 1974 became an 8 percent lead in 2010 among C2 voters (skilled working class.) There has also been a large shift in working class support, with a 35 percent Conservative deficit in 1974 becoming a 9 percent deficit in 2010. It remains to be seen whether 2010 was an outlier or the first signifier of the permanent decoupling of the working class vote from Labour. It should be stated that a degree of caution is needed in this regard as Labour only led by 8 percent in this group in 1983 but then rebuilt a lead of 38 percent by 1997.

Currently 30 percent of the workforce has been educated to degree level which will increase as 43 percent of 18- to 30-year-olds are currently in education. The number of boys achieving a full level-three qualification—equivalent to two “A Levels” (the main U.K. school-level academic qualification normally taken at 18 years old) has increased from 16 percent in 1992 to 48 percent in 2002. The rise among girls is 20 percent to 57 percent over the same period.

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Generation

The United Kingdom is an aging society. By 2011 the number of Britons over 65 years of age will outnumber the number under 16 years old. In 2008, the over 65-year-olds were 16 percent of the population. By 2033, they are forecast to be 23 percent of the population.

Those over 65 are more likely to vote (76 percent turnout in 2010 compared to 65 percent overall) and they are more likely to vote Conservative (44 percent for the Conservatives compared to 31 percent though Labour’s vote was down by 4 percent in this age group compared to -9 percent in the 35-to-44 age group.) The historical data are below.⁷ (see Table 5)

There are two conclusions to be drawn from the data. First, in the last four elections there was an increasing propensity to vote Conservative as we look at older groups of voters. Second, it is not such a strong relationship that Labour can’t hope to lead in any of the broad age groups in certain circumstances, and indeed did lead among over 55 year olds in the 1997 general election.

TABLE 5
Conservatives do relatively well among older voters
Party support by age group, 1974-2010

	Oct-74	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
18-34									
Conservative			41	38	38	28	25	26	33
Labour			31	36	38	49	48	38	31
Lib/Alliance/LD			27	24	18	16	21	27	29
Con lead			10	2	0	-21	-23	-12	2
35-54									
Conservative	34	46	44	45	43	30	30	29	34
Labour	42	35	27	29	34	45	43	38	29
Lib/Alliance/LD	20	16	27	24	19	19	20	24	26
Con lead	-8	11	17	16	9	-15	-13	-9	5
55+									
Conservative	42	47	47	46	46	36	39	40	41
Labour	40	38	27	31	34	40	38	34	30
Lib/Alliance/LD	14	13	24	21	17	17	17	20	19
Con lead	2	9	20	15	12	-4	1	6	11

Source: Ipsos MORI

Marital status

Between 1983 and 2008, the United Kingdom's population increased from 56.3 million to 61.4 million, yet in the same period the number of households increased by 25 percent to 25.7 million. This is partly a reflection of the aging society. It is also a reflection of people staying single longer and being more likely to separate or divorce. Between 1981 and 2008, the number of single-person households rose by 73 percent, from 4.3 million to 7.5 million. By 2021 single households will account for one-third of the total.

Over the past decade, the number of married-couple families fell from 12.5 million to 12.2 million, and the number of single-parent families rose from 2.5 million to 2.7 million. Meanwhile, the number of cohabiting couples increased from 1.8 million to 2.7 million.

What this means in political terms is that we are seeing a decline in what might be described as the typical family. Over-reaching in favor of supporting traditional notions of the family may become a political error. A more balanced and diverse response may be required.

Women

There were only two major demographics where Labour did not lose support in 2010: 18- to 24-year-old men, and women in the AB social class. This latter demographic is expanding, demonstrating that Labour is at the very least holding on to its support among professionals. In aggregate, it is favored by 31 percent of women as opposed to 28 percent of men overall. It must be of concern, however, that Labour lost 15 percent among women aged 18-to-24, according to Ipsos Mori figures.

This may, however, have been partly to do with a lack of affinity of this demographic with former Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The swelling ranks of female professionals should play in the center-left's favor. Table 6 details the 2010 data for women voting broken down by age and class. Table 7 shows party support by gender going back to 1974.

TABLE 6

How women voted in 2010 by age and class

Party support by gender, women by age and women by class, 2010

	Voting						Change since 2005				
	Con	Lab	LD	Other	Con lead over Lab	Turnout	Con	Lab	LD	Turnout	Lab-Con swing
Gender											
Male	38	28	22	12	10	66	4	-6	0	4	5
Female	36	31	26	8	4	64	4	-7	3	3	5.5
Women by age											
18-24	30	28	34	9	2	39	8	-15	8	4	11.5
25-34	27	38	27	8	-11	54	6	-5	-1	6	5.5
35-54	33	31	29	8	2	67	6	-9	4	6	7.5
55+	42	30	21	7	12	73	1	-4	1	0	2.5
Women by class											
AB	34	29	31	6	5	75	-2	0	2	4	-1
C1	39	28	25	8	10	66	5	-7	2	5	6
C2	41	25	25	9	17	58	7	-15	5	0	11
DE	29	45	19	7	-15	56	4	-4	1	2	4

Source: Ipsos MORI

TABLE 7

Labour has recently done slightly better among women than men

Party support by gender, 1974-2010

	Oct-74	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Men									
Con	32	43	42	43	41	31	32	34	38
Lab	43	40	30	32	37	45	42	34	28
Lib/Alliance/LD	18	13	25	23	18	17	18	22	22
Con lead	-11	3	12	11	4	-14	-10	0	10
Women									
Con	39	47	46	43	44	32	33	32	36
Lab	38	35	26	32	34	44	42	28	31
Lib/Alliance/LD	20	15	27	23	18	18	19	23	26
Con lead	1	12	20	11	10	-12	-9	-6	4

Source: Ipsos MORI

Labour has a slight relative advantage among women, especially professional women. Should this continue, then this is beneficial in two regards. First, professionals are more likely to vote. Second, this is an expanding demographic; in 1991 30 percent of women were in NS-SEC classes I and II (higher managers and professionals, large employers; lower managers and professionals.) By 2005 that had become 40 percent of women.⁸

Seculars

British Election Study data suggests that secularism is not particularly beneficial to the Labour party. In fact, the only large religious category (greater than 5 percent of the population) that seems to lean disproportionately in Labour’s favor is the U.K.’s Catholics, who make up 9 percent of the population.⁹ (See Table 8)

TABLE 8
Labour’s best religious group is Catholics

Party vote by religious affiliation, 2010

Vote choice at the May 2010 general election by religious affiliation					
	Anglican/ C of E	Roman Catholic	Other Christian	Other	No religion
Labour	25.5	39.9	29.9	27.8	27.5
Conservative	45.5	29.3	32.6	31.3	29.2
Lib Dem	20.5	23.2	26	30.9	33.2
Other	8.5	7.6	11.5	9.9	10.1

Source: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/?p=481>

It is likely that much of this is explained by the socio-demographic and migrant status makeup of the Catholic population more than any “Catholic factor” per se (which plays in a different way among Church of England/Anglican voters.) There are pockets of religiously motivated voting, such as certain portions of the Islamic vote, which turned against Labour in the aftermath of the Iraq War. Immigration status and socio-economic position tend to play more significantly. Faith voting tends to be localized.

Geography

Compared to an overall national vote of 29 percent for Labour in the 2010 election, the party's support in the large cities was 44 percent, and in the suburbs and small towns it was 29 percent (Conservatives were 33 percent and 36 percent, respectively), according to data analysis by polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. In the (non-London) South and the Midlands, Labour support was 16 percent and 23 percent, respectively. In the North and Scotland it was 39 percent and 41 percent, respectively. (see Table 9)

TABLE 9
Labour does best in London, Wales, Scotland, and the North

Party voting by region, 1983, 2005, and 2010

Region and voting 1983, 2005, and 2010												
Region	Con 1983	Con 2005	Con 2010	Lab 1983	Lab 2005	Labour 2010	Lib/ SDP 1983	Lib Dem 2005	Lib Dem 2010	Nationalist 1983	Nationalist 2005	Nationalist 2010
Scotland	28.4	15.8	16.7	33.1	39.5	42	24.5	22.6	18.9	11.8	17.7	19.9
Wales	31	21.4	26.1	37.5	42.7	36.2	23.2	18.4	20.1	7.8	12.6	11.3
North	34.6	19.5	26.6	40.2	49.8	41.2	25	23.3	23.7			
N. West	40	28.7	31.1	36	46	40.2	23.4	21.4	21.4			
Yorks. & Humbs.	38.7	29.1	32.8	35.3	43.6	34.4		20.7	22.9			
W. Mid	45	35	39.5	31.2	38.7	30.6	23.4	18.6	20.5			
E. Mid	47.2	37.1	41.2	28	39	29.8	24.1	18.5	20.8			
E. Anglia	51	43.3	44.7	20.5	29.6	18.8	28.2	21.8	27			
S. East [excl all London]		43.3	49.6		25.5	17.4		21.4	25			
Gtr. London	43.9	31.9	34.5	29.8	38.9	36.6	24.9	21.9	22.1			
S. West	51.4	38.6	42.8	14.7	22.8	15.4	33.2	32.6	34.7			

Sources: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/constituencies/default.stm; The British General Election of 1983 (David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh); The British General Election of 2010 (Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley); <http://www.earlham sociology pages.co.uk/vbint.htm>

As things stand, Labour is now a major urban and northern/Scottish/Welsh party largely absent from southern and Midlands nonurban England. The geography of Labour's support is extremely disadvantageous. Those suburbs and small towns are where many of the marginal seats are that a party must win in order to have a chance of forming a majority. But we are talking one election's data, so it's impossible to conclude that this is a trend.

The new pluralist left coalition

In a sense, the left's coalition challenge is similar to that of the right. The previous model of building a winning coalition, to simplify, was to secure your base and reach for the center ground. But there is such a weakening relationship between class and voting that this strategic approach is very difficult to carry off. Put simply, in terms of the last election, the Conservatives failed to build a majority and Labour failed to hold on to one.

Neither of the two main parties has secured more than 37 percent of the vote in the last two elections. Labour has made enormous in-roads into the professional classes, but has failed to hold onto its working class base. The Conservatives have experienced a similar erosion of their political base.

Labour's challenge is to further build support among growing professional groups and the United Kingdom's fragmented ethnic minorities. At the same time, the party must hold a portion of the middle classes as they are over-represented in the towns and suburbs that Labour must win to form a majority. The U.K. is increasingly divided along identity lines—the working classes (including many ethnic minority groups) have a greater attachment to tradition and place, while the growing professional demographic is more footloose and opportunity seeking. The increasing salience of immigration as an issue partly describes these new cultural divides. But this is not just a new description of class. In many ways, these issues cut across and into classes.

The elevation of immigration may hint at a new dynamic of British politics. An axis of communitarian versus individualist values seems to have emerged alongside the traditional left-right axis. Once the current economic storm has passed, British politics may be more located along the more identity-driven (though not exclusively so) communitarian-individualist axis.

The upshot: Future coalition-building won't be driven by clever positioning and marketing. The divides—by attitude, value, and outlook—between fragmented

groups are too great for the political strategies that worked in the 1980s and 1990s. The decline of the Liberal Democrats as a result of the unpopularity of their involvement in a coalition with a fiscal austerity package as its core mission could change the strategic imperative once again.

The underlying instability of potential electoral coalitions will remain. To succeed in building something more enduring, the center-left may have to pursue both a bottom-up strategy of active community engagement alongside a top-down vision of a post-austerity Britain that combines a degree of security for those of a communitarian bent with opportunity for those who seek to be socially mobile. Such a strategy requires political craftsmanship and leadership at the top and organizational innovation and painstaking commitment at a local level.

To seek to bring Britain's increasingly granular society together in some meaningful form will be no easy task. The alternative is to wait for the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to implode, or for the Conservatives themselves to implode. That is no strategy at all; it's despair.

The evidence in this paper quantifies the scale of the challenge more than identifying clear opportunities for demographically driven coalition building. So be it. But understanding the nature of what is happening in a changing society, with changing drivers of political decision-making and a changed party system, at least gives the rebuilding effort on the center-left a focus. Labour and the center-left will turn their current fortunes around just as they have always managed to do, but once again it will be different. And unless they appreciate that, it will take rather longer than it should.

A new center-left vision

First of all, it is worth saying that Labour has succeeded electorally when it has sought to present a narrative that is not solely “progressive” in nature. This can be seen in the case of New Labour, which was a blend of conservatism (community, family, and flag but with faith de-emphasised), liberal progressivism (an open and free market economy), and social democracy (expansion of the welfare state and public services.) As time went on, it was the latter two elements that increasingly dominated, which partly explains why Labour began to lose traction with voters who had more identity driven value sets since the British working class does have a conservative strain.

By 2010, the other two elements had been blown apart also. The global financial collapse and the controversy caused by large net inward migration throughout the 2000s challenged the legitimacy of the party’s liberal progressive strain. Finally, the social democratic strain lost credibility in the face of a £155 billion (\$250 billion) fiscal deficit. The language of “investment versus cuts” was dead, replaced instead by “bad cuts versus even worse cuts.” The New Labour coalition had disintegrated, and the party fell to its second worst level of support since 1918.

But if we look at the British electorate in a different way from the traditional socio-demographic categories then a new vision suggests itself—one that is deeply compatible with the Labour tradition. According to Cultural Dynamics there are essentially three basic value sets (based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs): stability/identity, material, and ethical mindsets.¹⁰ Much as New Labour attempted to respond to these basic categories of need, the outlines of a new vision can be sketched taking into account the barriers that the party increasingly faced. The challenge will be to draw these elements together in a coherent fashion, which will require dextrous leadership.

Stability/identity

Change, and the perception of change, is deeply disturbing to people who are driven by values that emphasise stability and identity. This is the group who feel they have suffered most in recent times, and this explains a spike in feelings of nostalgia. Labour

must have a strong narrative that emphasizes these constants: nation, family, community. To rebuild trust and dialogue with many in this group, it must continue to acknowledge that immigration must be carefully managed, and crime and antisocial behavior must remain on the party's radar (this doesn't suggest what the approach should be; just that they need due care and attention.)

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's "big society" will leave this group largely unaffected. The austerity program will bite and their incomes will suffer. This group is just as likely to contain the urban less well-off and older groups of voters in a range of places. Labour must organize to draw these groups into political dialogue and involvement.

Here an overtly localist agenda could be an important approach to pursue. The coalition's public service reform program, most especially of the National Health Service, is likely to create all sorts of localized concerns that will disempower local communities and patients. A message of "calm *after* the storm" would be right after convulsive change.

Labour's political economy must have a sensitivity to location as well as a sensitivity to growth. It is important not to overpromise on this front. Not only does growth matter but the distribution of opportunity matters also.

Economic opportunity and material benefits

Quite simply, Labour will need to create a convincing political economic strategy. There are two steps to this. First, it will need to acknowledge further the mistakes that were made in the run-up to the financial crisis, not only the lax regulation but fiscal looseness too. Alongside this, it must never concede the point that its response to the crisis was the right one, noting constantly that the Conservatives also backed Labour's approach to fiscal policy and were more *laissez-faire* on financial regulation.

The second element to this recovery is a new growth strategy. Britain has a deep economic imbalance as too much of its economy is devoted to financial services, which imposes severe risks even with a more stringent regulatory approach. The only ways to rebalance the economy are to:

- Widen the pool of capital for investment in the real economy
- Boost the levels of innovation in the economy
- Improve the nation's stock of human capital

All this suggests new government interventions. Indeed, the range of investments must span:

- Infrastructure
- Research and development
- Promotion of the creative industries, and creativity in industry and services
- Capital priming, and incentivising skills and academic investment
- Clustering of research, commerce, finance, and education/skills
- New approaches to education that both improve outcomes and widen the diversity of skills and capabilities

A return to the liberal economic approach of New Labour will not be sufficient. For Labour to make this case, however, it must first be listened to. For that to be case, the first condition—contrition and honesty about where it went wrong—must be met. Tracking forward, it must lay out a new and credible framework for ensuring fiscal caution while understanding the importance and symbolism of tax rates to a group among whom many would have faced declining real incomes for a long period of time by 2015 and so will have a natural and understandable political suspicion.

Ethical concern

The good news for Labour is that much of its program will appeal to those with this standpoint—one driven by notions of “fairness.” Restoring the value of public services after convulsive austerity reforms will naturally appeal. In electing a new leader who has expressed doubts about the Iraq War, much of the negativity associated with that has declined. Many of these voters will be former Liberal Democrat voters. Labour’s internationalist outlook and environmental concern will also meet the ethical concerns of these voters.

While this group is expanding within the U.K. population, it is also most at odds with the other two groups. This is where the balancing act needs to be struck. Take environmental policy. Where it implies tax and energy price increases, it is a much more difficult sell to the other two groups. Internationalism and ethical politics are intrinsic to the Labour vision. It does, however, need to be understood that this is not a universal outlook—far from it.

Conclusion

There is nothing that suggests a delicate balancing act between identity and stability, material concern, and ethical concern cannot be struck. The United Kingdom in 2015 will be even more pluralistic in both demographic and attitudinal terms. Ultimately, the glue will be political leadership, the nature of political conversation, and political organization.

That glue becomes possible if the policy platform is both credible and balanced. The next Labour party won't be New Labour. In fact, it can't be New Labour in significant respects. So a new program that blends labourism with a credible growth strategy and ethical awareness will be necessary. It may sound messy but that's the nature of majoritarian politics in an increasingly pluralistic nation.

Endnotes

- 1 PiaWohland and others, "Ethnic population projections for the UK and local areas, 2001-2051," School of Geography, available at <http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/index.php?id=712>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 These figures are from 2005 so it is worth noting that the Iraq War will have had a detrimental impact on Labour's share of the vote amongst groups with a high Muslim concentration. Indications are that much of this negativity was reversed in 2010. This table is reproduced from Roger Mortimore and KullyKaur-Ballagan, "Ethnic minority voters and non-voters at the British General Election 2005" (London: Ipsos Mori, (2006), p.4, available at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Publications/ethnic-minority-voters-and-non-voters.pdf>.
- 4 Ian Brinkley, "Defining the Knowledge Economy" (London: The Work Foundation, 2006), p.19.
- 5 "Lifestyle Data," available at <http://www.nrs.co.uk/lifestyle.html>.
- 6 "How Britain Voted Since October 1974," available at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=101&view=wide>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 As yet unpublished analysis by Professor John Goldthorpe of Nuffield College, Oxford.
- 9 Ben Clements, "Religious Affiliation and Political Attitudes: Findings from the British Election Study 2009/10," British Religion In Numbers, August 25, 2010, available at <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/?p=481>.
- 10 Cultural Dynamics reference available at <http://www.cultdyn.co.uk/valuesmodes.html>

About the author

Anthony Painter is a political writer, commentator, and researcher. He wrote *Fear and Hope: The New Politics of Identity* published by Searchlight Educational Trust in February 2011 and *The Politics of Perpetual Renewal* published by Demos in 2010. Previously, he wrote *Barack Obama: The Movement for Change* and was a European parliamentary candidate in 2009.

Acknowledgements

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