

PROGRESSIVE POLITICS: WHAT IS IT, WHAT IS IT FOR, AND HOW DO WE GET IT?

'where would we get to
If everyone said
Where would we get to
And no one went
To have a look
Where we'd get to
If we went'

Kurt Marti

Kurt Marti is a Swiss theologian and poet much loved by east European dissidents in the 1980s. Although their struggle then was for freedom and democracy, few could say what they would do with it if they got it.

It is a bit like that now. Not only did it take only 38% and 27% of those eligible to vote to, respectively, take the UK out of the EU and elect Mr. D Trump as 45th US President, but also neither campaign had a plan for the next fortnight, never mind the next few years. Nevertheless, what happened in the UK and the USA is the *consequence* of a politics that is failing to serve the best interests of either people or the natural world. Both results are part of a widespread disenchantment with and fragmentation of traditional left and right political ideologies, manifest in several countries by voters shifting to more extreme variants. Both were the only possible vote against more of the same.

All of which makes this the moment for those who are currently talking about 'progressive' politics to get very clear about what 'progressive' means, what any progressive alliance could offer to a disaffected electorate, and how majorities could be built around it.

This contribution to the debate is offered as a think-piece bordering on an action plan!

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1. What does 'progressive' politics mean?

NELSON MANDELA

"There is no passion to be found playing small - in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."

In the UK, even those who talk most about a Progressive Alliance are not united in what they mean by 'progressive'. For some, it means political parties not either Conservative or UKIP but positioned to the left on the traditional left-right axis used for political analysis. For others, it means any party (or person) campaigning for a proportional representation voting system, because they believe that, with it, sufficient people would vote for a 'progressive' (i.e. left +/- centre, not right) package of policies.

Some have gone further and tried to articulate a cluster of values and policies that represent the political or ideological 'place' where 'progressives' are to be found. For example, [More United](#), and in [The Alternative](#), an interesting collection of essays exploring a progressive alliance, editors Caroline Lucas (Green Party), Lisa Nandy (Labour Party) and Chris Bowers (LibDems) offer a three-paragraph definition of 'progressive' that combines values, opinions and hopes but explicitly excludes conservatives.

None have so far come up with a heart-lifting and confidence-inspiring narrative for either voters or activists. Which makes the idea that any 'progressive' alliance will emerge from the debris of the left rather fanciful. Moreover, in answering his own question in *The Alternative* - "Is there a progressive majority?" - John Curtice concludes that while there may be support for the '*sentiment*' of progressivism, when it comes to specific measures for redistributing wealth or even changing the electoral system, public preferences tend towards the *status quo*. Psephologist Curtice's findings support the view of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt that we will have to work hard to move beyond the current I-am-right-you-are-wrong stalemate if even loosely articulated 'progressive' ideas are to move into majority territory. (More from Haidt in 3 b).)

Remembering that more people didn't vote for Trump or Brexit than did (many did not vote at all), we can assume there is a legitimate vacancy for something to help people make sense of what to do next in today's increasingly difficult world. If we who call ourselves 'progressives' don't fill that vacancy, then others will – and are already doing so - not least the 'regressive'/extremist parties in forthcoming 2017 elections in Germany, the Netherlands

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and France, who deploy 'populism' for quite different political objectives to ours. The Green Party's Caroline Lucas, for example, [quizzed by Jon Snow](#) about the EU/Canada trade deal, was asked how her objections differ from those of *Front National's* Marine Le Pen in France or Donald Trump in the USA.

Returning to Kurt Marti's poem, my argument is that the current movement trying to assemble an alliance of 'progressives' is wrestling with the wrong problem in the wrong place. True, the electorate is fed up with the entire political system, including the quality of politicians – all across the left-right axis - but another re-arrangement of the political parties or suites of policies does not constitute a narrative that will make the hearts of either electorates or more than the hardest core of political activists zing with optimism about the future.

Campaigners for the environment and sustainability can learn from nearly 50 years of effort. Only a small amount of critical appraisal is needed to arrive at fundamental questions about why so many big negative trends remain unsloved, never mind halted or reversed. Here are two things which are relevant to thinking about a future alliance of 'progressives', presented as two 'what if' questions:

First, what if we set in motion a powerful *people-centred* narrative around how good it could be for us if a progressive view of the future came about? Not a detailed manifesto, just the headlines. And second, what if we escaped from the failing myth of right-bad/left-better politics and instead talked about a progressive/good and regressive/bad axis?

In a must-read book called [Econocracy](#), members of the now sizable student rebellion about how economics is taught point out that "the British public as a whole has never been asked what the aims of the economy should be" - so no wonder there is a resistance to being told that government knows best. So 'progressives' are advised to offer a simple, but nonetheless rigorous framework only (see the suggestion on page 5 of this article). No prescription. The idea is that the details and zillions of ideas for getting there are supplied by other people, starting from where they are and what their possibilities are. Masses of creativity and experimentation will be needed, so positive contributions are welcome from EVERYONE – wherever their stepping-off point from the wretched left-right axis might be. For more see 3 a) below.

My fear is that unless we can create a new political cleavage that gives us the command of both the language and a positive, attractive framing for any discussion about what happens next, 'progressives' will fail – the void will be filled by others. By having a *good enough* idea of where 'progressives' are heading, we can side-step the futile ideological debates of the past and recreate an inspirational debate about how we get to a future that sounds good for all life on earth. Then the questions to ask of any policy, action or words is nothing to do with left/right, but whether it is taking us in a sustainable/progressive direction or not. See 3 a) b) for more on questions as a political strategy.

What Nelson Mandela meant when he talked of 'playing big' (for a complete end to apartheid) is that only a strong narrative around the final goal will be powerful

enough to bring it about. His strategy was to make everything possible count as a step in that direction, right down to winning the right for Robben Island prisoners to wear long trousers! He created and sustained an irresistible momentum around a clearly articulated goal.

For sure, 'progressives' cannot afford to play small nor fail to be confident about the *practical* as well as visionary destination of their politics. So much is at stake, and not to be ready when opportunities arise would be unforgivable.

This is what 'progressive' politics means.

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2. What could 'progressive' politics offer a disaffected electorate?

MARK TWAIN

Once they lost sight of their goals, they redoubled their efforts

The [Mont Pelerin Society](#) was established in 1947 to bring into power economic theories now commonly called neo-liberal. It still exists today. Founded by Friedrich Hayek and championed by Milton Friedman, arguably the group's apogee came when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were elected to power in the USA and the UK respectively in the early 1980s. Arguably again, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the USA and the referendum vote in the UK for the country to leave the European Union can be seen as a redoubling of the efforts of the same ideology after the setbacks caused by the financial crises in 2008. The post-crash renaissance of hope that a non-right economic model would successfully challenge the neo-liberal narrative as the only possible economic truth proved short-lived. Even the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals include commitments to the same sort of economic growth that led to *unsustainability* in the first place.

True, the extreme right are well-funded, but Mandela and others teach us that there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come – provided it is championed by a trusted and wise leadership. So, learning from example: can we be cunning as well as bold in creating a new narrative about the future, one that offers an attractive most-good rather than a least-bad political choice at election times?

a) An attractive people-centred narrative about the future

[DAVID FLEMING](#)

Every civilisation has had its irrational but reassuring myth. Previous civilisations have used their culture to sing about it and tell stories about it. Ours has used mathematics to prove it.

The box below suggests five essential things which would have to prevail if we were living in the sort of society we could consider 'progressive' or, put another way, sustainable (i.e. having the capacity to continue into the long term). This is not a randomly assembled list, but is distilled from a fair amount of intellectual effort and trial by a new generation of potential leaders. All I have done is put people and how they live centre-stage.¹

Together these five outcomes tell a coherent story about what good would look like, leaving local detail and personal colour to close the gap between the progressive or sustainability 'sentiment' (which people like) and what it means in practice (of which they are scared).

FIVE BARE NECESSITIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE WAY OF LIFE

Sara Parkin, *What does good look like?* (2017 forthcoming)

1. We judge success by how good we feel about
 - ourselves
 - our relationships
 - the place where we live
2. We enjoy a sense of purpose, meaning and order in our lives
3. The logic of *fewer-people-consuming-less-stuff* shapes our economy
4. Our livelihoods are secured through building stocks of Natural, Human and Social Capital
5. Technologies and finance systems are *in service* to the above

For some time, the fossil fuel lobby have had a story-line in which environmentalists care about nature most while they care most about people. We have not been good at digging our way out of that narrative, and now the fossil fuel lobby runs the show in the USA, not us. Which makes it urgent we create attractive storylines about what it would be like to live in a society that was good for people as well as nature - storylines which go well with the

¹ The five 'bare necessities' derive from the Five Capitals and 12 Features model, sometimes favoured by Forum for the Future (see S. Parkin (2010) *The Positive Deviant: Sustainability Literacy in a Perverse World* and/or J. Porritt (2007 – revised edition) *Capitalism as if the world mattered*). The 12 features of a Sustainable Way of Life were designed in 1997 by Forum for the Future in partnership with Keele University, through an ESRC project grant that engaged 60 academics and practitioners. As a set, they were designed to be comprehensive, internally consistent, culturally neutral. For another earlier example, see *Blueprint for Survival* (1972)

places where people live and which speak to their lived experience as well as to their hopes and fears about the future.

The first necessity, for example, is simply a distillation of all the research into what makes people feel happy and satisfied with life. Wouldn't it be more sensible to judge whether our country, our community or our economy is 'successful' or not against those criteria rather than by GDP, an indicator which perversely incentivizes the opposite? It is what most people do instinctively.

A big part of feeling satisfied with our lives is finding a meaning in what we do and sharing a common purpose with others – enjoying a sense of belonging as well as certain order and predictability. Even terrorists say they enjoy the feeling of belonging and structure that comes with joining a terrorist cell.² Most cultures recognize that 'it takes a village to raise a child' and will affirm that the social service which matters most is the love and support of family, friends and neighbours. How can we rethink social security systems to support these more agreeable and often reciprocal arrangements, and make, as [Robert Putnam](#) says, uncivil society civil again?

Around the world people are starting already to live with 'de-growth' or more accurately a *disintensification* of economic life – where shrinking populations and the loss of old-fashioned economic activities are leading to different social and economic arrangements and ways of life (see for example [Shrinking Cities](#)). It doesn't have to lead to misery and impoverishment. In fact, the experience of different arrangements for economic and non-economic activity and getting a balance between competition, collaboration and reciprocity is something human communities have practiced for thousands of years, even in times of difficulty and hardship. Today the so-called global [shadow economy](#) (excluding illegal activities) is estimated to be worth around US\$10 trillion and is the fastest growing 'sector' in the world. What is there to learn from it about social and economic resilience, especially in localities, as the increasingly brittle formal economy fails? How do we share fairly the joys and pains of work in a way that doesn't depend on consuming ever-rising volumes of stuff?

Indeed, what would the world of work be like if we were living in a sustainable 'progressive' future? How would we secure our livelihoods? Or put food on the table, send our kids to school etc.? Ed Wilson, the famous biologist, has suggested we should 'set aside', in linked reserves, [half the Earth](#) for 'the rest of life', i.e. non-humans. He thinks, too, we can do it in a way which is good for people as we re-learn how to care for and live with nature. Permaculture on a global scale, if you like. It doesn't take much imagination to think about all the work to be done to make that happen, or in expanding the

competencies of people (we are all educated to way below our capabilities) or in strengthening our communities as we go. Who would deny that even the quality and the beauty of our built environment wouldn't benefit from lots and lots of work? Social resilience, like happiness, is about the breadth, depth and quality of the relationships between people and between them and nature. Livelihoods do not have to depend on activities that damage nature or people. They can depend on the opposite.

But - I hear you say - the world cannot thrive on building natural, human and social capital alone! Oh, yes it can – if we *choose* that it should. The economic system is a human construct, not a law of nature like gravity. The dominant economic theory and the financial systems it uses deepen inequality, drive the wrong sort of material consumption, and are environmentally (and morally) blind. Surely it would be better to put the cash and effort it takes to mitigate all those negative consequences – from poverty to pollution - to better use? If we can conjure up \$trillions to give to the banks in 2008, what is stopping us finding a few billions to stimulate direct investment in human well-being, our social fabric, and our natural environment, on which all depends? It has started already. Investment is draining out of fossil fuels and into renewable energy. What else can we do quickly? Take money into public ownership and return it to its original use – to simplify transactions rather than act as a commodity in its own right? A global surge in [local currencies](#) is beginning to show what can be done.

An equally powerful hand on the steering wheel of the current economic model is technology. At the moment, what it *can* do drives what we are *permitted* to do. Will genetically engineering a hairy mammoth help to feed future generations? And, do we really want robots to care for us in old age or to look after our toddlers, or are they an example of how technology is serving the growth of the wrong sort of economy? IT-based systems are competing with patients for the attention of doctors and nurses in the NHS, determining how our children think about themselves and each other, creating parallel universes where “alternative facts” spread like wildfire, and much more. Is this what we want?

I am not saying finance and technology are not part of a sustainable future, only asking whether we should question more strongly if they are pushing us in rather sad if not dangerous directions. How could technology – and finance – help us live how we want to live?

The previous three paragraphs probably contain more questions than you would expect in a soothing story about the future. That is intentional. Because, if anything, the spasm of irritation manifested by voters is down to the perception – and the real-life effects – of decision-makers with little or no idea of the hopes and fears of constituencies outside finance and other large business interests. And exasperation with their politicians' serial incapacity to implement policy that relieves the problems of citizens in their localities. In

the UK in 2015, Labour was shocked at the loss of so many of their “heartland” seats, but why would people vote *again* for a party that was re-elected to Westminster 3 times and still couldn’t pull them out of poverty?

The attractiveness of any ‘progressive’ narrative to voters will depend not only on a satisfactory logic in the story about what ‘good’ could look like, but also on the effectiveness of implementation for people where they live. And that can only come about with a carefully curated and iterative dialogue between the headline policies and the details added by the people who will a) pay for them and b) live the consequences.

b) An escape from the decaying L-R ideological axis (see also schema p20)

The current L-R political axis is already losing salience with the public and as a useful framing for political analysis. There is no longer a recognizable ideology of the left or right, as neither has a coherent package of policies that address the interconnected problems of, on the one hand, dangerous climate change and gross financial inequality, and on the other hand, everyday local concerns about housing, jobs, public services. Moreover, as taking part in the political process has never been more unattractive (to women in particular), the capabilities of candidates across the board is not great.

Therefore ‘progressive’ politics, whether as an alliance of people, groups or parties, should be able to offer a *new* and enjoyable political home to people who want to lean, not left or right, but forward towards a sustainable future.

The defining position for ‘progressive’ will be consistently in contrast to ‘regressive’ politics, which is backward-looking, *behind* the L-R axis to where the extremes of both left and right bend round and meet. Thus, Le Pen’s motives for not wanting an EU/Canada trade deal are protectionist and nationalist, meaning closing off relationships, while Lucas’s are about protecting diverse, resilient local economies (in both EU and Canada) and internationalist: championing fair trade everywhere.

This new axis will need to be talked, drawn and written into common parlance, until political analysis of this person, that political party or policy will be on the ‘progressive’ (larger lives, forward-looking) – ‘regressive’ (narrower lives, backward-looking) axis. Something to be done carefully, so that non-populists (who reject the ‘pure’ people v the corrupt ‘elite’ narrative) are not characterized as anti ‘the people’. But done nevertheless with some urgency, as others are already at work redrafting the political spectrum. For example, in Turkey where a Muslim/non-Muslim axis is gaining traction.

c) A public engagement in the policy-implementation cascade

To be taken as serious contenders for elected posts, ‘progressives’ will have to demonstrate that they understand how to make policy that fits the purpose

for which it is intended *and* understand the processes that lead to successful implementation.

Two lessons – from Tony Blair’s administration and from [Elinor Ostrom](#), the first woman to gain a Nobel Prize for economics – are worth heeding by ‘progressives’ seeking to bring politically disaffected voters into their ambit.

- **The Blair Lesson**

When Tony Blair led a long out-cast Labour Party into government in the UK in 1997, he was deeply frustrated at the difficulty of implementing all the lovely policies worked up so carefully during many years in opposition, so in his second term he set up a Delivery Unit and a suite of Leadership Academies – one each for the NHS, Police, Local Government and so on - all designed to ‘train’ people how to run organisations and implement policy. Some still exist.

But still, those in positions of political power – in the institutions of state and at different levels of government right up to the Cabinet Office – are not particularly competent in either designing policy (of a kind that is implementable without unintended consequences) or in managing large departments and other organisations. One of Blair’s Cabinet Ministers told me he got four half-days training. In the other half of the equation, people in their communities may be unimpressed by the amateurism of politicians and resistant to policies that don’t quite fit, but they too need training in how to contribute – both to policy design and its implementation – as an iterative process.

The Blair lesson is that competence in governance and political process should be part of our culture. Participation at all levels should be an attractive proposition.

- **The Ostrom Lesson**

[Elinor Ostrom](#) brings a similar lesson about how important it is to work painstakingly with local communities. She did some brilliant work on identifying how the sharing of scarce resources depended on mutually agreed structures and processes for getting things done.

Ostrom was prompted by her observations as an academic that the ‘tragedy of the commons’, as popularized by Garrett Hardin in the 1960s, was not inevitable. Hardin argued that individuals would put their own interests (such as grazing their animals, taking water for irrigation, fishing) above those of others, so the exhaustion of a shared resource on which all depended was inevitable.

By contrast, Ostrom painstakingly observed the many ways communities spontaneously organized in their localities so that a shared resource was protected from over use. From her multiple observations in many countries and cultures she identified eight principles that ensured such a system would work into the long term:

- Clear boundaries and membership
- Congruent (locally appropriate) rules
- Collective choice arenas (places and processes for decision-making)
- Monitoring systems
- Graduated sanctions to punish rule-breaking
- Conflict resolution mechanisms
- Recognised rights to organise
- 'Nested' units or enterprises (each obeys rules set higher up)

Just as usefully, Ostrom provided a map of the elements and processes used to decide how a system for sharing scarce resources could be tailored to different localities. **Because there is no one-size-fits-all of the time** rule. The principles are pretty universal, but the rules and the final system are the product of so many variables that only the people living with it are competent to fit it to their needs and maintain and adapt it over time.

The lesson from Elinor Ostrom is that anyone proposing a 'progressive' political agenda, whether in alliance or not, will find it hard to gain the electorate's ear – never mind the respect of the commentators – unless they can demonstrate that they understand the perils of the policy-implementation cascade. And, better still, can offer a tried and tested – and fair - methodology for engaging people in matters that affect everyone.

[Indeed, if we were to hold a Constitutional Convention or other process for refreshing the UK democratic system, Ostrom's map for decision-making would be a useful way of setting about it.]

d) A most-good rather than least-bad choice at elections

Even if the chances of a formal Progressive Alliance of the non-right wing political parties in the next UK national election are slim, 'progressives' can start immediately on storylines around a shared idea of what life in a society shaped by 'progressive' policies could be like. And include their ideas for 'defending and improving' our democracy (including how the EU could work better too – just in case!). The rationale is to build up support for the idea of a *most-good* option for voters, instead of a *least bad* one. Progressive politicians and activists will need to build a 'demand' for their type of politics, rather than assuming (mistakenly, *pace* Curtice) that it only lies sleeping.

This is because there is one lesson from the Brexit and Trump votes in 2016 worth thinking about quite hard. In neither case were people voting for the least-bad option; those who voted for Brexit and Trump were voting for the most-good one as they saw it – the vote most likely to change the *status quo* of which they wanted no more. And they found that experience exhilarating! Can ‘progressives’ create the same excitement (risky, but worth it) around a vote for a future political agenda that could deliver something like the five outcomes suggested on page 5?

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3. How could we build majorities around ‘progressive’ politics?

Very few people (probably under 20%) think automatically in outcomes. Which is part of the reason policy planning rarely strays into the longer term. It is also why the most popular courses taught in Business Schools are about strategy. For most people, it has to be learnt.

Arguably, political parties and NGOs considered to be ‘progressive’ are not great at sophisticated strategies. In fact, a good example of how *not* to do it comes from the UK’s ‘The Real World Coalition’. In 1996, a powerful alliance of 33 NGOs [published their agenda for the incoming government](#). It caused serious ripples and prompted the then Conservative PM John Major to write (unsuccessfully) to the Charity Commission challenging the legality of the NGOs’ action. But when the Labour Party beat the incumbent Conservatives in a landslide, the coalition disbanded, confident the new political climate would see their individual demands and campaigns fulfilled. It didn’t. The lesson being that if you set your strategies against that of others, then you will only get the space they choose to give you.

Here are a few ideas for strategies and tactics to help build majorities around progressive politics. The ultimate *vehicle* for getting our ideas into power can be either an existing political party or a new one (though see e) below), or an alliance of people and/or parties. Whatever, being ready when the opportunity(ies) arise will be key. All of the ideas below can start tomorrow.

a) Learn from how the neo-conservatives did it

Friedrich Hayek, mentioned at the beginning of section 2, described the campaign to win power for neo-liberal economic ideas as guerrilla warfare: “we are like freedom fighters” he said. Sam Brittan, FT economics correspondent, said they were “post-Keynesian counter-revolutionaries engaged in a world war that would affect billions of people”. The war was

conducted using a subversive strategy which sought every opportunity to get their ideas into the mainstream, starting with the academic world and then the world of media commentators.

The neo-liberals made much use of ‘think tanks’ that would then offer ‘independent’ articles, comments, papers on issues of the day. Slowly the impression was built that neo-liberal ideas were simply widespread common sense. Richard Cockett, when deputy editor of *The Economist*, described how it all happened in [Thinking the Unthinkable \(1995\)](#). The [Rethinking Economics](#) student campaigners who wrote [Econocracy](#) describe how neo-liberal modelling came to dominate economic teaching in the UK. Both books are recommended reading for all ‘progressives’.

Hayek and his successors were operating a very similar strategy to Nelson Mandela: keep the ultimate goal bright and illuminate the steps and many paths that lead to it, drawing in supporters as you go. Then, when the right time comes, be ready to take full advantage of it. Be ready to succeed.

Others successfully deploying subversive tactics include Wangari Maathai, of Greenbelt Movement fame. She won huge backing for tree-planting initiatives, yet her primary objective was the education and empowerment of women. John Kay, a UK economist, wrote a book in 2010 called [Obliquity](#) which explained how goals may sometimes best be reached indirectly.

Subversion and subtlety are strategies many ‘progressives’ would be wise to study afresh, after so much time in opposition arguing *against* rather than *for* things. For example, the protests against Donald Trump: would a boycott have more impact? Imagine, should he come on a state visit to the UK, if the streets were empty and we instead held events, wrote articles and interviews to talk about how good a ‘progressive’ future could be. Trump hates to be ignored and we would put our time to better use. See c) and d) below for other ways to help such a future become widespread and common sense.

b) Study psychology 101

There is a long literature on how people, by and large, and unless things are very difficult, do not like change. Machiavelli himself pointed out that “there is no constituency for change”. It is also why behavioural science techniques have become popular, with government now ‘nudging’ people to do things like pay income taxes or small fines on time.³

But for the purposes of this paper on taking ‘progressive’ ideas into the political mainstream, there is a BIG lesson to learn from the Brexit and Trump campaigns.

Take a deeper look into what has been wrongly called the careless ‘word salads’ of both the UK and US campaigns in 2016 and you will find that both used very carefully chosen ‘framings’ to convince the electorate in each country that a vote for Leave or for Trump was a vote against the dishonest elite and a vote for power to the people. For example: “Take back control [from the EU]” was the slogan in the UK (as if we had lost it) and “Make America Great Again” (as if it had lost its primacy) was the Trump slogan.

Well yes, I hear you say, we worked that out. But again, by going deeper we find both campaigns also drew on what US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls the [foundations of morality](https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind): a ‘first draft’ moral code provided by nature, instinctive at birth (not only in humans) and based on feelings rather than reason. It is not immutable, just organized in advance of our life experience, through which we revise it as we get older. We can plot our own responses on axes, which are shown in the box below. For more explanation, see the TED talk referenced in the box.

THE MORAL MIND

https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind

CARE: cherishing and protecting others; opposite of **harm**

FAIRNESS, reciprocity: rendering justice according to shared rules; opposite of **cheating**

LOYALTY or **ingroup**: standing with your group, family, nation; opposite of **betrayal**

AUTHORITY or **respect**: submitting to tradition & legitimate authority; opposite of **subversion**

SANCTITY or **purity**: abhorrence of disgusting things, foods, action; opposite of **degradation**

Brexiters framed everyone who disagreed with them as part of a conspiracy **subverting** rightful process and **oppressing** freedom, thereby painting themselves as **pure** and **loyal** [to the people]. Donald Trump heavily colonized territory normally associated more with the Democrats: the **caring** (empathy with downtrodden workers) and **fair** territory (crooked Hillary).

The adeptness of what are considered ‘right’ politicians (US Republicans, UK Tories and UKIP) in using all five channels, while left/liberals try to avoid talking in the zones of loyalty, authority or sanctity because of their association with right-wing political views helps to explain why people voted in certain ways *despite* knowing full well that a candidate or party was peddling lies: it all *felt* right. As we know, retaliating with truth and facts didn’t work – especially when the press found the distortions more interesting than reality.

From this we learn that values do matter a lot, but they need to be spelt out and justifiable - not assumed. To exhort people to do the right thing means articulating the moral case for what is right – and doing so attractively and consistently. This is not to say truth and facts are no longer necessary. They are just not sufficient. Imagine, for example, if Martin Luther King had said “I will reduce racism by 17% from 2005 levels by 2020” instead of “I have a dream ...”?

Can ‘progressives’ articulate a dream that more than a minority want to hear?

Because, as Jonathon Haidt points out (see TED talk), liberals who are “open to experience” and “closed-minded” conservatives who put order and tradition first are both such an entrenched part of what he calls today’s moral ‘matrix’ that it is unlikely problem-solving majorities can be found there. Haidt argues that it is only by moving beyond the current “I am right-you are wrong” stalemate towards a “**moral humility**” which acknowledges moral diversity, and where most people do have something positive to contribute, that we will genuinely progress.

That may seem like a tall order. But without a new approach to the language we use and how that touches people at a fundamental level, plus a strategy to keep broadening the appeal of a ‘progressive’ goal for society, where will the majorities come from? Mandela worked hard to broaden the constituency for ending apartheid, just as the neo-cons ensured their economic model became the new ‘normal’ for parties of the ‘left’ as well as ‘right’. Can ‘progressives’ do the same for their objectives?

*only by moving beyond the current “I am right-you are wrong” stalemate towards a “**moral humility**” which acknowledges moral diversity, and where most people do have something positive to contribute, will we genuinely progress.*

Next are two tactics which could help draw people onto progressive territory, and create a sense of normality around sustainability outcomes. One from pre-1989 Czechoslovakia, the other from the world of science.

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“If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be ‘for’ or ‘against’. The struggle for ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.”

c) Living in truth

During the 1980s I played a minor role in supporting Vaclav Havel and other east European dissidents by making sure that their governments knew that we knew that they were under arrest or in jail. That way it was harder for them to be made to 'disappear'. Havel, who became President of Czechoslovakia in 1989 when the communist government fell, believed in the sort of democracy where freedom of speech and of association were normal. He was a writer, particularly of plays, and before 1989 he insisted on living as if those freedoms existed. Consequently, he was frequently arrested, but always able to discomfit his jailers and their masters by asking "I am only living a normal life: why is it not normal to speak freely and spend time with my friends? Don't you want to live like that too?"

Havel called it [Living in Truth](#). And he showed the power of doing it. It kept him always on the front foot – of truth and normality – and his interlocutors on the back foot – having to justify, yet again and with increasing difficulty, why he was being arrested. His integrity meant that, when the Communist government called him in to discuss the disintegrating state, he was able to lead the peaceful 'velvet' revolution that put him into power. A modest man and a reluctant political leader, Havel nonetheless prepared for success, and when the opportunity arose, he took it.

The idea of living as if sustainability were normal and expressing surprise when the reality around us isn't, is invigorating to do and subversive in effect. Campaigning *against* things tends to give others a platform to argue about why the *status quo* is inevitable, whereas raising questions in the minds of others about why enjoying clean air is not a normal state of affairs, stimulates them to wonder the same thing.

d) The power of subversive questions

To underline the power of asking questions about why society is so unequal and climate change is not a state emergency, I recommend remembering Thomas Kuhn. He wrote [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#) in 1962, and there introduced the term *Paradigm Shift* - a phrase adopted and overused by many.

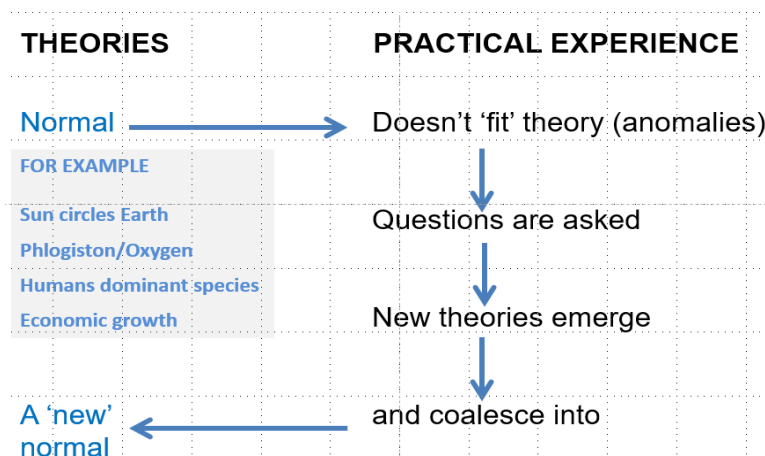
Much simplified, a paradigm shift happens when a new theory replaces an old one which has been rendered redundant by new evidence gained from observation and/or experiments. It was used by Kuhn to talk about physical science: an early example being when Nicholas Copernicus observed that it was the earth which orbited around the Sun, not the other way round – a paradigm shift that upset the church no end.

The process of reconsidering theories rendered wrong or out of date by new knowledge or experience is similar in principle to Havel's commitment to living

in truth, only more sophisticated. Subversive questions – in articles, plays, academic papers, books – are used to deepen doubt about the anomalies between the theories that govern our lives and the ill-fitting practical experience we have of their application.

The process is illustrated in the schema below. Kuhn talks of the shift from one idea of what is normal to a new one via four steps. For example, we are no longer confident that the theories underpinning our economic and financial systems are working to our benefit. Evidence suggests that they may even be causing some of our problems – climate change, inequality. So we ask questions, as the Queen did when inquiring why no economists noticed we were heading for a financial meltdown. As more and more questions are asked, slowly new theories start to emerge that better explain reality and fit better with what is actually happening.

Eventually a ‘new normal’ is created. The power that drives the change is good questions.



Kuhn was writing about the physical sciences, but the same process works with the science of human systems too. For ‘progressives’, the job is to drive change towards progressive ideas/sustainability by asking questions about the anomalies between today’s idea of normal and what we would like it to be. For example, why isn’t waste *reduction* the priority? Why can’t we bring forward some of our ‘retirement’ time for when our children are small and catch up when they are older? New normals are only created through human interaction over questions like these.

The exchanges prompted by such questions are learning opportunities for ‘progressives’ too, drawing out where the worries and reluctances are in potential supporters and finding ways to ease them into ‘progressive’ ways of thinking too.

e) Defend and promote representative democracy

FREEDOM HOUSE

“Referendums represent a radical reduction of democracy to its most skeletal form: majority rule. Too often, they are called in order to circumvent some obstacle thrown up by political or legal institutions ... Whatever the intent, such referendums are an end run around the structures and safeguards of democracy.”

[Freedom in the World, 2017: Populists and Autocrats: The dual threat to global democracy](#)

‘Progressives’ in the UK have got themselves into a right old pickle about whether referendums are the acme of the democratic process or simply useful plebiscites to aid the deliberations of representatives elected to exercise their best judgement on behalf of their constituents. How shameful it was that a citizen – Gina Miller – had to undertake a gruelling legal process to remind us all that parliament – where the wise judgements of our elected representatives are exercised for collective benefit – is at the heart of UK democracy. And how embarrassing again to see that coming between individual elected representatives and their electorates (on whose behalf the wise judgement is being exercised) is the edict of a political party. The views of both electorate and representative are compromised by an instruction on how to vote by the leadership of a party.

(The reform of our electoral system – long overdue and with its neglect now coming back to bite us – and the moot ongoing utility of political parties in the democratic process are subjects that deserve much more attention than is possible here.)

What is vital though, is that UK ‘progressives’ get themselves into some order and start to defend the system of **representative** democracy that we have now. To undermine it is wrong when we can see now, clearly, how we can improve it in the very short term. For example, through techniques like citizens’ juries and deliberative debates, engagement between citizens and their representatives could be enhanced and parliament could become a much better forum for an informative public debate.

In practice, this will mean an end to parroting the “respecting the will of the people” line about why we have to go ahead with Brexit. The will of “the people” was not manifest in the EU referendum. The view of *some people* (38% of those eligible to vote) prevailed and there is nothing to say the referendum is binding. Some constitutional humble pie could be eaten by those MPs who voted to hold the referendum in the first place, together with some strong arguments from them that the final decision be a parliamentary

decision, if necessary via a general election. At the same time the job of parliamentarians is to regain some personal respect and to rekindle faith in the system of representative democracy, through close conversation with their constituents over the process of implementing Brexit. Being honest about the pros and cons of various options relative to where we want to end up can lead to some alignment between their own judgement and that of their constituents.

For example, the recent decision by Morrison's supermarket to source more UK produce as a hedge against rising prices and insecurity of supply. Sounds good from a sustainability perspective, but is it more of an argument for remaining in or leaving the EU?

Indeed, as suggested in 2 d) above, through questions relating to the outcomes we are aiming for, could 'progressive' establish a framework for analyzing the benefits and downsides that would help citizens understand their choices? At the very least, as the Brexit process continues we should be able to comment in a way that differentiates us from the regressive voices (who will have their volume turned to maximum) and is firmly on our agenda, not theirs.

LEAVING THE EU	STAYING IN THE EU
What is already good for the 'progressive' view of the future?	What is already good for the progressive view of the future?
What would have to change?	What would have to change?

As with the UK, the US Presidential election also highlighted long present flaws in the electoral system. Well before the November 2016 elections, Freedom House, an independent NGO monitoring democracy and human rights around the world, downgraded the USA, citing the "cumulative impact of flaws in the electoral system, a disturbing increase in the role of private money in election campaigns and the legislative process, legislative gridlock" and more.

Without a healthy democratic system, even 'progressives' find it difficult to get things done (q.v. Obama). Elinor Ostrom is a good place to start for ideas on how to build one. And we should advocate loudly civic education as vital for everyone from primary school students to Prime Ministers. See the trusted and effective [Federal Agency for Civic Education](#) in Germany. (NB as well as stipulating proportional voting systems, the post-WWII German constitution - Basic Law – specifically precluded referendums except for state boundary changes, as a protection against populists like Hitler ever gaining disproportionate power again. When will we ever learn?)

f) Train and educate a new political cadre

NAOMI KLEIN (2014)

“Despite endless griping, tweeting, flash mobbing, and occupying, we collectively lack many of the tools that built and sustained the transformative movements of the past.”

From his Robben Island prison cell, Nelson Mandela promoted the importance of education for his colleagues, and for all black South Africans, particularly the young, so that they would be able to play full roles when apartheid eventually ended.

As someone who has worked for a long time with sustainability literacy as something everyone should possess, I remain bamboozled about why it is not, as one of the skills necessary to be a responsible, informed and active citizen, as mandatory as ‘employability’ in schools, colleges and universities. There is a trend starting, but it is far from secure.

Building capabilities, amongst ourselves, and amongst those who will have to implement and live in a ‘progressive’ – sustainable – world, has to be a priority. An urgent one. And it has to include how to organize, how to lead and how to build majorities.

ooOoo

4. In summary: Organize

This paper is an attempt to open up the three challenges facing supporters of what we would like to think is the territory of ‘progressive’ politics.

First, what do we actually mean by being ‘progressive’, and what do we want to progress towards? Why should a seriously disaffected electorate give us any heed? How are our ideas and politics different from – and better than – any other sort of politics?

And given that there are not currently majorities around the sort of things ‘progressives’ are saying, how might they be assembled?

I am afraid more questions have been raised than answered in this paper, but the point is to inject some urgency into galvanizing the campaign to get ‘progressive’ (aka sustainability, for me) ideas into power.

ooOoo

"A progressive is someone who wants to see society reorganised, part-by-part and step-by-step, so ordinary men and women have a better chance to live a larger life."
Roberto Unger. Is about opening up opportunities, connecting, engaging, trust, fairness. Is sustainability literate.

WHERE ARE WE HEADED: WHAT WOULD GOOD LOOK LIKE?

1. We judge success by how good we feel about:
 - ourselves
 - Our relationships
 - The place where we live
2. We enjoy a sense of purpose, meaning and order in our lives
3. The logic of *fewer-people-consuming-less-stuff* shapes our economy
4. Our livelihoods are secured through building stocks of natural, human and social capital
5. Technology and the financial system are *in service* to the above

People can move from any part of the political spectrum to join a progressive alliance

L

Axis no longer viable for useful political

New Axis

analysis of programmes, policies or parties.

R

REGRESSIVE
closing down

A regressive is someone who wants to see society and individuals leading narrower lives: nationalistic, xenophobic, socially and culturally fragmented and self-interested, intolerant. Is sustainability illiterate