

Preface: symposium on progressive politics

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Symposium on Progressive Politics

Preface

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On 20 October 1983 Nigel Lawson made his first Mansion House speech as Chancellor of the Exchequer. His description of the government's monetary policy as the programme of a 'reforming government' sparked a discussion among a number of Thatcher's key advisers. Arthur Cockfield, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, noted that while the party needed 'a banner: a short phrase which encapsulates our philosophy', 'reform' was not it. It had Gladstonian overtones of 'Retrenchment and Reform' and also seemed to place the party too clearly on one side of 'John Stuart Mill's antithesis of "Stability and Order": and "Progress and Reform"'. The alternative proposed by Robin Butler, Thatcher's Principal Private Secretary, was 'progressive' - a term he described as having 'the right vibes.' But this was immediately dismissed by Ferdinand Mount, head of the No 10 Policy Unit, who countered, 'I don't think progressive does have the right vibes. These days it is almost exclusively associated with the Left' (Cockfield, 1983).¹

This is a story about language and its history. It highlights the difficulty of finding a phrase that could adequately describe one political project, but was not already associated with another. The particular problem for Thatcherites was finding a way to express the dynamism of her vision without appearing un-Conservative. As Robert Page explains later in this volume, 'Conservatives have been uneasy about the notion of progress because it is associated with actions derived from an abstract "improving" doctrine rather than on pragmatic responses [...] in accordance with a nation's heritage and traditions.' In Cockfield's terms, Thatcherites needed to avoid 'The image of the small boy taking the clock to pieces and not quite being able to put it together again.'

'Progressive' is a particularly ambiguous word, with a nebulous political history. While it had been used by Conservatives like Disraeli and Randolph Churchill to describe their programmes of moderate, ameliorative social reform, it had also been associated with both the thrusting nature of nineteenth century liberalism and the fusion between social liberalism and social democracy which emerged in the early twentieth century. It was the latter use which, as Mount recognised, had become dominant by 1983. This had been cemented by both a flurry of academic works recovering the Edwardian 'progressive movement' (Clarke, 1971, 1974 & 1978; Freedon, 1978; Collini, 1979) and by the Social Democratic Party who were turning to this history in an attempt to present their new alliance with the Liberal Party as a return to Labour's roots, rather than a departure from them. In the interwar years, anti-socialist alliances between Conservatives, Liberals and non-aligned businessmen in municipalities across England and Scotland dubbed themselves Progressive Parties. After the war,

¹ I am very grateful to Matthew Bailey for pointing me towards this document.

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Churchill suggested ‘progressive unionist’ as a possible label within a merged Liberal-Conservative party (1946). Yet, three decades later, Margaret Thatcher was lamenting that Disraeli’s understanding of progressive change had been eclipsed by the assumption that progress must always mean ‘the Socialist, corporatist, collectivist way of doing things’ (1978).

The papers in this symposium aim to unpick this history and to put the recent assertions of ‘progressive conservatism’ by David Cameron and of ‘new progressivism’ by Nick Clegg in both historical and ideological context. The question that holds them all together is one posed several years ago by our commentator, Michael Freeden. In his exploration of *Liberal Languages*, Freeden (2005: 9) noted that the ‘central question’ the history of ideas must address is: ‘what has to hold for this sentence, that paragraph, this narrative, to make sense to its author, and what has to hold for it to make sense to its consumers?’ This symposium takes up Freeden’s question and asks, what has to hold for assertions of progressive politics by both Cameron’s Conservatives and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to make sense – to themselves, to us as political scientists and historians, and also to the public?

For David Blaazer, the answer is: far more than they are able to provide. Blaazer revisits his 1992 history of *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition* with its description of an intellectual community bound by commitments to anti-imperialism and anti-sectionalism, driven by an empirical inquiry into the role of the state and characterised by ‘ideological openness, intellectual eclecticism, and institutional fluidity’. He recognizes contemporary affinities with, for instance, the Occupy movement, environmental, anti-war and economic pressure groups, the Green Party and – perhaps – the Labour Party under Ed Miliband’s leadership. Yet, he concludes that the very particular constellation of beliefs that defined the progressive movement has disappeared, along with the political context in which it was shaped. He concludes, therefore, that it is a category best left to historians.

The remaining papers agree with Blaazer that the Coalition partners have little claim to the progressive tradition he describes, but they also suggest alternate ways in which their use of the term might be understood.

Robert Page begins with the ‘progressive conservatism’ of the inter- and post-war years, the attempt to ‘make an accommodation with liberal/socialist progressive ideas’. Although this was followed by an actively ‘anti-progressive’ position in the Thatcher years, Page suggests that the idea is not completely dead - yet. He examines the politics of Cameron’s Conservatives and their attempts to bring together the progressive concern for those suffering social exclusion, deprivation and discrimination, with a neoliberal emphasis on economic independence and the entrepreneurial spirit. Page highlights the ongoing tensions within this ‘neo-liberal progressivism’ and suggests that as a result the term ‘progressive’ may now revert to its ‘natural home amongst “egalitarian” interventionist liberals, socialists and social democrats.’

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Simon Griffiths, on the other hand, suggests that although Cameron’s attempt to distance himself from the legacy of Thatcherism was rhetorical rather than substantial, it is precisely in his similarity to Thatcher that we might be able to define him as a progressive. This is, Griffiths acknowledges, a ‘particular and limited’ definition of ‘progressive’, and it is not one that Blaazer would recognise. It depends upon a temporal rather than ideological understanding of the term, rooted in its modernising tendencies, not in a commitment to social justice.

Peter Sloman continues this attempt to re-orient understandings of progressive politics. He shows that Liberals of the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s used the notion of progress to define themselves *against* Labour and its programme of state intervention and redistribution. Instead they articulated an alternate vision of progress, based on wider property-ownership, competitive markets, and consumer choice. Sloman traces the rise and fall of this ‘anti-socialist progressivism’ and its eventual replacement by the more familiar social liberal progressivism that underpinned the formation of the Liberal Democrats but questions where Nick Clegg’s party sits in relation to the two.

The final paper, by myself and Joe Twyman, suggests that the alternative uses of ‘progressive’, explored by both Griffiths and Sloman might not be as counter-intuitive to a contemporary audience as they first appear. It examines the results of a YouGov survey, designed to test public understandings of the word ‘progressive’ and of ‘progressive politics’ in particular. It finds a wide variety of understandings, most of which have little specific political content, but speak instead of a general sense of forward movement, improvement and change. Moreover, survey respondents judged Conservative politicians – including Margaret Thatcher - to be more progressive than those of other parties.

To return to Freeden’s question: ‘what has to hold for this to make sense?’ The findings of this survey suggest that public understandings of ‘progressive politics’ may be informed by notions of innovation and enterprise at least as much as they are by social justice or state intervention. This is the context in which both Cameron’s ‘progressive conservatism’ and the ‘anti-socialist progressivism’ of the inter- and post-war years make sense. The distance between this understanding of ‘progressive politics’ and the very particular intellectual and moral tradition of ‘progressivism’ explored by Blaazer highlights the malleability of political language. It reminds us that the ‘vibes’ of any political slogan will always be a matter of interpretation and that our perspective depends as much upon memory as on ideology. If the historical resonances of particular words are difficult to predict, they can be even harder to control.

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