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The Progressive Dilemma revisited

Andrew Gamble

David Marquand wrote *The Progressive Dilemma* in 1991.¹ The book is an extended set of reflections on the progressive tradition in British politics and the dilemma faced by progressive intellectuals since the beginning of the twentieth century. They wanted political, economic and social reform. But which was the best way to achieve it? Which political party was most likely to deliver? Would it be better not to align with any political party but instead work through civil society to create the public opinion and the campaigning movements which would oblige whoever was in government to introduce reforms? During the nineteenth century most progressive intellectuals in Britain had seen the Liberal Party as the main vehicle of reform. The question they faced in the first few decades of the twentieth century was whether they should abandon the Liberal Party and join the newly formed Labour party. At first the ambitions of the Labour party seemed very modest. It presented itself as little more than the representatives of the Labour interest in Parliament, and only secured a handful of MPs. But with the upheaval of the First World War, the widening of the suffrage, and the split in the Liberal party, the Labour party suddenly emerged as the new parliamentary opposition to the Conservatives, the only party capable of dislodging the Conservatives from Government. So the progressive dilemma took a new and very precise form. Should progressives work with the Labour Party? If they answered No, the likelihood was permanent Tory rule. If they answered Yes, they had to agree to work within a party which was dominated by a class and an ethos which was not their own and which they would often find irksome and uncomfortable.

The Labour party was after all founded to defend the Labour interest, not the progressive interest or the socialist interest, and even when it acquired the ambition and capacity to govern, its Labourist tradition was always prominent. The clue was in the name. While most centre-Left European parties were called social democratic or socialist parties, the British Labour party was shaped from the outset by the organized Labour movement, which was more unified and more powerful than most other European Labour movements. Progressive intellectuals helped create the Labour party; the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabian Society and the Independent Labour Party were the first affiliated organisations. But their influence did not compare with the trade unions, who not only became the main source of funds for the party, but also provided many of the MPs. When the party adopted a new constitution in 1918, progressive intellectuals, particularly the Webbs, were influential in committing the party to long-term socialist goals. Clause IV promised to 'To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service'. But the constitution also formalized the dominant role of the trade unions in the party, particularly their representation on all the party's key committees and their control of Conference and policy-making through the block vote. From early on the internal management of the party depended on an alliance between the parliamentary leadership, selected by the party's MPs, and the leaders of the largest

unions. This enabled the radical intellectuals who made up the bulk of the individual members of the party to be kept under control. Internal party democracy never meant one member one vote, because this would have threatened the position of the trade unions. The Labour party was often conceived as an organization with two wings – an industrial wing and a political wing. Progressive intellectuals were much more prominent in the latter than the former, but holding the two wings together became a key task of successful Labour leadership.

The strategic problem facing Labour after it became the main parliamentary opposition to the Conservatives in 1918 with the extension of the franchise to all men over 21 and women over 30 was how to construct a progressive coalition to challenge the Conservatives. The British electoral system of first past the post made it necessary for parties to construct broad coalitions of interest in order to be competitive throughout the UK and win a parliamentary majority. In the new democratic era after 1918 the Conservatives proved highly successful in creating a coalition on the Centre Right to win power at Westminster. In the 26 elections since universal suffrage was conceded the Conservative party has formed governments after 15 of them, and has been in office for two thirds of the time. Many progressive intellectuals in the Labour party, like Peter Shore, assumed that it was only a matter of time before universal suffrage delivered permanent Labour rule. The expectation that it would has been confounded. The Conservatives have proved remarkably resilient and have always bounced back after defeats, and found ways to renew their coalition and shape the constitution to reflect their interests. Labour has been able to challenge the Conservatives and on three occasions, 1945, 1966 and 1997 has broken through and won significant majorities of its own, but except in the New Labour period it was never able to win two or more full parliamentary terms consecutively. The Conservatives achieved several – 1931-1945; 1951-1964; and 1979-1997.

The extent of Labour's relative failure in the last hundred years of universal suffrage needs underlining. In 2015 only 20 per cent of the total electorate voted Labour. In the 26 general elections since universal suffrage Labour has been in government after only 11 of them, and has had a parliamentary majority after only 8 elections. It has had a parliamentary majority of more than ten seats after only 5 elections. Before Jeremy Corbyn the party had 15 leaders. Only 4 of those leaders won a general election. Only 3 of them an election with a parliamentary majority. Attlee won 2, Wilson 3 and Blair 3. Only Blair won a parliamentary majority of more than ten seats more than once. The Conservatives by contrast have had 13 leaders since 1918. No fewer than nine of them won general elections, all with majorities above ten seats, and two of them (Baldwin and Thatcher) more than once. Until the New Labour era the expectation of Conservative Leaders was that they would become Prime Minister and every one did except for Austen Chamberlain. Since 1997 three Conservative Leaders have failed to do so. Only in the New Labour era did Labour achieve the kind of political dominance which the Conservatives have taken for granted for so long.

Writing at the end of the 1980s, following Labour's split and electoral collapse, Marquand sought to analyse in *The Progressive Dilemma* the reasons why Labour's electoral achievements had failed to match its promise. He argued that one of the main reasons was the narrowness of the coalition Labour put together compared with the coalition put together by the Liberal Party in the nineteenth century. It can be objected that the franchise in the nineteenth century was much more restricted, so the political circumstances in which electoral coalitions had to be formed were very different. But Marquand's point is that Labour's difficulties stemmed from the narrowness of its political appeal because it was based on the Labour interest. That delivered bed rock support in many parts of the

country and created a tight link between particular forms of working class identity and voting Labour. But it did not extend much beyond this 'world of Labour'. It made it hard, although certainly not impossible, for Labour to make a wider appeal, because its identification with the Labour interest seemed so tight. Organised Labour was the Labour party. But many people in Britain, even in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did not relate to the world of organized Labour. They had other interests and identities. J.B.Priestley talked of a Third England, which the world of Labour did not reach. This was the world of Woolworths, motor coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks. George Orwell wrote about the need for Labour to feel at home with radio and ferro-concrete. The 'blackcoated workers' of the new service industries were never completely Labour in the way so many heavy industrial occupations were.

The Labour coalition was built on the Labour interest and its ethos, which in Marquand's view tended to make it defensive and inward-looking. Group loyalty was given priority over dissent. Middle class radical intellectuals were treated as guests rather than as family. The intellectuals reciprocated. They believed strongly that Labour could not succeed without them. Only the intellectuals from the professions could supply ideas, frame policies and make ideological claims which would transform Labour from a corporate interest into a potential party of government. There is much talk today about Labour's cosmopolitan liberal intellectuals being out of touch with Labour's working class supporters, but the gulf was always there, and in certain respects because of the greater rigidities of class boundaries, was greater in the past.

Ever since it became a mass party in the 1920s and a potential party of government, progressive intellectuals inclined to work within the Labour party to secure economic, political and social reform have faced a number of difficulties, which Marquand summarises as

How to transcend Labourism without betraying the Labour interest?

How to bridge the gulf between the old Labour fortresses and the anti-Conservative but non-Labour hinterland?

How to construct a broad-based and enduring social coalition capable not just of giving it a temporary majority in the House of Commons, but of sustaining a reforming Government thereafter?

These are the reasons why working for the Labour party has often been dispiriting for progressive intellectuals. Writing in 1988 Marquand thought Labour's most important failure had been its inability to renew itself in office as the Liberals had done. Many of the Liberal intellectuals who joined the Labour party after 1918 did so in the belief that it could become in Ramsay Macdonald's phrase 'a Great Labour party', as the Liberals had been a Great Liberal party. The term 'Great' referred to the breadth of the tent which the party constructed, the diversity and strength of its coalition and alliances.

Ramsay Macdonald's ambition, Marquand argues, was never achieved. The Labour coalition proved no match for the Conservatives. This was surprising since the Labour party entered the fray with so many assets, compared to Centre-Left parties elsewhere in Europe. Britain was the first industrial nation, and by 1900 was predominantly an industrial society. It had an urban working class which comprised up to 70 per cent of the population, and only a relatively small population still on the land. There was no great reservoir of peasants for the parties of the Right and Centre-Right to draw on.

Religious cleavages, with some exceptions, notably in Ireland, were relatively minor. The trade union movement had a single peak organization, the TUC, and there was no mass communist party as an electoral competitor. The prospects for Labour to become the dominant political force in Britain in the twentieth century appeared high. It seemed only a matter of time before the structural advantages Labour enjoyed translated into electoral dominance. But this has not happened. Labour's full potential has never been realized because it has often struggled to win over that large part of the working class, particularly in non-Labour areas, which has always tended to vote Conservative. Labour would not have succeeded at all if it had not built a broader church than just the Labour movement, but Marquand's point is that it was always narrower than the one the Liberals created. Labour was constrained by always being seen primarily as the party of labour rather than of social democracy.

Since the founding of the party there have been three main cycles in Labour politics, and a prequel. The prequel, 1900-1931, saw the party first establish itself as a permanent presence and then emerge as the main opposition to the Conservatives in the Westminster first past the post system, displacing the Liberals. But the party's vote never rose above 40 per cent, and although the party formed governments on two occasions, 1924 and 1929, both were minority governments and were short-lived. In 1924 the party was in office for less than a year, and in 1929 for only two years. The Government collapsed in 1931 when the Cabinet split over the measures to deal with the financial crisis, and the Labour Leader, Ramsay Macdonald, formed a National Government with the Conservatives. At the 1931 General Election Labour was reduced to fifty two seats, although it still won 30.6 per cent of the vote (a higher percentage than in 1983 or 2015). In the interwar period as a whole (1918-1940) Labour's two highest votes in this period came in 1929 (37.1%) and 1935 (37.9%). The Conservatives twice won more than 50 per cent of the vote (1931 and 1935), and were in government for 19 of the 22 years, compared to Labour which was in government for only 3 of those years.

1931-51

Since 1931, the three main cycles of Labour politics are 1931-1951; 1951-1979; and 1979-2010. Each cycle starts and finishes with an election defeat, followed by a prolonged spell of opposition. Each cycle also contains a major election victory – 1945, 1966, 1997 – in which the Labour party secured a parliamentary majority of more than one hundred seats (although it never achieved more than 50 per cent of the vote). This election victory ushered in a period of Labour political dominance, but in each case it ended in electoral defeat and a long period of Conservative rule (1951-1964, 1979-97). We wait to see whether the period since 2010 will follow that pattern. In its three great election triumphs Labour did succeed in assembling a broad coalition with a unifying and compelling national story, and on these occasions, many progressive intellectuals suppressed their doubts and rallied to Labour. But each of these successes ended in defeat and disillusion. The party proved unable to hold on to government or to bounce back quickly, and suffered an electoral decline and internal division. The particular history is varied. The decline was more marked after 1931, 1979 and 2010 than after 1951, when the Labour vote held up relatively well, never dipping below 40 percent in three general elections. In 1951 Labour had more votes but fewer seats than the Conservatives. The election defeats in 1955 and 1959 were however felt especially keenly. Labour's dramatic breakthrough in 1945 to win a decisive parliamentary majority for the first time was considered by many to mark Labour's emergence as the default governing

party in Britain. The same sentiment was voiced in the 1970s when Labour returned to Government, even if only narrowly, after the brief interlude of the Heath Government. It was repeated again, and with more justification during the reign of New Labour. But none of these proved durable, and Labour endured another long spell in opposition.

Each time during the long spells of Conservative rule following the party's ejection from office, progressive intellectuals from all wings of the party, disillusioned by the performance of the party in government, have provided both a critique of that performance and helped lay the foundations for a new narrative and a new programme. After 1931 it took 14 years, after 1951 thirteen years, after 1979 eighteen years. How long it will take after 2010 is not yet clear, and there are no guarantees that the cycle will endlessly repeat in this way. But if we examine how the recovery was achieved in the previous three cycles a similar pattern is evident. The period of opposition was at first a time of great division and ideological conflict, even schism as in 1981, but eventually a new leadership and a new programme emerged, around which the party could unite and build an electoral coalition broad and inclusive enough to win.

After 1931 the rebuilding of party strength and confidence was slow, but the party was able to enter government in 1940 as part of the war-time coalition. The upheaval of the Second World War and the legitimacy it gave the leading Labour Ministers was a key factor in the new national image the party acquired. But important also was the role which progressive intellectuals played in the 1930s and during the war itself in preparing the basis of a new programme for Labour. Progressive intellectuals were divided in their allegiances between the Labour party, the Communist party and other groupings on the Left. The Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and the increasing international tensions provided the context for many debates and new thinking. The Left Book Club, the Fabians, the New Statesman, as well as key intellectual figures within the party, such as Hugh Dalton and Evan Durbin, and outside it, Keynes and Beveridge, all contributed. It meant that Labour's programme when it was formulated offered a vision of national reconstruction based on a promise of no return to the 1930s, universal programmes of social security, health and education, and the extension of public ownership and planning to guarantee full employment and prosperity.

1951-1979

The Attlee Government is currently regarded by all wings of the Labour party as Labour's most successful Government, but progressive intellectuals were quick to find fault with it, and in the inquest following its defeat in 1951 it was strongly criticized for not having achieved more. The period after 1951 was different from the period after 1931 because the achievement of the 1945-51 Government was so obviously more substantial than the 1929-31 Government, and it had not collapsed amidst charges of incompetence and betrayal. A lively debate still emerged among progressive intellectuals on both left and right about the causes of the defeat and what needed to be done to put Labour back in contention. The division as so often since was between those who argued that Labour was not revisionist enough and those who argued it was not socialist enough. Influential contributions of Tony Crosland and John Strachey were balanced by the analysis of Richard Crossman and Ralph Miliband.

Ralph Miliband may not have had many much else in common with David Marquand, but he did share a similar analysis of the dilemma facing progressive intellectuals on whether or not to work for the Labour party. In *Parliamentary Socialism* published some thirty years before *The Progressive Dilemma* Ralph Miliband argued that the Labour party would never be an effective vehicle to achieve socialism.² He singled out the domination of the party by a Labourist rather than a socialist ethos. Instead of a clear socialist programme the party was dominated by the trade unions who sought to defend their corporate interest, and a parliamentary leadership answerable to MPs which talked the language of reform but which was excessively timid about challenging the structures of power in Britain. The result was that Labour Governments invariably disappointed. When he wrote *Parliamentary Socialism* Ralph Miliband only had three Labour Governments to consider – the two minority governments in the 1920s – and the Attlee Government. But he thought a clear pattern was evident. Labour's political and constitutional conservatism and its reluctance to challenge the entrenched power of capital in all the institutions of the state meant that what Labour could achieve in practice was very limited. Miliband's advice was that progressive socialist intellectuals like himself should not join the Labour party. It was a doomed enterprise. As Robert McKenzie argued, the Labour party worked by recruiting members with strong socialist principles, who provided the foot soldiers for getting the vote out at elections and distributing leaflets, but who were shut out of any influence in the party by the alliance between the trade union leaders and the parliamentary leadership.³ The party had a democratic constitution but the votes were heavily weighted so that constituency parties could always be outvoted. Even on the relatively rare occasions when the leadership was defeated on an issue at conference it often refused to accept the motion as binding, claiming that the electorate mandate trumped the party mandate.

Richard Crossman, one of the Bevanite rebels against the leadership, thought that progressive intellectuals should remain members of the party. If the Labour Left became strong enough in the parliamentary party it could elect the party leader and Harold Wilson as the candidate of the Labour Left did win in 1963. He had opposed Gaitskell over the proposed abolition of Clause IV, yet once he was Leader he proved to be a balancer and a trimmer. He kept the party together in very difficult circumstances, but as far as the Left was concerned he delivered few socialist reforms and policies. For Miliband this confirmed his analysis. Only if Labour embraced an extra-parliamentary strategy did it have some chance of altering the balance of power in Britain in its favour and being able to introduce meaningful reforms. An extra-parliamentary strategy involving campaigning groups of all kinds, include shop floor trade unionists, could create a countervailing power to the established interests of the media and business. Labour politicians were all too easily influenced by these established interests once they were in office and even before they took office. If they were directly accountable to the extra parliamentary movement, organized not through trade union bureaucracies but through the informal networks of grass roots social movements, then this would exert counter pressure to keep them on the path of reform rather than conformity to the existing policy consensus.

The Left analysis of Labour and its problems after 1951 was powerful, and was part of a more general upsurge of ideas and critiques from other progressive intellectuals, including Crosland and Strachey, Andrew Shonfield, Richard Titmuss and Brian Abel-Smith. A critique of what was wrong with Conservatism and the policies of the 1950s was crystallised in J.K.Galbraith's phrase 'private affluence and public squalour', and led to the construction of a narrative around the need to modernize Britain, its institutions, its economy and its society. The programme celebrated what was new and vibrant in Britain, and urged many liberal reforms. If the most enduring achievement of the Attlee Government

was the creation of the NHS, the most enduring achievement of the Labour Governments between 1964-70 and 1974-79 was perhaps the raft of legislation abolishing capital punishment, legalising homosexuality and abortion, and implementing policies to promote gender and racial equality. These Governments presided over a major cultural modernization. Economic modernization was less successful. The role of the state was extended in an attempt to raise the rate of growth, and corporatist arrangements were introduced to deal with organized labour and organized capital, but results were patchy, and the oil price shock and recession in the mid 1970s discredited many of these policies.

1979-2010

The 1980s were much more traumatic for Labour than the 1950s, involving as they did a split in the Labour party, with the formation of the SDP, and Labour's slump to its worst poll result since 1918. David Marquand was one of the progressive intellectuals who joined the SDP, believing that the insurgency of the Left was destroying Labour as a vehicle for reform and potential governing party. If the project of social democratic reform to which he was committed was to be realized a new party had to be built. Important elements of his critique of what had gone wrong with Labour were also present in the analysis of Eric Hobsbawm *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* Hobsbawm as a long-standing member of the Communist Party was like Marquand in 1991 writing from a position outside the Labour party. For Hobsbawm Labour could only succeed when it transcended a narrow Labourism and put forward an inclusive national vision which could rally support from all groups, classes and regions in Britain.⁴ He was highly critical of aspects of the left insurgency in the party, particularly the militant sectionalism of parts of the labour movement, because it had lost Labour so much support in the non-Labour electorate.

The left insurgency which both Marquand and Hobsbawm identified as one of the obstacles preventing Labour renewing its electoral coalition failed ultimately to take over the Labour party, and was pushed back after Neil Kinnock became Leader. Whether Labour could have succeeded as a Left wing party under Tony Benn was never properly tested. The great ferment of ideas on the socialist left in the 1970s and 1980s petered out when the bid to take control of the Labour party failed. But many of their ideas, particularly the ideas of the social movement left and the local government left contributed to the next period of Labour renewal in the 1990s when a new raft of progressive ideas created a new national vision and a new programme for government. This helped form the context out of which New Labour came. David Marquand was one of the leading formulators of this new vision, both through his books and articles and his membership of the Social Justice Commission, set up by John Smith. Influential too was *Marxism Today* and the group of writers associated with it, particularly Eric Hobsbawm, Martin Jacques, Stuart Hall, Geoff Mulgan, Bea Campbell and Charlie Leadbeater. New Thinktanks including ippr and Demos as well as older ones like the Fabians were also important. Many of the themes of the new thinking were crystallised in Will Hutton's book *The State We're In* which argued that after almost two decades of Conservative rule Britain once again needed a Labour Government to modernize its constitution and its economy and liberalise its culture.⁵ New Labour sought to combine economic efficiency and social justice, and pledged to reform the constitution by for example devolving powers to Scotland and Wales, to launch an ambitious agenda on equality and anti-discrimination, and to modernize the economy through ambitious plans for social investment as well as improving social security and employment rights.

2010- ?

One of the many ironies of New Labour is that for a time it appeared to have resolved the progressive dilemma. It created the Great Labour Party of which Ramsay Macdonald had dreamed. For the first time Labour won three full parliamentary terms in a row. It dominated the Conservatives and sustained Labour in office for thirteen years. But since the financial crash of 2008 and Labour's eviction from office in 2010, hardly anyone can be found to defend New Labour's record. Progressive intellectuals from all sides have mounted ferocious critiques of it. Some of this is to do with foreign policy decisions, mainly Iraq, but it also reflects once again dismay that with such an opportunity so little in the way of long-lasting reform was delivered. David Marquand, having rejoined Labour in the 1990s, has since become one of the most trenchant critics of the Blair era.⁶ Many progressive intellectuals now see very little progressive at all about the Blair years. They suggest it was not really a Labour government because it relied on the wrong sort of voters, and pursued the wrong sort of policies. Many of the progressive achievements of the Blair era, particularly the social reforms, the constitutional reforms, the minimum wage, the social investment in schools and hospitals, tend to be overlooked, at least for now. All this is very familiar from previous cycles of Labour politics. The building up of hopes and expectations outruns what Labour Governments actually deliver, leading to disillusion and recrimination, but the critiques, like those of Marquand now may contribute to a future renewal.

Marquand's progressive dilemma is still with us. With the loss of Scotland and the decline of its vote once again in the South of England, Labour is facing an electoral problem as great as at any time in its history. The divide between its northern working class voters and its urban cosmopolitan voters was highlighted by the outcome of the 2016 EU Referendum. The historic fall in trade union membership, particularly in the private sector, has made Labour as a party increasingly reliant on professional workers in the public sector. As Labour Britain contracts, the party has not doing well at connecting with non-Labour Britain, particularly the growing number of people who are self-employed or working in small companies. The coalition which New Labour assembled has fragmented, and no-one is sure how the pieces can be reassembled, or what new coalitions are possible. Following Labour's second general election defeat in 2015 which saw no progress on 2010, the party experienced a new left insurgency. With the change in the voting rules for the party Leader, there was a big increase in party membership. The progressive intellectuals who form the bulk of the party members and the new registered supporters elected one of the last Bennites in the party, Jeremy Corbyn, by a large margin in 2015. In the twelve months that followed their support remained constant, despite no evidence that Corbyn can restore the party's electoral fortunes. The instinct of Corbyn and those around him was to consolidate and strengthen Labour's traditional identification with the trade unions, and to concentrate on making Labour a socialist party at every level of its operation, giving priority to its role as a campaigning extra-parliamentary party rather than an alternative parliamentary party of government. Corbyn as result lost the confidence of his MPs and his leadership was challenged. How the impasse in the party will be resolved is for the moment unclear. If Corbyn is re-elected by the party members and supporters the standoff with his MPs will continue, and Labour's electoral popularity will continue to weaken. Corbyn's leadership risks returning Labour to being a party of permanent opposition without hope of office. In these circumstances the question of what those progressive intellectuals who do not want this fate should do is posed in a new and acute form. Should they go or should they stay? The very fact that the dilemma is back suggests that we are still at an early stage of this latest cycle of Labour politics.

¹ David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma*, London, Heinemann, 1991.

² Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1961.

³ Robert McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, London, Heinemann, 1955. See also Richard Crossman, 'The Lessons of 1945', in Perry Anderson & Robin Blackburn, *Towards Socialism*, Fontana, 1965, 146-58.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Forward March of Labour halted?* London, NLB, 1981.

⁵ Will Hutton, *The State We're In*, London, Cape, 1995.

⁶ David Marquand, *Mammon's Kingdom*, London, Allen Lane, 2014.