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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

“THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS”

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to set out a different perspective on the future of progressive politics.

Previous speakers have taken a range of approaches to questions such as the nature of politics, the scope of government and the role of citizens. I may not agree with all of them but I appreciate the contribution they have made to the debate, just as I congratulate Demos on hosting these series of events.

What has struck me, in reading these contributions, is that amid all the words that could be used to try and define what is progressive politics, one stands out. Equality.

The advances that politics has seen over decades or centuries have been diverse. Freedom of speech and the rule of law. The abolition of slavery. The extension of the franchise first to all men, and then to women as well. The creation of the welfare state. And the acknowledgement that there are fundamental rights which must be granted to all.

The link between them all is equality. That all of us are of equal worth, and should have equal rights, whether it is to speak our minds, to vote for our government or to defend ourselves before the law. That women and men are equal. That all races are equal. That your birth should not entitle you to more power than another. That one person or one race should not enslave another.

These are the goals that progressive politics has pursued.

We have not always achieved them. Women have the vote, but women have nothing like the same representation in parliament or in any other centre of power that men do.

We may have banished forms of legal slavery, at least within our shores, most of the time. But there remains huge economic exploitation of one human by another, here and around the world.

Human rights have been enshrined in our law. There should be no discrimination on grounds of race, or sexual orientation. But in our society, a simple act such as walking hand in hand can still lead to intimidation and violence.

The great progressive agenda of the twentieth century – the assault on want, disease, idleness, ignorance, and squalor through social security, better housing, full employment, education reforms and the National Health Service – was also about equality. The simple principle was that, from the cradle to the grave, everyone in society should be provided equally with the basics of a civilised society.

And those of us who believe in equality recognise that these gains must be defended. For they are under attack. Defending people from discrimination is labelled political correctness. Courts that intervene to protect the vulnerable are criticised for interfering.

Those who remain disadvantaged are smeared as being lazy.

And this attack is from reactionaries. Those who believe in elites. In privilege of birth. In the strong ruling over the weak. In those who choose to live as man and wife being better than those who choose differently. And those who believe that one religion or race is better than another.

But if this were truly the position of progressive politics, why are we here? Why would we even be questioning our future?

It is this that leads me to put forward the proposition that there is a fundamental challenge for progressive politics in the opening years of the twenty-first century. It is that we have not yet come to terms with the meaning of equality. We have not properly thought of what it means, or thought of how we can make it a reality.

And the reason for this is the way we have gone about forging a progressive consensus for the last two centuries.

Progressive politics have depended on ever rising economic growth and prosperity to bring about a redistribution of power. As the economy has grown, so elites have been persuaded to give up a little of the wealth and power. They have accepted a little more taxation and redistribution; they have allowed political power to be spread a little more thinly.

This is natural. It is easier to ask people to take a smaller percentage of an ever growing cake.

But it has two consequences.

First, it gives the illusion of greater equality, while allowing for greater concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the few. So Peter Mandelson can speak of feeling intensely relaxed with people becoming filthy rich; and so Britain can, after thirteen years of a Labour government, be more unequal than before they came to power.

Second, the prosperity itself may be built on rotten foundations. The growth that has paid for our welfare state is built on the exploitation of our natural resources and on the exploitation of people here and around the world. And so we see a Labour government setting aside the rule of law to protect BAe Systems from an investigation into corrupt arms sales.

So progressive politics is undermined by power and money. The path towards genuine equality runs into the sand. Often with the best intentions, the pursuit of increased national economic growth and national wealth as a means to promote equality carries with it the seeds of its own failure.

Why? The heart of the trouble is a failure of imagination. For throughout the years, progressive politics – whether labour or socialist, liberal or social democratic – has failed to grasp the essence of equality.

We are all equal.

And equality does not stop at the borders of the United Kingdom. Nor does it stop with the present generation.

True equality means seeing every single human being on this planet as having an equal call upon us. Those on the far side of the world, suffering the effects of the earthquake in Chile, should mean as much to us as those who live at the end of our street.

And those whose world we are destroying, whose precious resources we are burning up, whose species we are making extinct, whose seas we are poisoning and whose beauty and tranquillity we are sacrificing – those who are yet to be born – we owe them just as much as those around us today.

That is the challenge of true equality. That is the challenge for progressive politics.

And that is the rock upon which progressive politics has struck.

It cannot be right that we enjoy a standard of living which requires children to work long hours for a pittance, in dangerous conditions, to make the clothes that we wear. Or for farmers to be poisoned with pesticides to grow the cheap food we consume.

That people live in slums, drink polluted water, breathe filthy air, and die young of disease or malnutrition, so that we can enjoy more consumer durables.

We have to recognise that the life style of the rich and powerful nations of the world is based on the exploitation of millions of our fellow humans. And that progressive politics has failed to resolve this dilemma: indeed, has encouraged it as a way to bring in some measure of greater equality within the confines of our islands.

We have to recognise that our lifestyle is also based on the consumption of finite resources. Land that is taken for roads or housing or factories is gone forever. Oil and gas that are extracted and consumed cannot be replaced.

But instead of treating these like the national equivalent of the family silver, to be used sparingly and only melted down when no other choice was available to us, we have as a nation cheerfully consumed as much as we could extract. We have treated it as income, adding it to our growth figures. We have not considered that by any rational measure, we are becoming not richer but poorer. Economic growth is becoming uneconomic.

Why do we not see this? Because those we exploit are far away, out of sight. We do not link our buying yet another short-lived gadget or plastic toy for our nearest and dearest at Christmas with pollution, exploitation or waste. We do not think of the consequences of our actions in years to come.

This is seen most clearly in the approach to climate change.

We know – we have known for decades – that releasing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is putting our whole world, and our whole way of life at risk.

We know that future generations will suffer more than us; and that today, it is the most vulnerable who are the worst affected. We can see the effects of the changing climate around us. But we are not yet suffering the catastrophic floods, droughts and storms that have hit other parts of the world. And we are lucky enough to live in a country where the impact of climate change can be mitigated to some extent. It will cost us dear, but we can

adapt.

But the resources needed in the developing world are far greater; and the ability to provide those resources far less.

This is why climate change is a test for progressive politics. We know we should act decisively to reverse the increases in greenhouse gases before it is too late; but we also know that doing this will not be popular. There will be hard choices. It will require honesty, and leadership.

And it cannot be achieved by a government that defers to the views of focus groups or the editor of the Daily Mail.

This is a test that Labour has failed in almost every way. We have had rhetoric about climate change; but not the action, or leadership.

Opportunity after opportunity to act have been squandered: in the detail – for example, after 13 years of a Labour government, TVs are still sold with a stand-by feature that allows power to be wasted overnight, or even for days and weeks.

And squandered at the highest level: as with the fiscal stimulus package that contained almost nothing to tackle climate change, even when a costed and workable Green New Deal had been developed by forward-thinking people across the political spectrum, ready and waiting for just such a moment.

And so we have what I feel ought to be the ultimate shame for a supposedly progressive government that its record on climate change is little if any better than that of the Tory government it replaced in 1997.

Take the fuel duty escalator: the single most effective way to shift people away from fossil fuels. Introduced by the Tories, scrapped by Labour.

Now perhaps unwisely for the leader of a political party, I do not believe that any one movement or grouping has a monopoly on wisdom.

There are politicians on all sides who are decent people, searching for the right response to the challenges of the age. I can even see that while the progressive tradition has been a tremendous force for good, the spirit of conservatism – in its purest sense of valuing that which is good in our traditions and inheritance – has something to offer. When we look at how in recent years so many initiatives that have been spun as the panacea to all our ills and which have often made things worse – from prison policy to Iraq – we should always temper progressive and reformist zeal with some robust scepticism about our scope to bring about improvement.

So in saying that there is a moral imperative to act on climate change, and to do so not only for our citizens but equally for all the inhabitants of the world, now and to come, I am not claiming moral high ground.

Those that act are not superior beings to those that do not.

My point is different: that only if we recognise how seductive the current situation is, that we can come together on this new and daunting agenda of putting our belief in equality

fully into practice.

I am reminded – as an English graduate and lover of English literature – of a Jane Austen heroine. We see her seated in a charming drawing room, taking tea with the dashing hero. We are delighted with this admirable scene.

Yet at the same time, we know that the lifestyle, even down to the tea they are drinking or the sugar they are stirring into it, is based on exploitation – poverty wages, disenfranchisement, discrimination, and above all on a slave economy.

Both views are true. None of us can be the first to judge.

So I do not claim superiority for myself, my party or our growing numbers of members and supporters.

But I do claim that we are bringing an essential new insight to progressive politics: that the time has come to widen our mission, renew our sense of internationalism, and embrace our responsibility for future generations.

What was accepted in 1810 is not acceptable two centuries later. We are not better people. But we know more.

For the Green Party, our own history gives us particular insight. Our roots are in both ecology and people – humanity and the planet on which we live. We were founded as PEOPLE in 1972 and then became the Ecology Party, seeking ways to live that did not exploit others or exploit the planet. And we joined with our sibling parties in Europe and beyond to become the Greens, advocating policies on sustainable economics, social justice and the environment in equal measure.

All built on single principle of equality. An attempt – not perfect, not complete – to put the underlying principles of progressive politics into practice.

Our growth has been slow, compared to other Green parties, because of the electoral system. But it has also been steady and productive, benefiting communities across the country through elected councillors, through our representation in the European Parliament and the London Assembly, and – if the polls are to be trusted – soon in Westminster as well.

We are not making bold claims of replacing Labour or any other progressive force. Instead, we offer partnership and co-operation when our values and policies coincide; and honesty and challenge where progressive parties fail to live up to their ideals.

There may be more of the latter than the former at the moment; but I believe that, whatever the outcome of the election, the public's desire for more honest and co-operative politics – and their lack of genuine enthusiasm for any of the three main parties – means the time for a shift in progressive politics to a more open form – the end of the sterile monopoly of New Labour – is long overdue.

What do we offer to the progressive coalition?

First, we are free from the influence of power and money. We have no vested interests, and we are free to represent those without anyone to speak on their behalf. This is our

PEOPLE strand.

Second, we understand that living in balance with the natural environment is the only way to provide a genuinely sustainable future for all. The word sustainable has been debased by successive governments to mean little more than business as usual. I see it as the counterpoint to equality, and its radical force must be reclaimed and fully absorbed by progressive politicians and activists of all parties and none. The simple premise that we must meet today's needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

And third, as a genuinely internationalist party – the only one, for example, to have regularly stood on a single platform in the European elections – we can speak up for those outside our borders whose lives are so strongly affected by our actions – from war and the arms trade to drugs and crime, to financial policy or even how we choose to shop.

I have outlined why I believe that progressive politics must renew itself not in tactics or individual policies, but in the very core of our work. We must see that true equality is a far more powerful and difficult aim than we might ever have believed.

This is a challenge for our imagination and our ability to empathise with those we may never have met in countries we have never visited.

The risk is that we try to make progress in our own narrow confines of the economic well-being of the people of the United Kingdom alive today.

So I would say the challenge for progressives is to engender this empathy; to help our fellow citizens to look beyond the boundaries of our country and of our immediate needs and take responsibility for others and for their own actions.

This will require leadership, honesty and courage to challenge the easy life.

And in modern politics, those are three qualities in short supply.

There is too much compromise. Too much settling for second best. The result has been a failure to take the desire for a better world we saw on the 1 May 1997 and turn it into reality.

New Labour has failed us. But Liberalism, Social Democracy and Socialism still look to make progress by making the cake bigger and sharing it out differently.

But this is an illusion. Already, we consume in Britain three times what the world can sustain.

We must make do with less, not seek to snatch more from poorer countries or from the generations to come. And if we cannot rely on ever increasing growth to bring about equality, that we are going to have to see a much bigger role for redistribution.

But we cannot give up on progress. Working together, we can try again.

And perhaps in the wake of the recent financial collapse there are some reasons for the progressive left to be more confident,

Research has shown that more progressive taxation is welcomed by voters. The new 50p tax rate for high earners and the tax on bankers bonuses remain two of this government's most popular policies.

That's good news.

But what do Ministers do?

Peter Mandelson promises that the 50p rate will be abolished as soon as possible and Alistair Darling makes the bonus tax a one-off, temporary measure.

The reality is, as Mehdi Hasan said in the newspapers on Saturday, that the public are far ahead and to the left of the government on financial and economic reform.

Polling by YouGov last month for example revealed that 76% of those surveyed wanted government to introduce a law to cap bonus payments. Over half the so called Robin Hood Tax on financial transactions.

Instead of apologising for these taxes we should be going further and making the case not just for equality at home but equality throughout the world.

Not just for equity today but for intergenerational equity. And to do so without trashing the planet on which we all depend.

That is the challenge of progressive politics and that is the challenge of today.