

Progressivism: Past and Present

On 3 July 2012, the Centre for British Politics hosted a conference on the meanings of **Progressivism: Past and Present**, at Senate House, London. The aim was to bring together academics, politicians, journalists and policy makers, to discuss the ways in which the word 'progressive' has been used and understood in British politics over the past century.

The day began by establishing that 'progressive' is a meaningless word! The chair of the first session, **John Rentoul** (*Independent*), reminded the audience that George Orwell had included it in his list of 'meaningless words'. **Emily Robinson** (Nottingham) picked up on this, pointing out that Orwell's critique depended upon the 'variable meanings' of the term which meant that it could be used in a 'consciously dishonest way.' She argued that this was due to the way in which it conveys a general sense of forward movement but has also become associated with a particular centre-left vision of progress. She noted though that this had not always been the case and that historically 'progressive' has also been associated with anti-socialist politics and business ethics.

David Blaazer (UNSW Canberra) began his paper by declaring the term an 'analytical marshmallow'. He argued that although none of the current political parties uphold the core principles of the movement he had described in *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition* (1992), the fact that they can still claim to do so, is proof that the progressive tradition is dead. Finally, **Joe Twyman** revealed the results of a survey on public understandings of the word progressive, which YouGov have undertaken for the Centre for British Politics. Above all, they revealed that the British public don't feel they know what the term progressive means, don't particularly associate it with left politics or social justice but do think it is a good thing. The full results of the poll are available on the [YouGov website](#). John Rentoul's own account of the session can be read on the [Independent blog](#).

The second session of the morning was a cross-party roundtable, chaired by **Martin Kettle** of the *Guardian*. **Max Wind-Cowie** (Progressive Conservatism Project, Demos) stated that progressive conservatism could best be understood as 'not neoliberalism'. This was challenged by **Richard Grayson** (Liberal Left) who acknowledged that Conservatives could take progressive stances on issues to do with social diversity but felt that fundamentally the progressivism relied on positive attitude to collective organisation. **Paul Richards**, one of the founders of *Progress* magazine described his reservations about its name – not only due to its vagueness, but also to its Stalinist overtones! However, he also felt that it was important to recover the traditions of radical and progressive movements in British history – whatever their names. His account of the conference is available on [Labour List](#). **Tim Bale** (Sussex) warned against

dismissing debates about language and rhetoric as 'froth', noting that the ability to control words and ideas constitutes real political power. He thought that progressive aspects could be found in the histories of all three main parties but that the current Conservatives could only be considered progressive on social issues. While Labour continues to have its head and heart in a progressive place a great deal depended on the outcome of the current policy review, being undertaken by Jon Cruddas – one of the afternoon's speakers.

Much of the very lively discussion focused on the question of progressive conservatism, with Max Wind-Cowie arguing that the Conservative desire to manage progress should be recognised as a genuine and progressive impulse, not a cynical attempt at political cross-dressing. However, some members of the audience responded that this should best be understood as accommodationism, as it was responding to social change rather than actively driving it.

After lunch, **Mary Ann Sieghart** (*Independent*) chaired a session on Liberals and the Progressive Tradition. **Michael Freeden** (Oxford) argued that the interweaving of liberalism and welfare was the greatest Liberal achievement of the twentieth century. It married established Liberal principles with new social and biological theories and recast the state as a manifestation of the social side of the human condition. **Peter Sloman** (Oxford) sought to correct the bias towards the Lib-Lab relationship by looking at the ways in which Liberals of the 1930s, '40s and '50s had used the notion of progress to define themselves *against* Labour. Finally **Seth Alexander Thevoz** (Warwick & History of Parliament Trust) explained why he believed the much-discussed realignment of the left had never happened, something he attributed to a combination of electoral circumstance and party culture.

Lord Hurd took the chair for the next session on progressive conservatism and began by noting that although Disraeli highlighted the existence of 'two nations', it wasn't until decades later that Stanley Baldwin suggested that they could be reconciled into one nation. **Robert Page** (Birmingham) examined post-war Conservatism, concluding that David Cameron is its first progressive leader. In contrast to the older traditions of modern paternalism and neoliberalism, Page characterised Cameron's politics as 'progressive civic conservatism'. Next, **Philip Begley** (Lincoln) revealed that in the 1970s Alfred Sherman and Margaret Thatcher claimed to be the true social democrats and to 'hold Labour's lost ideals in trust'. However, he concluded that this was just rhetoric aimed at disaffected Labour voters and did not have a substantive basis in policy. Finally, **Simon Griffiths** (Goldsmiths) identified two strands of 'progressive conservatism' in contemporary politics. The first, associated with Philip Blond, uses progressive means to achieve conservative ends, whereas Cameron has described himself as using conservative means to

achieve progressive ends. Ultimately though, Griffiths felt that Cameron's scepticism about the state places him closer to Thatcher than to the One Nation tradition.

The conference closed with a discussion of Labour's relationship to the progressive tradition, chaired by **Paul Richards**. **Craig Johnson** (Newcastle) argued that despite cultural and political obstacles, electoral necessity means that Labour needs to repair its relationship with the Liberal Democrats. **Steve Van Riel** (former Labour Party Policy Director) examined the rhetorical strategies of modernisers within the Labour Party, concluding that because they don't have a programmatic vision of where they are heading, they need to search for specific social injustices to react against, with the economic problems of the 1980s as a particularly useful reference point. The conference ended with **Jon Cruddas MP's** attempt to reclaim and reinvigorate what he saw as the founding ideals of New Labour. He argued that what had begun as a rich, complex, textured and romantic movement, rooted in the ideals of the ILP, gave way to a cold and destructive rationalism, with a 'sink or swim' vision of modernity. As a result, he felt that progressive was now a contaminated word, at odds with the way most people feel.