



The Progressive Consensus in Perspective

Iain McLean and Guy Lodge

FEBRUARY 2007

© ippr 2007

Institute for Public Policy Research
www.ippr.org



The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank and was established in 1988. Its role is to bridge the political divide between the social democratic and liberal traditions, the intellectual divide between academia and the policy making establishment and the cultural divide between government and civil society. It is first and foremost a research institute, aiming to provide innovative and credible policy solutions. Its work, the questions its research poses, and the methods it uses are driven by the belief that the journey to a good society is one that places social justice, democratic participation, economic and environmental sustainability at its core.

This paper was first published in February 2007. © ippr 2007

30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA
Tel: 020 7470 6100 Fax: 020 7470 6111 www.ippr.org
Registered Charity No. 800065

About the authors

Iain McLean is Professor of Politics and Director of the Public Policy Unit, Oxford University. He has published widely in political science and 20th-century British history, including *Rational Choice and British Politics* (OUP, 2001) and, with Jennifer Nou, 'Why should we be beggars with the ballot in our hand? Veto players and the failure of land value taxation in the UK, 1909-14', *British Journal of Political Science*, 2006.

Guy Lodge is a Research Fellow in the democracy team at ippr. He specialises in governance and constitutional reform and has published widely in this area. He co-authored ippr's report *Whitehall's Black Box: Accountability and performance in the senior civil service* (2006). Other publications include (co-editor) *Fabian Thinkers: 120 years of progressive thought* (Fabian Society, 2004) and *Radicals and Reformers: A century of Fabian thought* (Fabian Society, 2000).

The Progressive Consensus in Perspective

This paper explores the history of the progressive consensus, in particular analysing what happened to the 'progressive alliance' of the Liberal, Irish and Labour Parties which won an overwhelming electoral victory in 1906, only to be obstructed by the House of Lords and the First World War. At the end of that war, two of its three elements had been shattered and the Conservatives became dominant for most of the rest of the 20th century.

False dawn: A history of the progressive alliance 1906-1914

'There [a]re Progressives who are not Liberals, but that I think there are no Liberals who are not Progressives' Lord Rosebery, chairman of the Progressive-controlled London County Council, later Liberal Prime Minister, 1892

There was once a progressive alliance in British politics. It controlled the House of Commons in three successive parliaments. It laid the foundations of the welfare state and created a redistributive tax system to pay for it. It put trade unions on to a sound legal footing for the first time. Despite ferocious resistance from vested interests, which included two kings and the most eminent constitutional lawyers of the day, it enacted the two most important constitutional changes in the history of the United Kingdom – the Parliament Act 1911 and the Government of Ireland Act 1914. These were significant and unprecedented achievements for progressive politics in Britain, which had the effect of transforming the political landscape and paving the way for the breakthroughs of future progressive governments.

It is rather remarkable, therefore, that people on the centre-left go rather misty-eyed about the achievements of the Attlee Labour government of 1945-51 at the expense of the substantial, and in some cases, greater achievements of the Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith progressive governments of 1906-14. That Attlee scores higher than Liberals such as Asquith or Lloyd George in the consensus ranking of 20th century British prime ministers is silly and a bit sad. Clement Attlee had some notable qualities, not least that he could control his warring barons such as Ernie Bevin, Herbert Morrison and Stafford Cripps. But even here Asquith's qualities seem more pronounced. He had to manage a more heterogeneous coalition of personalities and interests that included the towering figures of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill as departmental ministers. He also faced down two obdurate kings, the naked class aggression of the House of Lords, and an armed insurrection in Ireland, encouraged by the Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition and the Director of Military Operations in the War Office.

So what was this neglected progressive alliance? What did it achieve and how progressive were those achievements? What caused it to fall apart, to be replaced by Conservative hegemony that lasted from 1922 to 1997? What was its legacy and what are its lessons for today?

The progressive alliance consisted of three partners: the Liberal Party, the Labour Party, and the Irish Party. And though it is often remembered in terms of the electoral success it enjoyed, the alliance was about more than electoral pacts and political deals. The electoral alliance mirrored an alliance in ideas and values. Of course there were differences between the parties but there was also significant common ground. The revisionist liberalism pioneered by the 'two Hobs' – LT Hobhouse and JA Hobson – and encapsulated in the 'new liberalism' of Edwardian England sought to recast the laissez-faire and individualistic liberalism of the 19th century so that it was more compatible with the ambitions of social democracy. This enabled a workable consensus between Liberal and Labour MPs. Indeed, the lack of significant ideological difference between the two is one of the reasons why the alliance was so effective.

However, a focus on the interaction between Liberalism and Labourism is misleading in that it overlooks a key dynamic at work within the alliance. That dangerous instrument the retrospectoscope has hugely exaggerated the role of the Labour Party and downplayed that of the Irish Party. In the two parliaments of 1910, the Irish Party held a veto over the Commons agenda and the Labour Party did not. Once we realise this simple fact, we can begin to see the successes and failures of the Progressive Alliance in their true perspective.

The basic data on seats and votes in the three Parliaments of 1906-14 is presented in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Seats, votes and proportionality: UK general elections 1906 and 1910

Parliament	Liberal Party		Unionist		Irish Party		Labour Party		Respon- siveness	Bias to:
	Vote share (%)	Seat share (%)	Vote share (%)	Seat share (%)	Vote share (%)	Seat share (%)	Vote share (%)	Seat share (%)		
1906	48.98	59.70	43.05	23.43	0.62	12.39	5.86	4.48	1.35	Liberal
1910 (Jan)	43.03	41.04	46.75	40.75	1.90	12.24	7.58	5.97	0.96	Liberal
1910 (Dec)	43.82	40.60	46.26	40.60	2.52	12.54	7.10	6.27	0.97	Liberal

Notes: Responsiveness: as between the two main parties only, the ratio of the gaining party's seat share to is vote share; Bias: as between the two main parties only, the one that would hold more seats if they had an equal number of votes

The Liberal Party won a landslide victory in the 1906 general election. The electoral fortunes of the Liberals and the Unionists were almost reversed from their standing in the previous election of 1900: the Unionists were reduced from 402 to 157 MPs, while the Liberals were elevated from 184 to 401 MPs. As in 1997, this owed as much to the implosion of the previous Conservative (Unionist) government as it did the incomers' policies. The Unionists had split into warring factions and collapsed from the sheer exhaustion of being in power for 20 years. New Liberals, like New Labour in 1997, had a blank sheet.

The electoral system helped. The Liberal landslide, as Table 1 shows, was a landslide in seats, not in votes. However, with their progressive allies the Labour and Irish Party, they did control a majority of votes as well as a supermajority of seats. The Irish Party held total dominance over the Catholic five-sixths of Ireland. Most of its seats were uncontested (hence its misleadingly small vote share). The new Labour Party was in the Commons by virtue of the Gladstone-MacDonald Pact of 1903. Herbert Gladstone, son of the Prime Minister, was Liberal Chief Whip and Ramsay MacDonald was secretary of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). They agreed not to oppose one another in 30 or 40 seats in England and Wales (not Scotland or Ireland, where there was no pact). The LRC won 30 seats in 1906 and renamed itself the Labour Party.

Labour was little more than a client of the Liberals, but a client with a grievance. The Taff Vale case, reaching the Law Lords in 1901, had held the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (precursor of today's RMT) financially liable for all losses incurred by the Taff Vale Railway during a strike. The decision could only be reversed by act of parliament, and Labour's leading parliamentarian David Shackleton produced a draft. To universal surprise and his colleagues' horror, the new Liberal Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (always known as CB) dropped his own party's bill and adopted Shackleton's. The result was the Trade Disputes Act 1906, which gave trade unions complete legal immunity from tort actions and which remained the basis for union rights until repealed under Edward Heath. That it has come to be regarded by many as the 'Magna Carta of Labour' gives some idea of how much of a landmark change it was (Morgan 2006).

Why did CB do it? He was sympathetic to trade unions and unsympathetic to his law officers' objection that immunity gave them unique privileges not enjoyed by individuals or companies. Perhaps he had a better feel for the new electorate than his colleagues. To win elections, governments must win the support of the median voter. The franchise extensions of 1867 and 1885 had moved the position of the median voter down the class ladder to somewhere in the skilled working class – that is, the class who were most likely to be trade unionists.

Labour's only other significant contribution to the progressive alliance was also on a union matter. The Trade Union Act 1913 reversed another court judgement – the Osborne Judgement of 1909 – which held that a union could not raise a political levy, nor give the proceeds to the Labour Party. The 1913 Act permitted both of those, so long as individual members had the right to opt out. The long-term fortunes of the nascent Labour Party were also bolstered by the introduction in 1911 of payment for MPs. Another first for progressive politics. The *quid pro quo* for this policy demanded by the Chancellor Lloyd George was that Labour members support his National Insurance bill.

The Irish Party existed for one purpose only: to gain Home Rule for Ireland. It had dominated Catholic Irish politics since the election of 1885, always winning at least 80 of Ireland's 105 seats. Whenever it held

the balance in the Commons, it could insist on a Home Rule Bill, which the sympathetic Gladstone had introduced in 1886 and 1893. The first bill had fallen in the Commons; the second was crushed by 419 votes to 41 in the House of Lords, where the Church of England bishops voted *en bloc* to deny devolution to a country in which their church had already been disestablished and had less popular support than either the Catholics or the Presbyterians. In the 1906 parliament, therefore, the less sympathetic CB and Asquith did nothing about Home Rule. It was bound to be defeated in the Lords; it was unpopular with the working class outside Ireland, and among Ulster Protestants; seeing it through the Commons would merely waste legislative time.

Everything changed in 1909. Lloyd George introduced what propagandists soon labelled the 'People's Budget', which set out to pay for both social reform and naval rearmament through a system of progressive taxation, that is, through a system that explicitly set out to redistribute income from the rich to the poor. It represented an unprecedented attack upon privilege and in so doing sparked a ferocious fight back, which would only be resolved after one of the most bitter and prolonged constitutional struggles in modern times. Even Lloyd George's own Permanent Secretary, Sir George Murray, was against him, going behind his back to urge the by now estranged Liberal ex-Prime Minister Lord Rosebery to reject the budget.

In autumn 1909, Lloyd George transformed this from a threat to an opportunity. He positively goaded the peers to reject the budget. The Lords could stomach 'supertax' on incomes; they could stomach increased spirit duties (which made the Irish Party very queasy); but they would not stomach taxes on land values, although these were by far the least of the new taxes. 'Who ordained that the few should have the land of Britain as a perquisite; who made 10,000 people owners of the soil, and the rest of us trespassers in the land of our birth?', Lloyd George roared in Newcastle. He had the desired effect. The Lords rejected the Budget. Roy Jenkins notes that 'as is so often the case when the House of Lords is engaged in reaching a peculiarly silly decision, there were many comments on the high level of the debate and on the enhancement it gave to the deliberative quality of the second chamber' (Jenkins 1968: 101).

The Lords' rejection of the 1909 Budget awarded the ensuing forced general election to the progressive alliance. By-elections had been showing a strong swing to the Unionists. But a general election forced by the refusal of the House of Lords to grant supply (and therefore to pay the wages of the Navy) was the most rumbustious of the 20th century. The progressive alliance fought on the century's best slogan – *The Peers against the People*. They won with a reduced majority, such that the Liberals were now dependent on the Irish Party. However, the figures in Table 1 show that they depended *only* on the Irish Party. Liberals + Irish formed a Commons majority even without Labour. Liberals + Labour did not form a Commons majority unless the Irish Party came in too. The Labour Party was a dummy player, which was why its issue (reversal of Osborne) had to wait until 1913, behind the Parliament Act and Home Rule.

The Budget was enacted in spring 1910, after which the Liberals began to set out their radical plans to curb the power of the House of Lords. The Irish Party, which had opposed the budget, welcomed the Parliament Bill with open arms. Not only would it reinstate what everyone had believed to be the position established in the English Civil War – that only the Commons could vote on supply – but it would remove the absolute veto of the Lords on other legislation and substitute a suspensory veto – that is, a provision that if the Commons passed a bill in three successive sessions, it would be enacted even without Lords' consent. The intention was clear. Never again would the vested interests of 'five hundred men, chosen accidentally from among the unemployed', as Lloyd George so memorably described members of the second chamber, thwart the will of the House of Commons.

First, though, there had to be another general election. The new king, George V, was for the first four years of his reign a committed partisan – a partisan of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition, not of His Majesty's Government. He refused to create the 500 peers necessary to force the Parliament Bill through the Lords unless the progressive alliance fought, and won, another general election. This they did, in December 1910, with the identical aggregate result to January (Table 1). The Parliament Act passed in August 1911. 'We were beaten by the Bishops and the rats', said the Unionist politician George Wyndham. It was now common knowledge that the parliamentary sessions of 1912, 1913, and 1914 would be dominated by Irish Home Rule, which would be enacted, together with land taxation introduced in a Budget immune from Lords' interference, in time for the 1915 general election.

HH Asquith succeeded CB as Prime Minister in 1908. This marked a turning point in the life of the government as he and his ministers (especially Lloyd George and Winston Churchill) set about cultivating the median voter much more actively than had CB. Their chief cause was that of social reform. But rather

than adopt Labour measures of social reform, they promoted their own. The highlights of this were old age pensions, employment exchanges, and the first National Insurance scheme. Combined, they laid the foundations of the welfare state and established for the first time a discernible social dimension to British citizenship.

The pensions and National Insurance schemes were, however, both more modest than they looked, for curiously symmetrical reasons. Old age pensions were introduced in 1908 at the rate of 5/- (25p) a week at age 70 for those whose total income was below 10/- a week. It was enough for Lord Rosebery (that former Progressive) to denounce them as 'so prodigal of expenditure as likely to undermine the whole fabric of the Empire' (Jenkins 1964: 167). But very few working people whose total income was low enough to qualify survived to the age of 70, so to begin with, pensions were cheap.

The state avoided heavy liabilities to poor pensioners because they died; it avoided heavy national insurance liabilities because the scheme was restricted to the best risks among the working class. Skilled workers had a triple advantage over unskilled workers. They enjoyed better health; they were less likely to be unemployed; and they were more likely to have the vote. For both financial and political reasons, the 1911 National Insurance scheme was restricted to them. The median voter was enticed by Lloyd George's slogan of 'ninepence for fourpence'. Most employees paid in 4d a week for sickness and medical benefit, their employers paid 3d, and the state paid 2d. Lloyd George really wanted National Insurance to be a pay-as-you-go fund, in which current benefits were paid out of current contributions. He objected to building up a National Insurance fund on the ingenious grounds that 'the proper course for the Chancellor of the Exchequer was to let money fructify in the pockets of the people, and take it only when he wanted it'. In the end, he announced, while on his way upstairs to dress for dinner, 'I am inclined after all to be virtuous' (Braithwaite 1957: 127).

Virtue meant establishing an actuarially sound fund, in which present contributions by young and healthy workers, their employers, and the state, were invested, to be paid out in future when the workers were old and sick. Actually, however, the fund was never actuarially sound, and every extension of coverage downwards in the social scale meant that it became (actuarially) more unsound still. However, Lloyd George created, and this is not to be sneered at, a magnificent house of mirrors in which people believed that they were contributing to a National Insurance Fund that *entitled* them to benefits when old, or sick, or unemployed. He also saw off the British Medical Association in a way that was to be a model for Nye Bevan in 1948. On both occasions, the British Medical Association collected pledges from the majority of its members voting to refuse to have anything to do with the new scheme. And in both cases a wily Welsh Secretary of State divided and ruled the doctors – in 1911 by appealing to those doctors in working-class areas who would be better off under the National Insurance scheme; in 1948 by 'stuffing their [consultants'] mouths with gold' and allowing them to keep private practice in NHS hospitals. In both cases the scheme started on the appointed day (Abel-Smith 1964).

National Insurance had little to do with the Labour wing of the progressive alliance (and not much to do with the Irish wing, which was easily bought off by separate National Insurance Commissioners for Ireland). The leading socialist thinkers, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, wanted a non-contributory scheme funded out of general taxation. Through their Minority Report on the Poor Law of 1909, they have convinced many historians and social work professionals that that would have been the way to go. They utterly failed to convince their contemporaries, and they never explained who was to pay for their scheme. A scheme that was practical in the conditions of 1911 was due to Liberals alone, and to one Liberal in particular: David Lloyd George, who more than anyone else put the ideas of the New Liberalism into action and whose portrait fittingly has pride of place in the reception room of 11 Downing Street over all other former Chancellors who hang on the stairs there.

By 1911, there were signs that the Liberal-Labour end of the progressive alliance was breaking up. Ministers were confident that they had marginalised the Labour Party. It had had no real impact on the old age pensions or National Insurance legislation. Its demands for protection of trade union interests had been met by 1913, so there would (ministers thought) no longer be any reason for trade unionists to support a party other than the hegemonic gatherer of working-class votes, the Liberal Party.

In the 1910 elections the spirit of the Gladstone-MacDonald pact had been quietly honoured: it remained in the interests of both parties that their candidates should not stand against one another. After 1911, the Liberals turned nasty. By-elections were always three-cornered, and Labour did badly, sometimes coming third even in working-class constituencies. They would have suffered heavily in the general election of

1915, although the split progressive vote would certainly have let Conservative candidates into some working-class seats.

More broadly, the relationship between the Liberals and Labour was beginning to come under strain as it became clear that they held divergent views on the nature of capitalism. The attempt by the New Liberals to reconcile capital and labour by reforming capitalism was ultimately at odds with those socialists who wanted nothing less than to replace it.

The Liberal-Irish Party end was destroyed from outside, not inside. Neither party had paid much attention to the Protestant objections to Home Rule in the north-east of Ireland, where Protestants were a majority. In their defence, the parliamentary route seemed clear. They had a Commons majority. The people of Ireland as a whole had overwhelmingly voted for a party whose sole platform was Home Rule in seven consecutive General Elections. What democratic mandate could be clearer? However, under the Ulster-Scots-Canadian Andrew Bonar Law, who unexpectedly became Leader of the Opposition in 1911, the Unionists moved to more and more explicit support of Protestant armed resistance to Home Rule. In 1912, Law said¹ that 'there are things stronger than Parliamentary majorities', and that he could imagine 'no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I should not be prepared to support them' (Blake 1955: 130). Earlier, he had suggested to George V that the king might refuse his Royal Assent to the Home Rule bill when enacted. The king was tempted, although, luckily for the survival of the monarchy in the UK, in the end he drew back from either that or dismissing the government, something it seems he was seriously considering in the autumn of 1913.

In the end, there was no less than a Unionist *coup d'état*. A private army of Protestant volunteers, the Ulster Volunteer Force, had been formed in 1912 and was growing rapidly. By the end of April 1914, they had obtained about 30,000 rifles and three million ammunition rounds, landed under the noses of the army and police at Larne, while army officers in the Curragh, near Dublin, egged on by the War Office Director of Military Operations, had said that they would resign their commissions rather than go to put down an Ulster Protestant mutiny.

Sir Edward Carson, later a member of the War Cabinet, was the master planner of these operations. Bonar Law, the Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition, may have been complicit in them – or so the chief gun runner claimed in a memoir of the Larne operation he wrote in 1915 (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland D/1700). His Majesty himself sympathised more with the plight of his million Irish Protestant subjects than the plight of his 2.5 million Irish Catholic subjects with their Commons alliance and their seven election victories for home rule.

Ultimately, only the outbreak of the First World War saved Ulster from civil war. The Government of Ireland Act was passed but immediately suspended for the duration of the war. When that war ended, the progressive alliance was shattered. The British execution of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising turned Irish opinion against the constitutional Irish Party in favour of the insurrectionary Sinn Féin, who won all but six of the seats in Catholic Ireland in the 1918 General Election and declared Ireland an independent state.

The Liberal Party split when some key Conservatives in the wartime coalition ousted Asquith in favour of the more vigorous Lloyd George, who served as Coalition Prime Minister until 1922. The Asquithian Liberals fell behind Labour in 1918, although both did very badly. The Conservatives ousted Lloyd George in 1922, as they could have done at any time since 1918, since they held more than half of the seats in the Commons. In the elections of 1922, 1923, and 1924 there was a hard fight for second place, which in 1924 the Labour Party won. The Liberals faded away, and the Conservatives began their 70-year hegemony.

The progressive alliance was partly a three-way partnership of convenience. The junior partners got their projects (union law, Home Rule) in return for providing the senior partner with support for its projects (pensions, National Insurance). But there was more to it than that. All three partners had a common interest in social and constitutional reform and in dismantling privilege. These causes united progressives, and though there were differences between them, the scale of these differences never rivalled those that existed between themselves and the Conservative Party and the forces of reaction. For all its faults, the progressive alliance succeeded in making Britain a much more progressive country.

1. At Blenheim Palace, 29 July 1912

The lessons of the progressive alliance

History rarely provides unambiguous lessons, and the experience of the progressive alliance is no exception. Nevertheless, it does teach us a number of things about progressive politics in Britain.

The first lesson for progressives is: do not ignore the electoral system. The progressive alliance was too careless about the electoral system, which rewarded it richly in 1906, but was to punish it viciously in 1918, 1922 and 1924. The Liberals and the Irish Party were both hegemonic – in terms of seats – in 1906. In terms of votes, the Liberals were vulnerable to ordinary swings and splits of the progressive vote. Therefore, as long as the first-past-the-post electoral system remained, the Gladstone-MacDonald Pact was vital to them (as it obviously was to the Labour Party), and abandoning it in 1911 was a bad, hubristic, mistake. The alternative was proportional representation, which a wartime Speaker's Conference actually recommended in 1917. However, it got nowhere once the electoral system had swung round, as it does, to reward the winners and penalise the Liberal and Labour losers in 1918. Winners rarely have the foresight to see that electoral reform may benefit them in the long run. Indeed the Conservative Party has not yet seen that despite three crushing defeats in 1997, 2001 and 2005.

In Ireland things were still worse. The Irish Party was vulnerable because seven successful General Elections seemed to have counted for nothing against a Protestant coup d'état. Even so, those who wanted to emulate the Larne gunrunners were initially unpopular. It was not the Easter Rising, but the British Army's brutal suppression of it, that shifted Irish support to Sinn Fein. Even then it was only a partial shift. It was the electoral system, rather than Carson, Pádraig Pearse, or the British Army, that destroyed the Irish Party. The Irish Catholic voters split about 2:1 in favour of Sinn Fein. The electoral system converted that to a 73:7 lead in seats. Of the seven seats saved by the erstwhile hegemon, one was in Liverpool, five were in northern Ireland, and only one was in what became the Irish Free State.

The Labour Party, too, forgot about the electoral system. As it struggled towards competitiveness with the Conservatives, its leaders lost interest in electoral reform. The second MacDonald government did propose the Alternative Vote in 1930. AV is not a proportional electoral system but it is good for the members of a progressive alliance when progressive voters are warm to several parties and hostile to one. That was true in 1906-14, 1929-31 and 1983-97. In each of these periods there was a progressive alliance against the Conservative Party. Unfortunately (for progressives) the AV proposal fell at the collapse of the Labour government in 1931.

The second lesson for progressives from 1906-14 is a thoroughly Marxist one: *never underestimate your class enemies*. The House of Lords' fight for the privileges of the landed interest was bitter and partly successful – it stymied land tax in 1909 and 1914, although it did lead to the Parliament Act. The list of people who believed that, in Law's words, 'there are things stronger than Parliamentary majorities' included King George V, all the Unionist leaders, Sir Edward Carson, Major-General Henry Wilson (the Director of Military Operations who tipped off the UVF and the Curragh 'mutineers'), Professor AV Dicey, and even Sir George Murray, Lloyd George's Permanent Secretary in charge of the 1909 Budget at the Treasury.

The third lesson is: attend to the art of the possible. It is very easy to pick holes in, for instance, the 1909 Budget or the National Insurance Act. But actually these reforms, flawed as they were in places, were monumental achievements. The 1908 and 1909 Budgets introduced progressive taxation to the UK for the first time. The 1911 scheme had lots of rough edges and concessions to vested interests, and it was actuarially unsustainable. But it worked. It bequeathed both its advantages and its disadvantages to Beveridge's welfare state and Bevan's NHS. We live with them to this day.

By attending to the art of the possible the progressive alliance achieved what might be considered the holy grail of progressive government – it permanently transformed the political landscape and redefined the terms of political debate along progressive lines. By 'winning the battle of ideas' it established a progressive legacy that shaped and constrained the choices of its successors and ensured that its gains were not subsequently reversed. It achieved that rare status of being a genuinely transformative government rather than an administrative one.

Do not run out of steam in office is the fourth lesson. This is a problem that has afflicted all good progressive governments. Atlee's administration, for instance, soon became exhausted after an initial frenzy of activity. In stark contrast the progressive alliance showed a tremendous capacity for renewal in office. Between 1906-08 the government was guilty of fighting yesterday's battles (schools, non-conformity and brewers – Liberal issues since Gladstone) but from 1908 onwards they engaged much more in the politics of

the future – understanding that times had changed and offering policies more relevant to the new working class electorate. The Liberal governments became more radical and more determined as they went on. Morgan writes that Lloyd George's 1914 budget was the most radical and redistributive of the lot (2006). Why was this? Partly it was down to the immense energies of individual ministers, notably Lloyd George, and partly to Asquith's adroit political management of the diverse coalition over which he presided. Above all it was down to the political courage shown by the government in taking on those who opposed it and winning the political arguments of the day.

The fifth lesson: beware of wars. Progressives are not usually good at fighting them. More precisely, however good they are at fighting them, they will always be vulnerable to nationalist and xenophobic opposition. Asquith was doomed to learn what Mr Gladstone had found out 30 years earlier.

The modern progressive alliance

Since 1983, there has again been a progressive alliance in British politics. That is, the combined size of the non-Conservative vote has always outstripped that of the Conservative vote. In 2005 Labour and the Liberal Democrats between them achieved 57.2 per cent of the vote.

The electorate, however, have been more grown-up about this than the politicians, who have sometimes childishly failed to see where their long-term interests lay.

In every general election since 1983, the people have made an anti-Conservative progressive alliance by voting tactically for whichever party seemed likeliest to be able to defeat the Conservatives in their constituency. The level of tactical voting has not been particularly high. Some people in all parties deplore it, preferring on principle to vote for their favourite party even if the consequence is to return the party they like least in their constituency. Most people are not in a position to vote tactically – if their favourite party is either first or second in their seat, they have no incentive to do anything other than vote for their favourite. But the tactical voters have sufficed to raise the total of non-Conservative seats in the Commons at every general election from 1987 to 2001, and to prevent it from declining as much as it otherwise would have done in 2005.

In 1906, there was no great ideological chasm between Liberal and Labour. Neither MPs nor their voters differed much in outlook or ideology. Most of the great Whig magnates had already crossed the floor to Unionism, so the 1906 Liberal Party was mostly middle class, with a few MPs and many of its voters drawn from the skilled working class. In the Labour Party the balance was different but the components were the same. The predominantly non-socialist trade union background of the first tranche of Labour MPs made them feel at home with the new Liberals. Since 1983 it has been true that Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers are more like one another than either is to Conservative identifiers.

As in 1906, the progressive alliance is now strongest in the peripheral parts of Britain. Plaid Cymru, SDLP and, to a lesser extent, Scottish Nationalist politicians (especially those representing urban seats) have a recognisably similar set of values to Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians, and so, on the whole, do the people who vote for them. Of course they do not agree about the distribution of the spoils – the national parties and their voters would rather have more in their patch. But these zero-sum distributional politics will always be there. Progressive politics are not pork-barrel politics – they are about democratic and liberal values.

But the politicians have not been so grown-up. Roy Jenkins – the best historian of the 1906 progressive alliance – had a lot of influence on Tony Blair early in his Prime Ministership, but it was never enough to persuade him to stick with the deal that Paddy Ashdown believed he had been promised. That deal would have delivered some form of electoral reform, which is anathema to many Labour politicians. But they need to consider their long-term as well as their short-term self-interest. An electoral reform package with attractions to any thinking progressive would be this: keep single-member seats in the House of Commons, but substitute the Alternative Vote for first-past-the-post. In the elected upper house that will succeed the House of Lords (and that was promised in the preamble to the Parliament Act 1911), introduce open-list proportional representation, with the 12 standard regions of the UK being the multi-member electoral districts, as they are for the European Parliament. Electoral reform should not consider one house in isolation.

Who are the modern equivalents of the House of Lords in 1909 and King George V in 1914? Progressives do not have naked class enemies as they did then. But undoubtedly there remain forces of reaction determined to resist progressive advances. They exist in the right-wing media and within the Conservative Party. The

rhetoric from the new Conservative leader – of which comparison with Bonar Law would be most unfair – suggests a shift in Conservative Party attitudes, but it is too early to tell whether this amounts to a credible progressive position. Nonetheless, Conservative support for fighting climate change and civil partnerships should be regarded as a triumph for progressives, in a similar way to the triumph achieved in getting bipartisan support for the Welfare State after 1951. In the long run, the Civil Partnership Act 2004 may be seen as one of the outstanding achievements of the New Labour governments – ranking with independence of the Bank of England and equally immune from dismantling.

If opinion polls are to be believed then the next election is likely to be a close-run thing. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for progressive politics. The challenge is whether, in the face of a resurgent Conservative Party, today's progressive parties can act decisively in tackling the ideas and values of their opponents, as the progressive alliance at the beginning of the 20th century succeeding in doing. A lot will depend on the Liberal Democrats. The time has come for them to decide whether or not they want to seize the progressive moment.

References

Abel-Smith B (1964) *The hospitals 1800-1914* London: Heinemann

Blake R (1955) *The Unknown Prime Minister* London: Eyre and Spottiswoode

Braithwaite WJ (1957) *Lloyd George's Ambulance Wagon* London: Methuen

Jenkins R (1964) *Asquith* London: Collins

Jenkins R (1968) *Mr Balfour's Poodle* 2nd ed., London: Collins

Morgan KO (2006) 'Blissful Dawn? The 1906 Election and the Liberal Government' Lecture to mark the Centenary of the 1906 General Election, Guildhall, London, 7 February