



# **Plan B: Shaping Progressive Politics in the Age of Austerity**

**Notes from the first Brighton and Hove Compass group event on 27 July 2015**

## **Plan B: Shaping Progressive Politics in the Age of Austerity**

### **Brighton and Hove Compass**

The Brighton and Hove Compass group was formally launched on 27th May 2015. On 27th July 2015, the group held its first public event entitled **Plan B: Shaping Progressive Politics in the Age of Austerity**. The event was filmed, and recorded and broadcast by Brighton Freedom Radio. This document is the more formal report of the event.

If you would like to find out more about Brighton and Hove Compass, including future events, please visit our Facebook page (Brighton & Hove Compass), follow us on Twitter (@BtnHoveCompass) or contact us on [brighton-hove@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:brighton-hove@compassonline.org.uk).

### **Programme of the event**

19.00 Welcome and Introductions

19.15 Speakers

#### **Setting the Scene**

Neal Lawson: Chair Compass, political commentator and writer

Luke Martell: Professor of Political Sociology, University of Sussex.

#### **Shaping Progressive Politics Locally and Nationally**

Nancy Platts: Chair Brighton & Hove Labour Party, Parliamentary Candidate for Brighton Kemptown

Caroline Lucas: Green Party MP Brighton Pavilion

20.00 Breakout Groups

Six breakout groups discussing building alliances and partnerships, focused around the three themes for Compass: Equality, Sustainability, Democracy

20.45 Feedback from groups

3 key points and actions members will take, followed by Panel and audience response

21.30 Close

### **Acknowledgements**

Brighton and Hove Compass would like to thank all those who attended the event and shared so many positive and challenging ideas. We would also like to apologise for all those who wanted to attend but were unable to get tickets because of the unexpectedly high demand. In the end, around 85 people attended - there was standing room only. The huge interest in the event took us by surprise but showed there is a real appetite for a new progressive politics in Brighton and Hove.

We would also like to thank all the speakers at the event - Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass nationally; Luke Martell, Professor of Political Sociology, University of Sussex; Nancy Platts, Chair Brighton & Hove Labour Party; and Caroline Lucas, Green Party MP for Brighton Pavilion. All the contributions were stimulating and inspiring. We are also very grateful that the speakers provided their notes for this report.

We would also like to thank all the Compass group members who helped set up the event, facilitate the breakout groups and took notes throughout the event, and contributed to this report.

## 1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

**Colin Miller, co-ordinator of Brighton and Hove Compass** welcomed everyone to the event. His presentation is provided below.

"As progressives we face deeply troubling and challenging times. We have a government that seems hell bent on forcing through its neo-liberal agenda, with massive cuts in public services, attacking the Trade Unions, privatisation of the NHS, cutting the benefits of those who most need them and a slow and under the radar manipulation of things in an attempt to ensure a permanent political hegemony in England. The progressive movement in the UK is transformed, the SNP playing such a key role in the opposition, the Labour Party is disarray, and we've seen the Lib Dems wiped out. We have also seen the amazing growth in votes and membership of the Greens.

And of course the development of the People's Republic of Brighton and Hove amid a vast sea of blue in the South East. And this takes us neatly to our city of Brighton and Hove.

The aim of our meeting tonight is to start a process of encouraging a conversation between progressives on how we might start working together in our city as well as nationally.

Brighton and Hove Compass has only properly been around for a couple of months. It started when a bunch of us met for a post election drink to commiserate and explore the idea of starting a local Compass group. More than 30 people turned up and said, yes please. We've met a couple of times since, but we are very new.

We are an open group, you don't even have to be a member of the national organisation and we will become whatever the members want it to become. Just as long as we subscribe to the idea that the good society must be shaped by sustainability, democracy and equality and that we must try and be 'the change we want to see'. We are already planning a much bigger event in October that will take many of the ideas discussed here forward.

Now about Compass nationally. Some people still think Compass is a think tank affiliated to the Labour Party, but it is not. It was when it was launched in 2003, but in about 2008 it took the decision to become a much broader organisation of the left and progressive. The aim was and is to involve people from all the progressive parties and unaffiliated people (like me).

Since then the organisation has consciously sought to do things differently. One of the reasons I joined is because it seeks to be the antithesis of the usual conference and think tank type group. Compass seeks to be inclusive not exclusive, it seeks to enable every member to have a voice.

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality. We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions; to be the change we wish to see in the world.

The aim is to create a unique space for people across different political parties (and those with no party affiliation) as well as activists, thinkers and doers who share our values. From this place we produce policies, discuss them and campaign together inside and outside Parliament and National assemblies.

Tonight is not about writing up a bunch of wish lists on some flip chart sheets and then forgetting about them. It's about identifying what we can do together and taking this forward. It's about taking the first steps in beginning to work together more positively, openly and effectively. It's about finding out what we have in common and building on that. It's about creating a shared progressive agenda.

We hope the ideas developed at this meeting can be taken forward in all sorts of ways. It's up to you what these might be. We plan a much bigger event in October, but it will be organised in the same spirit as tonight. Our aim will be the same, to carry on finding ways of working together and addressing some of the deep and challenging issues we face, to influence the progressive parties in our city and maybe have an impact on policies and actions. We hope that some of the concrete actions many of you will be involved with from today can feed into this bigger event.

Tonight is shaped around brief talks from our speakers, then conversation in some smaller groups and then getting back together to hear from the groups and get a response from our speakers.

So now to our speakers. We have asked each speaker to stick to 10 minutes each outlining their ideas, and we have also asked the speakers to join a breakout group. So you will be able to explore these in a little more detail. All speakers tonight speaking in a personal capacity.

### **Neal Lawson**

Has been involved in politics at a national level for years, he was for a while an advisor to Gordon Brown, which I know he has quite a lot of mixed feelings about. As well as chair of Compass he has written for numerous newspapers and journals such as the Guardian and pops up on Newsnight every now and then. Neal has played a key role in helping reshape Compass into a new kind of organisation and has some pretty challenging ideas about the future of the left in general and the Labour Party in particular.

### **Luke Martell**

Is Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Sussex. He has a particular interest in socialism and social democracy and social movements. Luke has written extensively about Blair and New Labour, global inequality and the anti-globalisation movement.

### **Nancy Platts**

Is a well-known figure in Brighton and Hove's progressive movement. She stood as the Labour Candidate for Kempdown and was recently elected as chair of Brighton and Hove District Labour Party. She has worked for the public and voluntary sector as well as trade unions and a senior project manager in the GLA. Nancy is also deeply involved in a wide range of campaigns. Recently she wrote an article for Brighton and Hove Independent arguing that progressives from Labour, the Greens and other organisations must seek ways of working more effectively together.

### **Caroline Lucas**

Has the distinction of being the first Green MP when she was elected 2010. She was also the first leader of the Green Party. She is well known for her campaigns on green issues and campaigning for social justice not least getting herself arrested at an anti-fracking demonstration. She also writes extensively for many newspapers and journals and has appeared on Newsnight, Question Time and dozens of other television programmes. She has also been a good friend of Compass for several years. Recently, along with Nancy she also wrote an article for the Brighton and Hove Independent calling for progressives to find ways of working together and developing alliances in our city.

Neal and Luke will **set the scene**. And Nancy and Caroline will talk about **how we can shape progressive politics locally**."

## 2. PRESENTATIONS BY INVITED SPEAKERS

We are very grateful to all the speakers for providing their own notes of their contributions, which are given below, so the texts are all their own words. Not all speakers kept rigidly to their notes, so the material below does not necessarily provide a full or verbatim version of what they actually said on the night.

### **Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass**

In 1952 Ross Ashby, an early cyberneticist and psychologist and peer of Alan Turing came up with the 'law of requisite variety'. If you remember one thing tonight please remember the law of requisite variety - it is blindingly simple but increasingly apparent.

This law is that, in order to deal properly with the diversity of problems the world throws at you, you need to have a repertoire of responses which is (at least) as nuanced as the problems you face.

Current politics change very quickly - as with the surges around Jeremy Corbyn and the SNP. The old tribal politics are breaking up. That surge is happening but it needs to be brought together to create coherent politics.

In a networked society – social media, algorithms, big data, 3D printing – a world in which everyone one can know anything and connect to millions at the touch of a button – Compass has called 'new times'. We stay in our 19th century parties – stuck in a rigid top down system where we pretend we have all the answers.

### **This is where it gets us - here in Brighton.**

We stick in our simple silos. We fought each other and not climate change. We fought each other and not poverty. The only people we didn't fight were the Tories – how Simon Kirby MP must be laughing

We are hitting the edge of the set. Like the film 'The Truman Show' - the wind blows – it's scary – the bump when the boat hits the edge of the set and our world is turned upside down. The Director lets him Go. We are Truman – this our show – not theirs.

Let's live out our political life – take collective control and see what happens. People will connect and combine and create a new collectivism across politics and parties to help create the new future.

We can push ourselves and be open. To the SNP – Common weal and RICS, Greens and social liberals and the big town halls, to strands in our party and our past. To radical housing campaigns, local currencies, to hope not hate, Precariat, the professions, Occupy, Podemos, Syriza.

Do the new politics here in Brighton first – be the change you wish to see in the world – break down the barriers – create the new alliance and networks – build a good society here in Brighton – the only way we can – together. Nancy and Caroline are very brave to be here and sharing a platform.

If you want to change the world so much – you will do the hardest thing possible and the only thing really possible – change yourself first. Follow the law of reciprocal vulnerability.

Welcome the world of pluralism, of complexity, of a future that will not be imposed by any one party but negotiated by all of us. We need to make hope possible. Welcome to the world of Compass. It's called the future – it's happening everywhere and we are making it.

**Luke Martell, Professor of Political Sociology, University of Sussex**

I'm going to talk about three things. Hopefully they all relate to being 'progressive' and to Labour, the left and Greens working together, themes of tonight. Some of them may sound a bit utopian but I think they're more practical than they sound.

**A society based on less paid work**

One thing I want to talk about is work, or less work, or more specifically less paid work. The left has tended to be oriented to work. The group who has traditionally been its agent and who it has represented has been the working class. The aims of the left have been more jobs, higher wages and collective ownership of production, of the workplace. New Labour saw work as the solution to lots of things. Labour more recently have adopted the rhetoric of hard-working families and the idle work shy. Greens have been more disposed to a shorter working week because work is to produce and consume and these are not sustainable at current levels. Although some green utopias, of agricultural self-sufficiency, are quite labour-intensive.

But work at the current levels we do it at is a problem. One reason is control. When people are asked about problems with their work they often don't mention hours worked, or the nature of their job or their colleagues, but the boss. So an issue is that in large parts of our life we don't have control. It's an issue of autonomy. Also for many people the issue is meaninglessness, it doesn't seem to them that their work is meaningful or has a good purpose or is useful. And also it's an issue of time. Many of us work long hours and it crowds out time for us to do other things in our lives. If we had more non-work time we would have more autonomy for our own activities, which may be leisure, or work, just not paid or employed work, but our own work. And more time for things like relationships and care. There could be gender equality implications to this, if less paid work meant men had more time to spend in the domestic sphere, although this is not predetermined. It's also about quality of life.

The progressive element here is that this goes with the development of technology. Technology allows us to produce as much but in less time, so we can cut working hours. But what it's used for is to increase productivity and profit while we work just as much. There are other ways in which working less is possible. A decent living wage and a universal basic income would allow people to have a good enough income to not have to work so much. The universal basic income is not as utopian as it sounds, it's been attempted in a few places, it's supported by people from all sides of the political spectrum, and could be financed by things like a financial transactions tax. We could have better legislation on working hours. In the UK at the moment the maximum legal working hours are 48 hours a week, which is not exactly a small amount.

It may seem strange in a time of austerity to be advocating less work, when so many people need jobs. But we need to keep a long-term perspective, and less work can help solve unemployment by redistribution of work from the employed who work too long to the unemployed who don't have work, and also from the developed world to developing countries. People this evening, quite reasonably, will be focusing on local and national issues, but we need to think about global issues too.

**Migration**

Another issue I want to talk about is movement, the free movement of people. The centre-left, social democrats, have been oriented around the national working class, the working class of their own nation, and overseas workers have been seen as a threat, to employment and wages and in other areas. Social democrats have operated through the nation-state, a national institution. Greens have been split between those who are pro-immigration, the UK Green Parties have pro-immigration policies relatively speaking, and other greens who are negative about it because they see the transport in people movements as causing carbon emissions and migration as breaking up community that's

necessary for an environmental society. The Marxist left are the ones who've been more consistently internationalist, seeing class identity as overriding national identity.

There are lots of reasons to open up borders and increase migration. There are principled reasons to do with freedom, self-determination, people escaping from poverty, persecution and other things. There's a racism dimension to border controls. There are economic and social benefits to international migration. I'm an academic and international migration is unusual in being an area where the research is almost universally on one side, positive about the economic and social benefits of it. International migration promotes economic growth and provides tax revenue to support public services, because migrants are often turned from unemployed to employed workers. Migrants make a net fiscal contribution to societies, they pay more in than they take out in welfare and public services. They add to cultural diversity.

In terms of being progressive, supporting international migration is the way society's going. This may seem a strange thing to say when UKIP got such a large vote at the last election and anti-immigration seems so rife. In Britain when people are asked if they would like immigration controls to be tightened, in opinion polls and surveys usually over 70% say yes. But in other countries people are more pro-immigration than in the UK, for instance in the USA which has higher immigration, but in many others too. Britain is a bit of an outlier in terms of being so anti-immigration. So there's hope for more pro-immigration sentiment here. The young in the UK are more pro-immigration than others. I think this is a generational thing that they'll keep on as they get older rather than a lifecycle thing that they'll lose as they get older. If you have a university degree you're more likely to be pro-immigration than if you don't, and there have been very big increases in the number of people going to university in the UK. Those living in diverse areas are more pro-immigration. So London has the highest amount of pro-immigration sentiment in Britain. If experience of migration leads to more pro-immigration attitudes this is positive for immigration. People are also more positive about some types of migration than others. They're more positive about skilled worker immigration, temporary migrants, international students and close family immigration. Some of these types are those that have had the most hostile media coverage recently.

There are freedom and egalitarian reasons why we should be supporting more open borders. And there's more support for immigration than there appears to be. It's important to keep in mind global issues, and international migration is just one global issue.

### **Counter-culture in Society**

The third thing I want to talk about relates to what Neal was saying about not being top-down and about pluralism and networks in society. It also relates to being progressive. Sometimes we may want to be conservative rather than progressive. Tony Blair recently was saying to the think tank called Progress that Corbyn and the SNP are reactionary. If Blair is the progressive and Corbyn and the SNP are the conservatives then maybe being conservative isn't all bad.

What Cameron has been doing is privatising and marketising the public sector. Thatcher privatised and marketised parts of the economy that it's not completely unusual to have in the private and market sectors. Cameron is more radical in that he's been extending this to the public sector where traditionally non-market values and production and distribution for need rather than market demand predominate. We need to rescue the old principles of the welfare state, need and collective provision for free, which is why I'm saying sometimes we need to be conservative.

Some initiatives that rescue these old values are in society, beyond parties and protest. Parties and protest are very important, but sometimes beyond them there are important initiatives going on too. Here it's possible to go beyond campaigning and being against to being creative and building things even while the Conservatives are in power. The old principles are being kept on in things in society like co-ops, free education and food counter-culture. These are changes in themselves, people just getting



on and making alternatives rather than, or as well as, trying to get change through party politics or protest. But they're also means to social change because they're experiments that show the possibilities of a non-market non-commodified society.

We have plenty of examples of this sort of thing in Brighton. There are co-ops like Infinity Foods and Magpie and lots of other co-ops like [bike co-ops](#) and other types. There's a [Free University in Brighton](#) that is setting up a free degree for students, taught for nothing by staff, and offered for free to students who can do it without a lifetime of debt. And there's food counter-culture, against waste and giving away food on the basis of need not money, like the [Real Junk Food Project](#), for example.

Counter-culture in these practical areas can also be one place where alternative narratives of collectivism and provision for need are built up. The right have taken over discourses of austerity and the left needs to have its [own narrative](#), that is an alternative, not just a version of the Right's. This can be a counter-hegemony or alternative set of leading ideas as people like Gramsci and Stuart Hall have argued in the past. The examples I've mentioned are left and green counter-cultures; some of them are about sustainability but also about non-market values traditionally of the left. If the left and greens are to build alliances, a big obstacle is going to be the left's record on green issues, so a basis for fostering co-operation may be practical local campaigns and initiatives on sustainability issues.

I think it's important that as well as being creative under austerity in these ways we also need to defend people. Trade unions are one way of doing this. Trade unions need not only be defensive, they can also be a positive thing, because when people are helped by their union or participate in it, it can be quite radicalising and get them involved in other things too. So trade unions are another area for activity by the left and greens.

So I've been talking about less paid work, open borders and collectivism in society itself. These are areas where left and greens can work together and try to unite around.

### **Nancy Platts, Chair Brighton & Hove Labour Party, Parliamentary Candidate for Brighton Kemptown**

I am Nancy Platts and I stood to be the labour MP for Brighton Kemptown at the last General Election and I am here speaking from that perspective.

For those of you who follow me on Twitter and Facebook, you'll know that I started running last October. This was partly to create some space, some thinking time - when the phone didn't ring and no-one was asking me to write copy, do a media interview or make six decisions at once. It helped me keep the campaign in perspective and keep me grounded - reminded me you need to stay outside of the political bubble a General Election campaign creates because as the candidate you become the centre of attention - the focus is on you and your opinions - constantly. And at times, I found that very frustrating, because that's not what politics should be about - it should be about listening and engaging - not a continuing Q & A with us as the experts and you a passive audience listening to our pearls of wisdom!

So, I very much welcome the format of this evening's event and to have some thinking time, and would like to thank the organisers for inviting me and to all of you for coming along to take part in the discussion.

My focus has really been on the question raised with me many times in the run up to the General Election and since - should the Labour Party and Green Party have done a deal to keep the Tories out of Kemptown?



We always knew it was going to be a close race and it was, with only 690 votes (or 1.5% of those who voted) securing a Tory MP for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven. So, despite 17,700 people voting Labour and 3,100 voting Green, neither of us are now able to represent nearly 21,000 anti-austerity voices - instead the votes of 18,000 people under our first-past-the-post system mean we have a Tory MP that will vote for cuts to public services and local authorities.

So some would think I might be in favour of a deal - but I don't think that is a realistic way forward. The Labour Party will always stand a candidate in every seat with the aim of being able to form a government. The reality is that other political parties will also aim for a candidate in every seat and will want to give people the choice of voting positively for their policies.

I believe that for us to get together behind closed doors and pre-determine who to put in front of the electorate would only increase the cynicism in politics - it is more likely to be seen as carving up the seats to suit ourselves and as such is anti-democratic.

I think, instead, the increasing plurality of politics and the extent to which many people feel disenfranchised means that we need to look again at a fairer voting system. That can be the only way to enable people to vote with their hearts and get better representation in Westminster. It is notable that every new level of government formed, such as the Greater London Authority, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament use a system where people's votes count for more than under first-past-the-post.

But we are stuck with it for now and, following the election, we now raise the question about whether there are other ways we can work together to oppose austerity, campaign for positive change and present a desperately needed vision of hope for the future.

My background is as a professional campaigner, working in the voluntary sector and trade union movement. I have not followed the route of some politicians and come from a background of working in and around Westminster sometimes straight from university.

In my professional life I have spent countless hours building coalitions around issues close to many of our hearts such as fuel poverty, affordable childcare, better healthcare, violence against women and public ownership of our railways.

That means I've also spent many hours talking to politicians of all colours about why these issues are worthy of their support. I come to politics more interested in what we can achieve together than tribalism.

We all come into politics because we see the political route as a way to make positive change happen but if you walk into a room wearing your political colours, you are seen as tribal - people see the politics before the person.

If you walk into a room as a community organiser, charity chief exec or representing a local campaign you are seen as an advocate for that group or issue and your authenticity as an individual is not questioned.

If people are cynical about politicians, it is up to us to fix that, to demonstrate that community comes first. I lost track of how many times on the doorstep during the General Election I heard voters sigh wearily; exasperated about the 'Punch and Judy' behaviour in the House of Commons and fed up that MPs didn't get the reality of their lives.

We worked hard on my campaign to address this by joining in at events, by visiting community centres, Local Action Team meetings and residents associations. We set up our own events on

healthcare and disability to hear what people had to say and they were well-attended. This was a high risk strategy but we wanted to reach out, and need and do talk more to one another.

And we must continue to do that, because politics can seem so detached from those who are suffering under austerity measures. It is not surprising that people either give up on voting or approach our efforts with some cynicism.

Here in Brighton, the harsh impacts of the cuts is visible - we have people sleeping on the streets and on our beaches, the poorest and most vulnerable in our society have been targeted with the Bedroom Tax, people have been left relying on food banks and we have witnessed the risk of the 'disposable employee' as people struggle to survive on zero hours contracts - it's dehumanising, it's degrading and it's damaging to our society.

Cuts aren't the only option for Government. To build a decent society with opportunity for all, we need investment in economic regeneration including secure well-paid jobs, public services, housing, childcare and public transport.

The question now is whether we can focus on what we have in common and always act in the best interests of our communities to challenge austerity, demonstrate a real alternative and offer people hope for the future.

I look forward to hearing what you have to say. Thank you.

### **Caroline Lucas, Green Party MP Brighton Pavilion**

I want to make 3 points:

- That we need to share a **common analysis of what happened at the last election** before we can build a more effective movement
- That in my view we need a **less tribal politics** – that electoral reform has to be embraced by the Left if we're to succeed against the Tories – and also in recognition of the fact that progressives can and should work together, because no one party has monopoly on wisdom.
- That we need to recognise the challenge before us isn't only about reframing current debates – it's about having the **courage to bring some new proactive ideas to the table, and confidence to win public support for them.**

**First**, we can't build common future for the Left without common analysis about what happened on 7 May.

Entirely reasonable response of B&H, on the morning after – seeing itself as island of green and red in sea of blue – **secede from Union, and formally declare People's Republic of B&H**, complete with passport & flag – asylum requests from Kemptown, formal request for invasion from Lewes.

**NB not a landslide** – Tory vote increased by just 0.8% on 2010 result, while Labour increased share by 1.4%, and Greens by c. 2.5%.

If we start this debate by accepting the narrative that the Left were not Tory enough, then we change nothing and challenge nothing. Harriet Harman on welfare changes – it's not that people rejected alternatives to austerity – it's that the alternatives were never made clearly and consistently enough.

**Labour never challenged early enough Osborne's narrative that recast an international financial crisis caused by the banks into a national crisis caused by too much public spending.**

Language about don't give the keys back to the people who crashed the car in the first place gained real traction, and **allowed the debate to be a technical one about rates of spending cuts, rather than a political one about the ideology underpinning those cuts.**

**So first point is that the Left needs to have greater confidence in alternative economic narrative (and training in language to communicate it)** – trying to set up cross party Alternatives to Austerity group in Parliament, as a focus for some of this work.

**Second point** – surely the Left needs to embrace an electoral system that allows all views to be represented. Empower people to believe vote counts.

Winner takes all system in which Tories claim mandate on 37% of vote and just 24% of electorate not sustainable. Greens 1.2 m votes, UKIP 3.8%. True that changing voting system wouldn't necessarily have changed result (15.2m for Tories/UKIP, v. 14.4m for others) although people would have voted less tactically if PR. Chance to revitalise our politics – challenge the cynicism and despair. Millions of fellow citizens think not worth voting – even though often same people who lose out most by current system.

Stella Creasy – Labour must be movement not machine – but that must surely mean not only engaging with unions, civil society groups, grassroots movements, green groups – but also other progressive politicians – a less tribal politics.

Need to agree values before tactics – I accept that – but have sat through too many meetings where we can broadly agree on values, only for the conversation to be rendered irrelevant once the election campaign is underway and pitched against each other again.

Accept PR looks a way off with this govt (though locally through devolution to cities? Choose local mandate that way?) – personally interested in exploring potential for local party pacts in FPTP elections (not a Party position). Nancy Platts in Kempton lost by a fraction of the Green vote – and in other places could imagine some kind of arrangements in return.

Won't happen without building trust – in by-elections? Over EU Referendum? And has to have input and agreement of local citizens and voters. Can't be sewn up behind closed doors – but at least debate.

**Third and finally**, the Left needs to bring some new thinking to the table – let me suggest 3 areas that are ripe for development:

- **Collective ownership** – it says a lot when the only things the Govt has left to sell off are the Met Office & Ordnance Survey, because everything else has been flogged off already. Real tragedy. Let's re-imagine what collective ownership might look like - my Bill to bring rail back into public ownership as each franchise expires – not just another State run utility – how do we get passenger groups more involved? Perhaps local councils on the routes? Great work of We Own It – Public Service Users Bill.
- **Reimagining the welfare state** – as a settlement that recognises social security should be a contract between citizens, who then employ the state as an accountable mechanism to realise shared goals. Any government is our servant, tasked with distributing money that's ours, not theirs. That gives any government a responsibility to properly reflect the collective contract that binds us together as members of society – by appealing to the very best of human nature, rather than the worst.

Everyone paying fairly into our joint insurance scheme, and having the right to draw on it without being demonised. True social security is valuing unpaid as well as paid work; prevention rather than crisis management; action to tackle both supply and demand in the labour market; and the benefits of realising every individual's potential rather than benefits as a stick with which to beat people.

- **Climate** – recognising that we need to leave vast majority of known fossil fuel reserves in ground if to avoid dangerous CC, but demonstrating that policies to promote green energy aren't distraction from austerity, they're a route out of it – mass super efficiency in homes creates huge numbers of jobs, gets emissions down, fuel bills down, and pays for itself within a matter of years due to tax receipts.

### 3. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

After the contributions from the invited speakers, Colin Miller introduced the next stage of the meeting as being about all of us developing a vision about what we might do. The point had been made that the achievements of the 1945 Labour Government did not come out of the blue - that was the result of a conversation between parties that had been going on for many years. We now have the chance to start a new conversation that could lead to new radical progress.

All participants, including speakers, then took part in smaller group discussions on building alliances and partnerships around the three guiding themes for Compass nationally: equality, sustainability and democracy. Each group discussion worked for around 45 minutes. Notes were taken in each group and each group then fed back the three or so main points they had identified in their own discussions. The notes below are taken from those notes and from the feedback into the full session.

#### Group 1.

- **Electoral reform.** Need to identify Jeremy Corbyn's position and consider how to lobby him on this issue. There is not a massive swing to the right - numbers voting Tory was a very small proportion of the population - 24% of those registered to vote but only 20% of the potential voting population. There is now a very small Tory majority (12). Concerns were raised about fixed term governments, and even more about current arrangements for the funding of party politics which raise major issues of equalities.
- **Media in democracy.** Very exciting to hear from speakers about railways and public ownership, and there should be a parallel strand around media and media ownership - the BBC and beyond. The media is a crucial element in the democratic system.
- **Party political alliances through building trust.** It is vital to build trust between the different progressive parties; at the moment, they do not trust each other (especially on Brighton and Hove Council). Need to find the issues where common ground can be found, and parties can work together. It could possibly be harder at local level than national level.
- **Parties working together.** Concerns about the willingness of politicians to focus more on attacking other parties than doing anything. Needs more than consultation - Labour had done enormous amounts of policy consultation (Jon Cruddas) but with no sign that it had made any difference. Need to get strategic agreement across parties on some issues. Some in all parties were interested but these people were still the exceptions. Need to include Lib Dems. A lot of interest in potential deals between parties, recognising that it should certainly not be done behind closed doors but also that people vote tactically all the time and there has been a growing interest in Vote Swap campaigns.
- **Politics in local government vital.** A lot of interest in taking the party politics out of local elections, and thinking about how candidates could stand as independents (as in Frome in Somerset). There was discussion about the referendum in Brighton and Hove on council tax rates and cuts, but may not be possible to get parties to work together on it.
- **Priority issues for potential joint party working.** A number of possible issues were identified where common ground might be found:
  - Brighton and Hove Council's Fairness Commission being set up to guide where cuts happen
  - Adult social care through co-ops etc
  - Housing and Bedroom tax coalitions

- Justice - especially given cuts to legal aid, privatisation of the probation service, courts being closed, prisons privatised and poorly run, and next year's Police and Crime Commissioner elections. A functioning justice system was essential for democracy and at the moment there was one law for the rich and one for the poor.

## Group 2.

- **Start from the bottom** on real issues like housing and TTIP. Get a consensus around particular issues and start there.
- **The importance of language.** Need some jointly agreed statements about what we agree on. Need to think about how to take the messages being discussed at this event more widely.
- **The hope of Corbyn.** A lot of people think Jeremy Corbyn might open a way of talking about politics which is inclusive.
- **Is electoral reform 'dead'?**
- **The co-operative council,** with greater dialogue with residents, business and civil society. Is this a Compass issue?
- **Dialogue with others** e.g. small single issues politics.
- **Is neighbourhood action the way forward?** Perhaps this could be the focus for organising action in Brighton and Hove.

## Group 3.

- **Need to prioritise campaigning together** e.g. on climate change and proportional representation.
- **One antidote to despair is community engagement.** While waiting for the Tories to implode, we can work in communities and do things that make us feel strong. Focus on local organising. The importance of direct involvement in local issues and the terrible tribalism of local government - "All my life I've been involved in the Labour Party and saying no to things but recently I've been involved in Exeter Community Hall which has been a totally positive experience." While the Tories are in we can work on creating community and building cross-party collaborations. We can learn from Flatpack Democracy in Frome. The importance of inspiration (like the 100 ways to change the world Compass meeting). Inspiration generates energy.
- **There is no progressive politics that is not built on a bedrock of sustainability.** It is no longer credible to talk of growth as though it's unarguably good without counting the political (who gets the cream) and environmental (what is destroyed) implications. It requires personal and social responsibility plus equality of use of resources. The problem is over-population (not immigration!).
- **Electoral reform.** What can we do to change Tory policies such as the redrawing of constituencies? The Tories obey the 'law of the jungle' so how could we expect them to change policies that favour them (e.g. redrawing of constituencies). The importance of electoral reform via petitions. Vote swapping as a bottom-up way of practicing electoral reform – if it was a mass movement it could be influential. However, not all agreed with this - it was tactical voting that got us into this mess. This Tory government is more vulnerable than it seems. The Tories will never bring in PR – they need to be confronted by a mass movement like what happened in Scotland. Anyway PR isn't all plain sailing – it can give undue power to extreme minorities. Mid-Sussex is

totally blue in part because the 'greys' are being bribed. But they may be let down by NHS changes. We need the red-green alliance back. Are we being too tribal by rejecting Tories and UKIP? Some may share some of our views.

- **Austerity?** Misuse of the word 'austerity' which originally included positive connotations. The anti-austerity march was vast and multi-faceted.

#### Group 4.

- **Overcoming oppositionalism.** The discussion point from the opening session about party deals and electoral pacts misses the point, which is that we need to get behind decent candidates who are of the left (the Caroline Lucas factor!). At one level we could take inspiration from Frome and say that there is no place for party politics at the local council level. But whilst this might be an admirable long term goal we had to recognise that in the short term the parties weren't going anywhere – and that the goal should be to encourage co-operation on the left. This meant a hard think about how we overcome institutional oppositionalism.
- **Focus on issues.** Compass could look at taking an issue based approach – seeking to come forward with specific campaigns around issues facing the city, such as homelessness, protection of/improvement of public spaces, community use of technology.
- **Work with the wider political ecology of Brighton and Hove.** Compass needed to work with the wider political ecology of the city – and think about how it would add value within that. In addition to understanding the parties, this would involve recognising the huge information flows that activists / potential supporters were already struggling to cope with (colleagues mentioned People's Assembly, Global Justice Network and the recent TTIP actions, 38 degrees, [Change.org](http://Change.org) etc.) Creating idea spaces and idea glue would be important – though, there was a need to think about the organisation necessary to deliver this. The space that Compass creates in Brighton could learn useful lessons from the People's Republic Open Spaceship – and of course national Compass's avowed commitment to being kind and respectful to each other etc. (open tribes / to be kind is to be radical etc)
- **Five year programme.** Having a five year programme/ time horizon in our minds could help us plan activity and grow our organisation. This would give us time to experiment, and hone our messages etc. One useful experiment could involve letting the council know that Compass exists and inviting them to add our name to list of consultees on sustainability, equality and democracy issues, as one of the city's civil society institutions.

#### Group 5.

- **What is the USP of Compass?** The key thing is that it connects to the political establishment. In terms of sustainability, Compass is not co-ordinating - it is a platform not an umbrella; it can connect groups to the political process. Compass has the ability to bridge between local campaigns and the political structure.
- **Bring creativity into the process.** Let's do politics in a different way. Bringing creativity into creating our own narrative will be crucial.

#### Group 6.

- **Safe neutral space.** There is value in having a safe neutral space to discuss a range of big policy issues, and from this to agree our common ground.



- **Electoral reform and mock Kemp Town election.** We should be campaigning for electoral reform (PR). As part of this we could seek funding to run a mock election in Kemp Town using proportional representation.
- **Share information.** We need to disseminate information about what is really happening (an end to the Truman show!) - to share what we know and to educate others. We need to value and promote the welfare state, and the key role of the public sector in the creation of a 'good society'. We want greater local accountability on key issues. The role and power of the banks, and the ownership of the Bank of England in particular, are key matters of concern. Migration and immigration are human rights issues which need a lot more thinking through. The national media cannot be allowed to control the narrative - we need to get more savvy in the use of alternative methods of communication.

### Points made by participants in main session in response to group feedback

- The People's Republic of Brighton and Hove provides one safe neutral space every other Wednesday; an open space meeting at Millward Community Centre.
- The re-run of the General Election in Kemp Town under PR was a serious proposal. Could seek funding from the Electoral Reform Society, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others. Would need to be organised properly for the whole constituency. Would take a lot of organising but could be done. [There was a lot of support in the room for this idea.] B&H Compass had done a pop-up ballot at the People's Republic of B&H picnic, which was very popular.
- Also on PR, it was suggested that Compass works with the Political Society at Varndean 6th Form College. Talk to them about the options and get the students involved, and talk to them about going further and involving schools.
- What exactly are the common causes? It doesn't matter who wins if the system doesn't change. Need a real common cause that we all believe in and is fundamentally about what we want to achieve. Need to think seriously about that.

### Responses from invited speakers

- **Caroline Lucas.** Really enjoyed hearing the feedback. The big job is how we achieve these things, and need to agree tactics. Liked the idea of the election in Kemp Town. Also liked the proposal for working with Varndean - and would like to see voting at 16. The need for a safe space is important - where there is kindness, humour and scope for experiment. The theme of working together - "let's choose some issues we can work on" - such as legal aid and the courts; housing and the bedroom tax; the Fairness Commission. Use working on those issues to build trust. "Let's learn by doing something really practical". Would welcome ideas on how she can help support that.
- **Nancy Platts.** Welcome Green and Labour people together in a room. Want to find common cause. Nancy and Caroline have campaigned together for public ownership of the railways. Can make that happen. On electoral reform - should make the case for it. Interested in attending the People's Republic and Compass meetings. Next time breaking into small groups, don't ask about people's political affiliations - that is not the interesting thing; interest is in ideas. On the mock election in Kemp Town - have to do the whole thing again? If take this new approach to politics forward, it has to be fun and sociable. It is nice to be back having political discussions.
- **Luke Martell.** Really like the idea of being creative. We can do things now - e.g. the free university has been created. Also need to be defensive e.g. trade unions. Need to defend people. On local

collaborative action - the obstacle is the green / sustainability issue in the Labour Party. Need to overcome that locally. Need to create an alternative discourse - Gramsci; it is worth look at the alternative austerity narrative produced by the New Economics Foundation. And maybe an alternative narrative to take climate change seriously.

- **Neal Lawson.** Need to treat each other with respect. Listen not talk. A new Platts and Lucas Law - the law of reciprocal vulnerability. Trust comes from recognising that we don't have all the answers and then we can find a progressive way forward. This stuff is different, brave and challenging. It is really easy to go back into silos - want a thousand flowers to bloom but needs some formal organisation. Need democratic accountability - that is possible - Frome and all sorts of people are doing it. Can learn from it, project it. "Really enjoyed this event. You could change Brighton politics - so much energy, networks, capacity". Get a sense of that power. "We are always the people we have been waiting for".

Colin thanked the panel and all at the meeting, closed the meeting and invited everyone to continue the discussions in the pub afterwards.

DW

7 August 2015