

Brighton & Hove Compass meeting, Cornerstone Community Centre, 22 October 2022

Working Together Then and Now

A conversation between Davy Jones, former Green Party candidate and Labour MP for Brighton Kemptown Lloyd Russell-Moyle

Summary

An open, collegiate and honest discussion about the challenges around collaboration and competition between the Greens and Labour in recent general elections in Brighton. Both Davy and Lloyd provided valuable historical background and context to the decisions each party took in the recent 2015 and 2017 general election campaigns. There was lots of discussion from them both about the pros and cons of parties standing their candidates down, and shared recognition that the Green decision to stand down in many seats in 2017 came at a significant cost, while it was met with very limited acknowledgement or recognition by the other parties.

Looking ahead, Lloyd raised fresh ideas about alternatives to the option of standing down, particularly around the idea of 'joint tickets' where the example of the Co-Operative and Labour party arrangements could provide some useful lessons.

More broadly there was widespread recognition that ahead of the next election, we need to be creating spaces for cross-party engagement and discussion. While we may not agree on everything, we have more in common and we need to be building relationships of trust. And we need to remember that most progressive voters aren't activists in any of the progressive parties – just people who want to see the end of Tory government.

1. **Martin Osborne (Chair)** introduced the session and the speakers. And described this as part of the broader activities of Brighton & Hove Compass: we'll be hosting events every quarter and there will be further events in the new year.

Davy Jones

2. Davy started by saying that he'd been in Labour and in the Greens. He's not tribal – it's the policies which matter. He laid out the case for why it's important to understand some of the history and content of what has happened around general elections in Brighton between the Greens and Labour.
3. In 2010: Caroline Lucas won as the first Green MP anywhere in the world elected under first-past-the-post (FPTP). Then in 2011 the Greens became the largest party on Brighton Council. Labour saw this is a serious threat that needed stopping. Labour was seen by many to be to the right of the Greens at the time, with Ed Miliband seen as being sympathetic to Tory austerity policies.
4. In 2014 when Labour identified priority seats to target for the upcoming election they included Brighton Pavilion with the aim of unseating Lucas. As a result, the Greens stood Davy in Kemp Town with the main aim of being as annoying as possible, and trying to prevent Labour from transferring campaigning resources from Kemp Town to Brighton Pavilion.
5. During the 2015 general election campaign Davy stood against Labour candidate Nancy Platts. Yet at the hustings, Nancy and Davy were basically saying the same things on every issue, even if Labour's national policy position was less aligned.

6. The 2015 results showed the impact: Caroline Lucas was returned with an increased majority in Pavilion, pointing to the futility of Labour actively campaigning against her. Meanwhile in Kemp Town Nancy lost by 700 votes, while Davy got over 3000 arguably letting the Tories in. Davy felt terrible though Platts and her team didn't blame Davy in public. But lot of Labour did. Davy blames Labour decision to campaign against Caroline and split resources.
7. In the aftermath of 2015 and in the run up to 2017, there was lots of attention on the idea of progressive alliances. The Greens selected Davy selected again for 2017 for Kemp Town. Immediately, he started a discussion in the Greens about whether to stand down. At the event to make this decision, 90% of Greens who attended voted to stand down. There was a real perception at the time that it was for the good of the country. As a result Lloyd won with a 10,000 majority - Davy didn't claim credit, but it did help. Really good that Lloyd got in. Nationally about 30 Green candidates stood down. You could easily argue this was a good decision – it helped to prevent May's majority .
8. But it represented a big sacrifice by the Greens. And there was absolutely no reciprocation nationally by either the Lib Dems or Labour - no acknowledgement publicly, and no thanks nationally.
9. The full negative implications for the Green party only became apparent afterwards. Because of the way the formula works for 'Short' money, the decision affected the money the party was allocated, how much media coverage they were entitled to, etc. Nationally the Greens lost c. 200k by standing down – with a direct impact of £100k less funding to Caroline Lucas and her constituency.
10. The result was that most Green Party members were influenced by this outcome and became much less supportive. They can't see the benefits. Davy doesn't agree with this perspective but he's sure that his view is now a minority opinion within the Green party.
11. Moving forward to the current situation: Starmer's position not to support the Labour party's conference decision on PR isn't helping, nor are local council decisions in Hastings, Stroud etc. where Labour's national leadership is threatening locals not to work together with the Greens. Local Labour people are trying to stand up to this but it's difficult given the threat of expulsion. It feels like the national Labour Party treat Greens no differently from the Tories. So Compass' Win as One Campaign is going to be hard one to sell to Green Party members.
12. When we look at the projected Sussex picture on tactical voting – what's proposed doesn't actually benefit the Greens. In Lewes, Greens got most the votes in local council elections. Yet the chance of other parties standing down at the next general election in this constituency is negligible. Those of us keen on practical collaboration and tactical positioning to unseat the Tories in Sussex need to think about what we can offer the Greens.
13. Of course not everything is about Westminster elections and at local council level there has been good joint working...especially where there is agreement on joint policies. We need to focus on what we agree on. Keep the sniping out – it's poisonous - and the public are fed up with it.
14. Of course we need to remember most progressive **voters** in Brighton aren't active members of any of the progressive **parties**. These voters need to put pressure on the parties to behave better and force people to work together. There's loads we agree on. E.g on NHS, environment. There is nothing like working together to build up trust.

15. Lastly, given the polls right now, if there's a snap general election - Labour could win by a landslide - so vote however you like!

Lloyd Russell Moyle

16. Davy is right to go back to help understand the historical context. Caroline beat Nancy in Brighton Pavilion when she first won. Labour had selected a good left wing woman. That created some grievance in Labour locally.
17. Between 2010-15 lots had the view about Labour not being left wing, but actually Miliband shifted the party to the left - even if his narrative was more right wing. E.g on fracking: 'We are **against** fracking less 6 safety conditions can be met' (Corbyn) vs 'we are **for** fracking as long as 6 safety conditions can be met' - the policy is essentially the same but the messaging is different. Under Miliband it was often about 'talking right'... but this wasn't projected - so people to the left felt it was necessary to challenge.
18. Lloyd had been the candidate in 2015 in Lewes when the Lib Dems lost. So he shared Davy's same feeling of guilt. Labour got no more votes in 2015 in Lewes than in 1997. It's worth noting that for him, Lib Dems standing in Kemp Town is helpful as they pick up Conservative votes who won't vote Labour. Lot of moderate Tories need somewhere else to go.
19. Davy was right about Labour's decision in 2014 to target Brighton Pavilion. Although the national party later decided (in 2015) not to prioritise Pavilion later in the election campaign, the damage was done in terms of Labour-Green relations.
20. In 2017, the Green Party standing down in Kemp Town was a big boost - but some Green Party people were very angry. Building trust is key. Lloyd did secure a 10,000 majority. He doesn't know how many lent their votes to Labour. This matters because of the need for you as an MP to represent your constituents.
21. The loss of AV referendum very unhelpful. The Australian system allows you to make a deal area by area. It allows the party to acknowledge it. The impact of this is shown in Labour's recent win there with the role of the Teals.
22. There are options we could explore. In the US there is the option of a 'joint ticket': the same candidate for different parties. This helps to avoid the problem of losing vote numbers and therefore short money.
23. Labour is a pre-made coalition. It's how it was set up. Consider the Cooperative Party structure within Labour. Perhaps we should try to do same with the Greens. Lloyd stands as the candidate for both the Labour and Co-Operative parties. This helps with Short money - money goes to the Co-op party as well as Labour when he wins. Lloyd would be willing to take a green ticket. It's possible. We could have a more honest system, even within FPTP. This is probably a better option than standing down.
24. So looking at what this means today. Let's consider the Lewes problem - Maria Caulfield thinks she can win again. She's right. Greens and Lib Dems need to join up. Because Lib Dems and Greens are both correct that it's their seat. Greens believe it can be won. Greens are strong - 2nd even in rural parts of Lewes constituency.

25. So how do we start to think about these challenges seriously? We need to have this conversation in Labour. It's not as simple as 'who voted for what last time'. Electoral calculus work on this helps. Give 50 seats to the Greens. Under this model, every party gains inc Labour. We can't rely on the Tories falling apart.
26. Now is the time to open up discussions - when polls are good. Commitment to PR important. Keir is committed to electoral/constitutional reform - when Lloyd talks to him privately. A written constitution helps. Labour policy is that a reformed House of Lords should be proportionally elected. Every voting system Labour has introduced has been PR based e.g Scotland, London, etc. We need to use the hooks that exist. So don't just focus on Keir's lack of commitment so far.
27. Maybe we need to start with more cross party meetings. Use coalitions like Lewes council. Labour has an internal vacuum with the soft left when Compass became a cross party organisation. Compass' soft left position needs replacing as a local pressure group and think tank. Open Labour is supposed to be this but isn't. The soft left doesn't have faction within the party and yet it's the soft left who are most supportive of this sort of collaborative thinking. The hard left and old right much more belligerent. Does Open Labour need to be in constituencies etc?

Audience Q&A:

28. Don't forget boundary changes will affect this too.
29. Across Sussex - what should be the next steps as we position ourselves? What should compass be doing?
30. What is appetite in PLP for PR?
31. What are your thoughts about the IPCC views on degrowth and other radical policies on climate change? (Will pick this up in a separate future meeting).

Davy Jones

32. Agreed with almost everything Lloyd said! Talking together is really valuable. We need to have more opportunities. Can we get more conversations going? It creates better atmosphere, even if we can't overcome the position of the national Labour Party. Seems small scale but could be really radical.
33. Why don't Greens win more seats? Basically because of FPTP. Greens can pick up former Tory votes in rural areas. This doesn't make them Green Tories. E.g. with the Balcombe fracking campaign at the start those activists were all Telegraph Tories – it was NIMBYist, but as time went on they started to realise the underlying issues and became more left wing. The Greens may well do well in traditional Tory rural areas.

Lloyd Russell Moyle

34. Agreed with almost everything Davy said!
The Greens focusing on a top target which is a traditional rural Tory seat would be a good tactic. Greens main target is Bristol against a sitting Labour MP. This will create hostility. Need more Green vs Conservative seats. There is currently generally more Labour-Lib Dem collaboration

than Labour-Green collaboration because of the recognition that they aren't against each other in most seats.

35. PLP view on PR? Generally against but not hostile and not completely anti - obviously. Would there be a rebellion against a PR policy adopted by the party? - no. But a system in which there are single seats per constituency is essential for many Labour MPs. The Jenkins Commission is the blueprint - don't just talk about PR. Make this the Labour policy. Avoid the conversation about 'what system' - use the system we already have in Scotland, London, etc. FPTP not always the only system in UK.
36. What should Compass should campaign on? Get people to talk together. To reduce hostility. Constituency by constituency. Use the Compass umbrella. Doesn't mean we'll agree on everything but we'll start to build up trust.
37. The Degrowth issue - debatable. We do need to degrow our *carbon* economy. Rio 2012 was about new economic models. This is a good example we could have as a discussion. Similarly, we could get Greens and Labour to have a conversation about solar subsidies. Creative tension is good - need to debate – it helps come up with better policy. This leads to more formal forms of alliances.
38. Greens at their recent conference said they wouldn't stand down in any seats. If you don't campaign, you give up data in particular areas.