

Labour and the Lib Dems: Cooperation and conflict in Consborough

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In recent years, Labour HQ has come down heavily on any whiff of cooperation between Labour activists or local politicians and other parties, or any support for a progressive alliance. Debate about cooperation often takes place at a high level of abstraction: would it be good or bad for our politics in a theoretical sense if anti-Tory parties worked together at the top level? In this article we examine what actually happens when two local parties undertake, under the pressure of circumstances, to cooperate in modest ways.

The local authority is an affluent one. A substantial proportion of the adult population falls into the top two socio-economic groups (higher and lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations), and nearly the same proportion has a degree-level qualification or higher. Its principal conurbation is an old market town, but many of its residents commute to the city nearby, or to larger towns in the area. Many, of course, work from home much more since the pandemic, and the increased possibility of home working has, in the past few years, attracted yet more out-migrants from the city, who come to snap up spacious family homes with easy access to countryside. It's an area of homeowners and drivers: a

large majority of households are owner-occupiers; a large majority live in houses or bungalows, and almost all have a car or van. The council has, for five decades or more, been dominated by the Conservative Party. So have several of the overlapping parliamentary seats. I'll call it Consborough.

In 2022, things changed. After the election that year, the council fell into no overall control. The Conservatives were the largest group but the Lib Dems had the chance to form an administration – as long as the Labour members offered their support, and the two parties entered into a formal partnership agreement.

Following the elections early in 2023 (Consborough holds elections for a third of its councillors, three out of every four years), the Lib Dems found themselves the largest party: the formal arrangement of the previous year was no longer necessary, and the two parties now subsist in council meetings under what the Lib Dem leader of the council described to me as an 'informal non-aggression pact'.

Such cooperation – which even at its closest fell short of entering a coalition – has become a touchy subject in the Labour party recently. In June 2023, Neal Lawson was sent a letter saying he faced possible expulsion from the party. Lawson, a Labour activist of over forty years' standing (he was a founding editor of this journal) is executive director of Compass, whose current focus is on promoting a progressive alliance against the Tories, and proportional representation to make our democracy less dysfunctional in the long run. He was investigated for a tweet he'd written two years previously: a retweet of a Lib Dem's call for voters to vote tactically for the Greens in some wards – crucially, from the prosecution's perspective, wards that Labour held – in a local election, with the comment, 'This is what grown-up politics looks like.' This is probably the most high-profile instance of a Labour member coming under investigation for talking about cross-party cooperation, but it's not the only one. Some members and councillors have been expelled for supporting coalitions, or formulating plans to support other candidates in a progressive alliance.

In this context, it's perhaps not surprising that the Labour group on the Consborough council felt able to talk about what has gone on in the local authority over the past few years only on condition of anonymity. This is despite the fact that they've never entered a coalition or promoted a progressive alliance.

In itself, this suggests something depressing about the culture in Labour HQ and Labour's regional HQs: that dedicated activists feel wary of speaking openly about what they're doing. There are, as the Lib Dem leader of the council told me, 'sensitivities' at Lib Dem HQ about the question of cooperation, but less so. The story of Consborough highlights how centralised Labour is, and some of the pathologies that throws up.

I'm anonymising Consborough, but one of the important take-aways from examining what's happened there over the past few years is just how difficult it is to come up with a one-size-fits-all diagnosis for how constituency Labour parties (CLPs) could or should handle cooperation or antagonism with other anti-Tory parties in their areas. The *specifics* of place matter in politics. Political strategy in the abstract often comes into direct conflict with messy realities on the ground.

In its vital statistics (tenure, socio-economic group, age profile, and so on) Consborough is like many other places in the south of England. But its particular location, history, and culture matter – its particular ward boundaries and neighbours matter. As the leader of the council's Labour group told me, local factors are completely vital in a 'multilayered local landscape'.

2022

2022 didn't come out of nowhere. The Tories had experienced setbacks in 2019 because of Brexit (Consborough is a strongly Remain area). Brexit, plus some local issues, like planned developments, continued to cause them problems. A small amount of cooperation between Labour and the Lib Dems began in 2021 as well.

On several occasions prior to 2021, Labour and the Lib Dems had competed for a council seat against the Tories and both improved their performance but failed to oust the incumbent. In autumn 2021, the local Labour group told the Lib Dems that they were not going to do any literature or canvassing in one particular ward. This wasn't a negotiation or a trade; it was intended to give the other party the confidence that they could throw resources at the seat. Relationships between the two parties weren't strong enough at that point for the Labour group to want to go any further than this. The Lib Dems later reciprocated, telling Labour that there were two wards they weren't planning to put resources into. The exchange of information worked out well: each party won one target seat, and Labour made gains in its second target.

After the 2022 elections, as the leader of the Labour group put it, 'our freedom of action was absolutely zero – there was no way any of us were going to be the ones who allowed the Conservatives to take control'. But it was a 'difficult moment' for the Labour councillors, and for many members: the councillors had to explain to members why they'd voted for the Lib Dem leader: that 'this is when it starts to get a bit more grown up, because we do decide who the leader of the council is going to be'.

The Labour group wrote to Labour's regional HQ to inform its officers of the situation, and – with a certain amount of trepidation, as they hadn't received a reply – voted in a Lib Dem as leader of the council.

Both sides agreed that, as the Lib Dem leader put it, there was ‘obviously a very pragmatic element to cooperation’, and an element of ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’.

When the leadership of the two parties met, which they’d never done in anything like a social setting before, what struck them was, as the Lib Dem leader said, how ‘easy the relationship was, how friendly it was, and how we were able to engage in humorous repartee – including the revelation that the Labour group had nicknames for all the other councillors’. The level of engagement, humour and trust was, in fact, ‘striking, and quite surprising’ – especially given the comments that some of the Labour team had made about the Lib Dems in previous years.

Before 2022, the Labour group had no affection for the Lib Dems: the leader of the Labour group said the feeling was that ‘they weren’t being oppositional enough, they were always being too nice to the Tories. We used to find it very frustrating.’ Most Labour activists can probably remember times when bad feeling towards the Lib Dems has been palpable in their local area. I recall campaigning in Bermondsey and Old Southwark in the run-up to the 2015 general election, when Neil Coyle took the seat from the Lib Dem Simon Hughes: there was much talk about the homophobic dirty tactics Hughes benefitted from in the by-election when he won the seat back in 1983, running against Peter Tatchell, and about the more recent phenomenon of misleading graphs on Lib Dem leaflets that claimed ‘only the Lib Dems can win here’. In the Mid-Bedfordshire by-election in 2023, similar accusations surfaced after some Lib Dems criticised Labour’s candidate, Alistair Strathern, implying he had been parachuted into the seat as an emissary of the metropolitan elite. These kinds of complaints stir bad feeling, and I’d bet that there are versions of them embedded in the party culture of many, if not most, CLPs around the country, deepening a hostility founded on anger at Nick Clegg’s entry into coalition with the Tories in 2010 and the Lib Dems’ complicity in austerity.

In Consborough, Labour had for a long time been a tiny presence, sometimes with no seats on the council, so, the leader of the Labour group said, ‘just being noticed and heard was our main priority – and opposing the Tories. We didn’t feel like the Lib Dems were terribly good at it.’ He thought the Lib Dems had missed important details and failed to stand up to Tory cuts enough: ‘We’d had things we’d tried to put through council where we felt they’d sabotaged what we wanted to do, just to stop the Labour group achieving something. I suspect we probably did similar things to them. It was very playground level. It was fractious, I’d say. We saw it as a three-way boxing match, not a two-way contest.’ So in 2022, when Labour had to support the Lib Dems to keep the Tories out, the leader of the Labour group thought, ‘we all had to grow up a little bit.’

In 2022, the Lib Dem leader said, ‘broadly’ there was agreement on policy: at the very least, ‘there was very little the Labour group disagreed with in our own manifesto and our priorities’. The leader of the Labour group agreed: mainly the two sides agreed, though it was also important to Labour to continue to publicly oppose the Lib Dems on important areas where they disagreed: this was vital to maintain a clear line between the two.

The Labour group slimmed down the partnership agreement that the Lib Dems originally proposed, agreeing to vote for the Lib Dem leader of the council and for their mayoral candidate, and to ‘no surprises.’ This, the leader of the Labour group emphasised, was important, as it allowed the Labour group to remain within the party’s rulebook, and meant the chance to talk behind the scenes and to influence the direction of policy. In a few areas where there was a difference of opinion, the Lib Dems agreed to simply drop or deprioritise a particular policy in order to achieve agreement.

Of course, the horrendous funding situation for local government means that progressive authorities often find they have very little room for manoeuvre. As the Lib Dem leader noted, the Lib Dems inherited a ‘very difficult financial situation’ in 2022. Both sides agreed the focus should be on the services that have the most profound impact on people’s lives, and on protecting the worst-off. Consborough is very affluent, but two out of five households still have one or more indicators of deprivation. In any case, many of the things both parties wanted to prioritise are in children’s and adults’ services where the council has statutory responsibilities.

This doesn’t mean there hasn’t been any disagreement between the two parties. One area of tension relates to the Lib Dem leader’s approach to the financial crisis: rather than salami slicing services, he wants to promote partnerships with other bodies (charities, educational institutions, the NHS, and so on) who can help deliver the local authority’s priorities. The Labour group, the Lib Dem leader noted, ‘is sceptical because they see it as outsourcing, or as the council abdicating responsibility’. The leader of the Labour group confirmed this: to him the agenda ‘smacks of Cameron’s big society – it’s an abrogation of what the state should be doing’. He thinks that the rhetoric of partnership working can create a lot of talk without much effect, and that as a matter of principle, services should be delivered by the state – where there’s a line of accountability – rather than by voluntary services. Ultimately there’s been agreement to disagree on this front. Ironically, if the next general election returns a Labour government and funding for local authorities recovers there may be more cause for disagreement between anti-Tory parties over how to spend public money.

2023

In the local elections of 2023, the Lib Dems made further gains, and Labour's support was no longer needed for them to form an administration. The leader of the Labour group noted that it was 'something of a relief' to be able to abstain on the vote to appoint the council leader. The Lib Dem leader felt that at present, the 'spirit of last year's arrangements lives on,' even without a formal partnership agreement. The two have continued to exchange information about their electoral strategies, and this has been fruitful. But, as the leader of the Labour group noted, it's relatively easy to work together where it's clear that the electoral maths dictates one party isn't going to make a big effort in a certain seat. And this won't always be the case.

2024 and beyond

Both boundary changes and a general election alter the strategic interests of each party. Taken together, they mean that there are some places in Consborough where it will be very unlikely either party will take a back seat. As the Lib Dem leader put it, the 'dynamic has changed' and there's a pragmatic acceptance on both sides that though policy priorities haven't substantially changed, in 'tactical and electoral arrangements', interests are now diverging. In some wards (and in some parliamentary constituencies) there are going to be conflicting views about which party is the strongest contender. The Lib Dems are targeting one of the parliamentary constituencies that has a large overlap with Consborough, and this will create pressure to campaign hard in every ward in the seat at the local elections, too. There will be more head-to-head conflict.

Despite the ways in which they have cooperated, and the positive relationships that have been established between the two parties in Consborough, neither the Lib Dem leader nor the leader of the Labour Group support a progressive alliance for the next general election.

The Lib Dem leader describes himself as not particularly tribal, a fact he ascribes to 'personal temperament' as much as ideology. He recognises tribalism within both parties, and its potential results:

In both there are the true believers who think any kind of association with another party is a form of treason. They're purists. The results of their purism can in some cases be powerlessness and the continuation of Tory dominance.

Despite this, the Lib Dem leader argues against a formal progressive alliance where one party or another steps down in particular wards or seats: he feels that voters

should have the choice of candidates to vote for, and notes that his experience of knocking on doors in the area suggests that many now have a visceral dislike of the Tories, particularly after the Truss/Kwarteng mini-budget, and are looking for clear evidence of who might win in a seat and practicing their own version of proportional representation, using tactical voting to get the outcomes they want.

There's supposed to be a general horror among British voters of coalition (and perhaps a whiff of anti-European prejudice attendant on that supposed horror). The Lib Dem leader suggests that there are some voters, in some places, though, who might look favourably even on coalitions. In 2022, when Labour and the Lib Dems had a formal partnership arrangement locally, the Conservatives routinely attacked it as a 'coalition', in the council chamber and in their literature: while at first the Lib Dem leader contradicted this, in the end he gave up, realising that it wasn't harming either party much with the voters, many of whom were glad that the two parties were working together to keep out the Tories and advance a progressive agenda.

Like the Lib Dem leader, the leader of the Labour group strongly opposes a progressive alliance. He recognises the popularity in some quarters of such an approach: the local party, he said, gets 'a lot of tweets and emails from people telling us we should stand down for the Lib Dems', or that the party should withdraw funding from at least one of the local parliamentary seats in order to give the Lib Dems a clear run at it; even some local Labour members have suggested the party shouldn't run a candidate locally at the next general election. But the leader of the Labour group absolutely rejects these ideas.

For one thing, he said, it's absurd to propose a withdrawal of funds from seats like Consborough. A place like Consborough isn't *getting* any national funding, and it would be perverse to tell local activists who are raising money and expending their own time campaigning in a difficult-to-win area that they can't devote their own funds to it. He argued:

This is a really misunderstood area. No political party has the resources – the money or the people – to fight everywhere it wants to. People are under the impression that the national party cares what happens in [Consborough]. The national party has never given us a penny – so the idea that they'd withdraw resources from us is absurd. I suspect it's the same in a lot of similar places. It suggests how little understanding there is among the public and some commentators.

In a general election, we'll have a campaign – but we'll have raised all the money ourselves. We'll have a candidate, and we'll want that candidate to win. The odds are long, but if we're not here to put our flag in the hill and say *support our candidate, who has labour values*, why are we here? And particu-

larly, for activists who spend huge amounts of time working for labour, why would they bother to do that if we just roll over at a general election?

Looking frankly at the next ten years, the leader of the Labour group noted that the party would – ironically – probably be best served locally by a large Labour majority in Parliament and the survival of at least one unpopular Conservative MP locally. A local Tory MP mobilises local Labour activists, whereas more Lib Dem MPs in the area would entrench the party's position in local government.

But for the Consborough Labour Party, a Labour majority in Westminster is the ultimate goal, so they may not do a great deal of campaigning in Consborough. They'll probably send most of their forces to nearby target seats that Labour has a good chance of winning – they'll be guided by the opinion polls as to which are safe, and which require support. By contrast, for the local Lib Dems, winning one of the local parliamentary constituencies is their primary aspiration, and they'll be focusing a lot of resources in the area.

Putting up a candidate in every constituency, for the leader of the Labour group, is a matter of principle: 'If we don't, then what's the point of us?' He also contests the ambient sense that the Lib Dems have a 'golden right' to be seen as the main challengers to the Tories in the area. Canvassing on the weekend of Truss's mini-budget (which looks set to be a profound inflection-point in British history), he found Tory voters saying they were now planning on switching to Labour. Not all voters see politics as a spectrum, along which it makes sense to move smoothly from the Tories to the Lib Dems – some, rather, see it as logical to leapfrog straight to Labour, as the other party likely to form a majority government. Labour did very well in some of the parliamentary constituencies in the area in 2017, despite doing very little campaigning locally; and the Lib Dems spent large sums in the area in 2019. Psephology is an art, not a science.

Moreover, although it seems extremely unlikely that Labour could control the local council or take most of the parliamentary seats that overlap with Consborough any time soon, that doesn't mean the stakes aren't high for the party. It's an achievement, the leader of the Labour group emphasised, 'just to exist'. The Labour group on the council is in 'survival mode'.

So, 2024 may well bring less cooperation at the level of local authority ward contests. It's *likely* that Labour and the Lib Dems will focus their campaigning, and central funding, on different parliamentary seats in the area. But this is by no means certain. Labour tacticians want to keep their room for manoeuvre open, based on polling. And many activists in CLPs in areas like Consborough are deeply committed to running their own local campaigns, even if they're not getting funding from Labour HQ to do it.

The leader of Consborough's Labour group is 'generally supportive strategically and tactically' of Labour HQ's approach to Labour members cooperating with other parties, but with a major caveat. In some of the cases where councillors have been ejected from the party, he said, these were 'tiny groups of people' entering into cooperation or coalition with other parties, in places where 'they've obviously worked really hard, in difficult conditions, to get somewhere', running entirely self-funded campaigns, and relying on a small core group of activists. He argues that:

If people are getting themselves elected under a Labour banner, you need to trust them. You might want a regular review process with the regional office, to make sure Labour values are at the heart of what people are doing. But I think it's too heavy-handed and doing a lot of damage to the party.

If you knock out core activists in places like this, 'you'll decapitate the local party'. Labour HQ's focus, he said, is on winning parliamentary seats, and if what a local party is doing doesn't look set to have any immediate impact on the party's prospects at Westminster, 'they don't care – and it's damaging to local people'.

Ad hoc muddle

The current approach could be termed 'ad-hoc muddle'. Informal exchanges of information and differential targeting of resources both sometimes occur, as circumstances allow, on a local level and on a national level. Informal cooperation springs up in particular places and then dissipates as strategic electoral considerations change. Individuals, and the relationships they build up, are important to communication and cooperation. Voters sometimes undertake tactical voting in order to get a progressive candidate elected and a Tory candidate out, but it's left to individual voters, and tactical voting calculus websites (of which there are a few) to organise this. The Labour leadership remains publicly hostile to cooperation between Labour members and other political parties.

The trio of by-elections that took place on 20 July 2023 make the case for and against the current way of doing things. Without any formal agreement, Labour focused resources on Selby and Ainsty rather than Somerton and Frome, and won; the Lib Dems did the opposite. But in Boris Johnson's old seat, Uxbridge and South Ruislip, Labour lost to the Tories by less than 500 votes; the Lib Dems and Greens together had 1,419 votes. Neal Lawson has argued this shows the need for cooperation at the top level.¹

On the other hand, the by-election in Mid-Bedfordshire a few months later points in the other direction. There were fears before the vote that Labour, though the second party in 2019, would struggle to beat the Conservatives, given the mainly rural

character of the seat, and the huge majority Nadine Dorries had there before her resignation (24,664). In the event, though, Labour's Alistair Strathern got 1,192 votes more than the Tory candidate. It's difficult to say for sure what it is and isn't possible for voters to do under first past the post (FPTP). As the Lib Dem leader of Consborough council suggests, many voters are willing to – and really do – put into practice their own versions of tactical voting according to their own priorities. Last year's Mid-Bedfordshire by-election seemingly saw a fair number of Lib Dem voters shift tactically to Labour (Strathern's campaign certainly promoted the voices of some of these tactical voters, in hopes of convincing more people to follow suit). But there are also some people for whom tactical voting would practically never appeal: anyone who's ever been canvassing knows that the British voter is an idiosyncratic, sometimes mysterious creature. Some people are tribal to the core.

There are strong arguments – principled as well as pragmatic – for the continuation of ad-hoc muddle. And with Labour polling strongly, and outdoing expectations in seats like Mid-Bedfordshire, it seems highly unlikely that the leadership will change tack on the idea of a progressive alliance. Informal cooperation or exchange of information will continue to flare up, highly dependent on local circumstances: the balance of strategic interests between different parties in different seats and local authority areas, as well as the personalities at play locally.

But Labour can and should change the culture that makes activists – especially activists in parts of the country where Labour's job is most difficult – feel anxiety about any form of cooperation with other parties, even when that cooperation seems to them like the best or only way of advancing the interests of those who most need Labour.

British government (despite decades of devolution projects) is still heavily centralised, and the Labour Party is too. Labour has been out of power at Westminster for nearly a decade and a half, but the Party has been governing away in plenty of places (Wales, Manchester, London, and many other areas of all shapes and sizes). Labour's record in those places is one that the party as a whole will inevitably be judged on – but Labour HQ shouldn't respond to that fact with attempts to command and control. Leaders like Andy Burnham and Mark Drakeford have called for more of a two-way relationship, and the Labour leadership should listen. Labour shouldn't be afraid to point out that in a large party – a large movement – there will be differences of opinion. When in power, Labour leaders in local, regional, city and devolved national assemblies have to get on with governing – with responding to their constituents' needs and pursuing progressive policies. Sadiq Khan defended the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) as the right thing to do to tackle air pollution, even after Starmer criticised the policy for damaging Labour's candidate in the 2023 Uxbridge by-election. He was right to do so.

The language of ‘grown up politics’ came up a fair bit when I was talking to the leader of the Labour group; this is a language that advocates of a progressive alliance often deploy. But we could have a more grown-up politics even without going the whole hog of a progressive alliance. The lesson of Consborough is that it is possible to create relationships between Labour and other parties that have an element of trust, an element of ongoing cooperation – but that as circumstances change, those relationships will have to be renegotiated again and again. The individuals involved are vitally important. One size won’t fit all.

At the national level, there are three obvious practical problems with a progressive alliance. The parties that Labour would have its eye on as partners would be the Lib Dems, SNP, and Greens. But levels of hostility towards the Lib Dems within Labour are still, in many cases, pretty high – the legacy above all of Lib Dem cooperation with Cameronian austerity. The SNP has a fundamentally different view of Britain’s constitutional future, a fairly existential stumbling block. And the Green Party isn’t a significant enough electoral force to make cooperation bear significant results, at least at a parliamentary level.

Behind the idea of a progressive alliance lies the (ultimately far more significant) question of electoral reform to get rid of FPTP. Labour Party conference has voted several times in favour of proportional representation; most party members support it, including an ‘overwhelming’ majority of members in Consborough.² (The leader of the Labour group isn’t one of them.)

The report of Gordon Brown’s Commission on the UK’s Future, published in 2022, made widespread recommendations for constitutional modernisation, but shied away from mentioning electoral reform. The report made the slightly convoluted statement that it would be possible to discuss ‘issues that would have to span more than one electoral cycle’, such as, ‘most obviously’, the UK’s ‘patchwork of different electoral systems for its different legislatures and systems of local government’, and concluded, ‘we recognise that a well-functioning electoral system is vital to the health and defence of our democracy, and that our proposed changes will no doubt be discussed within this context’.³

Tony Blair dallied with the idea of coalition with the Lib Dems, but summarily abandoned any thought of cooperation when he won a massive majority in 1997. The Lib Dems made a referendum on the alternative vote (AV) system a condition of entering coalition with the Tories in 2010, but it proved impossible to successfully make the case for electoral reform as minority partners in a (dubious) coalition government. So maybe electoral reform is simply doomed: the people who are in power by definition don’t want it and the people who want it by definition aren’t in power.

Or maybe not. At the moment electoral reform exists beyond the pale for the Labour leadership. But Brown's report made clear how profoundly economic change and constitutional change are connected. Voters want change – and the depth of misery, anger and frustration with politics is such that there's surely the makings of a powerful constituency of support for constitutional reform: not as a panacea but as part of an ambitious programme for national renewal. As the Tories shuffle from Prime Minister to Prime Minister, from failure to disaster, Labour's prospects at the next general election look strong. Perhaps a Labour Prime Minister with a large majority might one day consider altering FPTP. A progressive alliance isn't necessarily the only route to electoral reform. At certain points in history, political imaginations stretch, and the unthinkable can all of a sudden become thinkable.

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Notes

- 1 Neal Lawson, 'A progressive alliance would have won Uxbridge', *New Statesman*, 21 July, <https://www.newstatesman.com/quickfire/2023/07/a-progressive-alliance-would-have-won-uxbridge>.
- 2 LabourList polling of Labour members in 2022 found more than 70 per cent of respondents supported PR, and 22 per cent opposed: <https://labourlist.org/2022/09/conference-passes-motion-urging-labour-to-introduce-pr-for-general-elections/>.
- 3 *A New Britain: Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy*, Report of the Commission on the UK's Future, 2022, <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/a-new-britain-renewing-our-democracy-and-rebuilding-our-economy/>, p144.