

Document: The rise of the Green parties in Britain

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Membership and support for the Green Parties across Britain – the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) and the Scottish Green Party (SGP) – has surged dramatically. The membership of the GPEW has doubled in the past year and currently stands at 54,500, making it the fourth largest party in Britain—bigger than the Lib Dems and UKIP. It has also been rising in the opinion polls, topping 10% recently, well in advance of the Lib Dems—which has led the broadcasters to propose its inclusion in the TV debates.

The recruitment of young people to the Greens recently has been explosive. The Young Greens (now established as an autonomous youth organisation) have grown from 1,000 at the end of 2013 to 14,000 today. This was reflected on the Time to Act demonstration on March 7th, which saw large numbers of young people turn out to demonstrate, behind GPEW placards and banners.

In Scotland membership of the Scottish Green Party (which is a separate organisation) has increased in the last few years by a staggering 700% to 8,500 members today. If the GPEW membership were the same proportion of the population, its membership would be about 90,000. This reflects the very strong (and up front) role the party played as a part of the Yes campaign for the referendum—a factor that has no doubt strengthened their support in England and Wales as well.

In fact Patrick Harvie, the leader of the Scottish Green Party, played a central (and very able) role in the Yes campaign to the extent that he was effectively the deputy leader of it.

In Wales GPEW membership has quadrupled in the last year, and they are currently polling 6%. (They rejected an approach by Plaid Cymru to vote Plaid in seats that Plaid could win—despite the fact that Plaid is calling for the vote for the Greens in England.)

There are many reasons for this recruitment. The Greens (in England and Wales and in Scotland) have shifted to the left in recent years, in response to the austerity drive, which has allowed them to take advantage of the space to left of Labour for a radical alternative. They have also benefitted from the crisis of the establishment parties, particularly the Lib Dems who had gained the support of young people because of their stance against the Iraq war and then on tuition fees, which they

capitulated on once in office.

Another factor is the growing awareness amongst young people of the environmental crisis and the importance of green issues—which is a factor that is only likely to increase. After many decades of Thatcherism, and Blairism, and their successors, however, and the de-politicisation involved, most young people find the Green parties an easier option to contemplate rather than going directly to the more radical socialist (or revolutionary) organisations—none of which are reflecting such recruitment at the present time.

Also the Greens, despite the best efforts of the media, have a much higher public profile than the socialist left. Caroline Lucas has played a very good role since she has been an MP (and before in fact) taking the Greens to the left, and Natalie Bennett has complemented this since she has been leader of the GPEW. The discussion around the general election debates has also helped with recruitment as people have joined in solidarity when it looked as if the Greens would be left out.

Left Unity and the Greens

All this has meant that the Greens are taking a large swathe of support that we hoped would have gone to Left Unity (LU)—people that would be its natural constituency. This is taking place despite the fact that LU is a far more democratic party (i.e. a far better model on which to build) and is far more consistently anti-cuts and anti-neoliberal and far more consistent in its politics and its practice.

The question it raises for LU is how to build, or maintain, itself under these conditions. The danger is that the ultra-left in LU will attempt to push LU to the left and force it to abandon the space in which a broad party can be built.

The increased support the Greens have won, however, will not be reflected fairly in the general election results where the Greens will once again (as will other smaller parties) suffer from the undemocratic first past the post system. The Greens may well out-poll the Lib Dems in total votes but only get a fraction of the seats (even though the Lib Dems will be greatly reduced). Under a democratic voting system GPEW would have had a substantial group in Parliament for some years.

Many of the voters switching to the Greens have come from those who in 2010 voted for the Lib Dems. These are likely to include those older voters who switched from Labour to Lib Dems after the Iraq War in 2003 or supported them because of their apparent opposition to University tuition fees and occasional anti-cuts rhetoric during the period of Labour government.

This source of support for the Greens may well be more of a passing phenomenon due to their media profile as the most significant anti-austerity party. It is noticeable that as a result of their recent presentational difficulties, Green support in polls dipped a bit to the benefit of the Lib Dems. Some on the right wing of the Greens will want to concentrate on this demographic to reinforce the perception of the Greens as a 'non-socialist' opposition and take the space previously occupied by the Lib Dems.

However, the support for the Greens among young voters 18-24 (who largely would not have voted in 2010) shows a phenomenal rise. A recent opinion poll of 18-24 year olds for the British Youth Council showed the Greens on 19%, only narrowly behind the Tories and well ahead of UKIP and the Lib Dems. This support grew to 25% among recent graduates in this age group (approx. 21-24 year olds) and this reflects the radicalisation of the generation who protested against the massive tuition fees rise after the 2010 election. A key challenge for the Greens will be to get this constituency to vote (especially as they are likely to be under-registered following the recent changes to electoral

registration) and to reflect their more radical sentiments.

A progressive development

So how should we view these developments? The first thing to say about this surge of the Greens in membership and poll ratings is that it is a progressive development in British politics that socialists should welcome. It strengthens the left, progressive, and anti-austerity forces and is a part of a developing radicalism to the left of Labour—not least because it has been facilitated by a shift of the green parties to the left.

The GPEW, for example, has not only shifted to the left (and the Green Left appears to have expanded within it) but it has increasingly widened the issues it addresses beyond its core issue of the environment.

Although it is strongly pro-European Union it has been an anti-austerity party from the outset and has participated in the various anti-austerity campaigns including the People's Assembly. It has been a part of the Stop The War Coalition and calls for the end to Trident and for a hugely reduced defence budget. It is anti-racist and pro-immigration, with a position that is effectively open borders—though whether it will defend this fully under the pressure of the election campaign is far from clear.

It calls for the renationalisation of the railways, ending all privatisation in the NHS, raising the minimum wage to £10 an hour (a living wage) and obliging employers to recognise trade unions.

On the downside the GPEW also supports a policy of the citizen's income, which was the policy Natalie Bennett had serious problems with on the Sunday Politics TV programme. It looks unlikely, however, that this will be in their election manifesto.

All this makes the GPEW an organisation that best approximates to a left social democratic party, similar, for example, to Plaid Cymru, with a strong ecological profile.

Some argue that the Greens are not working class parties. Most members of the Green Party and most of those who vote for them have to sell their labour power as much as do the supporters of the Labour Party, Left Unity or any far left group. The defence of the environment is as much a key working class issue as wages and working conditions.

Some argue this because they don't have Labour's traditional relationship with the trade unions. This is a very static and mechanical view of what a working class party is, however, since there are many parties today that are clearly working class but are not currently in a position to have links with the unions.

Although they don't come from trade union origins they do aspire to build links with the unions and are seeking actively to do so—as can be seen by RMT President Peter Pinkney's candidacy for the Greens in Redcar. He made the decision after attending the GPEW conference two years ago and after working with Caroline Lucas on the renationalisation of the railways campaign.

Both the GPEW and the SGP have been gradually improving their orientation to the unions, and now have an extensive range of pro-union policies, although there is still some way to go. The GPEW recently created a TU Liaison officer as a member of the GP national Executive after a long campaign by their Trade Union Group. Romaine Phoenix, of the Green Left, is the current first post holder and is therefore responsible for working with Peter Pinkney. The Greens will have a presence at the TUC Conference this year for the first time.

Both the SGP and GPEW welcomed the decision of the main Greek Green formation to join the Syriza list and take up a seat in the Greek parliament and roles in the Syriza government and sentiment in the parties appears very much to be behind this.

Whilst the growth of the Green parties is a progressive development on the left of British politics it does not resolve the problem of a broad left alternative to neo-liberalism along the lines of Syriza in Greece, or the Left Block in Portugal or the Red green Alliance in Denmark, or indeed Left Unity in Britain. Although it is a response to the space to the left of Labour it does not resolve it in the form of the kind of a broad radical left party that is required in order to build a socialist alternative.

Brighton

The main reason for this is that it has a substantial conservative wing that would never accept its transformation into such a party. Also the GPEW is structured in such a way that that this conservative wing (which is heavily represented amongst councillors) is given a free hand when it gets into office at local level. Local branches have a constitutional right to autonomy at local level—even if that means running a cuts budget as in the case in Brighton. This is a major barrier to the GPEW becoming a radical left (or consistently left) political alternative.

The Brighton situation and the support of the Greens for an austerity mayor in Bristol are a hugely discrediting factors for the GPEW which threaten its future development if it continues and becomes more widespread, which it might well do since they are likely to win increased local representation in future local elections.

This is of course controversial in the Green Party—Caroline Lucas does not agree with the trajectory of the Brighton Council leadership, for example, nor does Natalie Bennett. Attempts by the left to challenge it (led by the Green Left) have so far failed, sometimes by very slim margins. The council elections in Brighton this year may well be a wakeup call to the rest of the party though the coincidence of parliamentary elections in which Caroline Lucas will be defending her seat with local elections makes for a very muddy situation.

So what should the attitude of socialists be to the Greens? We should work with the Greens in the campaigns and encourage LU to do so. We should urge LU to seek electoral arrangements with them if possible.

Another problem, which reflects the conservative wing of the party, is that they have a longstanding and sectarian policy of refusing to cooperate with other left parties in elections. The recent conference decision, however, in March 2015 to amend the constitution and permit joint candidates is a reflection of the growing challenge to this within the party.

In the short term this may well lead to joint candidates with the National Health Action Party and this could be very significant—for example in next year's London Assembly elections in places like Lewisham (the NHAP stood in London in the European Election in 2014 and scored a modest success of over 1%). As Left Unity increases its electoral strength, the possibility of proper coordination with the Green Party may well open up and we should view this positively while mindful of potential difficulties.

Increased Green Party representation in Parliament (in the upcoming election) and in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in 2016 would be a positive development even if the new green MP or MPs do not come from the left of the party since they would be representing a party that is taking a left stance, is playing a progressive role, and is being denied, by the electoral system the

representation to which it is entitled.

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/7356/the-rise-of-the-green-parties-in-britain>