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ACTION PAPER

# HOW CAN THE 2020s BE A PROGRESSIVE DECADE?

BY GEOFF MULGAN

# How can the 2020s be a progressive decade? by Geoff Mulgan

In recent years progressives have been embattled. In many countries they have clung to a shrinking centre-ground – often defending globalisation despite its evident failings, uncertain how to respond to new patterns of inequality, struggling to address threatened feelings of belonging, and squeezed into defense of past achievements against attacks rather than offering much vision of the future.

The result has been a narrowing of ambition and an emotional hollowing out that has left progressive parties cool, technocratic and unexciting and without either a compelling explanation of the present or a roadmap for the future. Even as disastrous a President as Trump was only just defeated and would probably have won had it not been for the pandemic.

Many analyses extrapolate from these problems and predict inevitable decline. But political history should make us sceptical. I've worked with and for many progressive parties and governments around the world, and have seen, and been part of, both winning and losing strategies. I've also seen political parties of all colours reinvent themselves, winning power within a few years of predictions of their imminent death.

So the future is open, not determined, and the COVID crisis should have made things easier. Left-wing policies have once again become normal and the late 20th century dominance of many neoliberal ideas looks to have come to an end – with what were once conventional wisdoms now seen as harmful errors.

But there is no guarantee that left-of-centre parties will benefit. To renew, reinvent and reinvigorate requires political creativity and boldness. It's easy to get stuck in ruts and easy to believe that if only we could return to (take your pick) the third way, full-blooded socialism, tighter discipline, better communications ...all would be fine. This piece suggests some different ways to respond:

- **Renew the central idea of being progressive – the view that the best years lie ahead, not behind;**

- **Translate that into programmes that are ambitious and engaging (on jobs and lifetime learning, care services and housing, climate justice and democracy);**

- **Use these to grow broad coalitions; how to adopt a new philosophy of how to govern; and how to rethink political style and culture in a social media era.**

**The central argument is that progressive politics has to offer both practical policies for the present, *and* a sense of the more ambitious, longer-term transitions that they are part of: both steps to be taken now *and* a picture of the journey of which they're part.**

## More diverse and precarious electorates

Let me start with a picture of my neighbours, who I always have in my mind's eye when thinking about political ideas and arguments. I live in Luton, a fairly typical post-industrial town in southern England. It thrived in the past making hats, and then cars. Now the largest employer is the airport, and many work in the big Amazon logistics centres nearby. The town is relatively poor, very diverse (roughly a third Muslim), sneered at by wealthy Londoners, but quite content. It usually votes Labour but is also home to an extreme right party and to young jihadis who went to fight in Syria.

My neighbours have little interest in theoretical debates. Only a small minority now have a strong attachment to an ideological tradition in the way that trade unionists at the car plants here did back in the 1970s. Instead, they look at political parties with a sceptical eye and see if they might deliver some improvements to lives that are often hard. They want to know whether there is a plausible route to good jobs – ideally higher paid and more secure. They want some care for old age. They want to be safe from crime. They are quite green though in a more amorphous way than in the big cities. They are patriotic. Although the town has many migrants – from Pakistan, Poland and the Middle East – they're generally sceptical about the virtues of more migration. They voted for Brexit (unlike my metropolitan friends I was surprised the Brexit vote wasn't higher). Most are fairly socially conservative but have also been swept up in the shifts of values of recent decades. They watch politics, if at all, partly as entertainment.

They are natural voters for progressive parties. But their allegiance is thin. Many like Boris Johnson even when they disagree with him. He seems authentic even in his dishonesties. And they appreciate his willingness to adopt a host of left-wing policies – regional equality, infrastructure spending, carbon neutrality. He has no real vision of the future. But neither do the other main parties. So, my neighbours support is up for grabs, as is the support of their tens of millions of equivalents in every country.

## What we inherit – and should want to keep

None of these voters care much for the traditions and banners of the left. But that's no reason to ignore the past, and you're more likely to be respected if you take pride in what you inherit. The progressive tradition can claim credit for much that is best about the world of the 21st century – unprecedented levels of health, education, prosperity and peace. It is our nature to focus on the many things that are wrong in the world. But it's important to celebrate what has

been achieved. Nothing is more damaging to us than the reactionary assumption that nothing can ever be changed and that all reforms are damaging or futile (and the related assumption that all politicians are useless and corrupt…).

The progressive tradition has four main currents that are particularly relevant to now, and the tasks of the 21st century:

- **The belief in unrealised potential and freedom** – and recognising that part of the job of politics is to make it possible for millions more to realise their full potential, including their freedom to live their lives as they wish and their potential to govern in an active democracy.

- **The belief in security as the precondition for a good life** – without a reliable foundation of security it is impossible for us to thrive, and part of that security has to come from government.

- **The belief in peace, and hostility to violence** – whether bullies in the home, the workplace or globally, leading us to policies stretching from domestic violence, crime and gun control to standing up to big powers.

- **The belief that we are part of nature** – and both depend on it and owe to it, an idea that was often marginalised in the past, but has to be central today.

These four together give a shape to the progressive cause. They give us goals – and also enemies worth fighting against. And nothing about them is dated.

## Being progressive – how people can gain without losing

The most important thing we inherit is so obvious we often forget it: an idea of progress. The heart of any *progressive* movement has to be an

articulated conviction that things can be better, that we have the power to shape our world and should not just accept the status quo as somehow natural. That means a belief that ahead of us lies the possibility of longer and happier lives, of an end to oppression, exploitation and inequality. That we can, together, solve our most pressing problems. That we can unite divided and fractured societies and not take new divisions as inevitable. That is the heart of the progressive promise, and often gets lost in compromise, everyday administration, the tyranny of the incremental. It's vital to return to it and it provides the fuel for radicalism.

Our problem is that this is harder now than it has been for many decades. Majorities expect their children to be worse off than them (*Figure 1*). They have lost faith in progress. Meanwhile radical activists have perhaps lost faith even more, focused rightly on the threats of climate change, and convinced that the best we can do is avert disaster.

To counter this pessimism, and the fatalism it often fuels, it's vital to re-energise social imagination; to show in new ways that progress is possible (I'll suggest later what that means in terms of policies) and to do ambitious work to flesh out what might be achievable a generation or more from now. Do we want a future with radically reformed welfare, such as a universal basic income (UBI)? With transformed governance of data and platforms? With investment reframed to focus on social and ecological results as well as financial ones? With a zero-waste economy? With homelessness eliminated?[1] At the very least we need to explore options that may seem utopian now but could become common sense in the near future.

For similar reasons it's also vital to find ways of talking about science and technology which assert their potential to make our lives better, whether through reducing grinding work and easing everyday burdens, while not being naïve about their risks (too often progressives have found themselves only talking about the downsides).
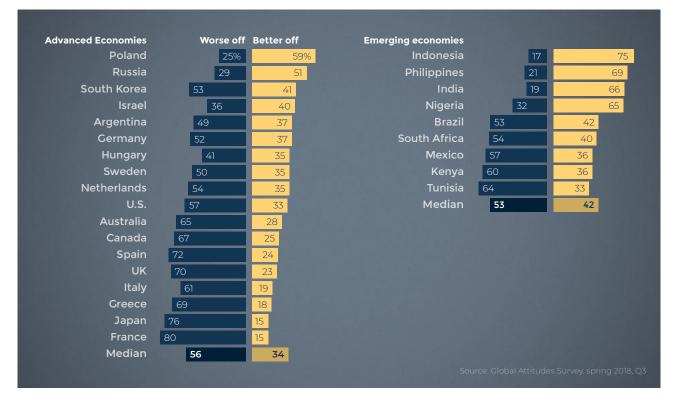


**Figure 1: Levels of pessimism about children's future in advanced an emerging economies,** spring 2018

1. In more detail: Mulgan, Geoff (2020): The Imaginary Crisis (and how we might quicken social and public imagination), Untitled: Demos Helsinki.

A progressive approach involves looking at how to expand education throughout life, and for life as well as work; seeing health as positive not just as the absence of disease; shaping cities to be more livable; enabling old age to be full of joy and making the most of the huge bonus of liberated time that will come from shorter working weeks and longer life expectancies over the next few decades; and, just as important, seeing capitalism not as the end of history but as a system which will itself be superseded. In short, on many fronts, being a progressive means *not* being satisfied with how things are now and having an account of how things could become better. One of the tragedies of progressive parties in recent years is that although their politicians could talk eloquently about incremental reforms, they lost the ability to connect these to longer and larger scale ambitions.

Of course, to earn an audience for progress we also have to respect the inheritances of the past: nation, religion, identity, family and community. If we show contempt for these, and become too 'woke', we also show contempt to the people for whom they matter intensely, which includes most voters. But our position has to be that the best years lie ahead, not in the past, and we have to show how people can gain without losing: gaining new opportunities and life, but without losing things that matter.

## Compelling programmes that fit the needs of the times

Programmes translate missions and vision into policies. They have to be relevant to both risks and opportunities. The background is a change in the shape of our economies – to a much bigger role for knowledge and intangibles (most of the world's most valuable companies are now founded on data and the internet, rather than finance or oil); a series of changes in the shape of our societies with new patterns of precariousness and inequality, far-reaching changes in gender roles and diversity; and big rises in life expectancy transforming the typical life-course.

So, welfare policies have to address the new risks, not just the familiar ones of unemployment or physical ill-health: addressing needs for care in old age, mental as well as physical health, the needs of a precarious workforce for portable benefits. They need to offer practical answers to housing shortage and household debt, mobility and the governance of data.

Many of these concern how we think about the economy. The traditional issues of economic policy – product markets, competition, macro policy, industrial policy – all matter, and it's right to address the core DNA of capitalism, developing alternative ownership models (commons, mutuals, social enterprises and co-ops) and new accountability for firms.
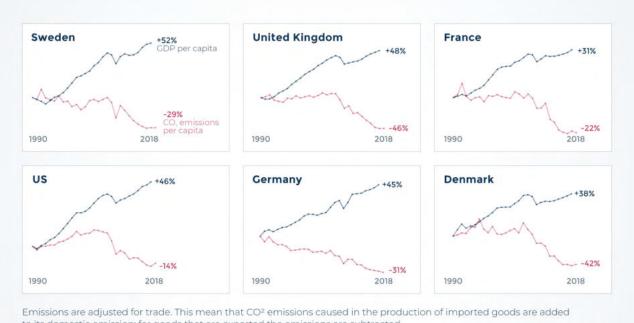
But to be adequate to our times our economics has to be much broader, attentive to how the economy interacts with home life and family, eco-systems and communities. This was all squeezed out by the pragmatism of the 2000s and 2010s and left a gaping hole in our programmes, leaving parties as managers not mobilisers; curators of the status quo not transformers.

Recent surveys show that half the population in many countries, including Germany, the US and UK, and 70% in France, believe the economic system needs "major changes" or "needs to be completely reformed".[2] So, what could that mean?

### Climate justice

The integration of economics and ecology has made slow but vital progress (I first worked on a national climate change strategy 20 years ago and it's 15 years since the Chinese Communist Party committed to a circular economy). But we are still some way from really convincing people that *less can be more*: that less consumption of meat, travel and energy can mean more well-being, even though this has to be part of the future vision.

2. See: Silver Laura (2021): People in U.S., Western Europe differ over what needs more fixing: Their nation's political or economic system, Pew Research Center.

Emissions are adjusted for trade. This mean that $CO_2$ emissions caused in the production of imported goods are added to its domestic emission; for goods that are exported the emissions are subtracted.
Other countries achieved the same. Data for more countries can be found on **OurWorldinData.org**

Source: Our World in Data based on Global Carbon Project; UN Population; and World Bank

**Figure 2: Six countries that achieved strong economic growth between 1990 and 2018 while reducing $CO_2$ emissions**

Achieving the twin goals of decarbonisation and social justice has become central to the progressive project – but is sometimes more rhetorical than substantive. To be serious it will require much more concerted action on the detail of transitions, with plausible pathways for individuals, firms and industries that will involve changing skills, jobs, regulations and tax treatments for millions of companies and tens of millions of people.

As *Figure 2* shows, the world has learned that economic growth can be achieved alongside decarbonisation. There is no reason why social justice can't be achieved too.

## The place of people – well-being and welfare

Our new economics has to put people at its heart too. That means recognising the importance of well-being, as New Zealand is already doing through a "well-being budget" and other countries like Finland are attempting: integrating well-being and policy for example through a focus on minimising unemployment, anxieties related to debt and uncertain income, and taking mental health seriously (including employer obligations).

It also means seeing childhood in economic as well as social terms: investment in the first five years has to be at the core of a 21st-century welfare state. We need to be at the forefront of showing new routes to continuous learning, helping people to navigate a period of potential turmoil as artificial intelligence (AI) transforms jobs and fields and much else, by offering platforms for navigation, easy access to skills, as well as new rights to learn.[3] We need to shift the status and rewards for care of all kinds, again seeing this in both economic and social terms. These are all vital, not just in themselves, but also because they support the economy in its more traditional sense, the world of money transactions and gross domestic product (GDP).

3. See on the transformation of public finances for the long term: at present governments treat spending on people as something to be done year by year, whereas spending on bridges and roads is treated as an investment. This is anachronistic. Mulgan, Geoff (2020): Anticipatory Public Budgeting: Adapting public finance for the challenges of the 21st century, Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation: Global Innovation Council, UAE.
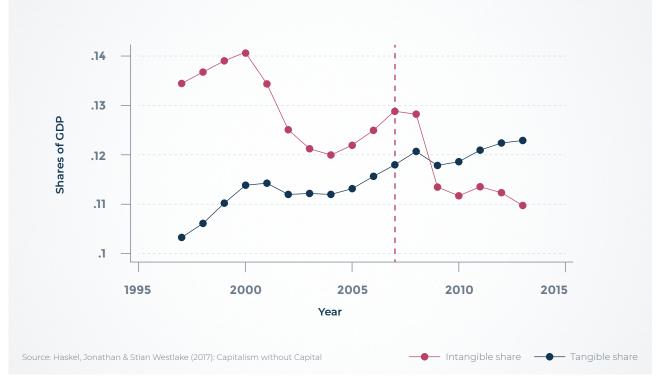
## Mutual support

There is also a bigger issue at stake. The World Happiness Report, and much other research, confirms that the biggest impact on happiness comes from the quality of social support – not just from GDP, education or life expectancy. This is why the more socially generous societies are admired around the world – yet our policies often over-emphasise bureaucratic provision over these kinds of everyday mutual support, and although billions are spent on R&D to boost the economy or life expectancy no countries invest seriously in social innovation to promote mutual care.[4]

This is just a very brief sketch of the new pro-grammatic priorities. In every field we need to explore the frontiers of what might be possible, not just what is expedient now. The risk for pro-gressive parties is that they become stuck in just seeing more public spending as inherently good or a sign of being progressive. It isn't, any more

than debt or regulation are good in themselves. It's the content that matters and the hunger always to be seeking out ways of doing things better.

## Winners and losers, the powerful and powerless in the knowledge economy

The other great issue in economics concerns the future and who gets to shape it. We live in econ-omies ever more dependent on knowledge and data, services and care, rather than either man-ufacturing or agriculture. Intangible investment in knowledge, ideas and designs now exceeds tangible investment in buildings and machinery – one reason why the rewards have concentrated on a minority in knowledge-intensive jobs, driving most people in services and care into precarious low-paid jobs (*Figure 3*).

The challenge for any political programme is to do three things in tandem:



Source: Haskel, Jonathan & Stian Westlake (2017): Capitalism without Capital

**Figure 3: Tangible and intangible shares of GDP in the US and 11 EU countries, 1995–2013**

4. See on theory and practice of social innovation, and why this has become so important a theme in the 21st century; Mulgan, Geoff (2019): Social Innovation: How Societies Find The Power To Change, Policy Press: Bristol.

- to welcome in the many now working on the frontiers of technology (and to be unembarrassed about promoting science and R&D)

- to show how many more could be participating in this burgeoning economy based on knowledge and data[5]

- in parallel to show how to grow the care economy and the proximity economy.[6]

## Reining in the locusts and supporting the bees

To win power, parties have to be credible at creating wealth as well as distributing it. The essence of capitalism is that it favours both the "bees", the creators of new ideas and services, and the "locusts", the predators seeking to extract value rather than create it. The key for policy is to back the first group and rein in the second, rather than slipping back into the old thinking – public good, private bad or the other way around. That means engaging with entrepreneurs and innovators, showing respect for those creating true value, but also being tough on the predators, whether banks or digital platforms. This is an intellectually *and* politically coherent approach, but still surprisingly rare in progressive platforms.[7]

## Global vision in a time of conflict as power shifts eastwards

Europe's political, economic and demographic weight is shrinking: from 22% of world population in 1950 to 12% in 2000 and a likely 6% in 2100). That will require new mindsets – and a new humility (*Figure 4*).

Traditionally the centre-left has believed in multilateralism, with a rule-based system, peace-making and global redistribution promoted partly through the power of Europe and North America.
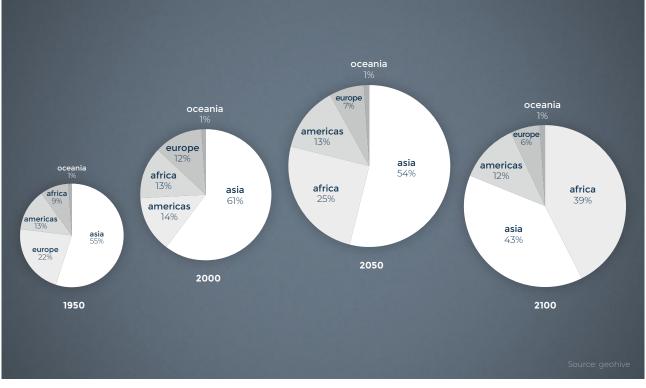


**Figure 4: Population distribution across the continents, 1950–2100**

5. See Unger, Roberto Mangabeira (2019): Imagination Unleashed: Democratising the knowledge economy, Nesta: UK.

6. In other words, the challenge is to support digital work in both senses: digital technology and the work of our digits, our fingers and hands, which are so essential to services and care of all kinds.

7. See for more detail: Mulgan, Geoff (2015): The Locust and the Bee, Princeton University Press: Princeton.

Recent years have not been propitious to this view, with the rise of more confident and powerful autocrats and shifting power patterns.

Over the next few decades China, Russia and other countries are likely to be more assertive and more aggressive as they promote high tech authoritarian alternatives to democracy. Our parties need to be realistic and tough in their responses, and to avoid the temptations of wishful thinking.

In some fields we will need new multilateral governance at a global level – for cybersecurity and carbon, biodiversity and refugees, corporate taxation and regulation of AI (e.g. blocking autonomous weapons). Unfortunately, ambition has shrunk in recent years – and little could be achieved with Trump in the White House. But history shows that sudden shifts can create space for new ideas – as happened with the birth of the United Nations in the late 1940s. What appears to be realism at those moments becomes completely unrealistic, as the ground shifts. So it's vital that serious work is done now on what *could* be the options for a more developed global governance in the decades ahead.

But where agreement can't be reached, we will also need collaborations of the willing and coalitions of shared values – of those countries that believe in democracy and freedom, science and the pursuit of truth. European countries will have to choose again and again whether to rally around values (often with the US) or whether to pursue only material interests. If we are serious about values, we will sometimes have to make sacrifices, and be willing to stand up for those values against bullies and dictators.

## Grow new coalitions

Over the last few decades the traditional coalitions of both left and right have fractured, with the rise of challenger parties, from the nationalist anti-immigrant right to the anti-capitalist left and the Greens.

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So how can coalitions of sufficient breadth be brought together to win and retain power? For half a century now parties have fretted over the decline of the old working class and the demise of a certain kind of progressive party rooted in manufacturing and male breadwinners. Yet throughout this period parties have won elections and pulled together very different governing coalitions. Indeed, socialist parties have achieved remarkable success in winning middle-class votes (for example, the British Labour Party's middle-class vote went up nearly three times, from around 2m to 6m, between 1987 and 2019, both elections it lost).

There are always two approaches open to any party. One is an assembly – piling up the pieces and trying to piece together a jigsaw of socio-economic groups: public services, knowledge workers, small business, regions, precarious workers, minorities. The other offers a universal story. There is bound to be always some element of both. But, as a rule, the assembly approach always struggles to be enough for majorities. For that it's vital to speak to the hearts of everyone.

This echoes research on why the authoritarianism of figures like Salvini and Trump is so attractive and how to combat it. As the political scientist Karen Stenner put it, their backers are "simple-minded avoiders of complexity rather than closed-minded avoiders of change", but activated by stress and uncertainty. We best limit their "intolerance of difference by parading, talking about, and applauding our sameness", not by continually celebrating differences.[8]

8. Stenner, Karen (2010): The Authoritarian Dynamic, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

So, the heart of a progressive politics has to combine a view of the possibility of progress – a picture of how things could be better for everyone, connected by our fundamental sameness – with a moral view that the winners should compensate the losers (recognising how much of life is a lottery, a matter of chance rather than merit).

Culturally we should combine tolerance with the cultivation of shared experiences and beliefs. Economically we should accept that old jobs and industries will disappear, just as agriculture shrank from half the economy to 1% in Germany and similar countries, or mining to less than computer games. But we can show how with the right support structures the pains of adjustment can be greatly minimised.

This unifying stance also relates to class. Progressive parties will always, rightly, address the needs of the poor and oppressed. But it's never enough to create coalitions only of the losers and the defeated. As the Marxists always recognised, dynamic political movements have to also attract people working on the frontiers of their time – which now means science and technology, creative industries, social entrepreneurs and innovators, next generation activists – a group which will always favour ideas of progress, in part because their lives embody it. Every past revolution and every successful movement of reform has been an alliance of top and bottom. The same is likely to be true in the future too.

## Embrace new models of governance – high trust, problem-solving with collective intelligence

Parties that want to win and keep power need not just an account of *what* they want to do but also of *how* they are to do it – a philosophy of governance. It's essential to be seen as serious and competent; to care about the public's hard-earned money; to differentiate from the self-indulgent rhetoricians of the populist right. But competent technocracy is not enough. We also need a philosophy of government that is right for the times and, yes, progressive.

This now has five main pillars. The first is an **emphasis on trust**: working in ways that grow and earn trust, with transparency, intolerance of corruption in all its forms, and humility about what government can and cannot do.

The second is the idea that the **mobilisation of intelligence** is at the heart of modern government: using data of all kinds, and increasingly AI, but also making the most of people's intelligence which is currently ignored or thrown away: the gold in the heads of teachers or nurses, and citizens; their insights about how their lives could be improved. This is the great promise of new methods of collective intelligence increasingly used in some countries and in the work of the UN, but largely invisible in mainstream social democracy.[9] It has huge potential to re-energise progressive politics but remains unfamiliar to a previous generation.

Third, it means accepting the role of government in **steering**. Governments have a vital role to play in setting directions, providing roadmaps to net zero, or universal care, or ending homelessness – helping to transform systems. This role cannot be left to business, or to chance.[10]

Fourth, steering has to be accompanied by **experiment and evidence**. Instead of rigid blueprints they need to experiment to find out what works in detail along the way, and making maximum use of evidence. Many governments are now applying this approach more systematically – with trials, experiments and rapid learning as an alternative to blunt top-down programmes.

Finally, this all has to be accompanied by **re-energised democracy**, recognising that democracy is a work in progress, not a final state, and that we

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9. See for an overview: Mulgan, Geoff  Big Mind: *How Collective Intelligence Can Change Our World*, Princeton University Press: Princeton.
10. See Mulgan, Geoff (2020): Steering through capability, Demos Helsinki: Helsinki.

can do better to mobilise the expertise, experience and insights of citizens, again using the new ideas of collective intelligence. There is now plenty of innovation happening – from citizens assemblies to virtual parliaments, juries to participatory budgets – and, done well, these squeeze out the space for populists who depend on the claim that citizens have no voice. It's vital to combine them with strength and decisiveness, not endless consultation. But far more people can now be involved in the framing and shaping stages of democracy than ever before. The best governments understand much of this and have showed extraordinary agility, cleverness in using data, and ability to work across departmental silos during the COVID crisis, as well as acting in ways that grow trust. But it's very rare to hear a progressive leader articulate a theory of government.

## The age of digital media – personality, style and culture

The question of 'how' to govern also involves style. Progressives can be charismatic and colourful, radiating a passion for betterment and richer lives. But too long in government often dulls the sparkle, leaving parties and politicians as bureaucratic, de-energising and, frankly, boring. In a social media age, even more than a TV age, politics is in part spectacle, even if government in reality is prosaic.

Many on the right have grasped this – filling up the space in erratic and contradictory ways, but getting noticed. The buttoned-up professionalism of so many progressive parties in the 2000s has become an anachronism, and we need a tilt towards more colour and vitality, with space for edgy and authentic personalities, while retaining a contrast with the shouting of reactionary buffoons who offer all talk and no results.

Culture matters in another sense too. The best progressive movements always had a strong cultural wing, from the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands in Germany to Partito Comunista Italiano in Italy, with music, writing, theatre, cinema and arts integrated with the rallies and meetings. A big error of the Third Way era was to ignore this side of politics, and this kind of culture has largely disappeared in the last few decades, in contrast to both the Green movements and the new nationalist ones, which have a strong cultural sensibility. This isn't about commissioning propaganda or didactic theatre or film pushing political messages. Rather it's about infusing politics and political events with culture in an organic way.

## The COVID-moment – and cultivating empathy beyond the bubbles

The shock of COVID has shifted the political landscape, forcing governments to intervene, to reinvent welfare and to prioritise science. But it remains unclear who will benefit most. Smart parties of the right have embraced this new normal.

Hopefully in this piece I have given some ideas about new dividing lines different from the classic ones of left and right; about combining material programmes that address the practical dilemmas of everyday life with pathways ahead; about how to weave together hope about the future with pride in the past and present. I commented earlier that many parties have reinvented themselves. But this is always hard. They tend to believe their own myths, and, even more today, risk living in their own echo chambers.

> Robert McNamara, former boss of Ford, the Pentagon and the World Bank once commented that the biggest mistakes made by governments usually stemmed from failures of empathy and in particular failures to see the world through the eyes of the other side. This is also true for parties.

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That's why it is so vital for activists to spend time with suspicious or even hostile voters. Through grasping how they see and how they feel they are more likely to be able to shape new inclusive and winning coalitions than through spending all their time with the already-converted. I would go further. The ability to see the world through multiple eyes and to grasp what the world feels like for someone very different from you is at the heart of social progress. So it's only right that a similar spirit should be at the heart of the practice of progressive politics too.

## Progressive Governance Digital Summit 2021

On 9, 10 and 11 June 2021, we are back with this year's Progressive Governance Digital Summit. As the political priorities shift from crisis management to the transition of societies and systems post-pandemic, progressives must lead a new political era defined by courage and action. This year's summit is focusing on how to build forward-thinking political coalitions that can lay the foundations to make the 2020s a decade of progress. And winning progressive majorities is more important than ever. After living in a pandemic for more than a year and experiencing a decade of inequality, planet degradation, and threats to liberal democracies by far-right actors, bold structural reform is needed to leave no person or community behind.

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## Das Progressive Zentrum

Is an independent, non-profit think tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes Future of Democracy, Economic and Social Transformation and International Dialogue, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries as well as in the United States.

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