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Building bridges is the way to the future

We need to look beyond modern parties to cleanse the political system of its toxins

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What seems confusing and scary for the Left is not really anything of the sort. We are not here, after all, because the Liberal Democrats are weak or inconsequential, or because progressive politics has failed. Instead, we are here because the third party has become so strong that it becomes difficult for anyone else to govern without its broader reforming support. This is a triumph of the modern.

In fact, there are echoes of liberal values everywhere, and in the most surprising quarters. Among the most impressive commentators this weekend has been Michael Portillo, soberly suggesting that David Cameron should not, after all, turn his face against proportional representation. There is, he implies, a job of work to be done far beyond the simple installation of a new government. We find ourselves blinking at a strange new world in which a totem of past Tory defeat becomes a prophet of electoral reform — and we suddenly discover that negotiation around something beyond party interest is real. In Britain, it seems, you have to be friends with liberals to have a real chance of lasting power.

There are many criticisms to be made of the Blair and Brown years. Too often a biting and unforgiveable contempt for the binding protections of our constitution soured new Labour discourse. Foolish attacks on the judges and crude rhetoric around criminal justice filled our prisons to bursting with junkies and losers. A love affair with right-wingery in Washington bought each of us shares in an unwanted war on terror whose primary dividends were too many bad laws, Abu Ghraib and bombs on the Underground.

It was, indeed, an awful shock to many when a Labour Prime Minister declared to the people who'd elected him that "civil liberties belong to another age". Millions were determined that a left-of-centre government would never again betray its own natural supporters, let alone the broader public, by insulting our rights in the spiteful pursuit of party advantage. Now left of centre would mean something different. It would be wider and less statist: it would never again lose sight of people's freedom.

And this determination would strengthen from an understanding that the first decade of our new century brought many prizes too. Setting its archaic electoral system to one side, Britain is not broken. In many ways Labour brought us a stronger, fairer and a more tolerant country. Millions of people who had been demonised under the old Conservatives, single parents, gays, racial minorities, found themselves gaining inclusion at last. The cruel Tory stupidity of Clause 28 became the civilised kindness of civil partnership as bigotry descended into anathema.

Even the commonplace slur of political correctness couldn't disguise that people wanted to express themselves differently and that hateful behaviour was no longer polite. The mockery of right-wing

columnists only reinforced this: our horizons became broader in ways we could not have imagined under the old right-wing governments, and we knew we were better for it. In a sense, David Cameron's whole modernising project has been an inevitable response to these unmistakable truths.

So we should be looking to the best and avoiding the worst. In the rapidly arriving world, any party monopoly on progress is steadily weakening. There is no doubt that the future belongs to alliance making and there is nothing at all wrong with this. Most people do not belong to political organisations, and political parties need to understand that voters will pick and choose and mix — and that many millions of instincts and inclinations will not be constrained in the old ways. Undoubtedly there is a progressive majority in this country, but it will not find every chord of its voice through membership and bound loyalty.

It isn't yet certain how much of the old political class has woken up to these changes. Everybody recognises, of course, that people are disengaged from Westminster. Expenses and spin and banks are everywhere loathed and held in septic contempt. But the trick is to understand that these are not just passing toxins to be cleansed by a change of government. No one really believes that some new age of political purity will be born by the creaking device of installing a different party in power. The winning post is splintering and no one believes that its old seesaw works as it used to: like ageing Hollywood starlets we all know that our marriages are getting shorter and shorter.

So the real meaning of a progressive majority that exists within and beyond the parties is that it offers something more fundamental than the traditional machinery of Westminster could ever promise. It heralds a growth in our collective imagination and less constrained ways of thinking.

Already we are seeing this in the parties themselves, where radical positions are being taken on voting and coalition that would have been unthinkable even moments before they were uttered. The words are all new and they will certainly strengthen.

So progressives should hold their nerve as they contemplate the coming months. There will be great risks. Yet, if they allow their judgment to be guided by their better angels, there will be the most extraordinary opportunities too. It is, after all, the Right that remains a minority in our country.

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