In his classic study of *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Peter Clarke commented on the neglect of the word ‘progressive’, which he felt had been ‘ignored’ by historians and had ‘virtually been consigned to a not dissimilar period of American history.’ He felt that this was ‘a classical instance of “whig” usage’, reflecting the fact that ‘After the [First World] War, progressivism guttered on and flickered out. It was forgotten.’ He defended the term on the grounds that it was ‘hardly strange in the 1890s, and by 1910 it starts out from every newspaper page.’¹ This itself sounds strange from the perspective of the early twenty first century when, yet again, assertions of ‘progressive’ politics are all around us.

The use of the term progressive was ‘important’ to Clarke ‘because it relates to changes in the nature of politics’. For him, this was about the ability of the Liberal Party to respond to the social and labour demands of the new electorate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He wanted to demonstrate that this process was well under way before the First World War and that the subsequent decline in the Liberal Party’s electoral fortunes was not the inevitable result of intellectual paralysis. The key to this was the development of new – or social – Liberalism in the 1890s, and its relationship with social democracy. The consequent alliance between the two was often described as ‘progressive’ and he went as far as to delineate an established ‘Progressive Movement’, which preceded and, to an extent invented, its American counterpart.² While Clarke acknowledged that not all of those who ‘who glibly appropriated the progressive label in 1910’ were new liberals, this was the heart of the term and the root of its meaning.³

Clarke’s work was the first of a wave of studies of progressive politics throughout the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ This seems to have precipitated a revival of interest in the idea of Lib-Lab alliance among politicians.⁵ The two strands came together in the work of David Marquand, a Labour MP until 1977, a founder member of the SDP, and the author of two influential texts on the

¹ Peter Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 397-8
³ Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 398
⁵ A suggestive example of this process is the way that the SDP-Liberal Alliance and merger into the Liberal Democrats were justified in terms of uniting the two streams of British progressive thought but that the earlier Lib-Lab Pact of 1977 was not. See Emily Robinson, *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics* (Manchester, 2012), pp. 144-5; 29
history and contemporary standing of progressive politics. While the concern of the historiography was to understand a particular moment in early twentieth century politics, and in particular to explain the decline of the Liberal Party, the concern of politicians has been to demonstrate the electoral compatibility of Liberals and Labour. Indeed, just last month a joint meeting of the Liberal Democrat and Labour History Groups focused on ‘The Progressive Coalition [of 1997] that Never Was’, with a clear eye to the prospects of reviving Lib-Lab coalition as a possibility in 2015.

All this is based on the clear assumption that ‘progressive’ has a particular meaning. Clarke’s definition is as good as any: ‘with its connotations of social justice, state intervention and alliance with Labour, [‘progressive’] aptly describes the basis of Liberal policy after 1906.’ We saw that assumption in practice in the 2010 General Election campaign, when all three main parties laid claim to the term ‘progressive’, portraying themselves as the most progressive party and – crucially – as the heirs to an established tradition of progressivism in British politics. As we will see below, there was very little attempt to define or redefine the term itself – despite the rather different interpretations which lay behind the parties’ claims.

My concern is to unpick what politicians have meant when they have described themselves as ‘progressive’ and – more importantly – what the public have understood them to mean.

Given its centre-left heritage, it is surprising that ‘progressive’ has recently become a key term for the Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition, described as a ‘progressive partnership’ by David Cameron. Although Nick Clegg mocked Cameron’s claims of ‘progressive conservatism’ before the election – pointing out that the words ‘contradict one another’ - he was later keen to describe the coalition partners as ‘new progressives’, in contrast to the ‘old progressives’ within Labour. While the two parties attempted to redraw the boundaries of progressivism around their shared views on localism, civil liberties, environmentalism and open government, it was also clear that they were both referencing and attempting to subvert the association of ‘progressive’ with Lib-Lab politics. The Labour Party, meanwhile, stuck to a

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7 22 January 2013, Portcullis House, London
8 Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 398
9 David Cameron, Rose Garden Press Conference, 12 May 2010
11 Nick Clegg, Hugo Young Lecture, London, 23 November 2010
binary and ‘timeless’ distinction between ‘Left and Right, Labour and Tory, progressive and conservative’. Even the think-tank Progress which complained that ‘the word “progressive” had been hijacked by David Cameron and his Conservatives without anyone interrogating what it meant to be a progressive’ responded by measuring the Conservatives’ against a seemingly undisputed standard of progressivism, without interrogating the concept itself.

However, while the term may have an established and self-evident meaning in Westminster, it is clear that this is not shared by the population at large. When 1,651 adults were recently asked by YouGov to define ‘progressive’ in their own terms, these were the words they used most frequently.

Figure 1: ‘Sometimes in politics people talk about things being “progressive”. In your own words, how would you define the term “progressive”? ’ YouGov, 2012

Overwhelming numbers simply didn’t know what it meant. Moreover those who did give an answer tended to stay clear of politics – even though this had specifically been mentioned in the question. Forward movement, change and novelty were the key associations.

This is borne out by coding the answers. Those which relate to being forward-looking and modern made up 18% of all responses – second only to ‘don’t know’ at 37%. Just 0.6% (10 in 1,651) mentioned Liberal politics – and of those two were negative:


14 Progress http://ratemytory.wordpress.com/. Accessed 14.11.2011. The policy areas were climate change, gay rights, inheritance tax, the hunting ban, public services, abortion, immigration, marriage, human rights and reform of the House of Lords
wishy-washy liberal politics

too liberal. anything goes policies, especially for minority groups and wasting precious government time on ridiculous things such as gay marriage when there is so much more of vital importance to be dealt with [sic]

The association with social justice or left politics was stronger, but still only 4% of the answers could be categorised in this way – barely more than the 3% who gave cynical answers such as: ‘Progressing their career’ or ‘progressive to me means it doesn’t [sic] matter how much the government will take off you it will always [sic] progress to more and more’. The association with left politics was stronger among Labour and Liberal Democrat voters – 6% and 7% respectively - but still hugely overshadowed by those saying they didn’t know or describing it in terms of being forward looking or modern.

We also asked respondents to say whether or not each of a list of public and political figures and institutions were progressive. The results here were counter-intuitive to say the least, with the royal family, non-political figures and Conservative politicians coming top of the list. Although the key thing to note is that none of these were thought to be progressive by more than 21% of our respondents. Again, ‘don’t know’ was out in front with 26%.

![Graph showing the results of the YouGov survey on who is considered progressive.](image_url)

**Figure 2**: ’Which of the following would you say are progressive? Please tick all that apply’, YouGov, 2012

When they were asked to say which of a list of words and phrases they would most associate with ‘progressive politics’, these were the results:
Figure 3: ‘Which of the following words/phrases do you most associate with ‘progressive’ politics? Please tick up to three’. YouGov, 2012

Here there was slightly more agreement, with both political reform and social improvement coming ahead of the ‘don’t knows’, and both being selected by over 30% of respondents. Another interesting one here is ‘enterprising’, on 26%. I’ll come back to this later.

II

One way of explaining these results would be to say that progressive politics have died out, as Clarke said; that this related to a very specific historical and political moment, which has now passed. I would like to take a slightly different view and show that the language has never been exclusively tied to social liberalism. I believe this helps us to explain not only the disconnect between political and public understandings of the term, but also some of its more surprising political manifestations throughout the twentieth century – particularly the ‘progressive’ anti-socialist coalitions of municipal politics between the wars.

It is important here to distinguish between the politics of new liberalism and the language of progressiveness and progressive politics. I use the rather ugly term ‘progressiveness’, because ‘progressivism’ did emerge only in the early 1890s and was associated with Lib-Lab alliances on the London County Council and the London School Board.15 The London County Council’s Progressive Party was taken by Clarke to mark the emergence of the term progressive ‘in practical politics’.16 But it was certainly not a new political term at this point, nor was this its first use as a noun. For instance, in 1845 Lord

John Russell had ‘declared himself to be a progressive in the cause of free trade.’\textsuperscript{17}

Whereas Clarke noted that ‘In 1906 laissez-faire and progressivism both called themselves Liberalism’,\textsuperscript{18} it is becoming increasingly clear to me that in the late 1880s and 1890s laissez-faire and new liberalism both called themselves progressive. Even the editorials of the \textit{Manchester Guardian} – the newspaper which, as Clarke makes clear, was central to the development of progressivism – do not show a sudden use of the term in the 1880s/90s to describe this new type of liberalism and its alliance with Labour. Instead we see a gradual evolution from progressive reform and improvement in the 1830s, through progressive policies and legislation in the 1840s and ‘50s, progressive opinions, governments and candidates in the 1860s, to finally the widespread use of progressive as a noun in the 1880s and its application to Labour politics in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{19} In the early nineteenth century, it is not always clear whether ‘progressive’ implied a particular political position, or a more general sense of \textit{ongoing} reform and \textit{continuous} improvement. However, the two are not entirely distinct. The ‘temperate progressive reforms’ of the Whigs were associated with exactly this sense of continuous, smooth development.\textsuperscript{20} But it was also applied to the ‘actively-minded’, Cobdenite gentlemen of the ‘progressive phalanx’ on display at the Manchester Reform Meeting of 1854.\textsuperscript{21}

The notion of Manchester School Liberals as being progressive might seem counter-intuitive. Surely progressives were defined by their rejection of economic liberalism? However, it is not out of keeping with some of its earliest uses in Britain. Adam Smith’s concept of progressive and stationary states is important here. Although Smith notes that labouring poor are likely to be happiest and most comfortable in a progressive rather than a stationary or declining state, it is its expansiveness, its dynamism, its ability to generate wealth which gives it its progressive nature.\textsuperscript{22} This understanding persisted into the 1880s. Although Henry George is generally seen to be one of the great inspirations of the progressive movement, both here and in the United States, his key work \textit{Progress and Poverty} (1879; in Britain from 1880), was devoted to mitigating ‘all the causes that in a progressive state of society operate to increase the productive power of labour tend, also, to advance rent, and not to advance wage or interest.’\textsuperscript{23} There is no indication here that progressiveness was in any way associated with social justice or collectivism. If anything, it was a marker of capitalism and commerce.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Manchester Times and Gazette}, 5 July 1845
\textsuperscript{18} Clarke, \textit{Lancashire and the New Liberalism}, p. 355
\textsuperscript{19} Database search: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian (1821-2003) and The Observer (1791-2003)
\textsuperscript{20} Editorial, \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 9 January 1836, p. 2. See also 15 November 1837, p. 2; 30 March 1839, p. 2; 25 August 1867, p. 4
\textsuperscript{21} Editorial, \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 28 January 1854, p. 6
\textsuperscript{23} Henry George, \textit{Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth, the Remedy} (Kindle version of Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition [1879]), pp. 215-6; location 3528
Rather than eme raging with the Progressive Party on the London County Council in January 1889, it is clear that the term ‘progressive’ was already well established in Liberal politics. Why then was it used by this new grouping? What was it intended and understood to convey?

First, it must be noted that this cannot be understood as the election of a unified and self-conscious ‘Progressive Party’. During the campaign, the majority of candidates stressed the non-political nature of the new body. It was only after the election that the party names Progressive and Moderate began to be used, roughly indicating a line between Gladstonian Liberals, Radicals and a few Labour representatives on one side and Conservatives and Liberal Unionists on the other. Just two election addresses referred to candidates as ‘Progressive’ with a capital ‘P’. As far as I can tell, only a further two candidates used the term at all – and one of these was a Moderate, who vowed ‘to introduce progressive reforms which shall redress existing grievances’ and praised the Liberal Unionists for strengthening the hand of the Executive in enacting its ‘progressive policy’.

Given the subsequent policies of the Progressive administration, their name is often taken to indicate a socialist or at least broad-left political orientation. However, the association between Labour politics and the term ‘progressive’ does not seem to have become established until the early 1890s – after the establishment of the Progressive Party. An examination of the 822 articles that use the word in the Times, Manchester Guardian, Glasgow Herald and the British Periodicals database during the year 1888, shows just seven that have any association with the politics of the ‘progressive movement’. And these are fairly vague. Two are Times articles warning readers that socialists were standing as Progressives on the London School Board, a further two use the term ‘progressive’ to mean ‘ongoing’ – as with Annie Besant referring to the ‘progressive restrictions of the despotism of the private employer’. The remaining three relate to free libraries in Glasgow, shorter hours for shop assistants and the suggestion that the ‘legislative suppression of the liquor traffic’ would be highly conducive to the development of a progressive civilization. This last however, was a quotation from 1853.

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24 Although the party initially used the term ‘Progressist’ in its internal documents, ‘Progressive’ was more commonly used from the beginning, especially in the press.).
25 London County Council 1889 election addresses, available in National Liberal Club Papers, University of Bristol Special Collections (hereafter NLC Papers), DM688/2. B.F.C. Costelloe & James Woolen’s address noted that they were standing ‘At the invitation of the Progressive Party in Stepney’; and George Cooper and Joseph Thornton said that they had ‘been selected by the Liberal and Radical Association as Candidates to contest this Division in the Progressive interest.’
26 Ibid, Theodore Lumley. The other was Halford L. Mills, a Progressive candidate, who hoped he would keep pace with ‘the progressive march of Municipal Reform’.
27 Times, 9 August 1888
28 Annie Wood Besant, ‘Capital and Land’, Our Corner, May 1888, pp. 139-55 (155)
29 Glasgow Herald, 21 April 1888; Manchester Guardian 1 February.1888; Manchester Guardian, 23 April 1888
Looking again at the editorials of the *Manchester Guardian*, it is not until the 1890s that Labour politics are described as progressive. Even then, it is not clear that the term ‘progressive’ applies specifically to this alliance, rather than the Labour candidates being welcomed into the existing fold of progressive politics. In November 1891, readers were reassured that ‘of course, we include the Labour party’ when calculating the votes of ‘what may be called the Progressive party’ on the Manchester School Board. In June 1894, an editorial noted that the ‘progressive movement in the country’ was ‘becoming more and more a distinctively Labour movement’. In November of the same year, another urged the Progressives on the Manchester School Board to withdraw one of their candidates to make room for a Labour representative – strikingly there was no suggestion that Labour candidates were themselves ‘Progressives’.

IV

In addition to Lib-Lab co-operation, the other defining characteristic of the London County Council Progressives was their municipal activity; their desire to use the instruments of government in the cause of social and political reform. Their most distinctive policies were the creation of a Local Works Department, with workers directly employed by the Council, and the municipalisation of the tramways. They also campaigned unsuccessfully for municipal control of gas, water, electricity, the docks and the Metropolitan Police and also for the incorporation of the City of London into a unitary authority.

Although ‘gas and water’ municipalism has primarily been associated with Liberal administrations – particularly that of Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham – it was certainly not limited to this side of the political spectrum. As Michael Freeden notes, ‘it is difficult to attribute […] to any of the official party ideologies.’ He points to the ambiguity of Chamberlain’s own political position and also the extent to which active municipalism appealed to many Conservatives who did not see a connection between the provision of gas, water, art galleries or libraries and socialism. Indeed, Roger Ward has pointed out that ‘More than fifty municipal corporations had municipalised gas before Birmingham […] while a greater number had taken control of their water supplies.’

Nor was this denied by the Progressives. Indeed, it was a key part of their
appeal to an electorate who saw municipal administration as entirely removed from national politics. Significantly, the terms ‘progressive’ and ‘progress’ were mobilized here, with electors reassured that ‘a person may be a sound Conservative or Liberal Unionist and also a sound Progressive.’ In particular, they argued that almost every other city (including those with Conservative administrations, like Liverpool and Sheffield) was progressive and London was being left behind. One particularly forthright election leaflet urged its citizens to: ‘Shake off the sloth with which you are reproached in public matters, and which makes your friends despair of your, and your enemies despise you’, by voting for ‘progress in town life’ rather than ‘reaction’.

This fits with the understanding of ‘progressive’ local government apparent in a book published the year before the London County Council was formed. A Natural History of Local Boards purported to be a scientific treatise detailing the varieties of local boards that the anonymous author claimed to have studied in West Yorkshire: Progressive, Forcible, Fighting, Experimental, Laissez-Faire, Compulsory and Contentious. Of these, the Progressive Board is the undisputed hero of the piece. Its administration is described as ‘enlightened, vigorous and comprehensive’. Its members undertake extensive public improvements but without ‘unduly heavy’ rates. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the prosperous nature of the town and its tradition of self-help and self-government. There is nothing here to indicate a turn towards the specific concerns of new liberalism. Indeed, practical, grounded common sense rather than the ideological extremes of the other boards is key to the appeal of the Progressive Board.

While the idea of active, energetic municipal governance clearly had the capacity to garner cross-party support, the Moderates in London took an oppositional stance from the start. As John Davis has pointed out, ‘In principle the Moderates had still the option of a ‘commonsense’ municipalism - Progressivism stripped of its ‘fads’ to leave something like Chamberlain’s municipal capitalism’. Yet, in practice, many Moderates resorted to reaction, leaving the Progressives free to ‘appropriate the most attractive municipal policies for their own programme’.

Not only was this electorally disastrous for the Moderates, who only won in 1907 under the new name of the Municipal Reform Party, it also helped to define municipalism as exclusively left-wing. A 1916 History of the Fabian Society asserted that in London, municipalism...became the battle ground of the parties: the claim of the Socialists awakened the Individualists to opposition: and the tramways of London were held as a trench in the world-wide conflict between Socialism and

37 To Conservatives ... and Liberal Unionists, leaflet No. 23 (London, 1901)
38 Ibid
39 Hobhouse, 'Londoners!!' (London, undated [1891?])
40 Anon., The Natural History of Local Boards; or, local government as it is (London, 1888), p. 1
41 Davis, Reforming London, p. 186
its enemies, whose capture was hailed as an omen of progress by one side, and by the other deplored as the presage of defeat.\textsuperscript{42}

We must allow here for Fabian self-promotion; the author attributed this development to ‘Fabian advocacy’, whereas it seems likely that the position of the Moderates was itself a determining factor. However, whatever the cause, it is clear that in London the idea of ‘progressive’ municipalism rapidly became a matter of ideological conflict in a way that had not been true in other parts of the country.

V

The experience in London seems to have fed into a wider attempt at redefining the nature of progressive politics. When the \textit{Progressive Review} was launched in 1896 by a group of intellectuals and self-described ‘progressives’, known as the Rainbow Circle, J.A. Hobson was asked by an interviewer how he understood the term and whether the \textit{Review} was ‘to be a party organ of advanced Radicalism’. He answered:

\begin{quote}
Progressive is a hard word to define. If I say that our review is to be an effective presentation of what we assume to be the forward movement in modern thought you will gain only an imperfect idea of our object. We feel that this great movement, which aims at social and political reform is wasting its energy in a confused inarticulate cry, to which the \textit{Progressive Review}, we hope, will give a clear and rational expression.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Hobson’s explanation is revealing as it indicates that the progressive movement was only termed as such because it was \textit{assumed} to be ‘the forward movement of modern thought’. This point was made more explicit in the first article in the \textit{Progressive Review}. It made clear that its use of the word was occasioned by ‘the disintegration and enfeeblement of the political party whose watchword has been Progress’. The authors were therefore able to insist that all future conceptions of progress and of progressive politics must rest upon an ‘enlarged and enlightened conception of the functions of the State’, noting that ‘If such a departure from the historical lines of party action seem impossible, we can recognize no force in the claim of the Liberals to be regarded as the progressive party of the future.’\textsuperscript{44} The appropriation of this key Liberal term was therefore a conscious strategy on the part of social liberals.

But Progressives were not the only – or even the first – political faction to lay claim to this label. Throughout the 1880s, both Liberal Unionists and Gladstonian Liberals vigorously contested their right to inherit the mantle of

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\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Westminster Gazette}, 18 September 1896, p.3
\textsuperscript{44} ‘Introductory’, \textit{Progressive Review}, 1:1, October 1896, pp. 1-9 (4)
\end{flushright}
the ‘Party of Progress’. While I have shown that in 1888 ‘progressive’ was not yet used to refer to the relationship between Liberals and socialists, it was frequently employed to describe that between the two Unionist parties. The progressive claims of the Unionists were strengthened by the way in which the Gladstonian wing had become associated with constitutional ‘fads’, which seemed to have more of a stationary than a dynamic effect on politics. As Chamberlain put it, ‘the Unionist Government have been able to give a fuller consideration to progressive measures than could have been expected from any party which was pledged to a great constitutional change.’ There were also a number of claims for the progressive nature of Unionism, per se, on the grounds that ‘A prosperous Ireland would be, unless all experience is at fault, a quiet, law-abiding, and progressive Ireland’ along with praise for ‘the most Liberal section of that Protestant minority which is the most stable, progressive, and enterprising element in Irish society.’ Progressive here was associated with becoming modern, industrial, affluent; not with the search for social justice.

VI

It is surely significant that the emergence of ‘progressivism’ as a distinct political ideology comes at a point when the traditional distinction between Conservative and Liberal – or stationary and progressive; obstructive and constructive – world-views was starting to dissolve. Not only were Liberal Unionists in league with Conservatives, but an acceptance of the idea of progress was becoming common currency across the spectrum of Conservative opinion. Social reformers in the mould of Randolph Churchill had long claimed to be ‘progressive’, but now Radical adherents of laissez-faire were also to be found in the Tory ranks. Indeed, Michael Freeden argues that by the 1890s views of this kind could only be found among Conservatives.

While, such politics have frequently been described as ‘reactionary’, this is to accept the redefinition undertaken by the new liberals at this time. As Freeden explains, new liberalism grew out of the same evolutionary and developmental conceptions of society as held by laissez-faire Liberals, like Herbert Spencer. Where they differed was in their deductions about the nature of that developmental process. Where Spencer had imagined a society of individuals, naturally evolving towards a state of co-operation and altruism, with no need for deliberate design or policy, new liberals like L. T. Hobhouse saw this as ‘fatalism’, and stressed instead the evolution of the mind and its role in ‘the attempt to remodel society by a reasoned conception of social

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45 See for instance, Manchester Guardian, 26 December 1886, p. 4; ‘Mr Chamberlain at Newcastle, Times, 3 October 1889, p. 8
46 Chamberlain, speaking in Birmingham. Quoted in the Times, 11 April 1980
47 Times, 5 June 1888
48 Times 10 October 1888
49 Freeden, The New Liberalism, p. 11
50 Freeden, The New Liberalism, pp. 5-22; See also Michael Freeden, Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth Century Progressive Thought (Princeton, 2004), pp. 21-8
In turn, Spencerians worried that new liberalism and socialism risked dragging the country away from the path of rational progress and back to a past of social coercion. For instance, the Earl of Wemyss, founder of the Liberty and Property Defence League, depicted the ‘progress’ supported by the Progressives as ‘progress backwards’ which would ‘lead men in legislation back to the dark days of the Plantagenets, when prices were fixed by public authority; when the State was everything and the individual a slave; progress which will in the end land you in the deadly swamp of State and Municipal Socialism’.52

It is also telling that the Moderates on the London County Council were unwilling to cede the term ‘progressive’ to their opponents. As we have seen, one of the four election addresses to use this term at the 1889 election belonged to a Moderate. At the 1892 election there was a more deliberate attempt to undermine the Progressives’ claim to the label. Of the thirty-three Moderate or Conservative election addresses which referred to the Progressive or Progressist party, policy or programme, twenty one - nearly two thirds - qualified this with the words ‘so-called’, ‘self-styled’ or by putting the words Progressive or Progressist in inverted commas. A few openly challenged the Progressives’ use of this term, such as John Bulmer, who appealed for ‘the support of both Conservatives and moderate Liberals against the extreme party which has usurped the name of "Progressive"’.53 Horace Farquhar, emphasised the way in which the Moderates had carried out their municipal duties without ‘arrogating to ourselves the title of "Progressists"’.54 Several Moderates followed this line, presenting themselves as the party of true, sensible, steady progress, rather than the false or extreme progress represented by the Progressives, characterised as ‘the wild extravagant schemes of Socialists and Faddists’.55

It might seem that this was simple political point-scoring, an attempt to undermine the appeal of their opponents and also to steal some of their support. However, the Moderate resistance to the name of the Progressive Party also points to the extent to which the Progressives had succeeded in laying claim not only to an attractive political label, but also to an important cultural and social value. Many of the opponents of Progressive politics in this period were strongly committed to the idea of social, moral and civilizational progress. They just did not believe that this could be brought about by legislation – especially not at municipal level.

Sir John Lubbock is a particularly interesting example. He was an evolutionary biologist, whose many books included The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man, in which he wrote that ‘The history of the human

51 L. T. Hobhouse, Democracy and Reaction, edited with introduction and notes by P. F. Clarke (Brighton, 1972 [London, 1904]), pp. 93; 118
52 Earl of Wemyss, Modern Municipalism, an address to the Paddington Ratepayers’ Defence Association (London, 1893), p. 10
53 John Bulmer, Election address, 1892. Available in NLC Papers, DM668/2
54 Horace Farquhar, Election address, 1892. Available in ibid.
55 George Whitehead, Election address, 1892. Available in ibid. See also the addresses of, for instance, Henry Percy Harris, Robert W. Edis and R.C. Antrubus & C.E. Howard Vincent
race has [...] on the whole been one of progress' because 'improving nations increase in numbers, so that they always encroach on less progressive races.' And these beliefs carried into his political career. As Mark Patton has explained, 'Lubbock had carried the flag of progress through interminable debates on education, on working conditions and on international relations. From the perspective of the 1860s and 1870s, Lubbock was the ultimate progressive.' However, he soon found himself caught on the wrong side of a new political fault-line: not between Liberals and Conservatives, but between Progressives and Moderates (incorporating Liberal Unionists and Conservatives). Patton has described the way in which it was something of a surprise for Lubbock to find himself in the Moderate faction: 'Instinctively, he too was a progressive - he shared many of the aspirations of the new radicals - it was only their means that he doubted, convinced that these would, in all too many cases, have the opposite effect to that intended.

VII

It might seem obtuse to focus on the 'progressive' nature of political positions which – given the accepted modern usage – were anything but. It is certainly not my intention to reclaim progressivism for the right! However, I do think that exploring this other side of the story can cast much-needed light on some uses of the term which otherwise appear at best highly idiosyncratic and at worst deliberately misleading. For instance in the inter- and post-war years, a number of anti-socialist Liberal-Conservative alliances labelled themselves 'progressive'. Even London’s Progressive Party made common cause with its former opponents – now known as the Municipal Reform Party – in order to challenge the now independent Labour opposition. Indeed by 1925 the London Labour Party was publishing pamphlets reminding readers that ‘the Anti-Labour Coalition sails under all sorts of names; for example, Municipal Alliance, Ratepayers, Progressives, Progressive-Reformers.

Similar stories can also be traced forward. Throughout the twentieth century, neoliberals and certain types of Conservatives have tried to challenge the idea that progress was intrinsically bound up with (in the words of Margaret Thatcher) ‘the Socialist, corporatist, collectivist way of doing things’. It is telling, for instance, that the grouping set up by the right wing of the Conservative Party to oppose the progressivism of the Tory Reform Group in

58 ibid, p. 207
1943, was called the Progress Trust.  

This other side of the Liberal story has been rather eclipsed by the focus on the Progressive Alliance with Labour. Historians have asked why the Liberal Party declined, why it was overtaken by Labour and whether it could have survived. They have tended to be less interested in the question of why Liberals have so often found themselves in compacts and alliances with Conservatives, at both local and national level. In the light of the emergence of ‘Orange Book’ Liberalism and the current coalition, there has been a renewal of interest in classical Liberalism. Yet the surprise with which the coalition was greeted in many sections of the media, show how antithetical this is to most contemporary understandings of either the Liberal Democrats or party alignments more broadly. Indeed, this perception was positively encouraged by the coalition partners who chose to present the arrangement as completely novel and counter-intuitive.

VIII

So, can this shift of perspective shed any light on current public understandings of the word ‘progressive’? First, it is worth briefly examining the 0.9% of respondents to the YouGov poll who defined ‘progressive’ in relation to enterprise, business or capitalism in the open-ended question. Although the sample size here is tiny (15 of 1,651), it is fifty percent more than those who described it as being connected to liberalism (10). And it is the range of answers here which is particularly interesting:

Acting in a way that improves the economy by investing in it

Being able to provide the same level of service for less cost.

privatising what they can for maximum profit whilst ignoring what services are left

the country getting on its feet with more jobs, making our country attractive to foreign companies to bring their factories here for jobs for the unemployed < stop companies employing Europeans for cheaper labour, sort out the people who are having benefits and should not be, who have been on the dole for years and don’t intend working, get them off or give them menial jobs to do for their money, get the health service back on its feet. [sic]

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Modernising work practices and realising we are in a competitive world. Training of young people who want to work must be improved and the "benefit" system must be re-appraised.

double speak for capitalism

I mentioned earlier that 26% of respondents chose ‘enterprising’ in the word-association question. When this is broken down by voting intention, we can see it is something that unites Conservative and Lib Dem voters, above Labour and far above those who don’t know or would not vote.

![Figure 4: % selecting 'enterprise' as progressive (current voting intention), YouGov 2012](image-url)

There is nothing that unites those who would currently vote for Labour and the Lib Dems in the same way. See, for instance, fig. 5 on ‘social improvement’. The percentage of Lib Dem voters choosing this is much closer to Conservative voters than to Labour.
However, if we add in Party ID (which means we are looking at twice as many Lib Dems), we can see that ‘not only are the Lib Dem identifiers much closer to Labour, but that they have overtaken them:

This is clearly a fault-line among Liberal Democrat identifiers which separates supporters and opponents of the coalition with the Conservatives. Incidentally, the percentage choosing ‘enterprising’ is virtually identical among the two groups, but that choosing ‘political reform’ is significantly higher among current Lib Dem voters than among party identifiers – 44% as against 38%. In this case, the current Lib Dem voters are the outliers – Labour and Conservative voters and identifiers are all in the mid-high 30s.
However, overall, the most striking finding of the survey was how little politics featured in the responses to the open-ended question – despite being explicitly mentioned in the rubric:

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 7:** ‘Sometimes in politics people talk about things being ‘progressive’’. In your own words, how would you define the term ‘progressive’?’ YouGov, 2012

Does this show that we have lost all sense of progressive as a political term? In fact, it seems it was ever thus. In 1888, the word progressive was used 822 times in the *Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Glasgow Herald* and in the 81 journals included in the British Periodicals database. I have already mentioned that just seven of these referred to anything we might call collectivism or socialism. What I didn’t say was that just 148 of them refer to politics at all – and of those 107 relate to British politics. Moreover, it is likely that political subjects are over-represented in this sample by the use of newspaper data. Of the 822 total uses of the word ‘progressive’, over a third mean either sequential (as in music and language exercises ‘arranged in progressive order’\(^64\)) or ongoing and increasing (for instance, many job adverts specified that the salary would be ‘progressive’\(^65\)). British politics was the next largest category with 107 uses, followed by the idea of the progressive nature of knowledge, especially in relation to the sciences and arts, used 104 times. This includes everything from the progressive nature of architecture and music to the progressive science of shooting and even the

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\(^65\) See the *Times* classified adverts throughout the year, for example 7 January 1888, 10 January 1888 and 23 January 1888. Similar adverts are available in the *Manchester Guardian*, for example 8 February 1888, 22 March 1888 and 19 May 1888.
progressive art of burglary! The other significant categories were the concept of progressive nations and progressive national characteristics - usually identified as energetic, enterprising, developing, improving, which was used 87 times. And finally progressive was used to mean prosperous or profitable 69 times, particularly in terms of share values and dividends. These include advertisements for opportunities in progressive businesses and also numerous reports in the business columns commenting that, for example, 'Tea is not remarkably progressive', or that 'Home Railways were on the whole the most progressive stock on the list.'

It is also clear that this mixed use of ‘progressive’ persisted throughout the Edwardian progressive alliance. For instance eleven books with the word ‘progressive’ in their title are listed in the British Library catalogue as being published in 1906 – that highpoint of Edwardian progressivism. Six of these had straightforwardly sequential meanings – as in A Progressive Course Designed to help the student of Colloquial Chinese or the Progressive Course of Chemistry for Junior Classes. To these we could add a progressive

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67 For instance, ‘PARTNER WANTED, with £2,000. Business in Paris of a high class, pleasant and progressive character’, Times, classified advertisement, 31 January 1888
68 Manchester Guardian, 27 March 1888; Glasgow Herald, 2 July 1888
69 T. F. Wade, A Progressive Course Designed to help the student of Colloquial Chinese (Vladivostock, 1906); Telford Varley, Progressive Course of Chemistry for Junior Classes, second edition (London, 1906); William James Milne, Milne’s Progressive Arithmetics (New York, 1906); Thomas J. Robertson, A Progressive Course in English Grammar and
history of the capital city of Minnesota and a handbook of progressive whist, which also have sequential meanings. The next two are *A Book for the Progressive Business Man and All Interested in Commercial Knowledge*, and a book on spiritualism associated with the Children's Progressive Lyceum. This movement originated in America in the 1860s and was 'an attempt to actualize on earth' a complicated system through which the soul was believed to progress in the afterlife – or Summer-Land. Only the final text, a collection of three sermons entitled *Marks of a Progressive Society*, is related to what we now think of as progressive politics. This made an argument for socialism, fellowship, mutual help and 'co-ordination' as a mark of progress, in addition to the prevailing understanding of progress as 'the accumulation of material resources; the enlargement of territorial empire; an increase, both in extension and in intensity, of the power of knowledge; the elaboration of culture and art'.

A selection of advertisements using the terms should also give a flavour of the variety of uses to which the term was put:

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*Progressive Golf*

In cloth. 4s. 6d. net. By Harry Vardon. With 36 Illustrations on art paper.

An important work on the game by one of the world's leading professionals, with very valuable *progressive* charts on the Driver, the Cleek, the Mid-Iron, the Mashie, the Niblick and the Putter.

*Times*, 7 July 1922, p. 9

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William B. Hennessy, *Past and Present of St. Paul, Minnesota*: being a relation of the progressive history of the capital city of Minnesota from the earliest historical times down to the present day, together with an exposition of the lives of the makers of history (Washington, 1906); Frank Spencer, *The ABC of Progressive Whist*: Rules, procedure and etiquette, with hints on play and prize-winning (London, 1906)

*Business Blue Book*: A Book for the Progressive Business Man and All Interested in Commercial Knowledge, etc. (London, 1906); Alfred Kitson, *Outlines of Spiritualism for the Young…To which is added The Children’s Progressive Lyceum*, third edition (Dewsbury, 1906)


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Daily till April 4

AT
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Inclusive Admission 1s.
BOOK TO WEST BROMPTON STATION.

Oil Field Equipment and Drills in Action.
Full of interest to Investors, Speculators, Motorists, and all Progressive People.
Marvellous Cinema Display of Film specially taken for this Exhibition.

Organisers: Messrs. G. D. SMITH, 119, Fulham Road, London.

Times, 1 April, 1914, p. 4

Progressive People find that they cannot do without
SECCOTINE to repair the leakages that are always occurring in the hurry and rush of the 20th century.

SECCOTINE THE GREAT ADHESIVE.

A FREE SAMPLE will be sent on application.
SOLD EVERYWHERE ... in 3d. and 6d. tubes ...

SOLE PROPRIETORS:
McCaw, Stevenson & Orr, Ltd., Belfast.

Times, 17 June 1911, p. 6

For Progressive Men only

If you must shave as your grandfather did I have nothing to offer, but if you will take a sporting chance and post me 6d. I’ll send you one of my twenty-five shaves demonstrator tubes, with full instructions on the Mennen method.

J. HENRY

MENNEN SHAVING CREAM
OF CHEMISTS & DRUGGISTS,
35, Jermyn Street,
London, S.W.1.

Times, 9 December 1920, p. 6
This is the wider context in which references to progressive municipalities should be understood. For instance, an advert for Torquay specifically references the 'progressive policy of the Corporation', however, it was part of a larger advertising campaign by Thomas Cook on holiday resorts. It therefore suggests a focus on modern commerce and enterprise more strongly than Lib-Lab politics.
Similarly the *Doncaster Gazette* produced a glossy brochure in 1936 revealing *Facts and Figures about this Progressive Town and the Intensively Industrial District*, which concluded that 'Doncaster is a rapidly growing district - an area devoted to many business interests, with men of foresight and Progressive minds at their head'. Gratifyingly for the *Gazette* it was also 'undoubtedly one of the most "Advertising-minded" towns in the country'\textsuperscript{74} If there is any political content to be found here, it is certainly not on the left of the spectrum!

In conclusion, I have argued that in late nineteenth century Britain, 'progressive' was not a new political term suggesting departure from all that went before. On the contrary, it was already understood to refer to a particular complex of social and political ideas. Moreover many of these ideas, especially dynamism, commerce and enterprise, were exactly the parts of the Liberal tradition which new liberals rejected. It was this very process of rejection and transformation that marked their project as 'progressive', however this has been obscured by late twentieth century accounts of the Lib-Lab project. Despite this, other uses and understandings of the term certainly persisted outside politics well past the Edwardian era.

Liberal-left progressives may feel that the meaning of the term 'progressive' is self-evident. However the sheer eclecticism, not only of self-declared progressive political causes, but also of other uses of the term – from progressive theology to prog rock – should warn us against making any such assumptions. In fact, if the data shows anything, it is that most of us simply 'don't know' what progressive means at all! Despite this, though, a majority of the survey respondents did think that being progressive was a 'good thing' (fig. 9). And a plurality were even happy to define themselves as 'progressive' (fig. 10). No wonder it is such a highly contested word!

\textsuperscript{74} *The County Borough of Doncaster: Revealing Facts and Figures about this Progressive Town and the Intensively Industrial District, in its relation to the Circulation Area of the "Doncaster Gazette"* (Doncaster, 1936), pp. 22; 21
Figure 9: 'Generally speaking would you say being 'progressive' is a good thing or a bad thing?' YouGov, 2012

Figure 10: 'And generally speaking would you describe yourself as 'progressive'?' YouGov, 2012