



Grassroots for Europe Round Table #26 Tuesday 7th June 2022

Title: “Defending Our Democracy – Next Steps and shared approaches”

Context:

Following recent failures in Parliament to block or amend a set of dangerous and antidemocratic Bills, and in face of the increasingly menacing conduct of our government, there is an emerging consensus that the UK is in a democratic emergency. There is a step change in the level of threat to our democracy, rights, and rule of law, concurrent with the external military and security threat to Western democracy unleashed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We believe that in this situation the agenda for pro-European organisations is inseparable from the need to counter current threats to the very possibility of a democratic politics, operating with others in wider alliances addressing a shared and urgent pro-democratic agenda.

In this session “Defending our Democracy – Next Steps and Shared Approaches” we are joined by two speakers with a wealth of experience in campaigning and defending our UK democracy. Jessica Metherringham, Chair - Unlock Democracy and Shaun Roberts, Head of Campaigns and Digital – Unlock Democracy.

Speaker: Jessica Metherringham, Chair, Unlock Democracy

Before working with the Police Bill Alliance (PBA), Jessica worked for Quakers in Britain, using her expertise in the area of parliamentary process. She also worked for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, part of the Electoral Commission. Her recent work with the PBA included writing briefings when the bill went to the Lords.

Her talk for Round Table 26 concentrated on the achievements of the Police Bill Alliance, the lessons learned and future plans.

Achievements

In one-night, last January the government lost the last 14 votes on the Police Bill in the House of Lords - the most ever lost in the reformed House of Lords. These losses were to do with Part Three of the Bill, to which the government had suddenly and substantially added amendments. The Bill was returned twice to the Commons during the ‘ping pong’ stage. The Lords made a concerted stand and removed the last-minute additions, partly on principle and partly on procedure, as the government had inserted what was tantamount to a new mini bill to a bill which had already been through the Commons and discussed by the Lords. Pressure by the PBA helped to ensure that the amendments were refused and the Bill slightly improved.

Lessons learned

A strong lesson which we learned was to prioritise our amendments bearing in mind that it is the political parties who mainly have all the power, especially when government has a large majority. So, organisations need to focus on influencing the parties.

It is hard to encourage MPs and Lords to rebel. If the government will not compromise, the Lords will normally tend to gradually give way.

Speak to and galvanise your base to spread the word from the outset. Find a balance between activating your own base and accessing known opponents whom you want to influence.

It is vital to have someone who effectively evaluates what is happening, and when, to keep the various organisations fully informed. In the PBA five core groups met twice a week, and a much wider group met weekly.

Shaun Roberts, Head of Campaigns and Digital, *Unlock Democracy*

The campaigns against the Elections Bill and the Police and Crime Bill have much in common, partly because of shared personnel. Our political system has now so centralised the power of the Prime Minister and the government that there is precious little scope to stop them if they choose to use that power. The main success of the campaign against the Police and Crime Bill arose because the government omitted significant elements in the bill when it went through the Commons. However, the defeated amendments have been re-packaged and are going through Parliament again, this time with the correct procedure.

- **A change of government will not in itself solve the problem of such centralised power.** We need to change the system because the next government, of whichever persuasion, might not give priority to restoring the checks and balances needed for a true democracy.
- **Not changing the political system could be very dangerous in future** because it is a struggle to get the public interested in the technicalities of legislation. The Elections Bill is the Conservative Party's attempt to gain electoral advantage, rather than to improve the electoral system. The same self-interest applies to their other legislation, but people are now beginning to realise that the government is there for itself, not for the people.
- **Great campaigns bring benefits to the democracy sector.** The Elections Bill and the Police and Crime Bill campaigns were great campaigns with small successes in areas which at first appeared unachievable. They brought together organisations in a way that had been absent for years. They strengthened the democracy sector, not just in size, but by putting in place more effective mechanisms and relationships. Hansard shows that our Elections Bill campaign in the House of Lords was among the most effective ever in terms of influencing peers, even if we later lost the repeat vote. When the government made no concessions, it was quite dispiriting to see the limited power of the Lords in our centralised system.
- **Fighting hard for good causes encourages progressive politics.** By the end of these campaigns the government knew it had been in a fight. If bad government bills are not opposed, we and they learn nothing. We must fight for good causes; however tough the fight may be. Our supporters are glad we had that fight, and

the number of *Unlock Democracy's* supporters, for example, has grown about 50%. Progressive politics in general needs to take advantage of this enthusiasm.

What worked well?

- **Excellent coordination and leadership.** Kyle Taylor of *Fair Votes*, for example, produced amazing coordination, ensuring information went out regularly and setting up a steering group.
- **Level of cooperation.** Lots of organisations pooled expertise, complementary skills, and staff time, with real support from the top of those organisations. Media help was bought in to fill an important gap. This created a whole which was much stronger than the sum of its parts.
- **Flexibility.** Groups were allowed to do what they did best and were most interested in. Such flexibility reduced stress and potential infighting about who would benefit most.
- **Clarity of message, strategy, and objectives.** The focus on targeting the Lords, composing, and openly sharing clear, practical briefings and messages were essential.

Finally, what should 'progressives' do now?

Move away from working defensively to stop bad things happening, because that focusses on the government's ideas and vision, we need to start talking more positively about **our vision for making the world better**, thus forcing our opponents to attack our alternative vision. For example, many people want to remove Boris Johnson, but are not sure about what comes next, and struggle to believe things can be better. So, we need to **develop campaigns that show what is better and offer some hope**. That's one of the big lessons from these campaigns over the last year.

Question & Answer:

Note: information pack. A selection of links to and extracts from recent documents on this meeting's topics is being circulated along with this report.

Question: I was curious to know whether you had any links or connections, or exchanges with organisations fighting different but similar battles in Hungary and Poland, in India or in other parts of the world?

JM: Not a lot in the case of the Police Bill Alliance, whose campaign was focussed on the specific UK parliamentary process, although the work of some key alliance members such as Bond involves very close international contacts.

SR: The recent campaign over the Election bill was also very UK-focussed. However, there is a keen interest in learning from experiences and approaches on these issues around the world. This podcast series by Anat Shenker-Osorio is highly recommended: <https://wordstowinby-pod.com> . (See also below on a recent project using experiences from Georgia, USA).

Chair: Eliot Higgins' recent book *We are Bellingcat* (p 150f) mentions various national citizen and public initiatives promoting awareness, detection and combating of online disinformation.

Question: Do we know if anyone has created a 'write to your MP' tool on the Public Order Bill?

SR: Liberty are likely to offer this, as previously, but may delay releasing it until the Report

stage of the Bill, so as to concentrate letter-writing from the public to MPs at that time, following earlier lobbying by the organisations.

Question: Should the next phase of campaigning against anti-democratic government legislation use the same approach as the recent campaigns, or does their experience suggest any fine-tuning or trying something different? Does the current instability of the government offer campaigners new opportunities?

SR: Experiences in countries with chronic long term democracy issues are that resistance can involve very long periods of frustration and failure, but when it is one's own country, there is no alternative to continuing the struggle regardless. Now we are starting to experience this in the UK. There can be a happy ending. You have to keep fighting. We need to keep doing all these things, while still always saying how do we do that better. People have been looking for lessons learned but don't currently see a better way. In broader terms what is missing now is engagement with challenging issues by the political parties, leaving a void which campaigns and charities are then trying to fill. So (agreeing with comment by JM) more effort may need to be directed to get the parties to take more ownership on issues like crime and Brexit.

JM. Totally agree with SR. Disagree with assumption in the question that the ruling party may be more willing to rebel if the government is looking fragile. The opposite is the case. Conservatives have a culture of loyalty, not rocking the boat, even though some individuals are alienated and express dissent. A few of them will speak out on key issues, but not very strongly, and the weaker the government gets, the stronger they all cling together, right up until the moment where it completely shatters. Progressive opposition parties may also not be bolder at this time for fear that a misstep will make them lose their fleeting opportunity. They will want to stick to simple messages, nor nuanced messages.

Question: Has anyone calculated what the totality of the government's recent electoral law changes will do to help the government in terms of seats or percentage points, and thought about how to play the answers to that question back to the Labour Party?

JM: That would be fascinating but don't know.

SR: The parties may have done this but kept the findings private. There has been encouraging progress in Lab/LibDem cooperation since 2019. But there is a concern that Labour would rather win the GE and then inherit the benefit of distortions that favour government, rather than give them up. And then there is a worry, as now in the USA, that if nothing is reformed under a progressive government, the right on its return to power will have a strong basis to make things even worse. There was a recent conference at the Constitution Society which discussed whether there is a concerted assault on democracy under way in the UK. The scholarly consensus answer was apparently no: there is currently a chaotic bunch of uncoordinated anti-democratic moves: "they're just removing the checks and balances that they find inconvenient;" but this could effectively clear the way for an organised move at a later date.¹ Angela Rayner was talking at the weekend about restoring

1 <https://consoc.org.uk/executive-power-and-the-constitution-is-the-uk-government-getting-more-powerful/>

<https://consoc.org.uk/is-the-uk-sliding-into-state-capture/>

decency to politics. More pressure is needed from our campaigns to ensure that Labour will genuinely commit to rolling back the recent dangerous moves.

Action points and plans

The chair read a message to the meeting from Best for Britain, who were unable to attend. *“With an 80-seat majority in the Commons it is incredibly difficult to get meaningful concessions from the Government in the Commons but focusing on amendments in the Lords is do-able. In many respects, the best thing for your members to do may even be pressuring Labour to undo all the anti-democratic legislation if they are the largest party after the next election. There is no certainty that they will and so as selections of Labour PPCs begins apace (the first was selected in Gedling yesterday) it might be worth local groups pushing those PPCs to pledge to row back the Elections Bill/Policing Bill etc. when elected as MPs.*

In terms of next steps, the Government will be consulting on the Bills it passed in the last parliament, before introducing secondary legislation, so it will be worth GfE submitting responses to those consultations (B4B emails will signal when and how) and the details of the Queens’ Speech Bills haven’t yet been published, but as they are, national campaigns will take the lead on different ones.”

Make Votes Matter:

Democracy Loves Strong & Stable Government, Monday 13 June 2022 at 6:30pm. An Online seminar - Can Proportional Representation deliver 'Strong & Stable Government'? The evidence shows that yes, it can!

<https://www.makevotesmatter.org.uk/democracy-loves-strong-and-stable-government>

Another Europe is Possible:

It was uplifting to hear from the speakers about the work in Parliament and their many achievements. It is important for us to keep resisting, on the parliamentary side through lobbying, but also through the extra-parliamentary social movements. The protests on the streets and the level of public unrest forcing the government to delay the passing of the Police Bill worked in tandem with the parliamentary lobbying. If the social movements can really get into an organised mindset and mobilise on the streets regularly, in tandem with the parliamentary lobby, we can make the government quake in its boots and think twice about passing certain laws. That takes work on the ground, and it takes resistance to fatigue, it takes consistency, drawing on an impetus against this authoritarian bill in wider, broader society.

Liberty is leading a campaign against the repealing of the Human Rights Act. They have got a petition going on the Public Order Bill. The KillTheBill Instagram account, which is quite good at reaching out to different groups, has started telling people about what's bad about the Bill, telling people to write to their MPs, and doing some outreach work. Another key issue where we can engage a mass movement is the cost-of-living crisis, where people can see the connection between economic pain and our democratic crisis. There is a rally in London on 18th June: <https://costoflivingcrisis.org/events/we-demand-better-march-and-rally/>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a reminder of other Russian interventions against democracies across the world. Supporting post-war reconstruction will be essential to

stopping the long running slide into fascism. Social movements across France, Germany, Spain, and the rest of Europe are organising a European summer university on questions about democracy, migration, international solidarity, war, and peace. AEIP is organising a workshop on building a secure Europe, in Europe and beyond its borders. European Alternatives, which is our partner organisation has been running citizens assemblies across Europe and online. AEIP did a recent event on the French presidential election, which is interesting, given the new alliance of the left that is happening there now. This is quite relevant here in relation to Labour and the Lib Dems collaborating, so there's lots to learn.

AEIP are collaborating with the Frederic Ebert Stiftung in Germany to look at Islamophobia in France and in the UK, because we think that that scapegoating of minorities was quite key to the anti-migrant sentiment in Brexit, and it's happening in France as well; it's part of the slide into authoritarianism, stamping down freedom of religion and attacking minorities. AEIP is also writing a report with Frederic Ebert Stiftung on Brexit and the environment. George Monbiot wrote recently on the coastal pollution impact on marine life resulting from new work on post-Brexit freeports, which are also attracting a lot of corrupt money. There will be a report launch at the Labour Party Conference on that. All these different contributions connect to each other and to wider pro-democracy struggles.

Grassroots for Europe:

GfE were encouraged to hear about the flexible approach in DDC as described by Shaun, allowing for a range of modes of collaborative engagement, suited to organisations' different missions and constitutional arrangements. The pro-European scene includes a large number of small, various, and independent groups. Grassroot volunteers are often motivated by personal engagement in a specific topic area, e.g., Europe or climate. Hence it makes sense to keep a specific focus of action for specific campaigns and groups of campaigners, although there is often much overlap – though the political parties have unfortunately not yet caught up with this.

European Movement UK:

There are past and ongoing personal connections between people in EM-UK and other campaigns, notably Make Votes Matter and Compass. EM-UK has taken a policy decision not to engage extensively at national level on pro-democracy actions outside of its core pro-European mission. This is influenced by a current situation where opposition parties are reluctant to engage with Brexit issues, or have currently unhelpful positions: “if we don't focus on this, who will?” EM-UK's local affiliated groups are welcome to engage in collaborations with other campaigns – just as some are already now doing via MVM and Compass. Meanwhile there are up to nine Brexit-related Bills expected in the current parliamentary session, including the Brexit Freedoms Bill. There's a new Bill that's threatening the Northern Ireland protocol. EM-UK expects have its work cut out addressing these.

Suggestions for closer cooperation of pro-EU and pro-democracy groups:

1. Events information sharing: the GfE Round Table operates an event news 'hopper' service for its participants, which could broaden its scope to include other pro-democracy events likely to interest our campaigners.
2. Formal participation in alliances/coalitions. Partner organisations in the Round Table

who are not already engaged in the Democracy Defence Coalition are welcome to get in touch via Shaun to discuss joining. We hope DDC will continue to be represented at this Round Table.

3. During the Police Bill Alliance campaign there were moves to encourage local collaborations by activists in different campaigns to jointly lobby MPs and conduct citizen consultations.
4. There is seen to be useful scope for sharing campaign know-how, tools, and skills across the different campaigns. The Round Table team are aiming to focus on this theme at RT27 on 7 July at 17.00 BST