

THE CONVERSATION

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The Greens are not a real party of the left – here's why

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Big and brave or the best of a bad bunch? Steve Parsons/PA

The Green Party of England and Wales is in clover on manifesto day, and sports a well-designed and compelling tract on its party website. But it's also in trouble.

Yes, this year has seen an extraordinary upsurge in party membership and a wildly popular election video that spoofs boy bands and pale-male politicians.



But with that prominence has come increased scrutiny and even cruelty. Loughborough University's account of the campaign so far describes media coverage of the Greens as "derisory".

A hostile press

It's tough to do what the Greens desire: stand beyond the mainstream while appealing to it. The bourgeois media has had a field day in response, veering between adolescent satire and dire accusations that the party is either laughable or a dangerous front for socialism, the latest site of "entryism" (an ugly word for an ugly thing that saw Labour targeted for a clandestine takeover in the 1980s by the militant tendency, a minor organisation that sought power by joining a larger one).

Consider the Telegraph: Britain under the Green Party: Zero growth, no army, and everyone either high or hungry; Drugs, brothels, al-Qaeda and the Beyonce tax: the Green Party plan for Britain; and The Green Party is a Looney Tunes alliance of druids and trots. Such splendid sentences are calculated to outrage retired majors in the Cotswolds.

More representative, and perhaps more patronising, is the FT's take, that decent people in the Greens are overwhelmed by the crass nature of campaigning. For its part, the Guardian, Natalie Bennett's former employer, worries that a 5% vote for them could put the Tories back in power.

The authentic left?

Unlike another surging outsider, the revanchist 19th-century nationalists known as the United Kingdom Independence Party, the Greens have endeavoured to transcend their major issue — environmentalism — to become the authentic left of British parliamentary politics.

This strategy is by now a standard attempt to appeal beyond conventional constituencies: Labour wants to be the party of capitalists as well as workers, the

Conservatives desire social liberals in addition to their traditional base, and the Liberal Democrats target people who don't fit in but want to be liked.

The Greens' rebranding may seem more plausible. The party differs from the long-term consensus of Britain's two-party system, where each side periodically seeks floating fragments of its opponent's electoral base. The years between 1979 and 1990 were exceptional in their genuine polarisation. The sense that each major party is a palimpsest of the other's previous reign is palpable once more.

But are the Greens so distant from their older brethren? Their newest candidates for the 2015 election are two-thirds male and the whitest on the block, with less racial diversity than UKIP, while most Green voters are young people in college towns and cities, not the countryside, industry, or the working class.

European alternatives

Contrast that record with the mass movements underpinning new political formations in Greece and Spain. Could the Greens learn from Syriza and Podemos?

We hear a lot about Syriza. It's in power, it's in difficulty, and it's laden with charismatic, churlish politicians. But its Spanish counterpart, Podemos is just as interesting.

Originating from the 15-M movement (*los indignados*), Podemos has crossed class, location, gender, and age in a nation with similar levels of electoral participation to Britain's own unpopular democracy. Appealing to people "traditionally outside the culture of dissent", it has transcended self-anointed activism to command greater appeal than the sparse partisans of Occupy London and New York.

A very diverse public is attracted by its blend of academic rationality and populist rhetoric. Peppered with intellectuals and informed by social movements, Podemos has signed up 200,000 members in less than two years – more than any UK party.

Syriza and Podemos are based on four key elements: suffering, intellectual engagement, populism, and electoral systems.

What are the prospects for such developments in Britain? Not great. Why? All those aspects are missing.

While the past five years have undoubtedly made life infinitely tougher for many people in the UK, the impact of austerity has been significantly greater right across Greece and Spain. Left-wing thinkers here are conspicuous in their reciprocated contempt for and infelicity with both the popular media and public policy, while social movements are suffused with anti-intellectualism and grandiose claims that fail to engage the public. Finally, the British political system fails to support the will of the people as per proportional representation, preferential voting, or other forms that are available in more sophisticated democracies.

The Greens remain the “best of the British left”. But unless a mass movement pushes for constitutional reform, probably in the light of increased social suffering, the party will remain left right out.