

The Only Green in the House

Article by Beatrice White

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In 2010, Caroline Lucas became the first Green member of the UK Parliament. Since then, despite remaining the party's only nationally elected representative, she has had a pivotal impact on both policy and public debate in the UK. At the conference of the Green Party of England and Wales, she spoke to Beatrice White about her decision not to run for re-election, the difference even a single Green in the room can make, and the battles that lie ahead.

In early October, members of the Green Party of England and Wales gathered in Brighton for the party's autumn conference. At the event, the party set out its central objective for the next general election, scheduled to be held no later than January 2025: to [see four Greens elected](#) to the UK Parliament, known as Westminster. Although Greens have in recent years made significant gains at the local level (currently holding 745 seats spread across 168 local councils), under the "first past the post" voting system getting MPs elected is an uphill struggle. Increasing the number of seats from one to four is therefore a highly ambitious target.

It seemed fitting for the conference to take place in Brighton – the city is one of the target constituencies and also the seat of the party's only current MP, Caroline Lucas, who announced earlier this year that she would not be seeking re-election. When Caroline Lucas took her seat as the country's first Green MP in May 2010, she became not just a Green voice for her constituents, but the single voice representing a political movement that had hitherto been locked out of Parliament. It was, as she wrote in her 2015 book *Honourable Friends? Parliament and the Fight for Change*, "a moment of history: the first new political movement to enter Parliament in nearly a century". It would also be a heavy responsibility to bear, under the weight of immense expectations and pressure.

In an interview with Lucas on the sidelines of the Green Party's conference, I asked her what changes – if any – she had observed in the way that voice is heard and listened to in Westminster since she first stood up and spoke in parliament, 13 years ago. One key shift, she says, is that the "climate-shaped hole" that was conspicuous in every statement, speech, and piece of legislation coming out of Parliament has shrunk. But of course, this adaptation brings with it the need for a new kind of vigilance: "It has become politically difficult for other parties to pretend the environment doesn't exist or to pretend that climate isn't a major threat. But I think the challenge now is to try to unpack greenwash and work out what's really meant and, in the case of Conservatives, to try to make sure that they don't keep rolling back on pledges that they have given so far."

Indeed, Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced in September his government's "[new approach to net zero](#)", which involved scaling back climate change commitments and postponing key targets to phase out fossil fuels.

Post-truth politics

While Westminster is notorious for its adversarial, conflictual style of politics, Caroline Lucas has sought to model a different approach – based on alliance-building and civil, respectful communication. She has

gained recognition from across the political spectrum for her integrity – even among those who fervently oppose her politics. Yet a kind of Trumpian “post-truth” politics is increasingly gaining hold in the UK – particularly among the ranks of the Conservative Party. The party’s tactics have included passionately arguing against opposition policies that do not exist and mainstreaming marginal conspiracy theories around initiatives such as [15-minute cities](#).

“It’s fair to say that we are still struggling to work out how to cut through such blatant lies,” says Lucas, who is acutely aware of the dangers of such claims, even if they initially appear “ludicrous”. She deplores Sunak’s rhetoric that suggests “every environmental measure was a burden for people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis” and fears the ruling party has now concluded “that their best chance of winning the next election is to move much further to the right and to weaponise things like net zero and immigration.”

This presents a dilemma, Lucas explains: “It is difficult to know how to engage because on the one hand, you feel compelled to point out the inaccuracies in their statements. On the other hand, I’m very aware that that kind of takes you down into the weeds of where they want you to be, fighting on whether climate politics is good or bad for people on low incomes instead of zooming out and seeing the bigger picture.”

Lucas is also wary of the risk that rising public mistrust in politicians may lead to people switching off from politics and disengaging. “And that’s deeply dangerous, too, because we want people to be engaged in the political process now more than ever.”

Making policy vs. Doing politics

Caroline Lucas became the Green Party’s press officer in 1987, having just finished a PhD in sixteenth-century literary romance – not an obvious qualification for the role, perhaps, but she made her case successfully. In 1993, she was elected to Oxfordshire County council.

At the 1989 European elections, Greens won a [historic 15 per cent](#) of the vote – ten times their general election score, but since European elections were also subject to “first past the post” at the time, it won them no seats. Amid the frustration, the party was able to capitalise on this breakthrough, supported by the Green group in the European Parliament who invited Jean Lambert, a prominent UK Green and later elected MEP, to join them as an “honorary member”.

But it was not just European solidarity that buoyed them. As Lucas recalled during one fringe discussion at the conference, this was a time when the environment was high on the agenda. It was to be a propitious historical moment for Greens, boosted by their status as political newcomers and outsiders which gained them sympathy among both the public and media; the wind was at their back. In the 1999 European elections, run under a proportional system, Lucas was elected to the EU Parliament, where she was to spend a decade.

Lucas recalls her time in the EU Parliament fondly – particularly the consensual approach to policy-making, and the fact that Greens were well established as a force. As an MEP, Lucas was able to pilot legislation and steer it through the institutions, around illegal logging for instance.

But there was a problem, Lucas points out. These victories, significant though they were, were not being reported in the UK. “They didn’t change the nature of the debate in Westminster and in the UK. So it did feel important to come back in order to be able to try to influence the political conversation here.”

Her decision to leave Brussels and return to the UK to stand as a parliamentary candidate was made

easier by the fact that she would not be starting from scratch – party activists such as [Keith Taylor](#) had been doing vital work to prepare the ground for a Green breakthrough in Brighton Pavilion for years. Due to the turbulent nature of British politics, the last 13 years have witnessed four general elections – a period over which Lucas has built up a rock-solid majority, from a marginal win by just over 1,000 votes in 2010 to almost 20,000 in 2019.

An activist politician

In her approach to parliamentary politics, Lucas was influenced by German Green pioneer Petra Kelly, who was among those subscribing to the idea that Greens could be an “anti-party”, existing within political institutions without compromising their radical credentials.

I ask Lucas whether, according to her experience, this works in practice. In response, she recalls the mass student demonstrations that erupted in 2010 in response to the government’s plans to cut spending on education and raise tuition fees, and which were met with police repression. “It felt really important to be out there on the front line with young people protesting, and then – as people were being [kettled](#) for hours – being able to go into Parliament and put a point of order straight away.” Another enduring image of Lucas is her [2013 arrest](#) at anti-fracking protests, which she feels showed “you can be a politician and activist. It is that combination that I think gives us a particular role in the political system.”

For Lucas, using every parliamentary process available to her as a backbench MP, but also being on the frontline, and occasionally on the wrong side of the law, are two inseparable strands of the political fight. Ultimately, both the Labour opposition and the Conservative government changed their positions on fracking – and it seems evident that Lucas’s vocal opposition (in the name of her party but also of countless environmental groups and civil society campaigns) and efforts to put the issue on the agenda were a decisive factor in bringing about the conversation that led to this shift.

The end of an era

To get a sense of the importance of Caroline Lucas as a figure to the Green Party, one merely had to observe the reception she got from party members at the conference in Brighton. The warmth and admiration towards her were evident just from the cheers elicited from a mention of her name in a speech, and from the queues to greet and be photographed with her.

Having watched Lucas at previous party conferences and in Westminster, she seemed now more relaxed, allowing a human side to shine through in an unusually personal discussion at a fringe event, during which we learned that her favourite colour is purple, and that she is partial to gin, panna cotta, and binging *The West Wing*. Perhaps she is already able to look towards the moment when the burden of being the sole Green representative will be lifted.

The weight of this responsibility, partly intrinsic to being an MP – with the overwhelming and relentless volume of constituency casework to wade through, and the constraints of the British system – is intensified by the challenge of representing a party with extremely limited resources.

These difficulties, however, were not evident at the conference, where the mood among members was upbeat and enthusiastic following the announcement of the “Four for 24” objective for the next general election. Did Lucas worry her decision not to run again might send a message to the party’s activists that parliamentary politics cannot be the route to address urgent issues like the climate crisis – as the time it takes to build up a power base that can really shape policy over electoral cycles is time we simply do not have? Lucas is keen to distance herself from this suggestion: “I absolutely believe that we need Greens

in every single corridor of power. And it's vitally important that there's a Green voice in Parliament." She stresses again the personal nature of the decision, which is "about having worked about 80 hours a week for 13 years and just thinking, hang on a minute, I just need to take stock."

When it comes to the difficulties of addressing the climate crisis, however, Lucas has no qualms about decrying the parliamentary process as "frustratingly, maddeningly, dangerously slow." At the same time, she adds, "if one concluded that you therefore turn your back on democratic processes – I think that would be dangerous." Ultimately, there is no escaping the fact that Greens need to be both in the streets and on the benches. "To me, it feels that change is most likely to happen when you've got that momentum and pressure coming from the outside, but you've also got good people on the inside, who will challenge the other parties."

The next chapter

In a statement published on [the party's website](#) regarding her decision not to stand again, Lucas emphasised her desire to focus more fully on "the existential challenges that drive me – the Nature and Climate emergencies." What will be her approach in campaigning for change in these areas? For a start, amplifying Green messages that not only are there solutions, but also win-win solutions, "like rolling out a programme for home insulation, which would get people's bills down, get climate emissions down, and create hundreds of thousands of jobs. It doesn't always have to be this binary trade-off, which is the narrative that's coming from the government."

She explains that it is now about something much bigger and more ambitious than pushing for individual behavioural changes. "Right now, in the middle of the cost-of-living crisis, at a time when we've just seen that 16 per cent of species in the UK are facing extinction, when scientists are running out of language to describe what they're seeing in terms of the heating of the planet, it feels like we need system change."

The route to this broader change, it seems, comes back to building bridges and alliances. Lucas says a key element is finding effective ways to scale up "coordination amongst the voices that are broadly in agreement, and in opposition to the direction of this government." At present, she explains, campaign groups and organisations working on climate issues often find themselves competing with one another for resources, which discourages collaboration and ultimately undermines their messages and appeals for change. "The voice gets diluted, or there's more of a cacophony of voices and it's harder to hear. Thinking strategically right now needs to be about how do you fight a post-truth government."

Beyond the everyday struggles people face, she senses something bigger is going on which she admits she doesn't have the language for quite yet. She would like to explore "how we help people cope with what I think is just a huge amount of suppressed grief" connected to climate change, the destruction of nature, and biodiversity and species loss. She is interested in finding ways of "helping people to be in touch with that grief, but in a way that can lead to action, not to paralysis and despair."

What is clear is that Lucas is more driven than ever to bring about change, but also to convince others of their own agency and power. Her own brand of optimism is more extraordinary than she seems to realise; despite being acutely aware of just how severe these crises have become, and how profoundly broken the political system is, "I get out of bed each day thinking I can change things."

To summarise her outlook, she recalls the words of cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world." After having been the solitary Green voice for change for so long, perhaps this next stage for her will be about helping as many other

people as possible to feel they can change things too.



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