DEMOS

REPOPULATING THE CENTRE

HOW TO BUILD THE PRACTICE FOR A NEW POLITICAL CENTRE

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ABOUT THIS ESSAY

In this essay the author, **Gregory Maniatis**, argues that the centre is not an ideology. It is a practice — the practice of building things together with people you disagree with. In a moment of democratic emergency, he argues, this may be the most radical thing you can do.

Gregory has worked on immigration policy in the United States, Europe, and globally for many years. He currently leads the work on immigration and refugees at the Open Society Foundations, was a longtime advisor to the UN special representative for migration and numerous governments, and a journalist and author whose work has appeared in outlets including the New York Times, Washington Post, and Foreign Affairs. Inspired by our conversations, I asked Gregory to write this essay as a call to action.

Our mission at Demos is to upgrade democracy with a new deal to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen. Our mission is big and ambitious; our methods are practical, bold, and hopeful. We focus on improving the everyday practice of democracy, reforming public services, strengthening the citizen economy, and creating more resilient information ecosystems. We are designing and evaluating new practices for building trust through programmes such as Waves and our MP/Citizens Conversations work.

I think this essay is a rallying call for many people — from across the political spectrum — to rise to the challenge of the current democratic emergency. I am hugely grateful to Gregory for sharing his experience and insights, and I hope it inspires others to act as well.

Polly Curtis

CEO, Demos

INTRODUCTION

In the two years before Trump's re-election, something remarkable was happening in American immigration — and few people grasped its political significance.

A cross-partisan, cross-faith coalition — evangelicals and Mormons, Catholic charities and progressive advocates, veterans and business leaders, small-town mayors and big-city philanthropists — had quietly replaced top-down government resettlement with something radically different: community sponsorship. Citizens formed groups, named refugee families they wanted to resettle, and took responsibility for integrating them — housing, employment, school enrollment, navigating a new country. Millions of Americans signed up to sponsor through programmes like Welcome Corps. Not because a government told them to, but because they wanted to.

Immigration is not a side issue in the story of democratic decline. While populists offered people the chance to "take back control" by shutting borders, community sponsorship offered a different kind of control — the kind where communities decided for themselves. And then it was completely abandoned.

Trump destroyed all of it — at least for now. Every one of those programmes has been shut down or frozen. The cross-partisan participation was real — millions of Americans from every background were already doing the work. But we built the policy without building the political coalition that could protect it. Without a strong centre, progressive policy is an executive order waiting to be reversed — and that is exactly what happened. We confused having the right policy with having the right politics. When Gallup[1] polled Republicans after border crossings dropped dramatically, the share wanting to reduce immigration fell from 88% to 48%. The public was persuadable. Our coalition did not persuade them.

I have spent 20 years in the middle of this work — advising leaders and UN Secretaries-General, running one of the world's largest philanthropic programmes on refugees and immigration, working with NGO leaders and with people sleeping in camps. I have given my life to it, which is why I need to say something uncomfortable, something I have watched rooms of progressives and former officials resist each time they hear it: Trump is our fault.

1 Gallup, July 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx

AN HONEST EXAMINATION

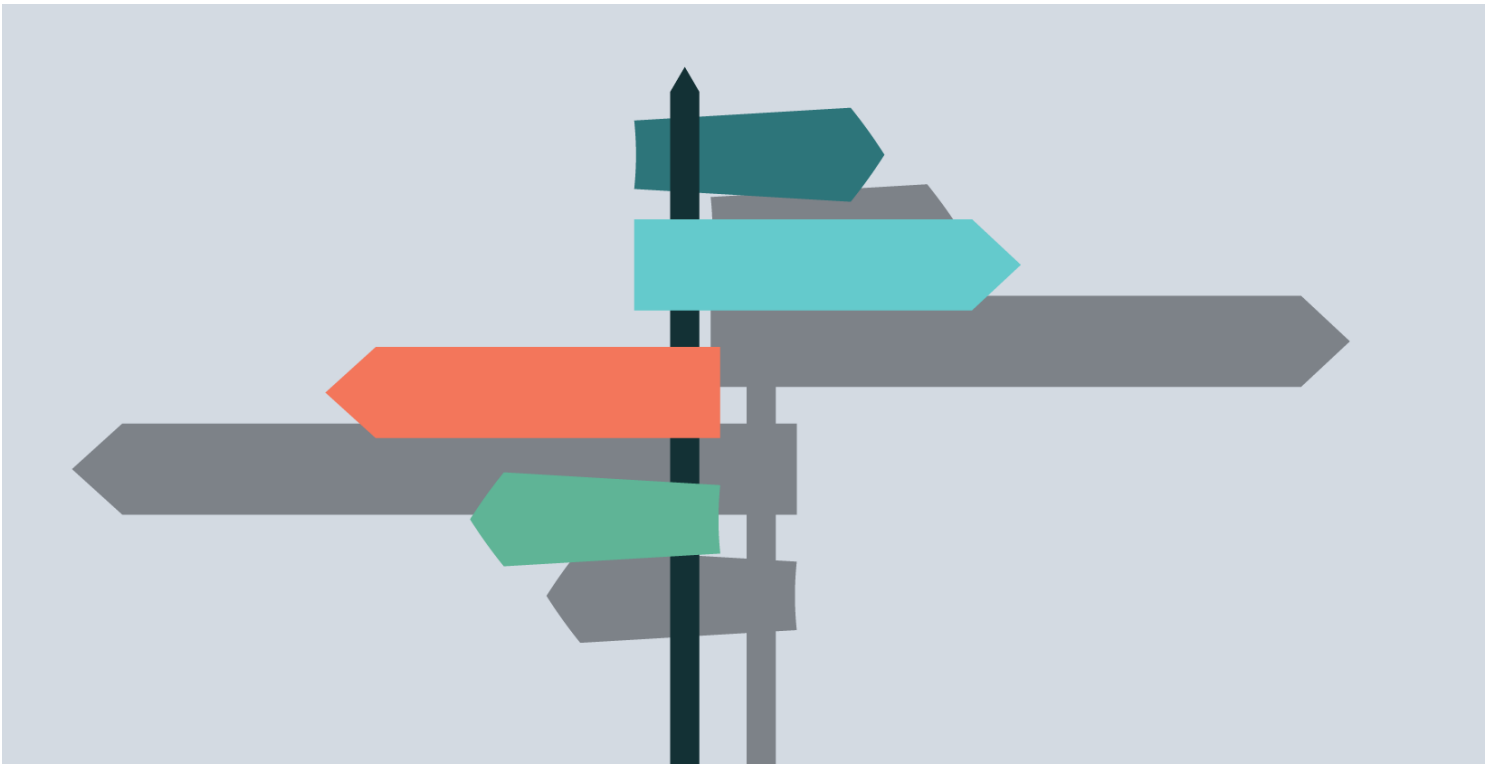
I say it gently at private gatherings of former senior officials, under Chatham House rule. A colleague once pulled me aside to say I was the only person in the room who thought this was a useful conversation. Not because I was wrong, but because self-critique, in a friendly setting, was triggering. We could acknowledge, in general terms, that serious mistakes had been made. What we could not do was analyse them — attribute them to specific causes, specific processes, specific people. We had the platforms, the resources, the job security to speak honestly, and too often we chose safety.

That failure to reckon honestly is not new. It is the latest expression of a pattern that made Trump's re-election possible. This is that story. The capacity to examine our own failures honestly — to course correct when the facts demand it — is the open society's greatest claim. At this moment, it is also our most conspicuous failure.

Trump's second term was not the product of Fox News or American racism alone, though those played a major part. It also was the result of two decades of progressive retreat from democratic persuasion. We retreated into litigation, into moral certainty, into what I think of as bilateral honesty — the kind of candor we practice over drinks. There is nothing wrong with discretion. The problem is when it becomes a permanent substitute for the argument that needs to happen in the room.

We mistook moral assertion for political strategy. The caution was not irrational — immigration enforcement in America falls disproportionately on communities of colour. Progressive speech norms — the unwritten rules about what could and could not be said about (for instance) enforcement without being accused of racism — developed partly as a response to real harm: family separation, deportation of longtime residents, racial profiling. But a legitimate moral impulse calcified into orthodoxy, and we made it dangerous to say obvious things: that enforcement is part of any functioning immigration system, that not everyone fleeing poverty qualifies for asylum, that broken systems needed reinvention rather than defence. Our refusal to say them out loud did not make us righteous. It made us sanctimonious and irrelevant.

That orthodoxy had enforcers. The progressive mainstream could not defend itself against vocal factions on its own side — not just Twitter activists but members of Congress and prominent advocacy organizations, influential far out of proportion to what the public believed. Abolish ICE, defund the police — positions that collapsed the distinction between idealism and strategy crowded out or silenced more sensible arguments. Those of us with the standing and institutional power to push back mostly didn't. That is what censoriousness has produced: people who know better staying quiet. We deceive ourselves into thinking we are intellectually honest because we do have honest conversations — but only in groups of two or three. Rarely in the room, rarely where it might really count.



THE GAP WIDENED

Meanwhile, the border became synonymous with chaos. The Biden administration's enforcement record was genuinely mixed — maintaining some controls while dismantling others, implementing new ones while being blocked by courts — and the political class could not find the language to make a credible case for what it was trying to do, because the institutional culture made honest talk about enforcement radioactive.

We have a target-rich environment in Trump and his allies: the corruption, the incompetence, the open looting of public institutions. And that is their greatest trick: being so outrageous that the left rarely has to look inward. Their extremism functions as an alibi for our complacency. I might be wrong that courage alone would have changed this — the structural forces driving polarization are enormous, from algorithmic sorting to economic dislocation to the collapse of shared media to the concentrated corporate power behind the populist right. But I am certain that our silence made it worse.

The right's version of this dysfunction runs deeper — not speech norms or institutional conformity but the active dismantling of democratic guardrails: pardoning insurrectionists, prosecuting political opponents, hollowing out federal agencies built over generations. There is no honest equivalence. But diagnosing their pathology is not this essay's task. The harder and more useful work is diagnosing our own.

WHY WE NEED A STRONG CENTRE

Some leaders have shown it can be done — Spain's Pedro Sanchez made the economic case for immigration openly and won, at least for now. Without a strong centre, however, such victories rarely outlast the leader who makes them.

I am writing this from America. But most progressives I know in Britain recognise the pattern. The retreat from persuasion. The replacement of democratic contestation with moral certainty. This is not only an American problem.

The progressive left has lost the capacity to build solidarity across difference.

We can build affinity groups. We can assemble coalitions of the like-minded. What we cannot do is build solidarity across real lines of disagreement — the kind that requires tolerating people whose views conflict with yours, not just people who look different from you. There are those who will not join forces with Pope Leo on immigration — where the Catholic Church has been among the boldest voices in the world — solely because of its stance on abortion.

Our institutions — the NGOs, think tanks, universities, foundations, and political parties that constitute the progressive infrastructure — have yet to diversify, not demographically, but *politically*. Uncomfortable voices belong on our boards, in our strategic debates, and around our decision-making tables. These are not failures of strategy. They are the predictable output of incentive structures that reward conformity — good people, operating within systems that produce homogeneity as if by design. Many believe that ideological uniformity is strength — that in the face of rising authoritarianism, the last thing you do is open the door to disagreement. But institutions that cannot tolerate internal dissent are the least equipped to fight it externally.

The people are passionate, principled, talented. And yet the outcome is too often conformity and silence. Our institutions have become good at protecting themselves and affirming their own moral purpose. They fight the crises but rarely the politics that create them. That requires honest reckoning that our institutional cultures resist. But the people inside them are capable of more than the systems currently ask of them.

And the people best positioned to force that reckoning — the leaders with the biggest platforms, the deepest resources, the most secure positions — are often the ones who stay silent. Privilege has not produced responsibility. For years, I was one of them. And when someone who could afford to be honest chooses silence, they are not simply being cautious. They are signaling to everyone below them that honesty is not safe. Elite silence cascades. It sets the terms for an entire ecosystem.

STABILITY OVER PURPOSE

The cumulative effect is an ecosystem that looks, from the outside, exactly like what it is: a set of institutions that have come to prioritise their own stability over their original purpose. Outsiders do not see idealism when they look at us. They see a class protecting its position. And that fuels the populist rage — because at some level, they are right.

Who *is* doing this bridging work? Interfaith coalitions — Catholic and other religious charities working alongside evangelical resettlement groups, trade unions partnering with business associations — are among the few spaces in public life where people of genuinely different political views still work on the same problems and build trust across lines that the rest of our politics treats as unbridgeable. These are not natural allies — evangelicals alongside progressives. That is the point. Some of the most innovative work in this space is being funded by philanthropies, like Open Society, willing to take risks — backing cross-partisan coalitions and supporting the research that proves the centre is persuadable.

Governors like Spencer Cox of Utah have built "Disagree Better" into a national movement — standing on stages with Democrats, modelling bipartisan cooperation when the political incentives run entirely the other way. Braver Angels is bringing left and right into the same room across the country. Faith communities have done some of the most effective resettlement and integration work. But the centre-right is fighting its own civil war — pragmatic Republicans at the state level being driven out by performative ideologues. The centre needs to be built from the right as much as from the left — and progressives who want to repopulate it will have to do more than diversify their own institutions. They will have to show up in other people's.

Political credibility comes from doing what you demand of others. We demand pluralism and practice its opposite.

Meanwhile, outside our institutions, trust has retreated into hyperlocal pockets — Facebook groups, WhatsApp threads, bonded social capital with few bridges beyond. The populist right, however crudely and dangerously, is linking those pockets into movements. MAGA succeeded not because it had better policies but because it gave people who felt invisible the experience of being seen and of community. It offered symbolic belonging — flags, rallies, a tribe. Community sponsorship — the programmes in which millions of Americans volunteered to resettle refugee families in their own communities — offered something deeper: structural belonging, genuine agency over who your neighbours would be and how your community would change. One gave people a feeling, the other gave people power. Both answered the same hunger, but only one of them has so far survived.

Participation-based belonging will always be slower to build than identity-based belonging. That is the centre's permanent disadvantage — and the reason it must be built deliberately, not assumed.

THE REAL CONTEST

The deeper contest is not over policy. It is over loneliness and purpose. More in Common's research[2] suggests that populism functions less as a policy response than as a mode of engagement — people drawn not to arguments but to movements that feel alive. The generation now entering political life has lived through the financial crisis, a pandemic, the accelerating reality of climate change — and now faces the existential uncertainty of artificial intelligence. Poll after poll shows record isolation, anxiety, purposelessness. The political movement that credibly addresses belonging will have an enormous advantage. And the centre — if it is to mean anything at all — barely exists on this terrain. What passes for it offers position papers where people need community, expertise where people need dignity. It has been happening to people rather than *with* them.

The centre is not in opposition to the left or the right — it is where their best ideas become durable. Without a strong centre, progressive victories exist by executive order and die by executive order. Progressives should welcome a powerful centre. Instead, they too often position themselves against it.

The centre will not be built by better arguments. It will be built by becoming a place people want to belong to — and by institutions that are rigorous, not just righteous.

BUILDING THE CENTRE

In 1922, a young American named Charles Garland rejected a near-million-dollar inheritance — then changed his mind and used it to create the American Fund for Public Service, known as the Garland Fund. Its architect was Roger Baldwin, the founder of the ACLU, who built a board that was deliberately and uncomfortably mixed: liberals and leftists, union organisers and civil liberties lawyers, Black leaders and white radicals — James Weldon Johnson, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Benjamin Gitlow. Seldom more than a dozen. They argued constantly, about everything.

And from those arguments came investments that transformed the United States. The Garland Fund financed the NAACP's legal strategy that would eventually produce *Brown v. Board of Education*. It incubated industrial unions that gave tens of millions of workers economic agency. It underwrote the ACLU's foundational free speech litigation. It did not merely fund progressive causes. It funded the *infrastructure* of progressive change — the institutions, the legal strategies, the organizing capacity that would reshape American life for half a century.

Thirteen people who disagreed fiercely and often — within a shared commitment to justice, but with genuine ideological diversity about how to get there — funded a social revolution. As John Fabian Witt argues in *The Radical Fund: How a Band of Visionaries and a Million Dollars Upended America*, what made the money valuable was the network it convened — people hailing from a sprawling, heterogeneous America that was just coming into existence. The friction was real and sometimes destructive; the Fund burned through its capital faster than it should have, and some of the arguments turned bitter. But they wanted to win, not just to be right.

2 More in Common, "Beyond MAGA: A Profile of the Trump Coalition," January 2026

Now consider the boards of many progressive institutions. Politically aligned, ideologically comfortable, often unwilling to risk the friction that produces genuine innovation. Progressive institutions in democratic societies require productive friction to generate strategies equal to this political moment. An institution that prizes harmony above honesty will not produce them.

Philanthropy can take risks that governments cannot and speak truths that politicians dare not. The Garland Fund used that freedom to build a board that fought. Today's institutions have to recapture that spirit.

REPOPULATING THE CENTRE

Zohran Mamdani, the new mayor of New York City, did something so simple it should not count as revolutionary: he went out and listened. He did not begin with a platform and try to sell it. He began with a question — *what do you need?* — and turned the answers into a physical movement. More than a hundred thousand volunteers had ownership of the outcome because they had been heard first. Listen first and the rest follows.

I once heard the arc of change described as moving ideas from the seemingly impossible to the merely implausible to the surprisingly possible. Ireland's citizens' assemblies seemed implausible in 2012 — ordinary citizens, not politicians, deliberating on marriage equality — and helped produce the law of the land by 2015, rebuilding trust in democratic institutions along the way. Community sponsorship seemed implausible before we started; then millions of people signed up. The Garland Fund's investments were implausible in 1922 and transformational by 1954.

Every example points to the same principle: Mamdani's campaign worked because people had ownership of the outcome. Community sponsorship worked because ordinary Americans had real power over real decisions about their own communities. Ireland's assemblies worked because ordinary citizens deliberated and decided. The Garland Fund worked because the people in the room had real power over real resources and disagreed about how to use them. The centre will be built by giving people genuine agency over the outcomes that shape their lives — making it a home, not a proposition.

What would it take? Politicians willing to build deliberative infrastructure — the participatory structures that turn passive recipients of policy into active agents of change. Institutions willing to diversify politically, not in the ways we already celebrate but in the ways that make us uncomfortable. If everyone on your board voted the same way in the last election, your institution is a club, not a force for change. The political theorist Hélène Landemore argues that our democratic institutions are dominated by the confident and the loud — while the shy majority stays silent. The task of democratic reform is to draw those people out. The work of Demos, to upgrade democracy by designing practical ways to rebuild the relationships between state, institutions and citizens, and between citizens, makes this task tangible and achievable. Their call to "optimise to depolarise" against the current toxicity is a way forward.[3] Honest disagreement, structured well, produces good policy and generates the public support needed to implement it.

3 Curtis, P, Upgrading Democracy, Demos, 2025 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Upgrading-Democracy_2025_July.ac_.pdf

HOLDING A NEW CENTRE

What this essay asks — institutions that genuinely tolerate disagreement, that seek out the people who make them uncomfortable, that design friction into their governance — will sound implausible to many.

You will read this and agree with most of it. You will share it with a colleague over drinks and say: *he's right, we do need to change*. And nothing will happen.

Unless.

The cost of progressive silence is not hypothetical. It is Trump. It is the collapse of public trust in the institutions we built. It is the destruction of programmes that were changing real lives in real communities — on both sides of the Atlantic.

We have the platforms, the resources, the standing to absorb the consequences of honesty. If we will not take the risk, we are asking people with far less power to do it for us. And they cannot.

The question is whether you will say it to 20 or 200 people. Whether you will put someone on your board who voted differently than you. Whether you will hire — and fund — the person who disagrees with you instead of the one who confirms what you already believe. And if you don't sit in those seats — whether you organise, or teach, or lead a congregation, or run for local office — whether you will build across the lines your own community treats as fixed.

But I want to end where I began — not with what we have lost, but with what I have seen work. I have seen millions of Americans welcome strangers into their communities, 13 people on a board who disagreed fiercely and often funded the end of segregation, and a country that could not discuss marriage equality or abortion hold citizens' assemblies and make both the law of the land. Every one of those was impossible until it wasn't.

The centre is not an ideology. It is a practice — the practice of building things together with people you disagree with. It has worked before. It will work again. But only if we stop agreeing with each other and instead start building with everyone else.

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DEMOS

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At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

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