

Deputy Leader Autumn Conference speech 2022



Green Party

1 October 2022

Thank you.

Let me tell you about what happened in my first engagement as the new Deputy Leader, I was at a community garden: a group of urban food growers were launching a handbook called Growing for Change. I'd been invited to speak to everyone and I got there early as I was keen to see what other people had to say too.

They were making the clear, excellent points that we should all have access to growing our own food – particularly in a cost of living crisis.

I too was already pretty clear about what needed to be said: that there is no environmental justice without social, racial and economic justice too – and that urban food growing is a perfect, really tangible example of where these different aspects come together particularly for those struggling with the rising price of food and being able to grow their own.

I was just about to speak

-The speaker before me finishing up about their work at lots of community gardens, when suddenly he stepped into the audience, got down on one knee in front of the person next to me. And delivered a spontaneous wedding proposal!

Not something I was expecting. Could have gone very wrong, but luckily she said yes. And, although a hard act to follow, we then did get back to talking about the climate and nature emergency.

So as well as congratulating Noemi and Andy on their future together and barring another proposal in the offing – I want to talk about another hard act to follow, indeed a spectacular act to follow and that's our outgoing deputy leader Amelia Womack.

Amelia has been our deputy leader for 8 years, seen us through several general and local elections, a pandemic, brexit and very wonderfully, she told Piers Morgan live on TV that he was getting his knickers in a twist over a vegan sausage.

Amelia in her time as Deputy Leader has seen the party grow with her dedicated support. When you look at the trajectory of Green Party councillors we've won, yes, it was trickling upwards by a handful each year but it accelerated during Amelia's term of office as she toured the country week after week for around, I make it 416 weeks of her term, and in the last few years we all know what has happened.

I want to take a moment before talking about what comes next, to say on behalf of all of conference, those now 558 councillors and the entire Green Party, – Amelia Womack, thank you!

It's now been a month since I was elected as your new Deputy Leader and what a month it's been. My first week wasn't even over and Liz Truss had become Prime Minister.

As with any new Prime Minister we have to hope for the good of the country that she can rise to the scale of the challenges facing us. But previous experience suggests she won't – in fact in a very short space of time, she's already made things considerably worse and rather than reversing her awful decisions, she looks like she's just going to dig deeper and deeper.

And we know all this not just because we listened to that catastrophic mini-budget last Friday but because we talk to people every day – on their doorsteps, on picket lines, at bus stops – we know the problems. And in the Green Party we know the solutions too.

We know that the same actions to tackle the cost of living crisis are often the exact same actions that we need to tackle the climate crisis.

From insulating homes to investing in renewables to pushing hard for the fundamental human right to breathe clean air – we have been pushing our plans for decades and more recently across the country implementing them into real action that changes people's lives.

So when I say there's no environmental justice without racial, economic and social justice too – what do I actually mean? It's the idea that everything is interconnected. We want system change. We cannot have business as usual. So- Let's look into that a little deeper – let's begin with environmental justice.

The IPCC – the intergovernmental panel on climate change – says we need to reach peak emissions within the next 18 months. It seems to me that other parties simply haven't heard this call or are choosing not to hear it. As Greta Thunberg said "Is my microphone on?"

We in The Green Party have consistently placed protection of our planet at the heart of everything we do. And we will continue to do so.

We know though that in order to achieve that our society must simultaneously tackle the other injustices too. They are embedded in it so let's talk about those. They are often the consequences of colonialism – we need to name that.

A society built deliberately on the exploitation of people in order to feed our society's reliance on fossil fuels. The most recent United Nations report finally included a line about colonialism. Brazilian Indigenous activist Taily Terena opened the Peoples Pavillion at COP26 with these words: "Colonialism caused climate change.

Our rights and traditional knowledge are the solution." And she's right. Not only do colonial states exploit the land and resources that others are dependent on – they devastated ecosystems too. We need to listen to the people who are bearing the worst brunts of the crisis who have often done the least to cause it.

That's why you can't have environmental justice without racial justice too.

And here in the UK, let's take air pollution for example – whether it's campaigning against incinerators or new road building projects or voting against cuts to public transport, far too often these occur in the middle of communities of people of colour who can feel like they don't have access to representation or power. That there is nothing they can do.

I was having this exact conversation this week in Manchester with Cllr Ekua Bayu who has joined the Green group from the Labour Party (welcome Ekua!) joining Astrid Johnson and Rob Nunney as our Manchester Councillors.

We were speaking at an event with the Young Greens where Ekua spoke powerfully about the community she serves in Hulme. She spoke about the need for Green politics to not be abstract. but to be with communities – to be active, supporting people who may never have had the resource or opportunity to literally get their hands in the soil.

We know as a party we need to do more to reach out to these communities and be clear that we will always stand by them.

And then on to social Justice. We are in a cost of living crisis but we know that this is really an income crisis. For years people's wages have remained stagnant or fallen whilst shareholders take home large dividends, while people at the top have seen their profits skyrocket and lucrative contracts awarded to their mates.

The Tories never acknowledge their mismanagement of our economy, their ideologically driven so called "trickle down economics", the unforgivable lifting of the cap on bankers' bonuses. Conference, haven't they noticed? people are suffering. And with the inequality crisis too, it's the most vulnerable people who are always being hit the hardest.

I've been proud to be out on picket lines with working people. We know in this party that when people ask for our help we give it. Ultimately there's only one authentic response to people struggling just to get by and in the Green Party we know that response is solidarity-

And here we have yet another cabinet set on ripping up our human rights and creating phoney

culture wars. They only have one tactic. To scapegoat. To other. To blame. When I was elected as Deputy Leader I talked about being the first Jewish and gay Deputy Leader in British History – and some people online asked me why that was relevant. It's a fair question – but I think there's an even fairer answer.

Representation is important. Diversity is important. Not just for me to advocate for my communities – although I will certainly do that too – but it's massively important that I use this literal platform to campaign and speak with – rather than for – those people who don't have that voice.

There are so many people who feel unseen, unheard, unrepresented and we as a party can both connect with these people and take their worries and needs and speak truth to power.. And crucially – be there to protect them when they want it when the powerful hold them in their sights.

Whether it's refugees, Gypsy Roma Traveller communities, people with disabilities and/or the LGBTQIA+ community (and of course that includes trans people as there's no LGB without the T) – history has horrifically demonstrated that when they come for one of us, they come for all of us...and conference, we will stick together.

Environmental justice, racial justice, social justice:

We won't let them get away with any dereliction of duty. People can say we're virtue signalling – I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to signal towards virtuousness and they can call us woke – Fine. Yes! We're awake, alert and ready to go.

And whilst others may sleep through all the alarms – ringing for climate ringing for the cost of living – ,we are the ones leaping to action. We do not have time to keep hitting snooze!

And then there's economic justice. We talk about this winter being difficult – if not impossible for people. And that's shockingly true. But those in power need to also face up to the fact that millions of people in the UK in 2022 are already living in extreme poverty.

Damp, cold and mouldy homes, struggling to keep food on the table, struggling to pay their rising bills We as a party have long advocated for plans like a Universal Basic Income – we know that this has the potential to lift millions of people out of poverty.

In London where I'm elected to the Assembly and chair the Environment committee, I've been making the case to the Mayor to do a pilot scheme and have recently commissioned a report looking at how we can best engage with local communities and have these conversations.

It's these examples that are happening all across England and Wales: elected Greens and local members understanding the power of good ideas and making change in their communities.

And we know economic justice isn't just about money: all too often with

poverty it is a lack of space and time as well as a lack of resources that means people struggle to properly manage their everyday circumstances, to get everything sorted and in order, to overcome the anxiety that can literally grip their chest on a daily basis. That's why it's so crucial that we get more Greens elected so we can turn the power of our good ideas into reality.

And talking of good ideas you can't have environmental, racial, social or economic justice without democratic justice too.

You didn't really think I was going to give a speech without mentioning our broken voting system? First Past the Post has never worked for anyone – the difference now is that everyone has started to notice that we are stuck. Time and again in General Elections people see candidates like our Prime Minister say she doesn't even mind being unpopular – as she knows she can still get first past that post on a minority of votes. We know that if we want grown up politics, grown up collaborations that work in people's best interests – then we need Proportional Representation. It's no longer if – it's when.

So let me say this to Keir Starmer – listen to your members. We're delighted that Labour members, and unions, have backed Proportional Representation in overwhelming numbers. We saw the feed in the conference hall as people raised their hands to vote for a fairer system. I punched the air and celebrated but very quickly reality started to bite. Keir is saying no. No to fair votes.

He says "It's not a priority." We have a broken voting system that means people are not represented properly in decisions made from everything from policing, transport to the NHS. Literally being people's representative is one of the most fundamental duties and privileges of being an elected politician. It's not OK to present representation as unimportant or a distraction. It's not ok to continue to support a broken status quo and hope that no one notices. For a society that includes everyone that has to include the right to a fair vote for everyone. And in the Green Party – representing people IS our priority.

And conference we ARE representing people. Greens all across England and Wales are proving even with the odds stacked against us, even with the huge sums of money ploughed into the other parties by big business – we will still win even under the current voting system.

Just this month in Lancaster we saw Sue Tyldesley take us from 33% to a whopping 65.7% of the vote becoming one of our newest councillors. Huge congratulations to Sue and the entire team.

This isn't even an unusual story. Over and over again as local results come through – we see the power of an organised Green campaign team, embedded in a local community, knocking on doors and getting out the vote. And it's not just at local level, The media are noticing too with Professor Sir John Curtice saying that the Greens "are a force in British Politics and we simply can't be ignored" and Labour copying our conference slogan almost identically – what can we say other than that we love recycling?

Joking aside, it's heartening when other parties take our ideas and in London with my colleagues Sian and Caroline – London Mayor Sadiq Khan regularly takes up our ideas and implements them and in doing so makes millions of peoples lives better – but it's time to cut out the middle man. And so we all look to Parliament. Caroline Lucas is an amazing MP. She's doing brilliant work and punching far above her weight. Just imagine a whole parliament of Caroline Lucases – or rather less weirdly, a whole parliament of people embodying what she does speaking truth to power, with an authenticity, a compassion and a care we rarely see in our politics. We need to see people like Carla Denyer join her and let's get more Green MPs urgently speaking out and taking action on the change the country desperately needs.

To do this – we need to grow. It's wonderful that you're here and that you're engaged. We all know people who would be here too or join the party – but no one has asked them. Please, talk to your friends, to your family, to your work colleagues. Now is the perfect time to join our movement and to see it grow.

Conference – we know we're not powered by big business. We're powered by people. People like local party chairs, leaflet deliverers, people who manage social media accounts, collect data or make food for activists on action days (a vital job!) – everyone's contribution is hugely welcomed and has played a part in our past success.

I want to thank every single person both in this hall, watching online and more widely who have worked so hard to gain us the success we already have earned.

But there's still a lot of work to do.

Let's get to it – Person by person. Town by town. City by city. That's how we grow. That's how we have justice.

That's how we change our country.

Conference – let's go.

[Back to main news page](#)

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