

Clinton crisis exposes Blair's "Third Way"

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25 September 1998

British Prime Minister Tony Blair had hoped that the 'Third Way' seminar held at New York University Law School on Monday would provide him with an international platform to espouse his favourite theme of a new model for government. Variations of the 'third way' are being promulgated by nominally liberal and social democratic governments the world over, and Monday's seminar included Bill and Hillary Clinton and Romano Prodi, Italy's premier.

Blair's hopes were dashed by the broadcast of President Clinton's grand jury testimony, which ensured the seminar was just a footnote to the day's main event--if it was reported at all. The main elements of Blair's thinking, however, are outlined in his newly published Fabian Society pamphlet, *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century*.

Released to coincide with the New York seminar, *The Third Way* is Blair's first attempt to define his strategy. Despite his pretensions, the pamphlet is devoid of any philosophical or ideological merit. Nor does it set out a 'new' idea as such. *The Third Way* is in the main a repackaging of the same right-wing, pro-market policies that have been pursued by governments internationally over the last two decades. His specific contribution is to call for a more interventionist role to be played by government on behalf of the major global corporations.

Blair states that his vision for the twenty-first century is, 'of a popular politics reconciling themes which in the past have wrongly been regarded as antagonistic--patriotism and internationalism; rights and responsibilities; the promotion of enterprise and the attack on poverty and discrimination'.

Social democratic and liberal governments must accept the global market economy, Blair continues. Their aim must not be to interfere with its operations or attempt to regulate the activities of the transnational corporations. Pointing favourably to the European

Union being predominantly headed by 'centre-left' governments, he notes that whilst these governments are 'learning lessons about efficiency and choice, particularly in the public sector,' they are not returning to the 'old politics' of nationalisation and 'tax and spend'. 'We are acting afresh. Across Europe, social democratic governments are pioneering welfare state reform, tackling social exclusion, engaging business in new partnerships and establishing a stable economic basis for long-term stability and investment.'

These governments must continue to be 'user-friendly' to the global corporations, creating the most favourable conditions for the success and profitability of global capital. They must promote competitive markets, boost human capital, ensure 'effective access to the labour market' and above all ensure that tax is kept under control.

Acknowledging that much of the 'neo-liberal' economic reforms of the 1980s were necessary, Blair argues that the conservative parties were unable to take their programme any further because of social opposition to its consequences. 'By the 1990s there was a growing realisation that this presented a serious threat to national cohesion. Too many people were losing out; too many companies were under-performing; too many public services were failing through inattention; and too many communities were endangered by the rise of crime, unemployment and social exclusion.'

The specific responsibility facing social democratic and liberal governments is to contain this threat. This is not to be done by making certain reformist concessions. Blair states categorically that the formation of workers parties in Europe at the turn of the century was a mistake and that politics should have been left in the hands of the liberal bourgeoisie. He defines his aim as uniting the 'two great streams of left-of-centre thought--democratic socialism and liberalism--whose divorce this century did so much to weaken progressive

politics across the West.'

What Blair advocates in place of reforms is a greater degree of state coercion than was contemplated even by such right-wing figures as Reagan and Thatcher. Not content with stealing their economic policies, social democracy must now take on their social policies as well, albeit refashioned in the language of 'responsibility' and 'obligations'.

'In recent decades, responsibility and duty were the preserve of the right. They are no longer, and it was a mistake for them ever to become so,' Blair states.

Touching on all the traditional conservative themes, he adds, 'For too long, the demand for rights from the state was separated from the duties of citizenship and the imperative for mutual responsibility on the part of individuals and institutions. Unemployment benefits were often paid without strong reciprocal obligations; children went unsupported by absent parents. This issue persists....

'The truth is that freedom for the many requires strong government. A key challenge of progressive politics is to use the state as an enabling force, protecting effective communities and voluntary organisations and encouraging their growth to tackle new needs, in partnership as appropriate.

'The life of any family and any community depends on accepting and discharging the formal and informal obligations we owe to each other.'

Blair always substitutes sound bites for political substance. In this respect Monday's events have a more fundamental significance for Blair than simply knocking him off the front page. They exploded the myth of a 'third way'. The Clinton crisis expresses--in a grotesquely distorted fashion--that opposing social and class interests are once again making their impact on the political scene.

Clinton and the US Democrats provided the model for British Labour's evolution from a reformist workers party to one of the bourgeois liberal type. So much so that Labour was described as undergoing a 'Clintonisation'. Since then Blair's mentor has made one concession after another to his Republican opponents. This has only served to strengthen their hand to the extent that they have now attempted to mount a coup d'etat and engineer his removal from office.

Big business will not tolerate anything that impinges on their goal of driving up exploitation and

profitability. Blair's refusal to make a statement opposing the attack on Clinton--unlike many other European leaders--signifies that he has gotten the message.



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