

# The "Third Way" loses its allure: Clinton, European leaders head up Progressive Governance conference in Berlin

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On June 5 German Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder hosted 13 "progressive" heads of government from four continents at a conference in Berlin entitled "Progressive Governance in the 21st Century". The three-hour gathering, intended to be the highlight of US President Bill Clinton's visit to Germany, was planned as a link in a series of similar meetings symbolising the advance of the "Third Way"—the brand of politics associated with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Clinton and Schroeder.

Things, however, did not work out that way. Instead, the conference demonstrated that the "Third Way" is in crisis. It is questionable whether a similar conference will ever be held again, since, as the German weekly *Die Zeit* commented sarcastically, in the future there probably would not be enough "progressive governments" to hold one.

Of the six heads of government who attended the last meeting of this type, held in November in Florence, two were absent in Berlin. Tony Blair's excuse that his new-born son prevented him attending was not very convincing, since the conference, originally scheduled for May, had been postponed at Blair's request so that it would fall after the birth of his child.

The other absentee was Italy's Massimo d'Alema, the ex-Communist Party leader-turned social democrat, who had since resigned as head of government. In his place came his successor, Giuliano Amato of the Socialist Party, who is regarded as a purely transitional figure. Even Bill Clinton, who was supposed to add some glamour to the proceedings, is now regarded as a "lame duck" president, since his term of office comes to an end next January.

The term "Third Way" did not even rate a mention in

the communiqué released at the end of the conference. The new catch phrases are "modern government" and "progressive governance".

The terminology has changed in other ways as well. The gathering was stamped with the handwriting, so to speak, of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, rather than that of Tony Blair. The state was to be accorded a greater role in relation to the economy. Thus the Berlin communiqué demands "efficient regulation, supervision and accounting, codes of conduct" for the international finance markets. It even calls for a "sweeping and lasting international redistribution of wealth and opportunity".

At the press conference following the summit, Clinton blustered about social justice and the necessity of overcoming poverty, disease and inequality, while Schroeder held forth against the domination of politics by the market, and called for more efficient regulation and monitoring of the financial markets.

It would be mistaken, however, to see in this a "turn to the left", or a return to traditional social democratic reformist policies. The political practice of the heads of government who gathered in Berlin makes a mockery of their professed belief in social justice. Nor is there a single concrete indication in the conference communiqué of how poverty is to be combated or the markets regulated. The document is a typical product of the Clinton-Blair-Schroeder school of politics—"an airy entity made up of pious professions, empty phrases and pallid platitudes", as one commentator aptly put it.

The change in tone was not the expression of a change in policy, but rather a reaction to growing opposition to the consequences of the policies being pursued by the "Third Way" leaders, as reflected in last

fall's protests against the World Trade Organisation conference in Seattle and other instances. Likewise, the admission of smaller and economically weaker countries, and so-called "threshold nations", to the ranks of "progressive governments" was aimed at placating mounting criticism of the imperialist powers' economic domination. This is why South African President Thabo Mbeki and "threshold" government leaders Fernando Cardoso (Brazil), Fernando de la Rúa (Argentina) and Ricardo Lagos (Chile) were invited to Berlin.

These cosmetic changes in public image are indications that the social democratic parties are under increasing pressure. They were voted into power in the 1990s as a result of opposition to the economic and social policies of their conservative predecessors. They had to distance themselves from the conservatives' policies to get elected. But they were neither willing nor able to return to the politics of social reform. This was the birth of the "Third Way".

The secret of the "Third Way" was to package the attack on the welfare state in a new ideological shell, while prosecuting it at an accelerated pace. The art of governance became the art of play-acting. Spin doctors and other specialists in the manipulation of public opinion were coveted as never before. Clinton, Blair and Schroeder excelled not as political strategists, but as the political salesmen. Their strength lay in their handling of the media, their orchestrated public appearances, their fabrication of illusions.

These methods seemed to be successful. In the wake of the election victories of Blair, Jospin and Schroeder, Social Democrats were swept back into government in most of Europe. But their success had less to do with their own efforts than with widespread revulsion against their predecessors and the alienation of broad sectors of the population from the entire political establishment. This somewhat blinded them to popular opposition to their own policies.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, you can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time. The politics of illusion is a short-lived enterprise.

In Britain, Blair suffered his first serious defeat when Ken Livingstone was elected mayor of London in spite of the full-fledged campaign Blair waged against him. In Italy, the ex-Communist Party Stalinists, who had to

wait more than 50 years to get into government, have discredited themselves within a few months. In Germany, the SPD-Green coalition government was in dire crisis only one year after taking office, and has only managed to scrape through for the moment because of the corruption scandal and resulting crisis of the conservative opposition. In France, the Jospin administration is facing a mounting wave of strikes.

The empty and farcical nature of the Berlin conference was so obvious that even large sectors of the bourgeois press heaped derision upon it. The collapse of the facade called the "Third Way" is now bringing the real social and political issues to the foreground. The intense social conflicts and antagonisms that have accumulated under the regime of the Social Democrats will now of necessity assume a political form.

Future governments will be compelled to act more openly and frankly in their true role as representatives of specific class interests. This is already obvious in Russia, which was the next stop on Clinton's European tour after Berlin. Russia's new President Vladimir Putin has cast aside the democratic pretensions of his predecessor, and is now constructing an authoritarian state in the name of the "dictatorship of the law". Such developments will return the issue of a genuine alternative to the current structure of society to the centre of public concern.



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