

**The Third Way:  
Post-ideology or Politics as Usual?**

Kris McCracken

School of Government, University of Tasmania

Refereed paper presented to the  
Australasian Political Studies Association Conference

University of Tasmania, Hobart

29 September – 1 October 2003

The debates over the future of social democracy since the 1980s have raised a mixture of issues and problems. These issues are crucial in understanding the development of a third way approach to politics. Anthony Giddens regards the third way as (in part) a response to five key dilemmas, they are all crucial in understanding the third way.

For Giddens, the five dilemmas concern:

- 1) Globalisation – what is it and what are its implications?
- 2) Left and right – what are we to make of the claim that these categories have no meaning any more?
- 3) Individualism – in what sense, if any, are modern societies becoming more individualistic?
- 4) Political agency – is politics shifting away from orthodox mechanisms of democracy?
- 5) Ecological problems – how should they be integrated into social democratic politics?<sup>1</sup>

This paper is primarily concerned with the first two of Giddens' dilemmas, although three and four are also considered. Firstly, globalisation is an elusive concept.

Despite rising interest in the phenomenon of globalisation since the 1980s the term is still used to refer, variously, to a process, a policy, a marketing strategy, a predicament or even an ideology.<sup>2</sup> The problem with globalisation is that it is not so much an 'it' as a 'them'. Globalisation is not a single process but a complex of processes, sometimes overlapping and interlocking processes but also, at times, contradictory and oppositional ones. It is very difficult therefore to reduce globalisation to a single theme.

Thomas Friedman's argument in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* is that information technology has made the world a smaller place, in which ideas and money can move almost instantly across borders. This smaller world richly rewards countries and societies that meet its needs – that is, places that have strong property rights, open minds, and a flexible attitude – but it metes out devastating punishments on those

---

<sup>1</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, p 28

<sup>2</sup> Heywood, Andrew (2002), *Politics*: Basingstoke, Palgrave, p ?

who fail to live up to global standards.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, globalisation has to be understood not only as an economic regime, but as a system of social relations rooted in the specific capitalist form of social power, which is concentrated in private capital and the nation-state. What globalisation basically means is that as the market widens, the scope of democratic power narrows. Whatever the market controls becomes exempt from democratic accountability. This leads ultimately to a weakening of the nation-state and the democracy that justifies them.

The third way therefore is very much an ongoing conversation among politicians, political strategists and political theorists about governing along a centrist course between – or beyond – the ideological spectrum of left and right. In policy terms, it has meant finding some passage between socialism and the neo-liberal approaches of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

The term ‘third way’ itself has a long and varied history, which can be traced at least from the appearance of Marx up until the present day. The phrase has been associated with the far left and the far right, as well as numerous centrist groups looking for a compromise along the ideological spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

The most common application though, has been as a generic name for systems that blend the best features of planned and market economies within a broadly liberal democratic framework. More recently however, it has been most closely associated with the projects of Bill Clinton and the ‘New’ Democrats in the United States, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Friedman envisages a world that is essentially democratic, because you people become harder to oppress when they have Internet access, and essentially peaceful, because speculators will pull out their money if you remain aggressive. (Friedman, Thomas (1999), *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, p. 1, p. 2.)

<sup>4</sup> The historical desire for a third way encompasses: the ‘Reform Socialism’ of Eduard Bernstein; the Fabian movement; Mussolini’s *fascisti* expression; the ‘National Socialism’ of Hitler; the *Falange* of Franco; Wilhelm Roepke’s third way to Free Society; Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’; Keynes & Welfare Capitalism; Sweden’s ‘third way’; Harold Macmillan’s ‘Middle Way’; ‘Market Socialism’ as seen in Czechoslovakia and China; Juan

Tony Blair's 'modernisation' of the Labour party in the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

The term 'third way' is itself vague and subject to an assortment of interpretations. Given that third way politics draws on varied ideological traditions, this is unsurprising. Different third way projects have arisen in different countries: including those associated with the DLC and Clinton and New Labour and Blair, as well as others that have emerged in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, New Zealand and (more recently), the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Brazil.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the diversity inherent in such a project, certain characteristics can be identified as being central to finding a third way. The first of these is the belief that socialism – or at least the monolithic "top-down" state intervention-style socialism – is redundant. There is no alternative to what Clause IV of the UK Labour Party's constitution (redrafted in 1995<sup>7</sup>), describes as "a dynamic market economy".<sup>8</sup> With this comes a general acceptance of inevitable globalisation and the belief that capitalism has mutated into a "knowledge economy" that privileges information technology, individual skills and flexibility for both labour and business.<sup>9</sup>

A second feature is that – in contrast with a neoliberal approach – government is acknowledged as having a significant economic and social role. Nonetheless, this role is focused on the promotion of international competitiveness by building up education and skills, and the strengthening of communities and civil society to

---

Perón's 'middle way' in Argentina; the 'third road' of Tito, Nasser, Nkrumah, Nehru and Sukarno; Qaddafi's third way and even the Hawke/Keating experiment in Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Our current understanding of what the third way means came from the United States in the mid-1980s. The term originated in the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in the face of the electoral successes of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Similarly, the formulation of 'New' Labour has been in response to the Thatcher/Major years.

<sup>6</sup> Giddens, Anthony (2003), "The world has not heard the last of the third way": *Financial Times*, July 11, p 19

<sup>7</sup> The original Clause IV of the Labour Party read: "To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service." See Clause IV Profile, Online. *Australian Politics.com*. Available: <http://www.australianpolitics.com/uk/labour/clauseIV.shtml>. (19/7/2003)

<sup>8</sup> Fielding, Steve, Thompson, Peter and Tiratsoo, Nick (1995), "New Labour and 1945?": *History Today*, July, Vol. 45, Iss. 7, p 11

<sup>9</sup> Heywood, Andrew (2002), *Politics*: Basingstoke, Palgrave, p 59

contain the centrifugal pressure generated by market capitalism.<sup>10</sup> In this manner, this expression of the third way is in fact a form of liberal communitarianism. Its “new individualism” calls for a balance between rights and entrepreneurialism, on the one hand, and social duty and moral responsibility on the other.<sup>11</sup>

A central feature of this expression of third way politics is its disconnection from traditionally understood socialist egalitarianism. It instead embraces the liberal ideas of equality of opportunity and meritocracy.<sup>12</sup> Third way politicians tend to embrace welfare reform. Certainly, they reject both the neoliberal emphasis on ‘standing on your own two feet’ and the socialist commitment to ‘cradle to grave’ welfare in favour of an essentially modern liberal belief in ‘help people to help themselves’,<sup>13</sup> or (as Clinton put it) giving people a ‘hand up, not a hand out.’<sup>14</sup> This has led to support for what has been called a ‘workfare state,’<sup>15</sup> in which government support in terms of benefits or education is conditional on individuals seeking work and becoming self-reliant.

Another characteristic of the third way vision of politics is that it attempts to move beyond conflict and harmonise opposing standpoints. Tony Blair claims that:

“My vision of the 21st century is of a popular politics reconciling themes which in the past have wrongly been regarded as antagonistic – patriotism and internationalism; rights and responsibilities; and the promotion of enterprise and the attack on poverty and discrimination.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Heywood, Andrew (2002), *Politics*: Basingstoke, Palgrave, p 59

<sup>11</sup> Telo, Mario (2000), “European social democracy and the third way: Another view”: *New Political Economy*, March, Vol. 5, Iss. 1, p 139. See also Rothstein, Bo (2001) “Social capital in the social democratic welfare state”: *Politics & Society*, June, Vol. 29, Iss. 2, p 207

<sup>12</sup> Heywood, Andrew (2002), *Politics*: Basingstoke, Palgrave, p 59. See also: Giddens, Anthony (2001), “Just carry on being new”: *New Statesman*, June 11, Vol. 14, Iss. 660, p 29; Kahlenberg, Richard and Teixeira, Ruy (2001), “A better third way”: *The Nation*, March 5, Vol. 272, Iss. 9, p 15; Petras, James (2000), “The third way: Myth and reality”: *Monthly Review*, March, Vol. 51, Iss. 10, p 19; Ojeili, Chamsy (2002), “Marxism, History, and Intellectuals: Towards and Reconceptualized Transformative Socialism/Marx@2002: Late Marxist Perspectives”: *Thesis Eleven*, February, p 128

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, Eric (2003), “Britain: Left Abandoned? New Labour in Power”: *Parliamentary Affairs*, January 1, Vol. 56, Iss. 1, p 6

<sup>14</sup> Mattson, Kevin (2001), “Remember liberalism?”: *Social Theory and Practice*, July, Vol. 27, Iss. 3, p 519

<sup>15</sup> Goldberg, Chad Alan (2001), “Social citizenship and a reconstructed Tocqueville”: *American Sociological Review*, April, Vol. 66, Iss. 2, p 289; Peck, Jamie (2002), “Political economies of scale: Fast policy, interscalar relations, and neoliberal workfare”: *Economic Geography*, July, Vol. 78, Iss. 3, p 331

<sup>16</sup> Wighton, David (1998), “Blair spells out vision of ‘third way’ politics”: *Financial Times*, September 22, p 13

Blair insists the third way is not attempting merely to 'split the difference' between right and left. "It is about traditional values in a changed world." Blair is unapologetic about the large measure of pragmatism in the way the vision is implemented:

"Some commentators are disconcerted by this insistence on fixed values and goals but pragmatism about means. There are even claims that it is unprincipled. But I believe that a critical dimension of the third way is that policies form values, not vice versa."<sup>17</sup>

Policy will emerge through a process of "permanent revisionism", a continual search for better means to meet agreed goals.

This position echoes that of New Democrats like Bill Clinton. In Germany, Gerhard Schröder has echoed a similar rhetoric. Yet the application of a shared rhetoric does not necessarily imply any shared meaning. As Klein and Rafferty explain, if the appeal of the third way appears to cross borders, it is not necessarily because it reflects the ineluctable logic of a new global order. Rather, its conceptual versatility has allowed divergent political parties in different countries and contexts room to co-ordinate their survival. There can be no doubt – despite the similarities of an American, British, German or New Zealand third way – that its meaning is contingent on the particular historical circumstances of individual nations.

### **The Development of the Third Way**

The challenge for the centre-left has been to assemble a viable electoral position for a party whose traditional power base has been weakened considerably.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) is attempting to re-fashion itself in the face the global shift to the ideological right.<sup>19</sup> However, this can only be achieved within

---

<sup>17</sup> Tony Blair, *The Third Way*, Fabian Society, London, 1998

<sup>18</sup> Fourcade-Gourinchas, Marion and Babb, Sarah (2002), "The rebirth of the liberal creed: Paths to neoliberalism in four countries": *The American Journal of Sociology*. November, Vol. 108, Iss. 3, p 533

<sup>19</sup> In particular, the Federal members Mark Latham and Lindsey Tanner have explicitly explored the third way option. See Botsman, Peter and Latham, Mark (eds.) (2001), *The Enabling State: People Before Bureaucracy*, Annandale: Pluto Press; Tanner, Lindsay (1999), *Open Australia*, Annandale: Pluto Press.

tremendously different historical and ideological contexts.<sup>20</sup>

Blair's own exposition on the third way is enlightening:

"Over the last fifty years two major political projects have dominated Britain and many other Western democracies – neo-liberalism and a highly statist brand of social democracy ... Britain has experienced both in full-blooded form. That is why the term 'third way' has particular relevance to Britain."<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the US has never really experienced a "highly statist brand or social democracy", which necessarily implies that the parameters of a third way discourse are immeasurably different there.

Blair's restructure of the Labour party, and his own particular brand of third way politics can only be understood in the context of Margaret Thatcher's impact on the political topography of the UK.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Thatcher's greatest achievement was the reformation of the public perception of what government could be expected to deliver. Similarly, the reconfiguration of the New Democrats under Clinton is wholly dependent on the neoliberal dominance of Reagan and Bush.

Critics of the third way have argued that it remains contradictory. It simultaneously endorses the dynamism of the market and warns against its tendency to social disintegration.<sup>23</sup> This problem is one that particularly troubles left-of-centre governments. The argument of economists that 'all change requires pain' and that people will only change if they must might hold true for economic theory, but it ignores social and political reality.<sup>24</sup> The social reality is that even in a strong

---

<sup>20</sup> Simply imparting the same third way template will not work across geographical, cultural and social borders. Blair could never go as far Clinton with regard to welfare provision, for example. In much the same way, Schröder cannot treat trade unions in the manner of Clinton or Blair. (See Sims, G. Thomas and Rhoads, Christopher (2003), "Tough Times Humble German Labor": *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, p A9.)

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Klein, Rudolf & Rafferty, Anne-Marie (1999), "Rorschach Politics," in *The American Prospect*, July, p 27

<sup>22</sup> For more background on Thatcher's impact see: Skidelsky, Robert (ed.) (1988), *Thatcherism*, London, Chatto & Windus; Evans, Eric (1997), *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, London, Routledge; Abercrombie, Nicholas, & Warde, Alan (1994), *Contemporary British Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press; Pakulski, Jan, & Waters, Malcolm (1996), *The Death of Class*, London, Sage.

<sup>23</sup> See MacGregor, Susanne (1999), "Welfare, neo-liberalism and new paternalism: Three ways for social policy in late capitalist societies": *Capital & Class*, Spring, p 91 and Petras, James (2000), "The third way: Myth and reality": *Monthly Review*, March, Vol. 51, Iss. 10, p 19.

<sup>24</sup> Labour market deregulation has been particularly difficult for third way leaders, most notably Schroeder.

economy, there will always be those who cannot find and keep a job to support them. The political reality is that those who bear the burden of change tend to be at the lower end of the spectrum and within a liberal democratic system, will either resist or opt out altogether.<sup>25</sup>

Above all of this is the spectre of globalisation and the idea of the powerless state. It is not that governments are powerless, but it is clear that the old levers of public policy are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the global context. With this in mind, in their 1998 discussion paper *About The Third Way*, the DLC have declared that from their own political analysis and policy innovations, there has emerged a progressive alternative to the “worn-out dogmas of traditional liberalism and conservatism.”<sup>26</sup> In a similar fashion, Anthony Giddens speaks of preserving the values and ideals that remain “intrinsic to the good life that is the point of social and economic development to create.”<sup>27</sup> Giddens sees the challenge of a ‘third way’ as making these values count where the “economic programme of socialism has become discredited.”<sup>28</sup>

According to the most prominent of its proponents, third way philosophy seeks to adapt “enduring progressive values to the new challenges of the information age”. In theory, it rests on three core beliefs:

- the idea that government should promote equal opportunity for all while granting special privilege for none;
- an ethic of mutual responsibility that equally rejects the politics of entitlement and the politics of social abandonment; and

---

Reich, Robert (2000), “Is Scrooge a Democrat now?”: *The American Prospect*, June 19–July 3, Vol. 11, Iss. 15, p 96

<sup>25</sup> Reich’s observation has been that it is the left that will bear this reaction more, because their traditional support bases generally want governments to spend more on social services. This is compounded by the fact that international finance markets keep a closer eye on the fiscal rectitude of left-wing parties. This was Clinton’s central dilemma during his first term. The deficit that had grown enormously under the Reagan/Bush administration left Clinton under pressure to prove he could control it. In a similar manner, other third way governments have been (and will increasingly be) under pressure to prove their fiscal prudence.

<sup>26</sup> *Progressive Policy Institute* (1998), “About The Third Way”: Online. June 1: [http://www.ppionline.org/ppi\\_ci.cfm?contentid=895&knlgAreaID=85&subsecid=109](http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?contentid=895&knlgAreaID=85&subsecid=109). June 36, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, p ?

<sup>28</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, p ?



- a new approach to governing that empowers citizens to act for themselves.<sup>29</sup>

From the current literature, the third way approach to economic opportunity and security “stresses technological innovation, competitive enterprise, and education” rather than top-down redistribution or *laissez-faire* economics.<sup>30</sup> On questions of values, it embraces “tolerant traditionalism,” honouring traditional moral and family values while resisting attempts to impose them on others. It favours an:

“Enabling rather than a bureaucratic government, expanding choices for citizens, using market means to achieve public ends and encouraging civic and community institutions to play a larger role in public life. The third way works to build inclusive, multi-ethnic societies based on common allegiance to democratic values.”<sup>31</sup>

Within much of the third way literature, there has been a shift towards almost puritanical self-help liberalism.<sup>32</sup> This can be seen in the adoption by the social democratic parties of the UK, Germany and Australia of the New Democrat approach, which has been about liberal values, but of an individualistic sort – with an odd paternalistic flavour – that encourages people to help themselves. For example, this can be seen in the ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’<sup>33</sup> approach, or indeed the treatment of asylum seekers.<sup>34</sup>

Stripped of its intellectual pretensions, the third way reflects two key beliefs: firstly, there is recognition that the world is undergoing a great transformation.<sup>35</sup> Secondly,

<sup>29</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, p ?

<sup>30</sup> *Progressive Policy Institute* (1998), “About The Third Way”: Online. June 1: [http://www.ppionline.org/ppi\\_ci.cfm?contentid=895&knlgAreaID=85&subsecid=109](http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?contentid=895&knlgAreaID=85&subsecid=109). June 36, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> *Progressive Policy Institute* (1998), “About The Third Way”: Online. June 1: [http://www.ppionline.org/ppi\\_ci.cfm?contentid=895&knlgAreaID=85&subsecid=109](http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?contentid=895&knlgAreaID=85&subsecid=109)

<sup>32</sup> It’s important to note how third way thought has reflected many of the recent trends in communitarian philosophy. The 1980s communitarians like Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer and Robert Bellah all criticised the excessive individualism of classical liberalism as well as highlighting the damage caused by state socialism. Similarly, the 1990s saw a steady flow of current communitarians like Amitai Etzioni, William Galston and Philip Selznick, emphasising the need to balance commitment to the social good along with respect for individual rights, as well as to ensure that strong communities do not oppress.

<sup>33</sup> McKinstry, Leo (2001), “The age of Blairjorism”: *New Statesman*, February 26, Vol. 14, Iss. 645, p 23

<sup>34</sup> Bara, Judith and Budge, Ian (2001), “Party Policy and Ideology: Still New Labour?": *Parliamentary Affairs*, October, Vol. 54, Iss. 4, p 590; Stevens, Christine (2002), “Asylum seeking in Australia”: *The International Migration Review*, Fall, Vol. 36, Iss. 3, p 864;

<sup>35</sup> See Cerny, Philip (1997), “Paradoxes of the competition state: the dynamics of political globalization”, *Government and Opposition*, Spring, Vol. 32, p 251

it accepts that pragmatism should dictate how policy ends are achieved. With this recognition, ideological principles have been replaced with “non-ideologically contaminated decision making.”<sup>36</sup> Such a view reflects the desire to leave ideology behind.

### **The Role of Ideology**

Ideology has played a central role in the political experience of the modern world. Entire histories have been built, shaped and ended due to the constant competition within a diversity of ideologies. To many, ideology represents the opposite of notions like ‘truth,’ ‘science,’ ‘rationality,’ ‘objectivity’ or ‘philosophy,’ preferring dogmatic beliefs beyond critical appraisal.<sup>37</sup> Given this negative conception, it is not surprising that some commentators have advocated – and even declared – ideology redundant.<sup>38</sup>

It remains difficult, however, to overcome ideology when the politics of modernity have been – and continue to be – defined by a variety of ideological traditions. Furthermore, ideologies – whatever form they may take – remain a valuable tool for ordering, defining and evaluating the political landscape and establishing workable political identities onto which we may conduct the business of politics.<sup>39</sup>

Politics has traditionally been arranged on a left-right spectrum since the beginning of universal suffrage. The importance of this class-based spectrum has declined since the 1960s however, with the growing importance of new issues such as gender equality, sexuality and the environment, which upset traditional class divisions between left and right.

There are several other reasons for this decline, including: the decreasing relevance of the Keynesian welfare model; the decline of the nation-state and thus the weight of state intervention; the rise of a more flexible and heterogenous society; and the

---

<sup>36</sup> Cohen, Nick (1999), “Ideologies? Can’t help you there, I’m afraid”: *The Guardian*, May 16

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance the work of pragmatic liberal Richard Rorty or the postmodernist, Jean-François Lyotard.

<sup>38</sup> See Bell, Daniel (1963), *The end of ideology: on the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties*, Glencoe: Free Press; Waxman, Chaim Isaac (ed.) (1969), *The end of ideology debate*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls; Fukuyama, Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press

<sup>39</sup> Heywood, Andrew (1992), *Political Ideologies*, London: Macmillan, p 7

decline of traditional working class solidarity expressed through the trade union movement. The last thirty years in particular have seen a dramatic transformation of politics. Welfare-oriented models, which had previously dominated the political landscape, have been increasingly dismantled and there seems no reversing this trend.

The neoliberal policies of the Thatcher and Reagan governments reversed the welfare consensus. The social and economic change of the 1980s, made individualism the rule and deference to authority became less significant. Yet, in much the same way as pure Keynesianism, free-market liberalism has also proved flawed. A Thatcherite *laissez-faire* model is unworkable as much because of the economic instability it generates amongst the middle class, as is the massive inequalities of wealth and outcomes it produces.<sup>40</sup>

At this point, it may be pertinent to ask whether or not the concepts of 'left' and 'right' are in reality appropriate in a rapidly globalising world, or are they an ideological hangover from the contests of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historian Eric Hobsbawm describes the twentieth century's major struggles<sup>41</sup> as the modern 'wars of religion.' As we have seen, the third way has sought to offer a post-ideological politics that seeks to relegate this historical dissonance to the past.

Italian sociologist Norberto Bobbio has explored the notions of left and right and sees the separation as one between those who believe that equality is attainable and desirable, and inequality is undesirable and those who believe that inequality is inevitable and (for some), desirable.<sup>42</sup> Bobbio contends that the left/right division is

---

<sup>40</sup> Ha-Joon Chang (2003), "Kicking away the ladder: Neoliberals rewrite history": *Monthly Review*, January. Vol. 54, Iss. 8, p 10

<sup>41</sup> The major conflicts of the 20th century have been between fascism and communism/liberalism/social democracy in the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, and the struggle between liberalism/social democracy and communism in the Cold War. It remains to be seen whether or not we may see a 'Western' liberalism versus Islam as the next contest.

<sup>42</sup> Bobbio, Norberto (1996), *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, [trans. By Allan Cameron], Chicago: University of Chicago Press

neither outdated nor irrelevant. He stresses that those political movements that would initially indicate that the left/right axis is dead and has been supplanted by 'new politics' – such as the Green movement – have an increasing tendency to fracture into left and right versions. Thus, Greens may come in 'left' and 'right' forms, even though their initial claims argued that such notions were outdated and undesirable.<sup>43</sup>

For Bobbio, the left/right separation has an 'axiological' significance. Things can only be on the left or right, they cannot be both simultaneously. What is left and what is right may alter, but the distinction does not. The left defines itself against the right and vice versa. Thus, if one claims to be beyond this distinction, one merely floats in space. This has significant implications for the third way movement.

Historically, when one side has tended to dominate the other, both sides have an interest in understating or denying the differences. In 1945, the right was subsumed to a Keynesian agenda and thus sought to co-opt much of that approach. An inversion of this appeared in the 1980s. The dominant side therefore seeks to argue that it has the only feasible program, and the subordinate side seeks to argue that it is not really left or right in order to present a viable opposition.

This can be seen in Clinton's reaction to the diminishing popularity of the Democratic party, Blair's continuation of John Smith's reforms of the British Labour party after successive electoral defeats. Similarly, Gerhard Schröder's attempts to modernise the German SPD and the ALP's effort under Kim Beazley to narrow the differences between left and right demonstrates this propensity.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> This is evidenced in Australia, where one may vote for the Greens (left) or Liberals for Forests (right). Similarly, France has two Green parties that reflect both ends of the spectrum. Smith, Pete, "Do you know your left from your right?": Online. *Chartist*. Available:

[http://www.chartist.org.uk/articles/labourmove/July\\_3rdway.html](http://www.chartist.org.uk/articles/labourmove/July_3rdway.html). (22/4/03)

<sup>44</sup> Sackman, Adrian (1996), "The learning curve towards New Labour: Neil Kinnock's corporate party 1983–92": *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 30, Iss. 10/11, p 147; Parnell, Martin Francis (1999), "Globalization, "organized capitalism" and German labour": *European Business Review*, Vol. 99, Iss. 5, p 300; Claven, Jim (2000), *The Centre is Mine: Tony Blair, New Labour and the Future of Electoral Politics*, Annandale: Pluto Press, p 129–146

## What Does The Third Way Look Like?

Historically, we have seen, those on the Right have wanted to shrink the state. Social democrats generally seek to expand it. Giddens argues that the third way intends to reconstruct it.<sup>45</sup> Like Giddens, Blair locates the third way both as the child of, as well as the alternative *to*, traditional democratic socialism. The third way sets out a centrist vision in which social solidarity complements, rather than confronts, the market.

For Giddens, social democracy can prosper on both a practical and ideological level only if social democrats are prepared to revise their pre-existing views more thoroughly than most have done before. This is the task of a third way as he understands it. Giddens has been searching for a new politics that would transcend the traditional left-right axis. This can be seen as a continuing theme in his 1994 book, *Beyond Left and Right*, right through to *The Third Way* (1998), *The Third Way and its Critics* (2000) and *The Global Third Way Debate* (2001).

The term itself – ‘third way’ – suggests no specific destination, nor any definite ideology. It is neither the way of capitalism, nor of socialism, yet its supporters tell us that that there is no alternative to it. Central to the rhetoric of leaders like Blair and Clinton is the understanding that if one is not part of the third way, one is not really modern. Consequently, the term brings with it a sense of inclusiveness but, intellectually, it also appears narrow and conveys a sense of closure.

What this has meant in practice has been a clear drift towards the political centre by the nominally ‘Left’ parties. This should not mean, advocates of the third way claim, a compromise in the middle of more clear-cut alternatives. On the contrary, the new middle is described as the “active middle” or “radical centre.”<sup>46</sup>

In his first major policy speech after winning re-election in 1996, Bill Clinton vowed to “forge a coalition of the centre.” He went on to call for “a vital American centre

---

<sup>45</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p 65

<sup>46</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p ?

where there is cooperation across lines of party and philosophy.”<sup>47</sup> New Labour, under Tony Blair has similarly called for cross party cooperation in the UK, located in the ‘radical centre.’

For the purpose of this discussion, ‘New’ Labour in the UK is perhaps the most obvious and interesting example. New Labour is as much as anything a socio-political coalition which seeks to consolidate a solid centre-ground socially, economically, politically and (perhaps) culturally – by excluding what it sees as both the radical left and its natural constituencies and the radical right and its natural constituencies.

To Giddens, this is simply a rational and creative response to a changing world. Indeed, the majority of third way-ers argue that the spectrum of ‘left, right and things in between’ is redundant.<sup>48</sup> For Giddens, policy and politics cannot be seen in those terms, rather, creative solutions must be found to problems as they emerge, without being bound by categories as antiquated as ‘left, right and centre.’

For Blair, “what matters is outcomes, what matters is what works.”<sup>49</sup> This phrase is so prevalent within new Labour that pragmatism has been elevated virtually to the status of a philosophy. Such a course may be the result of a desire for ‘consensus’, which – as Trevor Smith noted in his reflection on the 1960s – “whether real or imagined, is ultimately prejudicial to democracy whose main foundation is organised conflict.”<sup>50</sup>

If the ideological spectrum that defined the politics of the twentieth century is indeed behind us, perhaps history (ideologically, at least) has come to an end with the worldwide reach of globalised free market capitalism. Francis Fukuyama has proposed that one specific ideology has in fact triumphed. His premise is quite

---

<sup>47</sup> Klein, Joe (2002), *The Natural*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, p ?

<sup>48</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p ?

<sup>49</sup> Blair, Tony (2000), *Speech to Labour Local Governance Conference*, Blackpool, February 6

<sup>50</sup> Smith, Trevor (1972), *Anti-politics*, London, C. Knight for the Acton Society Trust, p 20

simple; after years of evolution, revolution and war, the “forces of freedom have finally defeated those of dictatorship.” The combination of market economics and representative democracy is the best we can do.<sup>51</sup> However, Fukuyama isn’t under the illusion that the end of history will resemble some sort of utopian ideal. In fact, he sees it as benign, when ideological struggles that called for daring, courage, and imagination will be replaced by the endless solving of technical problems. If this position is correct, all that remains is the challenge to manage a system over which governments have little control.

In this environment, ideology is irrelevant and becomes the refuge for those who refuse to face up to the realities of the modern world. Yet a world without politics, where the focus group replaces democratic consultation and political activists are viewed as part of the problem rather than the solution, is problematic.

There are unmistakable trends that see the social and political prevalence of the functional over the structural. There is a prevalence today of movements which overwhelmingly appear as single-issue. Traditionally, politics based itself in ideology and interests have one rational propensity – they are more or less predictable. However, the postmodern political condition has changed all that. Political parties have changed and now resemble mere economic agencies, elections now seem to more and more depend on economic and administrative issues.<sup>52</sup>

Where are we if we have reached the “end of ideology,” as Blair has proposed? That, it seems, is unclear. Lack of clarity is something intrinsic to the third way thus far. As it dismisses the relevance of most ‘old-style dichotomies’ which offer a degree of clarity in political life, the third way is firmly rooted in the idea of ‘fuzzy edges.’

---

<sup>51</sup> Fukuyama, Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press

<sup>52</sup> Heller, Agnes and Feher, Fereenc (1988), *The postmodern political condition*, Cambridge: Polity, p 3

We are told that New Labour wants people to be less selfish, but claims to have no problem with anyone growing “filthy rich”.<sup>53</sup> They promote equality, but don’t want to restrict choice. Indeed, some want the dynamic market of the US, but also the social cohesion of Western Europe. Perhaps the most surprising thing is that proponents of the third way want the public to believe that all of these desires can be pursued without clashing with each other.<sup>54</sup>

New Labour minister Jack Straw has said people need a “framework of belief,” and it is the role of government to decipher this framework so that there is “some template for the scores of individual decisions which they have to make every day.”<sup>55</sup> Yet it is hard to imagine how any template could hope to sort out such manifold goals and desires. To its detractors, such diversity reveals the third way’s fundamental hollowness.

Fundamental to this criticism has been the embrace of former Clinton advisor Dick Morris’ marketing strategy of ‘triangulation’. In short, triangulation essentially meant the re-positioning of Clinton both in between, and above, both his own Democratic party and the Republicans in Congress. That is, Clinton sat at the apex of a political triangle.

From the vantage point of the political centre, Morris argued, Clinton would be in a position to appropriate the most saleable policies from both sides, as well as embrace issues lying outside traditional partisan politics and presidential concern. In this respect, Clinton would then appear more moderate and reasonable than either the Republicans or more traditional Democrats.

To many critics, Morris’s techniques betray the true heart of the third way, which – in its desire to move ‘beyond’ ideology – echoes the fusion of a managerialist agenda,

---

<sup>53</sup> Minogue, Kenneth (1999), “Modernizing the Brits”: *The American Spectator*, January, Vol. 32, Iss. 1, p 56

<sup>54</sup> *The Economist* (1998), “Goldilocks politics,” December 19, p 73



marketing culture and pragmatism as the guiding force. The 'Americanisation' of politics, much evidenced in those parties seeking a third way route is clear. We have seen how the public is increasingly offered a strong, almost presidential leadership type. Indeed, a synthesis of organisational control of party and 'improved' media relations have seen third way parties like the New Democrats, under Clinton in 1996, 'New' Labour and the German SDP achieve electoral victories.

What this has encouraged, however, is a further withdrawal of democracy from within the party structures themselves. For leaders to be democratic rather than oligarchic, they must be accountable from below through an internally democratic political organisation, as well as through elections. This is not the case within the developing third way parties of the UK, Germany and Australia as their leaders shift further away from broad based party participation into narrower focus-group oriented policy planning.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas Mayer identifies within New Labour a "very radical type of 'Clintonisation of political communication' within the "strategic apex" of the Labour party, which has:

"Subordinated everything else including the party's discourse, the role of the party and even the role of the parliamentary party ... to the rule of the perceived necessities of successful media communication of the party leader's image and his symbolic project ...

The image of the leader hero, the selection of the issues and the design of the way they are presented to the media, the disciplining of the party and all its actors beneath the strategic apex have not only created a new way to conduct politics but also a new type of relation between the social democratic party, its members, its leadership and its relationship with society as a whole. Therefore, it cannot be seen as a change in marketing and communication only. It is rather a substantially new type – defining the role of the party in the process of formulating and implementing policies. It is basically nothing less than a new type of media democracy."<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> *The Economist* (1998), "Goldilocks politics," December 19, p 73

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, Joy (2000), "Rethinking Democracy": Online. *Chartist Magazine*. January/February. Available: [www.chartistmagazine.freemove.co.uk/jan\\_johnson.html](http://www.chartistmagazine.freemove.co.uk/jan_johnson.html). (2/4/03)

<sup>57</sup> Mayer, Thomas (2000), *The third way: Some Crossroads*: Forum: Scholars for European Social Democracy, Working Papers 1, p 4

Anthony Barnett labels this new type 'partyless democracy',<sup>58</sup> a media-saturated democracy where part of its credibility is attained in the way leaders can be known in an apparently personal way by a broad spectrum of society.

Democracy's dilemma is that the more people feel like they have no influence, the less they participate in the electoral process, and the less influence they have. When upper-income Americans provide a disproportionate share of the campaign contributions and votes, democracy ceases to be rule by the people, but rule by the people with the most money. If the trend continues, all that will be left is a democracy in name only.

Third way supporters see it markedly differently. Certain goals may be in tension, even incompatible, but they happen to be what the voters – who display increasingly less of an appreciation for ideology – want. In striving to deliver what their market research tells them, policy-makers are released from the need to locate every decision on a left-right spectrum, or inside any overarching ideological framework.<sup>59</sup>

For some then, the third way approach is decidedly postmodern in that it is claimed as an attempt to move *beyond* left or right, attempting to deal with economic, social and political challenges as they arrive, rather than advocate a set of policies or goals first.

These developments include the notion that left and right have lost their importance; that globalisation is inevitable; and that problems have to be dealt not by policies informed with metanarratives, but "sound common sense effectively applied".<sup>60</sup> Such a position has coincided with the rise of the 'professional' politician, and more

---

<sup>58</sup> Barnett, Anthony (2000), "Corporate populism and partyless democracy," in *New Left Review*, May/June, p 80

<sup>59</sup> See Morris, Dick (1999), *Behind the Oval Office: getting reelected against all odds*, Los Angeles: Renaissance Books; Morris, Dick (1999), *The new prince: Machiavelli updated for the twenty-first century*, Los Angeles: Renaissance Books.

<sup>60</sup> See Byers, Stephen (1999), "Stephen Byers TUC speech": *The Guardian*, September 13

‘professionalised’ political parties. For example, in the UK, the Labour party under Tony Blair has ‘modernised,’ replacing the unwieldy and union dominated bureaucracy of old power structures with a streamlined, centralised and wholly professionalised system of administration.<sup>61</sup>

This has not resulted in the expansive, inclusive, de-centralised, participatory and member-led form of organisation that Giddens likes to invoke. Rather, one has seen a further disenfranchisement of political engagement where there are no longer members, only ‘subscribers.’

It is clear that the British Labour party needed to reinvent itself in the wake of four successive electoral defeats. After exorcising the electorally damaging reputation as the party of tax and spend and winning power in 1997, New Labour has been forced into a challenge: what actually defines ‘New’ Labour? This is where the third way has been crucial. To its traditional supporters it offers the rhetoric of idealism, to the electorally important new supporters, it offers pragmatism. Blair assures his audience that he stands for “insistence on fixed values and goals, but pragmatism about means.”<sup>62</sup>

Blair claims his ‘mission’ is to:

“Promote and reconcile the four values which are essential to a just society which maximises the freedom and potential of all our people – equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility, and community.”<sup>63</sup>

This catalogue is revealing in that it marks a significant shift in the presentation and interpretation of centre-left values. The state should no longer play a redistributive role, rather it acts as an ‘investment state.’ Equality of opportunity (an unclear

---

<sup>61</sup> See Brivati, Brian and Bale, Tim (eds.) (1997), *New Labour in Power*, London: Routledge; Claven, Jim (2000), *The Centre is Mine: Tony Blair, New Labour and the Future of Electoral Politics*, Annandale: Pluto Press; Rawnsley, Andrew (2000), *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour*, London: Penguin

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Jacobs, Michael (2001), “Don’t just act, talk!”, *New Statesman*, Jul 2, Vol. 14, Iss. 663, p 29

<sup>63</sup> Tony Blair, *The Third Way*, Fabian Society, London, 1998, p 2

proposition), replaces equality of income or outcomes as an explicit aim of policy.<sup>64</sup> It also redefines the relationship between the state and its citizens. Rights now carry responsibilities, and the function of government becomes to promote community and voluntary activities. Civic co-operation thus replaces state collectivism.<sup>65</sup>

Blair lays his approach out as 'permanent revisionism.'<sup>66</sup> Equally, the slogan that shapes New Labour's policy is "what counts is what works", almost a deification of pragmatism.<sup>67</sup> In effect, Blair accepts most of the Thatcher legacy, the most visible of which is the faith in market forces, the promotion of competition, and flexible labour markets as "necessary acts of modernisation."<sup>68</sup>

This in turn reflects the New Democrat view that sees government as something other than a provider of services, more an "enabler and catalyst ... a partner with the private sector and community groups."<sup>69</sup> Clinton required government to be more fiscally disciplined and less bureaucratic. Like Thatcher, he argued that it should not attempt to solve all society's problems, rather it should create the conditions in which people are able to solve their own. Similarly, Blair regularly accuses the 'Old Left' of supporting indiscriminate and ineffective public spending, and argues that the third way focuses its efforts on making sure that the spending produces more desirable results. He also advocates government forging closer links to private enterprise.<sup>70</sup> In brief, Clinton and Blair's approach is to make government smaller and cleverer, fiscally sound and friendlier to business.

---

<sup>64</sup> Honderich, Ted (1999), "Yes, Tony's talking that equality talk": *The Guardian*, October 1, p 20

<sup>65</sup> Klein, Rudolf & Rafferty, Anne-Marie (1999), "Rorschach Politics," in *The American Prospect*, July, p 27

<sup>66</sup> This evokes Trotsky's notion of 'permanent revolution' and betrays the socialist roots of Blair, and many of his speechwriters.

<sup>67</sup> Blair, Tony (1998), "Tough on red tape: Tony Blair on New Labour's approach to regulation and its importance for the European Union": *Financial Times*, March 9, p 18

<sup>68</sup> Milne, Seumus (1998), "Closet reformism in the UK": *Le Monde diplomatique*, December

<sup>69</sup> *The Economist* (1998), "Goldilocks politics," December 19, p 73

<sup>70</sup> Blair, Tony (2001), "Labor party's agenda for prosperity": *Presidents & Prime Ministers*, September/October, Vol. 10, Iss. 5, p 11

Blair has sought to mobilise support across the political spectrum within the UK.<sup>71</sup>

The third way seeks to be attractive to as many groups as possible: in the suburbs as well as the inner cities; the rich as well as the poor; old as well as the young;

Christians and non-Christians; hunters as well as animal-rights activists. This marks a major departure from the norms of post-war British majoritarian democracy.

Indeed (in much the same way Clinton rose 'above' the Democratic party), no post-war Prime Minister has sought to move beyond party as Blair has.<sup>72</sup>

In all this there is never any notion that a political party is some kind of common enterprise or joint endeavour. Similarly, one may ask: how removed from the realities of politics on the ground are the people who are paid to be 'experts'? People who – as Weber once said – live “off politics” not for politics.<sup>73</sup>

Such a restructure surely threatens the integrity of a 'social-democratic' party. In a heavily centralised bureaucracy, where everything is decided 'top-down,' there appears little room for realistic criticism. At its most extreme one can imagine a party without members (aside from corporate sponsors), and no policies, aside from those defined by the latest focus groups. Furthermore, its leaders are people who have never had jobs outside the world of politics and political entourages.

### **The Effect of Managerialism**

Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, when coupled with the increasing consequences of economic and cultural globalisation has encouraged governments into mirroring the technocrat, asking only 'how' and not 'why'. One can see this in the shift away from the broader philosophical and theoretical inquiring associated with traditionally understood political philosophy – which should bring with it a richer

---

<sup>71</sup> The role of polling and focus groups has been crucial in this. Dick Morris in particular stressed the importance of finding out what would most appeal to swinging voters.

<sup>72</sup> Hennessy, Peter (2000), *The Prime Minister: The Office and its Holders Since 1845*, London: Penguin, p 476–538

<sup>73</sup> See Weber, Max (1947), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, (trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons), New York: Free Press of Glencoe

appreciation of history and a deeper regard for questioning – towards a narrower ‘public policy’ approach focused on vocational skills, managerial techniques and fixed interpretations of the world we live in. The implications for politics, government, management and broader issues like global capital or equality are profound.

In practice, it is clear that pragmatism and policy reform at the micro level, rather than theorising at the macro level dominates the third way agenda. The ethos of the new managers has become the new common sense of politics itself (Clinton/Blair’s ‘modern’ approach). Managerialism has become the new organising philosophy of governance and has served to justify the restructuring and modernising of a range of institutions.

Anthony Barnett has described this development as ‘corporate populism,’ which has succeeded ‘consensus politics’ and ‘conviction politics’ in the UK and is distinguished by the way Downing Street “manages the party and the civil service as if they were parts of a giant company,” while treating voters as “customers.”<sup>74</sup> New Labour has used modern business management techniques to ‘deliver’ in government, with Blair on a number of occasions comparing himself to a chief executive.<sup>75</sup> In devising fixed goals, policy delivery, insisting on established outcomes and aspiring to joined-up administration, this is clearly a shift away from a pluralist vision of the state. Within this new understanding then, achievements must be effectively ‘sold’ or ‘marketed’ to the populace. Indeed, the way a policy is projected becomes a significant component of policy itself.

This new development can be seen in New Labour’s breaking of the civil service tradition of issuing non-partisan press releases about new policy initiatives.<sup>76</sup> Just as no business restricts its market advance to a limited number, New Labour seeks

---

<sup>74</sup> Barnett, Anthony (2000), “Corporate populism and partyless democracy”: *New Left Review*, May/June, p 80

<sup>75</sup> Rawnsley, Andrew (2000), *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour*, London: Penguin, p 17

universal popularity and 'brand loyalty' in the attempt to appeal to everybody. For Barnett, this mix of 'can-do pragmatism' and 'customer satisfaction' leads to a trivialising of democracy and a distrust of real participation and devolution of power. 'Corporate populism' differs from constitutional democracy in its attempts to 'manage' social and political change, rather than devolve any real political power and plan to shape those changes as they happen.

In a similar vein, Wendy Wheeler has questioned the notion of 'managerialism as politics'. Wheeler argues that in preferencing means rather than ends, denying a 'shared moral language' in favour of pragmatic utilitarianism, and the reduction of human beings to mechanical functionaries, the third way as practice so far has resulted in a "narrowed and reductive ... commodified culture." In this state, "managerial choice is dictated by what is effective – normally in terms of material profit or ease."<sup>77</sup>

From this, the ethical values of 'mutuality,' 'reciprocity,' 'responsibility,' and 'obligation' that might provide the basis for the renewal of a truly modern polity, become anathema or too compromised by 'market realities' to ever be undertaken. In this context, it may be argued that the new managerialism articulates a kind of flawed neo-liberal humanism. The language of 'empowerment,' 'inclusion' and 'performance incentives' reveal the underlying themes of the third way's socio-economic agenda – like 'lifelong learning' – that are based on the development of human and social capital.

Blair distances himself from a Thatcherite agenda by denouncing it as ideological dogmatism with a "visceral antipathy" to the public sector and its failure to encourage civil society.<sup>78</sup> New Labour thus views markets as tools of – rather than the driving force of – policy. 'Equality of outcomes' will come, it is claimed, only

---

<sup>76</sup> Barnett, Anthony (2000), "Corporate populism and partyless democracy": *New Left Review*, May/June, p 80

<sup>77</sup> Wheeler, Wendy (2000), *A New Modernity*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

with a broad investment in human and social capital.

However, this is undermined by the limitations of the broader neo-liberal outlook, where “getting more for less” and “controlling” outcomes is paramount. This not only limits democracy as Barnett describes, or devalues human activity as Wheeler suggests, but it also, when articulated at the level of governance, threatens to replace politics itself.

### **The Third Way Style and its Consequences**

The leadership style of third way leaders is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the different modes of its application. Blair, for example, follows Giddens in stressing key words like ‘justice,’ ‘opportunity’ and ‘community.’<sup>79</sup> Each term is calculated to reassure one group of supporters without distressing another. As Klein and Rafferty explain: ‘justice’ appeases traditional supporters; ‘opportunity’ appeals to many upwardly mobile working and middle-class voters whose support was vital in keeping the Conservative party in power for 18 years; ‘community’ should offend very few, and may even appeal to disenchanted Tory supporters who fear rising crime and the increasing breakdown of ‘traditional’ families.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, buzzwords like ‘new,’ ‘dynamic,’ and ‘modern’ litter the speeches, articles and releases of all identifiable third way parties. Such an approach enables proponents of the third way to embody and describe the movement as essentially progressive and modern.<sup>81</sup> Language has long been an important consideration of political analysis. This has become even more significant over the last 30 years because of the changes that have taken place in politics and government. Perhaps the most substantial shift is an altered relationship between politics, government and mass media – a new synthesis that means that many significant political events are

---

<sup>78</sup> Klein, Rudolf & Rafferty, Anne-Marie (1999), “Rorschach Politics”: in *The American Prospect*, July, p 27

<sup>79</sup> Giddens, Anthony (2000), *The Third Way and its Critics*, Cambridge: Polity, p 89

<sup>80</sup> Klein, Rudolf & Rafferty, Anne-Marie (1999), “Rorschach Politics”: in *The American Prospect*, July, p 27

<sup>81</sup> Norman Fairclough explores the rhetoric of New Labour in greater depth in his book *New Labour, New Language* (2000). He identifies the key words of New Labour, that is, the words that occur most frequently in speeches and press releases. The strongest words on this basis are: we; Britain; welfare; partnership; new; schools; people; crime; reform; deliver; promote; business; deal; tough; and young.



now in fact media events.<sup>82</sup>

Norman Fairclough labels this shift the 'mediatisation' of politics and government. One consequence of such a mediatisation is the transformation of political leaders into media personalities. Leaders have of course always sought to build a 'cult of personality' or to personify a movement or idea. Similarly, the deployment of mass media techniques to strengthen this aim is itself not new.<sup>83</sup>

Within the modern scene, the communicative style or rhetoric of leaders is understood to be a crucial factor in political success or failure. Inside the British Labour party, this is even more acutely accepted, given the failure of both Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock in the course of the 1980s.

Communicative style in this respect is a matter of language in the broadest sense – this includes not only verbal language (words) – but also the many other elements of the varied performance that forms political style. These elements include gestures, facial expressions, posture, movements, attire and hairstyles.<sup>84</sup> The successful leader's communicative style is not simply what makes him or her appealing in a general way alone, it carries with it certain values that have the potential to strengthen the political 'message.'

As we have already seen, New Labour makes the bold claim to offer 'new politics.' Indeed there exists no such party as 'New Labour', there exists a Labour party of the UK, yet through constant repetition of the term, it becomes the automatic response to add the prefix when referring to the party post-Tony Blair.<sup>85</sup> According to Blair:

---

<sup>82</sup> Fairclough, Norman (2000), "Language, politics and government": *The Guardian*, March 2

<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the clearest expression of this approach has been by Adolf Hitler, who effectively predicted current political techniques in 1925. See Hitler, Adolf (1992), *Mein Kampf*, [trans. Ralph Manheim], London, Pimlico, pp 164-169

<sup>84</sup> See Fairclough, Norman (2000), *New Labour, New Language*, London, Routledge, p 103

<sup>85</sup> Draper, Derek (2000), "Drop the new from new labour": *The Spectator*, September 23, Vol. 285, Iss. 8981, p 14

“Ideas need labels if they are to become popular and widely understood. The ‘third way’ is to my mind the best label for the new politics which the progressive centre-left is forging in Britain and beyond.”<sup>86</sup>

Fairclough pays particular attention to this statement. There are two things that stand out: first, the third way is being ‘forged;’ second, ‘forging’ it is associated with making it “popular and widely understood.” The third way does not, then, come ready formed. Quite the contrary, New Labour politicians are constantly forming and formulating it. The third way is thus constantly being talked into being. This is then a process that may never be complete, as circumstances are ever changing. Much of this reformulation is being undertaken in public.

With this, New Labour’s ‘reinvention of government’ is in part a matter of a new form of control from the centre based upon business corporation models, including promotional means for managing consent. For Fairclough, this not only includes ‘government by media spin,’ but also what Blair calls ‘experiments in democracy’ such as focus groups and citizen’s juries, which (it is claimed) enables government to develop its policies in a way that absorbs some public opinion from the very beginning. However, the centralised administration of the political communication of New Labour in government would seem to be in conflict with the commitment to “devolving power and making the government more open and responsive.”<sup>87</sup>

Despite the numerous attempts of New Labour to explain the third way, many remain to be convinced. Blair has blamed this upon ‘the forces of cynicism.’<sup>88</sup> Why? Rawnsley emphasises that Blair, more than any other Prime Minister, has committed so much time to explaining his purpose. New Labour has offered a continual commentary on its own administration throughout its time in power, yet the third way remains as elusive as it ever has been to much of the electorate. There can be no

---

<sup>86</sup> Fairclough, Norman (2000), “Language, politics and government”: *The Guardian*, March 2

<sup>87</sup> See Giddens, Anthony (1998), *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Giddens, Anthony (2000), *The Third Way and its Critics*, Cambridge: Polity Press

<sup>88</sup> BBC (2001), “Policy wonkers’ playtime”: Online. *BBC News*, available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/uk\\_politics/2001/conferences\\_2001/labour/1573057.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/uk_politics/2001/conferences_2001/labour/1573057.stm). (22/7/03)

doubting that crucial to this is an unending over-communication of its message.<sup>89</sup>

The third way is then an incomplete exercise. It is a rhetoric in search of meaning, concepts that need more precise definition and political expediency in need of intellectual and moral justification. The outcome of this is a realisation both of the technocratic objectives of 'neutrality' and 'efficiency' and of the meritocratic ideal that all advancement is through individual effort and motivation. What this potentially means, is that 'conflict' and 'struggle' over imbalances of power and structural inequalities and those between competing ideologies – the very essence of politics – are sidelined in the belief that everything can be reduced to "what works best."

The consequences for politics are inevitably short-term and populist. There is a clear difference between political pluralism and technocracy. A genuine pluralist culture opens up, but cannot possibly control all outcomes, whereas the technocrat seeks to control outcomes (but within a very limited framework).

In a similar fashion, the rise of the technocrat – which describes equally well the modern politician as well as the modern manager – has been at the expense of the intellectual. Managers seek the populist centre, while intellectuals (often against the tide) should demand a more critical and independent engagement. To put it simply: managers are do'ers, driven by results; intellectuals should be making sure whether the right questions are being asked.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Rawnsley illustrates this point by outlining New Labour's first term in power, granting the government an above average score. Yet continual rhetorical overstatement – "verbal diarrhoea," to use his term – undermines the overall project. At various times Blair has claimed his ambition to create: 'The Decent Society,' 'An Age of Achievement,' 'The Giving Age,' 'The Radical Century,' a 'Twenty-first Century model nation,' a "Beacon to the world," and the 'Young Country.' The composition of the third way agenda has thus been clouded in a fog of rhetorical smog. Indeed, many of the government's real achievements are lost in the endless emission of initiatives, announcements, speeches, articles and roadshows. (See Rawnsley, Andrew (2000), "As you spin, so shall you reap" in *The Observer*, Sunday, May 14.) A good example of this was found at his first party conference as Labour leader, where Blair announced: "Let us say what we mean, and mean what we say. Stop saying what we mean, and start saying what we do mean, what we stand by, what we stand for." (in Cohen, Nick (2000), *Cruel Britannia*, London: Verso, p 27.)

<sup>90</sup> Of course, this notion itself is being threatened with the increasing corporatisation of higher education (itself a policy of many third way exponents).

The managerialist agenda eventually comes down to a belief that what is good is what works and has a natural tendency towards a 'science' of public administration and governance, its roots in the idea that very little can actually be done. If elections are little more than exercises in choosing between sets of people who claim to manage the economy best, then this is an argument that goes nowhere. Citizens cannot be enthused by an argument between two sets of managers. What this inevitably tells people is that politics can make only a marginal difference in their lives.

### **Is The Third Way Postmodern?**

At this point, one feels obliged to ask: does our current understanding of a third way reflect a distinctly modern phenomenon, or is it post-modern? If so, can a 'postmodern' third way have any ideological foundation or does it offer a post-ideological approach to politics?

Although Giddens dislikes the term 'postmodern,' he, like Habermas, accepts the notion of 'late modernity' and does not disagree with the characteristics of recent social interactions which some theorists label 'postmodern.'<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the third way's embrace of pragmatism over ideology reflects Lyotard's notion of a 'postmodern condition,' marked by the death of the *metanarrative*.

Postmodernism is a (non-?) ideology that depends crucially on the denial of history. Sometimes this is explicitly theorised as an embrace of discontinuity. It can be seen as a celebration of the fragmentation of time, space and historical experience that liberates us from the 'dead hand of master narratives.'<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> This includes scepticism towards metanarratives, heightened superficiality, bland consumerism and so on.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques, Martin (1993), "The end of politics: a victim of outdated ideologies and lackluster leaders": *World Press Review*, November, p 23

Characteristic of this new condition is the 'recycling of theories.'<sup>93</sup> In our incessant quest for some foundation we lift isolated and valued efforts of the past out of their context and leave the old framework behind. Postmodernity is in every respect parasitic on modernity; it lives and feeds on its dilemmas and achievements.

In this sense then, the third way as expressed by Giddens and other third way thinkers rejects the metanarratives of both Marx and Smith, yet does not deny using either's work in part. The notion of the third way as 'post-' or beyond politics as we have historically understood it is an exciting one. The New Labour think-tank *Demos* has in the last few years declared: the 'end of politics;' the 'end of unemployment;' the 'end of social democracy;' the 'end of 200 years of industrial society;' the end of 'traditional definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman;' and the end of 'class based left-right politics.'<sup>94</sup> No doubt a key for Blair in this has been the emphasis on 'modernisation'.

Marshall Berman invokes Marx's vision of a world in which "all that is solid melts into air," in order to express the experience of perpetual disintegration and accompanying realignment of politics.<sup>95</sup> Thus, large-scale redemptive politics of any kind are ruled impossible and it would seem 'big' ideology is dead. Also, the self-limitation to the present as our one and only existence excludes attempts at absolute transcendence of modernity. In this world, Bewes suggests in *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, politicians must put a premium on 'sincerity,' even if all they are doing is sincerely promising to do little.<sup>96</sup>

Therefore, a devotion to a pragmatic approach ("what counts is what works": Blair) echoes Lyotard's notion of *petits recits*.<sup>97</sup> Renouncing any claim to universality, such

---

<sup>93</sup> Heller, Agnes and Feher, Ferec (1988), *The postmodern political condition*, Cambridge: Polity, p 4

<sup>94</sup> Cohen, Nick (2000), *Cruel Britannia*, London: Verso, p 33

<sup>95</sup> Berman, Marshall (1982), *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity*, New York: Simon and Schuster

<sup>96</sup> Cohen, Nick (2000), *Cruel Britannia*, London: Verso, p 28

<sup>97</sup> "little narratives"

forms of knowledge may be successful in a pragmatic process of give and take. As we have seen, for someone like Tony Blair, governing is about management, not ideology. It is not about great issues of principle, but about what works.

Given this, how much can we read into the notion of the third way as representative of a postmodern (or post-ideological) approach? There is unquestionably vagueness about the term that has been no doubt very helpful to its practitioners. Indeed, the ability to promote an almost mythical midpoint between (or beyond) left and right without being clear on specifics is fundamental.

In many ways, the third way does not resemble an ideology at all. As with Clinton, triangulation seeks to position the 'third way' above the centre of the political spectrum so that it occupies the 'post-ideological' centre, a path allegedly between – and ahead of – the Old Left and the New Right. If one accepts this, the third way represents the triumph of political pragmatism over theory, or at heart reveals a postmodern approach to politics with the intention firmly focused on winning elections, but seemingly little else.

All of this reveals a disturbing trend. Politics cannot flourish if voters are not offered some sort of clarity of goals. It can be said that voters become cynical when politicians make impossible promises and then fail to achieve them. Yet surely citizens become more cynical when promises are over-technical and qualified almost out of existence.

Heller and Faher remain positive about a postmodern approach to politics. The abandonment of the myth of foundations “does not lead to nihilism, just as uncertainty as to how an enemy will attack does not lead to passivity. It leads, rather, to a proliferation of discursive interventions and arguments that are necessary, because there is no extra-discursive reality that discourse might simply reflect.”<sup>98</sup> It is

---

<sup>98</sup> Laclau, Ernesto (1993), “Politics and the Limits of Modernity”: from Docherty, Thomas (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, New York: Harvester, p 79

further possible that the dissolution of modernity, the dissolution of the myth of the grand narrative, further radicalises the possibilities of freedom offered by ideologies since the Enlightenment.

### **The Implications?**

The shift in campaign methods from 1980s on – initially in the US, and then in the UK – with its emphasis on attack advertising, packaged campaign slogans and candidates who shun direct contact with voters, have been embraced by third way leaders. Significantly, the third way electoral experiences outside the US have borrowed Clinton's campaign strategies. Indeed, the association moves beyond electoral strategies – they are central to the political approach in view of policy. The obvious outcome of this is a fall in participation. As the American political parties have endeavoured to close the gap between them, voters have simply opted out of the system to the point that over 50 percent registered do not bother to turn out.<sup>99</sup> The Keystone Research Center noted in a 1999 report on democracy in the US, "57 percent of middle and low-income Americans agreed with the statement: 'People like me do not have any say about what the government does.' Only 25 percent of Americans held this view in the 1960s."<sup>100</sup>

The forces propelling voter retreat from the US public square are numerous. Critics of the money-driven campaign system argue that voters believe it is money, rather than some notion of representation, that drives elected representatives. There has been a similar trend in the UK, despite attempts to reinvigorate political activity (directly elected mayors, polling stations open for several days, wider postal voting).

---

<sup>99</sup> This figure becomes starker upon closer inspection. Among the eligible voter population, 76 percent of those with family incomes above US\$75,000 voted in 1996. Only 63 percent of those with family incomes ranging from US\$35,000 to US\$49,999 and 57 percent of those in the US\$25,000 to US\$34,999 range voted, according to the Census Bureau. Among those with family incomes under US\$10,000, just 38 percent voted. The 2000 election produced similar figures, and produced a disputed outcome that has only served to further disenfranchise even more from representative politics.

<sup>100</sup> Wial, Howard (1999), "Democracy in Pennsylvania": Online. *The Keystone Research Center*. Available: <http://www.keystoneresearch.org/pdf/democracy.pdf>. (20/3/03)

In general elections, turnout has dropped consistently since 1992.<sup>101</sup>

Obviously, to blame all of this on the ideological vacuum of mainstream politics prompted by the nominally Left parties' drift towards the centre is tempting, but simplistic. However, even if the 'New Democrats' or 'New Labour' are not responsible for this situation, low turnouts are most certainly their problem.

The problem has not been Labour voters switching sides, but Labour voters opting not to vote at all. New Labour has operated on the calculated assumption that as it shifted for votes on the right and centre, there would always be a hard core of Labour supporters who would vote for it come what may, because politically they had nowhere else to go. What it didn't bargain on was their supporters not voting at all. This trend is reflected in the US and the falling Democrat vote.

Of course, a healthy democracy is not founded alone on the number of people who vote, rather the choices they have when they do. In this light, the US and UK trend is disturbing, as it indicates that many people are increasingly failing to see democratic politics as a continuing source of inspiration and idealism. Indeed, it can be said that the 'market-research' approach logic of modern politics destroys the sphere of public debate. Eric Hobsbawn has written in defence of his own (often disparaged) choice of state-socialism:

"I know very well that the cause that I embraced has proved not to work. Perhaps I shouldn't have chosen it. But, on the other hand, if people don't have an ideal of a better world, then they have lost something. If the only ideal for men and women is the pursuit of personal happiness through the attainment of material assets, then humanity is a diminished species."<sup>102</sup>

Can politics prosper if voters are not offered clear alternatives? It is often claimed that people become cynical when politicians make impossible promises and then fail

---

<sup>101</sup> In 1992, turnout was 77.7 percent. By 1997 that figure had dropped to 71.4 percent. In 2001, after four years of New Labour and an ineffective opposition, that figure had fallen to 59.4 percent, the lowest since 1918. The 1918 poll itself was a unique case, with over 100 MPs standing unopposed, which means that the 2001 poll saw effectively the worst turnout since 1885 – the first time most adult males were granted the vote.



to achieve them. Yet, as Wilby stresses, voters become at least as cynical when the promises offered are qualified, circumscribed and technical.<sup>103</sup>

To reduce politics to a question of management implies that it can make only a minimal difference in people's lives, and that 'big ideas' are condemned to the past. This was essentially the message of the Clinton presidency after 1994, with the result being that less than half of all registered voters (registered voters themselves sitting at about 50 percent of those eligible) chose to vote in the 1996 and 2000 elections.<sup>104</sup> We have noted the similar trend in the UK.

This should concern parties nominally situated on the left, because low turnouts traditionally favour parties of the right.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, such a response is worrying in that not only are these third way parties failing in their attempt to enthuse voters to support their message, but that they are failing to promote democratic politics as a source of idealism and inspiration.

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that under the conditions of third way politics as we have seen it in practice thus far, ideology is a thing of the past and civil discourse has been reduced to an approximation of managerial spin. Of course, 'spin' has long been a component of political life, yet it used to be spun on behalf of a political philosophy, or at least a coherent policy, rather than on behalf of an image or 'brand'.<sup>106</sup>

The systematic shift towards occupying the centre-ground of politics undermines any substantive democracy and is perhaps an important factor explaining growing

---

<sup>102</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric & Polito, Antonio (2000), *The New Century*, London: Little, Brown & Co

<sup>103</sup> Wilby, Peter (2000), "C'mon Tony, where's the big idea?": *The Guardian*, June 4

<sup>104</sup> See the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems website: <http://www.umich.edu/~cses/>. (23/7/03).

<sup>105</sup> Gidlow, Liette (2002), "Delegitimizing democracy: "Civic slackers," the cultural turn, and the possibilities of politics": *The Journal of American History*, December. Vol. 89, Iss. 3, p 922

<sup>106</sup> Spin is perhaps best described as "deliberate shading of news perception... [and] attempted control of news reaction." (in Safire, William (1993), *Safire's New Political Dictionary: The Definitive Guide to the New Language of Politics*, New York: Random House.)

public cynicism and declining voter participation rates. Of course, one cannot blame Tony Blair for attempting to win elections. Many of those names associated with the third way – Clinton, Schröder, Blair and Prodi – are united by and large only by the fact that they had won elections, generated big shifts in public opinion, and defeated leaders who were well established. Certainly, these leaders brought with them (rhetorically, at least), a ‘modernised’ social-democratic vision that believed in a reconfigured notion of public welfare and a commitment to public-private initiatives of varying levels. Yet firm links between them with regard to policy have not been evidenced.

Indeed, each of the key third way election victories has seen campaigning centred on the notion of ‘continuity and fuzzy change’. With this, the spotlight has been kept off policy and firmly on presidential images and attacks on the previous Government’s record. Such a drift towards presidential-style politics and excessive sloganisation is troubling. Similarly, whilst an end to ideology may appear seductive, without ideas to drive change, politics stagnates, and without proper debate, informed choices cannot be made.<sup>107</sup> For the new breed of leaders, informed by a managerialist agenda, democracy is not about debate or discussion, it is about finding appropriate means to give legitimacy (without serious challenge) to decisions already taken and their course already determined.

Equally, while citizens hear much about their duties and responsibilities, the only duty required of a publicly listed company is to maximise dividends for its shareholders.<sup>108</sup> The collapse of Enron, with its unclear links to politics of all persuasions, has shaken up faith in politics globally.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Johnson, Joy, “Rethinking Democracy” found at *Chartist Magazine* Website at Johnson, Joy (2000), “Rethinking Democracy”: Online. *Chartist Magazine*. January/February. Available: [www.chartistmagazine.freemove.co.uk/jan\\_johnson.html](http://www.chartistmagazine.freemove.co.uk/jan_johnson.html). (2/4/03)

<sup>108</sup> *New Statesman* (2001), “Having his way and eating it”: September 25, p 4

<sup>109</sup> See Eisler, Riane (2002), “How politics impact your personal life”: *The Humanist*, May/June, Vol. 62, Iss. 3, p 24. Likewise, the very public failure of Railtrack and farcical handling of a privatised air traffic control system in the UK has diminished belief in many of the third way’s prescriptions for society.

Jacques believes the exhaustion of the left-right equation is intrinsically linked to the decline of ideology. The grand narratives of communism, socialism, fascism and neo-liberalism dominated the twentieth century.<sup>110</sup> The expectations encouraged by these ideologies, in all cases, have been met with disappointment. Yet, for Klein and Rafferty 'Old Left' and 'New Right' become the thesis and antithesis of a "political dialectic" to be resolved by a third way 'synthesis' that remains distinctive, however elusive in its precise implications. Thus, the third way requires an ideological (or post-ideological) wedge to be driven between the past and the future.<sup>111</sup> The required distance between the 'old' and the 'new' is achieved by maligning the past and acclaiming the present.

Given this, it is understandable why many have shifted away from such metanarratives into a new form of pragmatism. Extensive transformative ideologies appear increasingly less effective in a world of flux and oscillation. This has led however, to a crisis of politics. Citizens are less interested and more hostile to politics than ever before. A more open and pluralistic society suggests political parties that are more socially diverse and reflective of that diversity, un beholden to specific vested and material interests are the future,<sup>112</sup> but where are they?

Even if one agrees that an absence of politics is possible (or desirable), one must examine the nature of the modern political consensus. As Cohen emphasises, consensus can be defined by what is persistently excluded from debate. In the UK, historically this has included the nature of Empire, the position of women, Ireland or nuclear disarmament. Today, it includes the causes of poverty, the power of big business and the hollowing out of democracy.<sup>113</sup> Despite this, there still persists the assumption that, given a chance, consensual politics will be benign.

---

<sup>110</sup> Jacques, Martin (1993), "The end of politics: a victim of outdated ideologies and lackluster leaders," in *World Press Review*, November, p 23

<sup>111</sup> Klein, Rudolf & Rafferty, Anne-Marie (1999), "Rorschach Politics": in *The American Prospect*, July, p 27

<sup>112</sup> Jacques, Martin (1993), "The end of politics: a victim of outdated ideologies and lackluster leaders," in *World Press Review*, November, p 23

<sup>113</sup> Cohen, Nick (2000), *Cruel Britannia*, London: Verso, p 3

In the countries encountered in this thesis, across all political parties, the basis for selecting candidates, policy and sequentially, governments is becoming increasingly narrow and unhealthy. Politics has thus become the sanctuary of a small, professional political class. The implications for democracy are enormous.

Rorty underlines the dilemma regarding a plurality of values that are ultimately irreconcilable. The emergence of new social movements and new political subjects has so radically pluralised the agenda that gains for some cannot be universalised as gains for all.<sup>114</sup> The result of this new agenda is a field of heterogeneous positions and occasionally contradictory discourses, often with no common content and no overall guarantee of a progressive outcome. Liberal democracy – as promoted by third way leaders – ultimately leaves us all unsatisfied, it claims ideals that in essence can never be reached. As Dunn says, “democracy is the name for what we cannot have, yet never cease to want.”<sup>115</sup> This must ultimately apply to the third way as well, for some issues are ultimately irreconcilable.

---

<sup>114</sup> Ross, Andrew (ed.) (1989), *Universal Abandon? The Politics Of Postmodernism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p xiv

<sup>115</sup> Dunn, John (1993), *Western Political Theory In The Face Of The Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 28