

Tony Blair & the ‘New First Way’

Steven Fielding’s “A New Politics?” rightly asserts that Blair’s ‘Third Way’ is in many respects not unprecedented, but the extent to which Blair’s New Labour is ‘all spin and no substance’ is less easily discernable in a brief critique such as this. Although Fielding’s argument – that the Labour and Conservative parties were less starkly black-and-white than Blair paints them as having been – is valid, the possibility of Third Way innovation remains in the restructuring of left-leaning social justice along economically liberal lines. Instead of using the catch-all ‘Third Way’ moniker, Tony Blair’s New Labour could have more accurately been called the ‘New First Way.’

Seen in context, Tony Blair’s attempted [and succeeded] conversion of disillusioned Conservatives went with rather than against the grain of political maneuver. “Labour relied upon the support of two-thirds of manual workers while the Conservatives benefited from the votes of about three-quarters of the middle class. Nonetheless, this still meant that each required to win over significant minorities outside their main class bases to attain office.” (Fielding, 16) New Labour’s transformation is more easily understood if one accepts that “parties...were now forced to adopt each other’s characteristics just to stay afloat” (Fielding, 13).

The second major point of Fielding’s argument – that “Labour gives evidence of remaining on the left; Conservatives indicate they continue to reside on the right.” (Fielding, 28) – supports my New First Way (i.e., New Labour) claim. Fielding cites Norberto Bobbio’s argument by which equality and redistribution are central to the left/right split (Fielding, 24), evidenced by Blair’s focus on social justice – “In standing for justice, we assert the historic claim of the centre-left that there is no progress unless

every citizen has a real stake in it. Without a fair distribution of the benefits of progress, societies risk falling apart in division, rancour and distrust.” (Blair, 20) – and the falsity of a compassionate conservatism (Hague’s ‘British Way’) that in practice opposed Trade Union rights and the imposition of a minimum wage. (Fielding, 23).

The final central point of “A New Politics?” hinges on the universally applicable need for political parties to account for the exigencies of growing globalization in the new international order; In Blair’s words, Labour cannot ignore the rise of “global markets and global culture” (Blair, 6). Because international trade necessitates competitiveness, the renovation of Labour’s Clause Four from an essentially socialist state-over-market stance (Fielding, 14) to being inclusive of a “dynamic economy” and “enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition” (Fielding, 18) is telling. Economically speaking, a reversion to pure demand management was no longer an electorally viable stance.

Finally, one need only look to Blair’s “The Third Way; New Politics for the New Century” to realize the fundamentally New Left nature of the so-called Third Way. Unabashedly “progressive centre-left” (Blair, 1), New Labour strives to unite “the two great streams of left-of-centre thought” (Blair, 1); New Labour is arguable *more* “a third way *within* the left” (Blair, 1) than a Third Way broadly speaking. Furthermore, “the Right does not have the answer” (Blair, 2), and although “the left” may have “stifled opportunity in the name of abstract equality” (Blair, 3), the fact remains that New Labour is “passionate in its commitment to social justice and to the goals of the centre-left” (Blair, 1); if one accepts Bobbio’s argument, the Third Way remains fundamentally left-leaning.