

What the 'Third Way' Is Really About

By Reginald Dale *International Herald Tribune* April 4 2001

- 5 LONDON - The idea of a Third Way between, or perhaps beyond, traditional forms of socialism and capitalism has intrigued many politicians - especially those on the left who see that their old dogma no longer applies in a world dominated by the Internet and open markets.
- Although the Third Way has been most avidly plugged by Tony Blair, the British prime minister, and President Bill Clinton, many others have climbed on this trendy but amorphous bandwagon.
- 10 In the recent past, Third Way policies have been attributed to the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and even Russia (including former President Boris Yeltsin and now President-elect Vladimir Putin).
- But despite the Third Way's wide appeal, it is hard to define what it actually means, still less to substantiate claims that it represents a radically new departure in political thinking. P.J. O'Rourke, the American humorist, has described the broad philosophy of the Third Way as "a sort of clarion call to
- 15 whatever."
- As if to justify that description, Hillary Clinton once reportedly portrayed the Third Way as "a unified field theory of life" that will "marry conservatism and liberalism, capitalism and statism, and tie together practically everything: the way we are, the way we were, the faults of man and the word of God, the end of communism and the beginning of the new millennium."
- 20 The reconciliation of opposites is certainly an important element. According to a new British book analyzing the sayings of Mr. Blair, "New Labour, New Language?" by Norman Fairclough, the aim is to stress not antithesis (capitalism or social justice) but synthesis (capitalism and social justice). Thus Mr. Blair recently ridiculed the "politics of division" and said the whole of Britain should be seen as Labour's "core constituency."
- 25 In another new book, "The Third Way and Its Critics," Anthony Giddens, one of the Third Way's leading exponents, again attempts to make the picture clearer.
- The book comes complete with tributes from Mr. Blair, Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, and President Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil. The cover depicts a road that seems to lead to a promised land of blue skies and fluffy clouds, suggesting that the Third Way constitutes a
- 30 distinct new political path.
- Two things, however, quickly become clear. The first is that the criticism Mr. Giddens cites often makes more sense than he does. The second is that the Third Way is not meant to be something quite separate from right and left, but an evolution of the left to cope with the realities of the modern world.
- According to Mr. Giddens, the Third Way aims to combine social solidarity with a dynamic economy,
- 35 to stress equality of opportunity, not of outcome, and to concentrate on the creation of wealth, not its redistribution.
- He accepts that old-fashioned welfare states have failed and that there is no viable alternative to the market economy.
- Unsurprisingly, the critics in Mr. Giddens's book all come from the left. They quite plausibly accuse
- 40 Third Way exponents of selling out to the markets, of advocating "Thatcherism without the handbag." But these critics want to go back to the discredited ways of the Old Left. Mr. Giddens easily dismisses those arguments. What he fails to appreciate, or can't admit, is that few critics come from his right precisely because most of his ideas have long been center-right policies.
- They are only new to left-wingers. But because good socialists cannot admit they are stealing conservative policies, they have to maintain that they are setting out in a whole new direction.
- 45 The Third Way is little more than a fancy name for the repackaging of existing policies in recognition of the rise of the center - as represented in Germany by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's "new middle" and in the United States by the growing number of independent voters.
- It is hard to see where the Third Way differs much from traditional Christian democracy in Germany,
- 50 the compassionate conservatism advocated by George W. Bush, the Republican presidential candidate, or moderate conservatism in Britain.
- There are still big differences between left and right. But on at least some of today's major issues, ranging from welfare reform to trade, the Third Way does not depart in a new direction. It looks more like the right side of the road.
- 55 <http://www.iht.com/articles/2000/04/04/think.2.t.php>