Third Way Values?

Ever since the inception of New Labour, Blair and his project have been widely accused of being purely pragmatic and ‘not believing in anything’. There is thus no little irony in the fact that, on the issue of Iraq, Blair gave his most forceful demonstration of conviction-based leadership; yet it is this very conviction that may tarnish his legacy forever. As Martin Jacques observes:

On this Blair abandoned his normal timidity and caution, ignored the focus groups, took on his opponents and argued his case. It is the only occasion that Blair has behaved like Thatcher as a political leader ... His only resort to political boldness, though, could not have been a bigger miscalculation: Iraq will stand as his epitaph.¹

However, this chapter argues that on the domestic agenda too, New Labour has attempted to elaborate a distinctive set of Third Way values. It is certain that there will be sustained academic argument about the extent to which Blair’s Iraq (mis)adventure was a logical extension of, or deviation from, his Third Way normative core. Here the focus is on establishing that such a core does exist, but that attempts to understand the Third Way purely in terms of its values, or as a political philosophy in the traditional sense, are misplaced. Third Way values need to be understood in relation to its sociological claims. The Third Way’s sociological impulses and freewheeling approach to established political ideologies has led to claims that it is...
not an ideas-based project, that it is not a proper political philosophy. To be sure, this sense has been reinforced by criticisms of New Labour's pragmatism and preoccupation with spin. Nonetheless despite, or perhaps as a result of, claims that the Third Way is a value-free zone, a good deal has been written about what Third Way values are and should be. Blair and other leading Third Way practitioners occasionally add to the debate with keynote 'vision' speeches, attempting to give normative coherence to the ongoing actions of centre-left governments. A consistent set of themes has emerged, refuting charges of there being no normative core to the Third Way. Shrewder critics have perceived this; former Deputy Labour Leader Roy Hattersley has continually pointed out from his Guardian column that the problem is not that Blair has no beliefs – but that they are the wrong beliefs for a social democrat worthy of the name.

Giddens has also offered lists of Third Way values, but his project remains essentially sociological rather than an elaboration of a political philosophy. The most quoted statement of Third Way values, which does overlap with that of Giddens, is Blair's short 1998 Fabian pamphlet. Here Blair emphasises what he feels are the enduring values of democratic socialism, which he contrasts with the means to achieve them. Such values are listed as ‘equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community’. The latter three of these reflect the original core statement of New Democrat values, prior to Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential race. Significantly, and in contrast to Giddens, both Blair and the New Democrat politicians portray these values as driving the Third Way project. In subsequent years, Blair has continued to insist on the value-led nature of the Third Way, observing in 2002 for example that:

What is vital now is to explain the ‘why’ of the programme, to describe it not simply point by point but principle by principle. The reason for the changes we are making is not for their own sake but because they are the means to the fairer society, where aspirations and opportunity are open to all, which we believe in. The programme is not driven by administration but by values. [emphasis added]

The core values consistently deployed by Blair and other Third Wayers are briefly outlined below. This is followed by an overview of