A Roundtable Discussion on the Prospects for a Progressive Century

Held on 29 September 2000 at the National Liberal Club

The group of men and women who came together for this roundtable discussion had different political affiliations but shared a commitment to a new approach to politics. They were invited because they believed, like us, in the need for a degree of pluralism and interparty co-operation. We wanted participants to explore whether Labour’s statist tendencies would be improved with a dose of liberalism and whether Liberal Democrat individualism would benefit from a dose of collectivism. Participants were asked to define their visions of a new politics and identify which elements from each tradition they believed would help deliver the ‘progressive century’.

The debate took place after the fuel blockades of September 2000 which had raised important questions concerning the politics of popular protest, and at the end of the week of the Labour Party Conference in Brighton, where the Prime Minister had made a landmark speech outlining his vision of Labour's ‘core beliefs’.

The discussion is sometimes confused and contradictory. The tensions between the desire for equality and liberty at one and the same time are consistently evident. But this is the dialectic that will define a successful progressive politics. We should relish the struggle
between these competing principles and look to a synthesis as a route map for the future.

There is an underlying sense of disappointment with the limited achievements of the first term of Labour’s administration. But equally there is a sense of hope about what is still to be achieved. While there is little sense of a guiding philosophy of governance for New Labour, the long haul back from the margins of politics in the 1980s has now brought us to the point where such a vacuum is recognised as a fatal weakness that needs to be addressed. It is also interesting and encouraging that the participants discuss a ‘critique of capitalism’, another pointer that the centre-left has moved out of the shadow of Thatcherism. This is the seam that progressives must mine if they are to build on the electorate’s apparent sustained rejection of neo-liberalism. It is another vacuum to be filled by creative and brave thinking.

From his comments below, David Marquand now at best seems sanguine about the prospects for a ‘progressive century’. This is a pity because Marquand has offered the most coherent analysis of the failures of labourism in particular and the need for the link with liberalism to be re-forged. But what Marquand seems to be rejecting is not progressivism but modernisation. Here, New Labour has been guilty of not just sloppy but dangerous advocacy. ‘Modernisation’ has been hailed as unquestionably virtuous, and to be ‘anti-modernisation’ was to accept your place in the asylum of political Neanderthals. But we will do well to remember that Thatcher was a ‘moderniser’. The question is, what form of ‘modernisation’, and who benefits? If Marquand is being critical of such lazy sloganeering, then he is right to be. A belief in progressive values, as defined throughout this book, is not akin to a belief in puerile modernisation.

Finally, this discussion, shaped and influenced as it is by the particular circumstances of the day, offers a refreshing and vibrant sense of hope in the prospects of the centre-left and its ambition for human fulfilment. It shows a group of centre-left thinkers and politicians ready to move from the back foot of defeatism that deadened our minds throughout the 1980s and 1990s to the front foot of a willingness to shape society in the image of the progressive values they hold.

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