



Toward a New Progressive Politics

Matteo Renzi, Prime Minister of Italy

At the close of the 20th century, the fate of the modernizing left was intimately tied to the Third Way. The Third Way renewal of progressive governance was a passionate, critical, and evidence-driven approach. It was an approach that sought to provide individual freedom and social justice by shaping an agenda for change that transcended the blind reliance on the market typified by the right and the traditional statist ideology of the left. The success of the Third Way illustrated that it is indeed possible to renew progressive thinking in order to meet new challenges. Today, however, the task of defining progressive governance is more difficult than it was then.

The Third Way only had to contend with two old conservatisms, one on the right and the other on the left. Today, these outdated traditions have been joined by a new foe, an amorphous populism that appeals to base prejudices and fills political vacuums. In Europe in particular, this populism has been particularly successful, though it is evident elsewhere. For many citizens across the continent, a lack of interest in politics is now a badge of pride. Concern with understanding problems and finding solutions has been replaced with an obsessive need to identify enemies and persecute them. While populism occasionally

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Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Antonio Guterres discuss the challenges of progressive governance in Florence, Italy, November 1999.



AP Photo/Herbert Krosowski

touches upon real problems or attacks the true opponents of change, it always lacks credible solutions. Simply put, today's populists are as conventional and narrow-minded as the conservatives who resisted change in the past.

Our challenge today is to find a new path: one that is mindful of past progress, but also one that transcends both the old conservatisms and the loud and incessant stammers of the populists. This path can build on the lessons of progressive governance developed under U.S. President Bill Clinton's leadership, but these lessons will be but a foundation. Clinton, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the other Third Way leaders succeeded in modernizing progressive politics by proposing a liberal humanism. Their approach was built on a new dialectic between the freedom given to the market to provide opportunity and prosperity and a revised role of the state that sought to ensure the extension of opportunity to all.

Liberal humanism is as relevant to progressive politics today as it was then. Unfortunately, though, it is no longer a sufficient basis upon which to build a new progressive agenda.

Populism is an unconventional enemy, though it joins progressive politics' two old adversaries in imposing its presence, screaming loudly, and spreading a politics of fear. It is, however, the politics of skepticism it feeds that is the most significant challenge today. The only way to defeat and neutralize populism is to respond to the public's legitimate demands for greater transparency and new forms of leadership. While in the past the renewal of progressive politics required that we reinvent our policies, today the renewal of progressive politics must begin with a reinvention of how we do politics and how we govern.

As globalization and the information communication revolution have intensified, democracies across the globe need to become accustomed to making faster decisions and more effective in how they represent their people. At the same time, as deference toward elected representatives has fallen, citizens increasingly demand that the ways in which decision are made become more transparent. While this is a new challenge, progressive politicians must also seize this transformation as an opportunity. Transparency, combined with the use of new communication tools and networks, can and must help close the gap that people currently feel from politicians and the institutions of government.

The need for greater speed and greater transparency in decision-making is a historically new challenge for democratic thought and practice. And it is only once progressives have met this institutional challenge that we can begin to take on the difficult task of defining an economic and social agenda aimed at making the world a better place.

In short, trust and connectivity is now a prerequisite for progressive politics.

As we rise to these challenges, we must be wary of the left's tendency to become attached to policies and achievements of the past. It is this tendency that often leads the left to become conservative. We cannot defend past policies and outdated institutions when it has become apparent that they are now the main obstacle to achieving our future goals. This is the progressive paradox: Only the continuous renewal of how we realize the ideals of freedom and justice ensures historically that the left continues down the endless path toward progress.

We must, then, be careful not to canonize the Third Way, even if it is an object of our affection. For many, the Third Way has been the political compass, a guide rather than

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a simple tool of orientation. This cannot be the case for today's generation of leaders. When Bill Clinton and Tony Blair summoned progressives from around the world to Florence in 1999, I was but 24 years old. While I was already convinced that politics could be a force for good, at that time, I came to believe that it must be based on participation and choice, commitment and responsibility.

Yet in this season of great change in the global information age, an old compass can point us in the wrong direction. Today, the profound social, economic, and democratic changes taking place are often as unexpected as sudden shifts in magnetic fields that make the old compass needle jump. Today, only a new compass—built with the passions and intelligence of the past but informed and inspired by the knowledge and challenges of the day—can effectively serve as our guide.

The reform efforts that we are making in Italy, from increasing tax credits to the working poor to our agenda for institutional and electoral reform, are based on such an approach. Aligned as they are with similar initiatives implemented by progressives across Europe and beyond, they are helping to chart a new path toward progress. As with the path followed by previous generations, we will move beyond conservatives on the left and right and beyond those populists stoking fear and spreading mistrust. As we do, we will move toward a more prosperous and happier future.

Let us walk that path together.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Romano Prodi', is positioned to the right of the text 'Let us walk that path together.'