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The next step: a blueprint for New Labour's world role

Martin Kettle in Washington

BLOYED by his warm welcome at the White House this week, Tony Blair spoke ambitiously in Washington yesterday of his long-term plan to put New Labour at the head of a worldwide movement of ideas and create an international consensus of the centre-left for the 21st century.

In an exclusive interview with the Guardian in Blair House, where he has been staying during his Washington visit, the Prime Minister unveiled his blueprint for uniting the disparate parties of the left in their most far-reaching link-up for decades.

Mr Blair made clear his eventual aim is to bring together the diverse progressive parties of western and eastern Europe, North and South America, and many other countries in a common political response to the challenges of the global economy.

As a first step the Prime Minister and President Bill Clinton will host a conference in London in May to cement the joint policy thinking of the Democrats and Mr Blair's New Labour party.

Mr Blair and Mr Clinton joined teams of British and US advisers and intellectuals yesterday for a preliminary session at the White House,

which advisers dubbed the "workathon" — after "work", US slang for a policy expert.

The British-American initiative will be followed by a more ambitious attempt to bring centre-left parties from around the world to London in late 1998 or early 1999, to discuss common approaches to economic and social policies. Mr Blair wants this to be the first meeting of what would become a standing conference of the worldwide centre-left.

"The purpose is to craft and define centre-left philosophy for the world of today," Mr Blair said as he prepared to meet Vice-President Al Gore for a working breakfast yesterday.

"I want to start with the ideology that links Labour and the Democrats. Then I want to bring together the Anglo-Saxon definitions of these ideas and these policies with the European ones."

The Prime Minister said: "Every time that I meet these people I find that we are really talking about the same things."

"We on the centre-left must try to put ourselves at the forefront of those who are trying to manage social change in the global economy. The old left resisted that change. The new right did not want to manage it. We have to manage that change to produce social solidarity and prosperity."



Tony Blair: Enlisted President Bill Clinton in a plan to put New Labour and the US Democrats in the vanguard of a worldwide centre-left movement

He sketched out what he called "five clear principles of the centre-left", to which he referred in a speech at the US state department yesterday warning of "two tough years" ahead in his efforts to turn around the legacy of 13 years of Conservative rule.

These principles are:

- first, "stable management and economic prudence because of the global economy";
- second, "changing the emphasis of government intervention so that it deals with education, training and infrastructure and not things like industrial intervention or tax and spend";
- third, "we must be reformers of the welfare state, otherwise the right will dismantle it";
- fourth, "reinventing government, decentralisation, opening up government so

that what counts is what works".

Mr Blair said he was very impressed that Mr Clinton's State of the Union speech last week contained so much overlap with New Labour policy.

He cited Mr Clinton's pledges on school class sizes and welfare reform, and the president's use of terms including "the many not the few", "third way" and "one nation", which are familiar from his own speeches.

"These themes are increasingly echoed by the centre-left around Europe," he said. "There's a new confidence. It's all about ensuring social justice and shared prosperity in the modern world."

Setting out his plans, Mr Blair said: "I want us to start

a new standing conference of the centre-left, involving the Labour Party, the Democrats, the European socialist and social democratic parties and beyond.

"All this is at a very tentative stage, but the plans are in place. We will hold a further event in London in May, a seminar or a small conference between ourselves and the Democrats. Then after that we will attempt to build it out with the Europeans, the Australians and all of the parties that are on the same wavelength."

The Prime Minister confirmed that President Clinton would take part in the May event, which would be held immediately before or after

the Group of Eight (G8) summit in Birmingham. The international follow-up conference, he said, would take place either at the end of this year or the start of next.

He admitted the Democrats might be "more nervous than we are" about his long-term thinking but emphasised that he wanted to reach out beyond the Atlantic and Europe to leaders around the world.

Mr Blair specified President Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil as one. "He's a very interesting guy. He came to see me in London a while back and he gave me a copy of my speeches in Portuguese that had been published in Brazil with an introduction by him. I got the introduction

translated and I was really amazed when I realised that this guy was talking the same language. It was straight-down-the-line New Labour."

The Prime Minister stressed that there should be no "entry tests" of centre-left purity before traditional left-wing parties are invited to join his plans. "It is important that this initiative is unifying and not divisive. There can't be entry tests for this. And it's crucial to bind in the American centre-left. But I think they're up for it."

Mr Blair said he was committed "to engage with all sections of the European centre-left and not just the ones who appear to be most obviously close to where we are at the

'We on the centre-left must be at the forefront of those who are trying to manage social change in the world'

Tony Blair

moment". That meant the French Socialists and the German Social Democrats would be welcomed alongside the Dutch, Italians and Portuguese.

He spoke warmly of eastern European parties which have become "less market frenzied" and are acquiring a "more modulated view of how markets interact with society".

He said: "I am repeatedly struck by the complete and total identity of ideas in so many countries. People are really interested in this. When I talk with other leaders, they say: 'That's my problem, too'. That's why I am absolutely committed to this debate."