

Reclaiming Moderate America

(published on the *Policy Network* website, London, 5 August 2008)

These are exciting times for American progressives. They are also dangerous ones.

The times are exciting, because the Bush years have left so many people open to an alternative to the self-serving Republicanism of the American Right. They are exciting too because the Democratic Party at last possesses a charismatic leader appealing to a new generation of voters, and committed to progressive change. But the times are also dangerous, and for the same reasons. An entrenched conservatism threatened with loss of power can be expected to strike back and to strike hard. Progressive forces in the United States face not a coronation but a struggle, and one in which their opponents are unlikely to play fair. Both before and after the upcoming election, conservative lawmakers and their media acolytes can be expected systematically to denigrate their opponents and distort their arguments in a determined attempt to slow the pace of progressive change..

So if November 2008 is to witness a genuine watershed election – a moment of real progressive change – every one committed to a liberal politics will need to counter that conservative backlash by equally systematic action of our own. Both before and after the election, each of us will need to make our own sustained response to any onslaught of conservative misinformation: not by deploying false claims of our own, but by laying out carefully-constructed and empirically-grounded arguments that demonstrate the superiority of liberal answers over conservative ones to the dominant concerns of the day. There are fights ahead over health care reform, the war in Iraq, rising unemployment, illegal immigration, the looming pension crisis, and the ongoing social agenda. We need to win those fights, by persuading moderate Americans of the superiority of a liberal response to their daily concerns. A Liberal Tool Kit brings that response together in one easily accessible place.

Two extracts – from its first and last chapters – should give the flavor of the book.

First:

The whole premise on which this book is written is that moderate opinion will not be won over by denigrating positions with which we disagree, or by denouncing people whose politics are not our own. Moderate opinion will be won over only through the superiority of the arguments and solutions with which we respond to those positions and those people. Liberal arguments and solutions of that superior kind are readily available – and in some quantity – if you know where to look for them. The task of this book is to bring them together for easy use, in a structured conversation with the inferior ones currently being canvassed by the Republicans in Washington.

Last

Progressives were in the past, and must become again, authors of their own fate. Democratic Lefts always gets the Conservatives that they train. These days, European Conservatives – British Tories, French Gaullists, German and Italian Christian Democrats – are all liberals in American terms: and they are because they have to be, if they're to win support from electorates that are steeped in the values and institutions of European Social Democracy. But not here: here it's the Conservative Right which calls the electoral tune, and the New Deal coalition that lies fractured and broken. The ultra-conservatism of the contemporary American Right is testimony, not to something unique in the American character, but to the post-war failure of Liberalism to hold the center ground in American politics. It's

only the weakness of the Democrats that has allowed Republican rottweilers to run so free for so long. Re-caging them, recapturing that center ground, and obliging the American Right to re-educate itself in the electoral potency of liberal Republicanism, are currently the central tasks facing progressive forces in the United States.

Recapturing the dominant narrative in US politics is the key task facing contemporary American Liberals. That dominant narrative has to recapture the potential of the New Deal from its conservative detractors. The case has to be made again, and made convincingly, that the future lies with progressive programs, not with conservative ones. It lies not in the nonsense of trickle-down economics, but in policies designed to enhance the strength, skills and security of a vibrant middle class – a middle class expanded at the bottom by policy to raise the poor and at the top by policy to curb the rich. A stronger America does not need a Republican, however maverick. It needs its own renewed New Deal. It needs domestic policy built around earned income tax credits, active job creation schemes, progressive taxation, the strengthening of educational expansion, and the provision of health care free at the point of use for all Americans. It needs a foreign policy built around multilateralism and soft power – real strength at home and genuine security abroad.

A Liberal Tool Kit makes the case!