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Britons remain in thrall of Third Way

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NOW that British Prime Minister Tony Blair has called for a national election on June 7, Britons will, once again, be persuaded to embrace his Third Way. Opinion polls indicate the majority of Britons will not resist the seduction of Blairism - an ideological brigandage that transcends the old dogma of left and right, dubbed the centre-left.

But how compelling is the allure of Blairism?

Considering the robust economy and some extraordinary changes to rejuvenate a nation mired in middle-age blues, such as greater monetary independence for the Bank of England, the eviction of hereditary peers from the House of Lords and the creation of a regional government for Scotland and Wales, victory seems almost certain.

In the 1997 election, Blair won a majority of English seats - a feat that only two previous Labour Party leaders have managed, Clement Attlee in 1945 and Harold Wilson in 1966 - and all the Scottish seats. The seeming disintegration of conservative forces points to the likelihood a repetition. The mood of Blairism far outweighs Toryism.

But perhaps, the question of greater import is: How has Blair fared on the ideological front?

So far, he has demonstrated the zest to overcome the sterility of post-socialist thought. His distaste for the old ways was obvious when he referred to a group of journalists deemed to be for the Old Labour as "unreconstructed wankers".

Ideologically, the modernisation of the party such as the re-writing of clause four of its constitution and the introduction of Third Way as a new social democratic agenda meant that Humpty Dumpty was off the wall for good: There is no chance for Old Labour with its heavy emphasis on redistributive socialism. Still, it is difficult to know how much that has changed has done so permanently.

Blair's Third Way is neither a purist left or right. It is in his own words, "the politics of a radical centre". It goes beyond socialism (First Way) and neo-liberalism (Second Way). Critics say Blairism is petering out as it is no more than an ill-disguised Second Way. Others say his Third Way contains no in-depth description and no definite line of approach. Commonly perceived too that he looked across the Atlantic to former president Bill Clinton for inspiration and political rhetoric.

Clinton called for an "American vital centre" which he explained as "a dynamic centre that is not in the middle of what is left and right, but is way beyond it", in 1993.

He made references to it in 1996 upon his re-election. "Our people voted for the ideas of the vital American centre" and in January 2000, "We restored the vital centre, replacing outmoded ideologies with a new vision".

True, the two shared ideas but this does not mean that Blair is not his own man in remoulding social democracy. If anything, the association served to divert attention from the substance in Blair's centre-left as Clinton's centre is seen at most as a soundbite, a variation of special assistant to President John F. Kennedy, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr's The Vital Centre (first published in 1949 and reprinted in 1962, 1988 and 1998). Schlesinger's vital centre refers to liberal democracy that stands between the totalitarian twins of fascism and communism.

Instead, much of Blair's Third Way can be gleaned from the 1998

publication of his intellectual guru, renowned economist and sociologist Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity Press).

And so it is revealed that the Third Way serves to vindicate far-reaching interventionism to re-invent the state and defend it against Thatcherite, Reaganite and libertarian enemies, all of which create new risks and uncertainties that neglects the social basis of markets.

According to Giddens, the Third Way advocates a new mixed economy which "looks for the synergy between public and private sectors, utilising the dynamism of markets but with public interest in mind".

But far more interesting and of much relevance to countries like Malaysia, whose Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has spoken vociferously against unfettered globalisation, is the Third Way's stand on the current mode of globalisation.

As Giddens said, "we can't leave such global patterns to the erratic swirl of global markets and relatively powerless international bodies" and "No one any longer has any alternative to capitalism - the arguments that remain concern how far and in what ways capitalism should be governed and regulated".

Note too the Third Way's viewpoint on free trade - it can be an "engine of economic development but given the socially and culturally destructive power of markets, its powers need always to be scrutinised".

These are all anti-Hayekian proclamations but then social justice is the cornerstone of social democracy. Given the inequalities that divide the post-genome world, there is a current wave of the Third Way and its variations. As it is, social democracy is dominant in Europe.

Given the current anti neo-liberal sentiments across the world, Blairism has a direct impact on the global renewal of social democracy. If he can show the Third Way is the only way to go, we can say history is in the making.

But then, an unfinished history is always flawed. Whether Blair can create an international consensus of centre-left for the 21st century is doubtful given his maddening tendency to follow the US rather than assert and advocate Third Way politics and economics.

Blairism may assert its power over the imagination of New Labour and Britain but not, at this juncture, over the imagination of the international community. When he stands poised to stir a new beginning on the many issues of globalisation, then, and only then, the age of Blairism would have really begun.

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