

Sure way to bring about equality

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Human rights

Thatcherism's veneration of the market or Bennisism's of nationalisation. The way to achieve equality of opportunity is, he explains, to make it a central government goal to "abolish social inheritance". This is a hideous sociologists' piece of

girl will already be 10 steps behind; the market will then reinforce existing inequalities. Sure, there is the odd exception — the poor boy who becomes a rock star — but they are odd, and all the figures show that since the rise of Thatcherism,

for progressive governments to achieve this goal: Invest in babies. Esping-Andersen has shown that most of the social inheritance that benefits the rich comes not from their fancy schooling or swish houses; it comes from the development of advanced cognitive skills in early childhood. Most of your

kids in the lush day-care centers across the country.

When they arrive for their first day at school, their social inheritance is remarkably similar, whether they are the child of a millionaire or a bin-man.

The Blair government has put in place the beginnings of this programme for Britain with Sure Start, the childcare centers across the poorest constituencies in Britain. By March 2004, there will be 400,000 children in Sure Start; the roll out should continue even from this peak until every child has access to it.

My nephew was one of those kids, and I saw how access to the program transformed his potential: no wonder mums across the country rave about it.

The Tory party, of course, have moaned about the expense and hinted that they might abolish Sure Start altogether.

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ologies have to He has shown how Blairite values inform Blairite policy decisions.

We all know the New Labour rhetoric about values, centered on equality of opportunity. Like "Things can only get better", it has the nostalgic glow of 1997 attached to it. New Labourites explain this principle in strikingly similar, even repetitive terms: "The Thatcherite right don't give a toss about equality; indeed, they glory in inequality." Or: "The old Bennite left held as its ideal equality of outcome:

Take from the rich and hand it to the poor directly, on the old Robin Hood model. We believe instead in equality of opportunity, where everyone has the equal chance to succeed." Too often, this has sounded at best like vaguely pleasant mood music, and at worst like a rationalisation for existing inequalities.

Esping-Andersen is important because he shows how, if governments pursue the goal of equality of opportunity, it is a radical concept with policy implications as great as

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jargon that nonetheless represents a breakthrough. We all know that, in practice, the daughter of a rich family in Dulwich is almost certain to do better in life than the daughter born into a poor family in Peckham. When the two girls enter the marketplace, the poor

there are fewer and fewer of them. No equality of opportunity please, we're English.

Extensive government action is needed to abolish social inheritance, or "equality of opportunity" turns out to be just a honeyed lie. There is a straightforward, practical way

redistributive tax system, but mainly because all of its preschool children have access to excellent, high-quality childcare.

Children from the poorest homes receive exactly the same cognitive education and pedagogical standards as the richest

You can hear the sniggering now. New Labour thinkers were gathered over the weekend with like-minded world leaders — from Bill Clinton to Thabo Mbeki to Gerhard Schroeder — to discuss their political philosophy at a conference organised by Peter Mandelson's policy network.

What's that? New Labour? A political philosophy? Oh, call for the nurse to sew up my sides! For its critics on both left and right, New Labour — and the wider school of moderate, center-left parties like the New Democrats in the US and the Neue Mitte in Germany — have been not philosophies but marketing techniques, shallow justifications for the junking of ideology rather than a serious attempt to craft a new body of thought. The failure of the Third Way debate to connect with a wider public was especially bleak, because New Labour and its progressive friends really do represent, however tentatively, a political vision very different from the Tory neoliberalism that still blights the world.

One thinker at the conference, as vital to Blair and Brown's project as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman were to Thatcher's, holds the key to understanding the heart of Blairism: Gosta Esping-Andersen, the Spanish sociologist. He has pulled off the trick that all-important political ide-