

The Euston Manifesto

The Euston Manifesto Group

Editor's Note: The Euston Manifesto – a call for the renewal of progressive politics – was launched online on 13 April 2006, and at a 250-strong meeting in London on May 25 2006. It was written by the Euston Manifesto Group. As of early June, it has attracted almost 2000 supporting signatures, including Michael Walzer, Kanan Makiya, Paul Berman, John Lloyd, Sunder Katwala, Denis Macshane MP, John Mann MP, Greg Pope MP, and Mitchell Cohen, Editor of Dissent. The Manifesto has been translated into Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Persian, Polish, Spanish and Swedish, and more translations are in the pipeline.

A. Preamble

We are democrats and progressives. We propose here a fresh political alignment. Many of us belong to the Left, but the principles that we set out are not exclusive. We reach out, rather, beyond the socialist Left towards egalitarian liberals and others of unambiguous democratic commitment. Indeed, the reconfiguration of progressive opinion that we aim for involves drawing a line between the forces of the Left that remain true to its authentic values, and currents that have lately shown themselves rather too flexible about these values. It involves making common cause with genuine democrats, whether socialist or not.

The present initiative has its roots in and has found a constituency through the Internet, especially the 'blogosphere.' It is our perception, however, that this constituency is under-represented elsewhere – in much of the media and the other forums of contemporary political life.

The broad statement of principles that follows is a declaration of intent. It inaugurates a new Website, which will serve as a resource for the current of opinion it hopes to represent and the several foundation blogs and other sites that are behind this call for a progressive realignment.

B. Statement of principles

1) For democracy

We are committed to democratic norms, procedures and structures – freedom of opinion and assembly, free elections, the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, and the separation of state and religion. We value the traditions and institutions, the legacy of good governance, of those countries in which liberal, pluralist democracies have taken hold.

2) No apology for tyranny

We decline to make excuses for, to indulgently ‘understand,’ reactionary regimes and movements for which democracy is a hated enemy – regimes that oppress their own peoples and movements that aspire to do so. We draw a firm line between ourselves and those left-liberal voices today quick to offer an apologetic explanation for such political forces.

3) Human rights for all

We hold the fundamental human rights codified in the Universal Declaration to be precisely universal, and binding on all states and political movements, indeed on everyone. Violations of these rights are equally to be condemned whoever is responsible for them and regardless of cultural context. We reject the double standards with which much self-proclaimed progressive opinion now operates, finding lesser (though all too real) violations of human rights which are closer to home, or are the responsibility of certain disfavoured governments, more deplorable than other violations that are flagrantly worse. We reject, also, the cultural relativist view according to which these basic human rights are not appropriate for certain nations or peoples.

4) Equality

We espouse a generally egalitarian politics. We look towards progress in relations between the sexes (until full gender equality is achieved), between different ethnic communities, between those of various religious affiliations and those of none, and between people of diverse sexual orientations – as well as towards broader social and economic equality all round. We leave open, as something on which there are differences of viewpoint amongst us, the question of the best economic forms of this broader equality, but we support the interests of working people everywhere and their right to organize in defence of those interests. Democratic trade unions are the bedrock organizations for the defence of workers’ interests and are one of

the most important forces for human rights, democracy-promotion and egalitarian internationalism. Labour rights are human rights. The universal adoption of the International Labour Organization Conventions – now routinely ignored by governments across the globe – is a priority for us. We are committed to the defence of the rights of children, and to protecting people from sexual slavery and all forms of institutionalized abuse.

5) Development for freedom

We stand for global economic development-as-freedom and against structural economic oppression and environmental degradation. The current expansion of global markets and free trade must not be allowed to serve the narrow interests of a small corporate elite in the developed world and their associates in developing countries. The benefits of large-scale development through the expansion of global trade ought to be distributed as widely as possible in order to serve the social and economic interests of workers, farmers and consumers in all countries. Globalization must mean global social integration and a commitment to social justice. We support radical reform of the major institutions of global economic governance (World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, World Bank) to achieve these goals, and we support fair trade, more aid, debt cancellation and the campaign to Make Poverty History. Development can bring growth in life-expectancy and in the enjoyment of life, easing burdensome labour and shortening the working day. It can bring freedom to youth, possibilities of exploration to those of middle years, and security to old age. It enlarges horizons and the opportunities for travel, and helps make strangers into friends. Global development must be pursued in a manner consistent with environmentally sustainable growth.

6) Opposing anti-Americanism

We reject without qualification the anti-Americanism now infecting so much left-liberal (and some conservative) thinking. This is not a case of seeing the US as a model society. We are aware of its problems and failings. But these are shared in some degree with all of the developed world. The United States of America is a great country and nation. It is the home of a strong democracy with a noble tradition behind it and lasting constitutional and social achievements to its name. Its peoples have produced a vibrant culture that is the pleasure, the source-book and the envy of millions. That US foreign policy has often opposed progressive movements and governments and supported regressive and authoritarian ones does not justify generalized prejudice against either the country or its people.

7) For a two-state solution

We recognize the right of both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples to self-determination within the framework of a two-state solution. There can be no reasonable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that subordinates or eliminates the legitimate rights and interests of one of the sides to the dispute.

8) Against racism

For liberals and the Left, anti-racism is axiomatic. We oppose every form of racist prejudice and behaviour: the anti-immigrant racism of the far Right; tribal and inter-ethnic racism; racism against people from Muslim countries and those descended from them, particularly under cover of the War on Terror. The recent resurgence of another, very old form of racism, anti-Semitism, is not yet properly acknowledged in left and liberal circles. Some exploit the legitimate grievances of the Palestinian people under occupation by Israel, and conceal prejudice against the Jewish people behind the formula of 'anti-Zionism.' We oppose this type of racism too, as should go without saying.

9) United against terror

We are opposed to all forms of terrorism. The deliberate targeting of civilians is a crime under international law and all recognized codes of warfare, and it cannot be justified by the argument that it is done in a cause that is just. Terrorism inspired by Islamist ideology is widespread today. It threatens democratic values and the lives and freedoms of people in many countries. This does not justify prejudice against Muslims, who are its main victims, and amongst whom are to be found some of its most courageous opponents. But, like all terrorism, it is a menace that has to be fought, and not excused.

10) A new internationalism

We stand for an internationalist politics and the reform of international law – in the interests of global democratization and global development. Humanitarian intervention, when necessary, is not a matter of disregarding sovereignty, but of lodging this properly within the 'common life' of all peoples. If in some minimal sense a state protects the common life of its people (if it does not torture, murder and slaughter its own civilians, and meets their most basic needs of life), then its sovereignty is to be respected. But if the state itself violates this common life in appalling ways, its claim to sovereignty is forfeited and there is a duty upon the international community of intervention and rescue. Once a threshold of inhumanity has been crossed, there is a 'responsibility to protect.'

11) A critical openness

Drawing the lesson of the disastrous history of left apologetics over the crimes of Stalinism and Maoism, as well as more recent exercises in the same vein (some of the reaction to the crimes of 9/11, the excuse-making for suicide-terrorism, the disgraceful alliances lately set up inside the 'anti-war' movement with illiberal theocrats), we reject the notion that there are no opponents on the Left. We reject, similarly, the idea that there can be no opening to ideas and individuals to our right. Leftists who make common cause with, or excuses for, anti-democratic forces should be criticized in clear and forthright terms. Conversely, we pay attention to liberal and conservative voices and ideas if they contribute to strengthening democratic norms and practices and to the battle for human progress.

12) Historical truth

In connecting to the original humanistic impulses of the movement for human progress, we emphasize the duty which genuine democrats must have to respect for the historical truth. Not only fascists, Holocaust-deniers and the like have tried to obscure the historical record. One of the tragedies of the Left is that its own reputation was massively compromised in this regard by the international Communist movement, and some have still not learned that lesson. Political honesty and straightforwardness are a primary obligation for us.

13) Freedom of ideas

We uphold the traditional liberal freedom of ideas. It is more than ever necessary today to affirm that, within the usual constraints against defamation, libel and incitement to violence, people must be at liberty to criticize ideas – even whole bodies of ideas – to which others are committed. This includes the freedom to criticize religion: particular religions and religion in general. Respect for others does not entail remaining silent about their beliefs where these are judged to be wanting.

14) Open source

As part of the free exchange of ideas and in the interests of encouraging joint intellectual endeavour, we support the open development of software and other creative works and oppose the patenting of genes, algorithms and facts of nature. We oppose the retrospective extension of intellectual property laws in the financial interests of corporate copyright holders. The open source model is collective and competitive, collaborative and meritocratic. It is not a theoretical ideal, but a tested reality that has created common goods whose power and robustness have been

proved over decades. Indeed, the best collegiate ideals of the scientific research community that gave rise to open source collaboration have served human progress for centuries.

15) A precious heritage

We reject fear of modernity, fear of freedom, irrationalism, the subordination of women; and we reaffirm the ideas that inspired the great rallying calls of the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century: liberty, equality and solidarity; human rights; the pursuit of happiness. These inspirational ideas were made the inheritance of us all by the social-democratic, egalitarian, feminist and anti-colonial transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – by the pursuit of social justice, the provision of welfare, the brotherhood and sisterhood of all men and women. None should be left out, none left behind. We are partisans of these values. But we are not zealots. For we embrace also the values of free enquiry, open dialogue and creative doubt, of care in judgement and a sense of the intractabilities of the world. We stand against all claims to a total – unquestionable or unquestioning – truth.

C. Elaborations

We defend liberal and pluralist democracies against all who make light of the differences between them and totalitarian and other tyrannical regimes. But these democracies have their own deficits and shortcomings. The battle for the development of more democratic institutions and procedures, for further empowering those without influence, without a voice or with few political resources, is a permanent part of the agenda of the Left.

The social and economic foundations on which the liberal democracies have developed are marked by deep inequalities of wealth and income and the survival of unmerited privilege. In turn, global inequalities are a scandal to the moral conscience of humankind. Millions live in terrible poverty. Week in, week out, tens of thousands of people – children in particular – die from preventable illnesses. Inequalities of wealth, both as between individuals and between countries, distribute life chances in an arbitrary way.

These things are a standing indictment against the international community. We on the Left, in keeping with our own traditions, fight for justice and a decent life for everyone. In keeping with those same traditions, we have also to fight against

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powerful forces of totalitarian-style tyranny that are on the march again. Both battles have to be fought simultaneously. One should not be sacrificed for the other.

We repudiate the way of thinking according to which the events of September 11, 2001 were America's deserved comeuppance, or 'understandable' in the light of legitimate grievances resulting from US foreign policy. What was done on that day was an act of mass murder, motivated by odious fundamentalist beliefs and redeemed by nothing whatsoever. No evasive formula can hide that.

The founding supporters of this statement took different views on the military intervention in Iraq, both for and against. We recognize that it was possible reasonably to disagree about the justification for the intervention, the manner in which it was carried through, the planning (or lack of it) for the aftermath, and the prospects for the successful implementation of democratic change. We are, however, united in our view about the reactionary, semi-fascist and murderous character of the Baathist regime in Iraq, and we recognize its overthrow as a liberation of the Iraqi people. We are also united in the view that, since the day on which this occurred, the proper concern of genuine liberals and members of the Left should have been the battle to put in place in Iraq a democratic political order and to rebuild the country's infrastructure, to create after decades of the most brutal oppression a life for Iraqis which those living in democratic countries take for granted – rather than picking through the rubble of the arguments over intervention.

This opposes us not only to those on the Left who have actively spoken in support of the gangs of jihadist and Baathist thugs of the Iraqi so-called resistance, but also to others who manage to find a way of situating themselves between such forces and those trying to bring a new democratic life to the country. We have no truck, either, with the tendency to pay lip service to these ends, while devoting most of one's energy to criticism of political opponents at home (supposedly responsible for every difficulty in Iraq), and observing a tactful silence or near silence about the ugly forces of the Iraqi 'insurgency.' The many left opponents of regime change in Iraq who have been unable to understand the considerations that led others on the Left to support it, dishing out anathema and excommunication, more lately demanding apology or repentance, betray the democratic values they profess.

Vandalism against synagogues and Jewish graveyards and attacks on Jews themselves are on the increase in Europe. 'Anti-Zionism' has now developed to a point where supposed organizations of the Left are willing to entertain openly anti-Semitic

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speakers and to form alliances with anti-Semitic groups. Amongst educated and affluent people are to be found individuals unembarrassed to claim that the Iraq war was fought on behalf of Jewish interests, or to make other ‘polite’ and subtle allusions to the harmful effect of Jewish influence in international or national politics – remarks of a kind that for more than fifty years after the Holocaust no one would have been able to make without publicly disgracing themselves. We stand against all variants of such bigotry.

The violation of basic human rights standards at Abu Ghraib, at Guantanamo, and by the practice of ‘rendition,’ must be roundly condemned for what it is: a departure from universal principles, for the establishment of which the democratic countries themselves, and in particular the United States of America, bear the greater part of the historical credit. But we reject the double standards by which too many on the Left today treat as the worst violations of human rights those perpetrated by the democracies, while being either silent or more muted about infractions that outstrip these by far. This tendency has reached the point that officials speaking for Amnesty International, an organization which commands enormous, worldwide respect because of its invaluable work over several decades, can now make grotesque public comparison of Guantanamo with the Gulag, can assert that the legislative measures taken by the US and other liberal democracies in the War on Terror constitute a greater attack on human rights principles and values than anything we have seen in the last 50 years, and be defended for doing so by certain left and liberal voices.

D. Conclusion

It is vitally important for the future of progressive politics that people of liberal, egalitarian and internationalist outlook should now speak clearly. We must define ourselves against those for whom the entire progressive-democratic agenda has been subordinated to a blanket and simplistic ‘anti-imperialism’ and/or hostility to the current US administration. The values and goals which properly make up that agenda – the values of democracy, human rights, the continuing battle against unjustified privilege and power, solidarity with peoples fighting against tyranny and oppression – are what most enduringly define the shape of any Left worth belonging to.

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