



Moving Forward Together

Bill Clinton, Founder of the Clinton Foundation and 42nd President of the United States

A little more than 15 years ago, progressive leaders from around the world gathered in the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance hoping to develop the policies and politics necessary to unleash another age of progress, discovery, and creativity.

The entire world was at a crossroads. Since the end of the Cold War less than a decade earlier, the forces of interdependence had swept the globe, with new scientific and technological advances revolutionizing the ways people lived, worked, and interacted with one another. Borders were starting to look more like nets than like walls, with the lines between foreign and domestic policy growing increasingly blurred. We knew that the coming century held both great promise and great peril and that either way we would rise or fall together.

The idea behind the Florence Conference on Progressive Governance, like all of our Third Way meetings, was simple. We believed that as progressive leaders, there was value in learning from one another's experiences and in creating networks of support for policies that would spur growth, lift lives, and raise standards both within our nations

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and around the world. We believed in shared opportunity and shared responsibility, and we rejected the false choices that too often pollute dialogue and obstruct smart governance—business or labor, economy or environment, private sector or public sector. We believed that the role of government was to empower people with the tools to make the most of their own lives and to create the institutions and conditions for them to succeed. We believed that results meant more than rhetoric, so we focused on what works.

This approach had served us well in the United States during my presidency, when we added 22.9 million jobs, moved 7.7 million people from poverty to the middle class, and enjoyed the first four consecutive budget surpluses since before the Great Depression.¹ I thought I could share some of the lessons I had learned about dealing with the domestic pressures and political challenges I had encountered when enacting my policies, which many of my colleagues in Florence were currently facing. I also knew I could learn a lot from leaders like U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who had innovative ideas about how to lead their own countries and the international community into the 21st century.

Our meeting in Florence was spirited and substantive, as we worked late into the night at the Palazzo Vecchio on issues ranging from inequality to security to human rights to trade. And while we certainly didn't find an answer for every question, we came away with a unifying vision that respected our interesting differences but recognized that our common humanity and shared future mattered more.

The past 15 years have shown us that the world will only continue to get smaller, spreading and intensifying the impact of both the positive and negative forces of interdependence. And we've learned again and again that the most effective way to increase the positive forces—and contain and reduce the negative ones—is through networks of creative cooperation.

Take, for example, the impressive growth across much of sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades. With help in part from international policies in which aid, trade, and investment reinforce one another—like the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative and the United States’ African Growth and Opportunity Act—many African countries have increased their capacity, strengthened their institutions, and improved the quality of life for their people. Sub-Saharan Africa’s average real GDP growth rate was 4.9 percent from 2000 to 2008, and today it remains one of the fastest-growing regions in the world.² We’re all better off for it, and we must continue to find ways to help the countries that have not yet reached their potential.

The evidence is clear all over the world that wherever people are pursuing inclusive politics, economics, and social policy through networks of cooperation, good things are happening. Yet too much of our world is still plagued by economic inequality and divisive identity-based politics. That’s why I believe the lessons of the Florence conference are still relevant today, and I hope the rising generation of progressive leaders will carry the torch and continue to work together toward a future of shared participation, shared prosperity, and shared values.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Clinton". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Endnotes

1 Center for American Progress, “Power of Progressive Economics: The Clinton Years” (2011).

2 McKinsey Global Institute, “Lions on the move: The progress and potential of African economies” (2010).