

SPECIAL COVERAGE



| The past and the present of the European socialist (PES) family. Discussion during a PES preparation meeting ahead of an EU council, on 29th April 2017 between the current Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa and now former French President, François Hollande

TO REINVENT OR DISAPPEAR

by Pascal Dewilt

Never before since the introduction of universal suffrage has social democracy been so weak during peacetime. Today, the socialist parties face a collapse in public opinion as well as continuing trend which places them on the fringes of power. If the socialist family fails to return to their socialist *fundamentals* then they seem destined to disappear at the beginning of the 21st century.

The history of each political party within Europe features various political and electoral highs and lows. The highs follow the lows, and vice versa. Yet, if you consider the contemporary electoral and political indicators for each of the socialist parties, some would argue that there are "troubled times" ahead for the socialists before they can rise again.

I do not agree with this analysis however particularly when you consider that the electoral and political performances of social democrats around Europe have never before fallen so low during peacetime. Several parties have failed to achieve any significant results and are nearly insignificant: 6.3% in Greece; 6.6% in Ireland; 5.7% in Iceland; 5.7% in the Netherlands; 7.6% in Poland; 7.4% in France. I fear though that these results represent merely the tip of the iceberg. Over the last few years a number of social democratic parties have achieved their worst results since the Second World War (Austria, Dutch-speaking Belgium, Cyprus, Spain, Finland, Luxembourg, Sweden, and Switzerland). So what does this mean? This situation is nothing more than a manifestation of the serious identity crisis which has threatened to destabilise the electorate who typically support socialist

movements. In truth, there is a stark question which must be answered: who will support the socialist cause now and why?

For nearly 75 years, the social democrats have been considered

But the economic, geopolitical, and ideological changes we have witnessed over the last 30 years cannot be understated and the socialists have suffered. The social or welfare state continues to suffer savage cuts in many mem-

parties has been severely affected and, at the same time, continues to undergo permanent changes in terms of the international division of labour.

When viewed from this perspective it is understandable why many social democratic parties moved initially to defend the rights they had campaigned to secure before conceding ground and allowing provisions which saw the economy liberated once more and the de-structuring of social and welfare rights. In general terms, the socialist parties were unable to provide any alternative measures to prevent such action. Even towards the end of the 1990s, when the balance of power at a European level was more favourable to them, the budget was all too meagre. As a result, it is hardly surprising that we now face the present situation.

In general terms, there remains an alternative for socialist parties and their supporters. They can transform into a grouping of liberalist parties on economic issues and shift towards the left on societal issues to create a form of libertarian liberalism.

to be a major political force - one which seeks to defend the rights and claims of the working classes, first and foremost the rights of the workers. Indeed, no-one questions their contribution to society; their left-wing interpretation of Keynesian economics helped to forge the modern welfare state and introduce public regulation.

ber states. Public regulation of the economy is now in decline once more or is being misappropriated for anti-Keynesian purposes, as evidenced by the introduction of fiscal "golden rules" for countries within the European Union. As recent events have demonstrated, the social foundation which underpins many social democratic

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liberal parties, green parties or centrist parties which form part of the New Republic in France. It is even more difficult to understand how such social democratic parties would sustain any substantial support from the electorate.

only a limited number whilst other inequalities continue to increase? How can we re-evaluate existing policies and public policy where the virtues of public regulation have been so undermined?

extra-institutional level, most notably through trade union action. Today it is common for political action to be supranational in nature. Nevertheless, the difficulties cannot be ignored. In order to survive the social-democratic family must nevertheless address these difficulties head-on. If the social democratic parties make no attempt to implement renewed socialist fundamentals then it is difficult to envisage how they can claim any added value when compared to other parties within national and European political systems. The important sections of their voter base – prospective – will continue in their political reorientation. First and foremost, some may abstain, some may vote for the radical right-wing or the radical left-wing, or opt for a libertarian or centrist party.

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The other alternative would be to reconsider their underlying socialist fundamentals to better reflect the realities they face in the 21st century. How can we defend the working and middle classes in a society which includes such unbridled capitalism? How can we introduce and implement social reforms that promote equality for

These are complicated issues. The issues are complicated further because the most effective policy framework for social policy was the democratic nation-state framework. The framework allowed the state to intervene at an institutional level - within parliament in the discharge of their responsibilities – and on an



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