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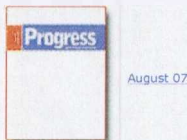
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February 07

Comparative decline

How Europe's social democrats can regain the initiative

17 September 2007

While the Labour party in the UK has recently been experiencing something of a Brown 'bounce', elsewhere in Europe, the prospects for social democracy appear far from rosy. A raft of recent European elections have seen incumbent social democrat governments lose elections - in Sweden and Germany - or fail to break through at the ballot box - in France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Of the old EU-15 member states, left-wing parties hold power at the national level in only three - Britain, Spain, and Italy (if we count the Olive Tree coalition). By contrast, right-wing parties occupy office in seven of the 15, and of the four remaining countries in which right- and left-wing parties are in coalition together, the right is the majority partner in all but one, Austria.

As the leader of an incumbent social democratic party with three successive national election victories to its name, Gordon Brown is a rarity among today's European statesmen.

In the coming months, Policy Network will seek to lead a debate on the reasons underlying the remarkable electoral decline of the centre-left in Europe, following its brief political renaissance in the 1990s. While the causes are complex and inevitably vary from country to country, however, two crucial lessons can already be drawn for Europe's progressives.

First, the left's current difficulties need to be seen in the context of wider popular disillusionment with mainstream political parties in Europe. Mounting anxieties over the social and economic consequences of globalisation, the increased social, cultural and ethnic heterogeneity of European societies, rising inequality, growing immigration and further EU integration - often felt most keenly by 'traditional' social democrat supporters among the working and lower-middle classes - have led increasing numbers of Europe's citizens to reject the programmes of mainstream parties of all political persuasions, whose solutions appear inadequate to their concerns.

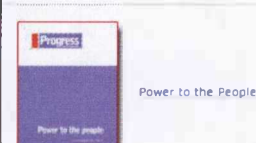
This can be seen in the decline in electoral turnout across the EU, and in the phenomenal growth in recent years in popular support for nationalist and populist parties of both the extreme left and right - including the German Linkspartei, the Flemish nationalist Vlaams Belang, the Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark, and Jean Marie Le Pen's Front National in France. Often standing on an anti-immigration, anti-EU platform, these parties give voice to growing popular resentment of Europe's political elites, who are seen as increasingly distant from the lives of ordinary people. If the centre-left is to regain the political momentum, it is essential that it finds ways of reconnecting with these disillusioned and insecure voters.

Second, just as the Labour party in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, along with many other European social democrat parties, had to undergo a significant period of political and intellectual renewal in order to become electorally successful, so a new period of revisionism is now required in order to meet a very different set of policy and political challenges in the 21st century.

The cost of failing to do so is made clear by the political scientist Wolfgang Merkel in his recent study of the performance of six European social democrat governments in the past two decades. According to Merkel, those 'traditional' social democrat parties such as the German SPD and French Socialists who rejected the modernizing path adopted by the Nordic social democrats and Britain's New Labour, 'increasingly failed to achieve the traditional social democratic goals, such as full employment, high employment rates, social justice, and justice between gender and generations.' He continues: 'This appears to be the paradox - if not the tragedy - of French and German social democracies.' Standing still is no longer an option for progressives in today's rapidly changing world.

In November, at an event in London jointly hosted by Policy Network and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the thinktank of the German SPD, senior social democrats, advisers, and academics from across the EU

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will come together to discuss ideas for the renewal of the centre-left in Europe.

As one of its leading political and intellectual figures, the new British prime minister is ideally placed to take a lead in this debate. And, as he seeks a renewed mandate against a revived if currently faltering Conservative opposition, it is a discussion that is as important to have on this side of the Channel as it is in the rest of the EU.

Mark Day is head of communications and programmes at Policy Network.

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