

Intervention by the Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis

at the meeting of the Socialist International

There is a feeling of perplexity and self-doubt among democratic socialists. The question that occupies many is this: in what sense do the democratic-socialist and the conservative-liberal parties differ? Our macroeconomic policies have common themes. The central policy reference in both camps is the market. The "line in the sand" that used to distinguish capitalists from socialists – state ownership of the means of production – no longer has much relevance. Income redistribution policies such as tax policies are hard to convey, inspire little and their impact is not particularly evident. In all countries "Third ways" are in evidence. The differences between the "flexible and effective state" and the "weak liberal state" are to most citizens hard to discern.

Despite all this there is still a very fundamental difference between social democrats/socialists and neo-liberal conservatives. The latter are for unregulated competition which, both on the national and global level, create growing inequalities and social disorganization; whereas the former are for the type of regulated competition which combines economic productivity with social solidarity. It is precisely this difference which may enable social democrats/socialists to pursue effectively a set of goals which concern directly all European citizens - goals such as the deepening of democracy and the improvement of the quality of life.

More precisely a first domain of concern is that of institutions, of democracy and politics, those functions of society, which promote and ensure participation and freedom.

It is a well-known fact to all of us that the behavior and reactions of and ever-larger segment of the population are increasingly determined by mass media. Public opinion is to a large extent managed and guided. What is our response to this phenomenon? Uncertain and hesitant. The concentration of power is steadily increasing and democracy is in danger of becoming just an ornamental cover for an authoritarian society whose protagonists are not democratically accountable.

Another much-discussed issue is civil society. The central element of a civil society is the link between individual initiative and collective responsibility. Citizens are today increasingly free but also increasingly irresponsible towards others and towards society as a whole. The behavior of citizens depends on the way that the education system, and society at large, deals with individualism, solidarity, and social work. The ideology of individualism continues to dominate and dictates that social responsibility is a weight to be jettisoned in order to succeed socially and professionally. The humanitarian ideology of socialism plays second fiddle in shaping our society.

The education system is an important tool for establishing freedoms and reversing existing balances. After decades of government by socialist parties social barriers continue to endure. They are the result of how open to all children or restricted the education process is, and the result of the quality of schools and

teachers. They are also the direct result of the extent to which we are willing to confront corporatist mentalities, and attitudes that attempt to precondition and “freeze-frame” life in a given framework.

A second domain to which we must turn is that of the quality of life, the quality of our rights, the extent to which both the human and the physical environment in which we live advances our values and especially advances human development. There are many counter-examples here. Some result from the fact that an increasing number of fields of human endeavor fall under the prerogatives of the market and thereby profit becomes a defining factor in human relationship even where it did not use to be. Violence on TV ensures better ratings. Violence also sells more children's toys. As a result our children not only get used to violence but also seek it in the real world. We stand hesitantly in front of such phenomena.

We also stand hesitantly in front of phenomena that relate to the protection of consumers, the protection of our health. Whether mad cows represent a danger, whether industrial oils can be used in stockbreeding are questions that were largely debated on the basis of whether they involved gains or losses for companies and economies. Our citizens feel unprotected because the voice of reason that demands absolute protection with no compromises is seldom heard by those responsible.

I have drawn these examples from our daily lives. There are others that relate to important characteristics of the world we live in. Our cultural identity, our cultural behavior, the image and

understanding that we have through culture is becoming homogeneous, restrictive, and identical in an increasing number of countries. Globalisation opens up new opportunities for many but also destroys or pushes towards oblivion cultural elements that express the sensitivities of some. But for us socialists, bringing out the distinctiveness of people was and continues to be an element of freedom.

I will finally mention a field from which many problems, as yet unsolved, have sprung: town planning. Satellite cities, dreary council estates, abandoned city centers are all manifestations of a certain economic rationality that has completely neglected the fact that we build for people, and therefore that what we build must improve opportunities in society. City ghettos and school ghettos bring class discrimination in through the back door, discrimination that our economic policies claim to abolish.

International relations and human rights is the last area that I will mention as a candidate for a stronger intervention by socialist parties and governments. The silent acceptance of our inability to pursue our values in the midst of economic and national expediency does not imply that we should stop trying. We can organise our effort and pursue it in other fields. We will have made important steps if we can establish in practice that in supranational fora such as the European Union commercial and non-commercial relations and especially gun sales require the adherence to international conventions, the respect of human rights, and the application of a process which guarantees peace, such as the recourse to the international Tribunal in the Hague.

Conclusion: to the question whether democratic socialism can become a reality in the era of globalisation, the answer is simple. Socialism is a never-ending process. It involves improving everyday life while attempting to address as well as possible both old and new problems. But in order to improve life for citizens today it is necessary to continuously expand the scope of action. Just like the functioning of markets expands, so must the socialist response expand to embrace all of life's domains. This is the only way to make our utopia, our vision, specific, a reality and a way of life.