

The Social Democracy To Come



by Poul Nyrup
Rasmussen and Udo
Bullmann

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT** 
STIFTUNG

Social Europe Occasional Paper

No. 11
October
2016

THE SOCIAL DEMOCRACY TO COME

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN A TRANSFORMATIONAL WORLD

Nichts kommt von selbst. Und nur wenig ist von Dauer. Darum - besinnt Euch auf Eure Kraft und darauf, dass jede Zeit eigene Antworten will und man auf ihrer Höhe zu sein hat, wenn Gutes bewirkt werden soll.

Nothing comes out of nowhere. And very little is lasting. Therefore – focus on your strength and on the fact that every period demands its own answers, and that one has to be up for this, if any good is to come of it.

Willy Brandt, Congress of the Socialist International, Berlin, 15 September 1992

INTRODUCTION

Willy Brandt pronounced these inspiring words less than a month before he died, after an exceptional life spent fighting for progressive values in Germany, Europe and around the world. He reminds us of something essential that we should always retain in our hearts and minds - the best response to yesterday's challenge may not work today, let alone tomorrow. He equally tells us, and did so throughout his life and in all his actions, that the best responses for us to provide, as progressives, are the more difficult ones: those that merit fighting for.

On our journey towards what we hope will be a better, fairer and peaceful world, we have now arrived at the crossroads between the old post-war world and a new world.

The basic issues we have to fight for are constant - social justice, solidarity and equality, sustainability, freedom and democracy as well as peace. But the relentless and accelerating pace of change in its manifold and radical forms, the often unpredictable occurrence and the sheer scale of multiple crises and the ever greater pressure on pretty well everything we progressives have built and achieved over many decades are unprecedented.

Over the last three decades, humankind has sparked off powerful and far-reaching dynamics of change in the economic, social, cultural, and political fields. These dynamics, their interactions and the impacts they have on society and on our planet, are taking us into an ever faster world where increasingly transformative developments are self-generating. They are filled with powerful new risks as much as with fascinating new opportunities for our future.

From a political perspective, mastering this transformative world for the better through a value-based system with equality, social justice, freedom and peace at its core, is becoming incredibly complex - and increasingly hard to achieve.

It is only by inventing a new form of transformational progressive politics that social democrats will, in future, be able to secure this value-based system within what has already become a super complex transformative world. Otherwise, by failing more and more in this mission, social democracy runs the risk of further structural regress turning it into a political minority movement and ultimately into a marginal form of political expression.

The sad and deeply worrying fact that, in most of our countries, fewer and fewer young people are keen to engage with us and to look at social democracy as an essential part of the politics of the future should be a brutal wake up call for all of us.

A TRANSFORMATIONAL WORLD

The world we are living in is undergoing a deep metamorphosis. This process, which is going way beyond mere globalisation of trade and investment, has indeed produced impressive benefits. With hundreds of millions of people lifted out of extreme poverty, there can be no doubt of the immense potential for worldwide progress that globalisation entails.

However, in the absence of sufficiently progressive global rules, globalisation is also exacerbating some of capitalism's most devastating effects. Indeed, it often seems as if our political systems and practices - nation states, current forms of regional and global integration, and organised civil society - are proving increasingly unable to manage global change for the benefit of citizens. While this inability to manage current transformative change is bad news for all political movements - progressive, conservative, and centrist alike - it is particularly challenging for present day social democracy.

Social democracy, as a political movement, owes its existence to the realisation that history rarely if ever works out to the benefit of ordinary people unless it is guided and shaped by purposeful and value-based political intervention. The early days of the industrial revolution, when the few reaped the benefits of economic modernisation while the many endured hardship and exploitation, certainly taught us this lesson. Yet, social democracy managed to rise to the challenge. Our success - embodied in achievements like the welfare state - changed the course of history and indeed enabled the industrial age to develop by putting it on a socially sustainable basis.

This promise of empowering citizens and communities vis-à-vis history is the fundament of our political identity. Our vision has therefore always been more ambitious and far-sighted than that of our rivals. Social democrats do not long to adjust society to dogmatic imperatives but aim to shape history itself so that society becomes master of its own destiny. Yet, as soon as we fail in this aim, our identity is lost. Worse still, unless social democracy succeeds in delivering on its promise of shaping history, society is exposed to the erratic movements of human development without protection and thus threatened in its very existence. Unfortunately, this seems to be exactly what is happening today as part of the ongoing metamorphosis.

In today's world economy, for instance, financial and economic dynamics are increasingly unpredictable and capitalist crises are ever more devastating and frequent. Economic change seems to become more disruptive by the hour. Frequently, we witness even well-functioning and profitable industries shut down, thousands of workers lose their good quality jobs, and are pushed into unemployment or precarious work instead. As national systems of re-distribution are proving increasingly inadequate - not least because of booming global tax avoidance and evasion - society is more and more split between winners and losers. While conservatives might get away with arguing that markets are inevitably prone to occasional processes of structural change and painful consolidation, social democrats are perceived as credible only if they succeed in effectively combatting the ensuing social hardship.

The digital revolution provides another case in point. The simultaneous emergence and proliferation of new, ground-breaking technologies, such as mobile broadband, big data and artificial intelligence are fundamentally reshaping our societies and economies. Besides producing tremendous gains in economic efficiency and productivity, though, such technological advances have already begun to unravel established economic and labour market models. Too often, painful transitions from 'old' to 'new' jobs and loss of societal security are the result of this. While neo-liberals might argue that such disruption is the necessary companion of a desirable 'reshuffling of the cards', social democrats are trusted only if they manage to ensure that nobody is left behind.

The confusion our civilisation is undergoing is compounded by a new world (dis-)order. Although a world liberated from the final shackles of colonialism and the confrontation between east and west opens the way to global justice and shared prosperity, the current state of the world is adequately described as inherently unstable and insecure. The continuing refugee and migrant movements, Islamic terrorism, and the renewed possibility of large-scale armed conflicts illustrate this regrettably well. The world's incapacity to eradicate the causes of increasingly massive migratory and refugee movements across the planet, and its despairing inability to manage these crises where they do occur, does not only generate enormous human suffering, but offers a particularly dismal picture of collective political failure. While nationalists take this sorry reality as a pretence for fetishizing the nation state as the sole bulwark, social democrats can only save their integrity by delivering results in their collective and cross-border fight for human decency worldwide.

The longer these transformations are allowed to continue unchecked, the more the ultimate disaster becomes a real possibility. After decades marked by the large-scale pollution of ecosystems and unbounded exploitation of natural resources, especially in developing countries, the laws of nature are beginning to strike back. Deadly storms destroying homes and livelihoods, droughts killing livestock and crops, and fresh water becoming the source of conflicts are no longer part of science fiction but real events. While some might just close their eyes in the face of climate change, social democrats know that it is time to act when society - whose well-being is what gives us meaning - is at risk of being annihilated.

THE CRISIS OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

Observing how our *raison d'être* - a prosperous and peaceful society of equals - is threatened in its existence, social democracy can only survive by launching an offensive and taking on the fight. We believe that it is high time to embark on this journey. As Western-style democracy is on the defensive and sham democracies are gaining ground across the world, we fear that many citizens around the world have lost faith in the very idea of open societies and democratic politics catering for a decent life and a better future. Instead, populism and nationalism are gaining ground, culminating in events of historical magnitude like Brexit. Major nations around the EU are becoming increasingly autocratic and undemocratic, and in the US the openly xenophobic and protectionist discourse of populists such as Donald Trump occupies the public space.

In our view, there are unmistakable signs that the populists' rise is structurally rooted in the multiple failures of politics to master the transformative dynamics of globalisation. Moreover, the fact that these new, destructive political forces are often drawing large-scale support from those who used to be with us - the vulnerable and the marginalised - illustrates how the crises of social democracy and democratic societies are deeply intertwined. Unless the social democratic promise of shaping history according to the needs of society is revived, we fear that history might regress and the world fall back into the dark ages. Let us therefore renew social democracy for the sake of protecting and defending the very ideals of a humane society and a just economy that caters for us as well as our grandchildren.

What such a renewal means in detail is not for us alone to say. Especially in a movement that is - despite our recent demise - as large and heterogeneous as ours, defining the specificities can only be for progressives at large to decide. This requires more than articles in journals but innovative, open, cooperative, inclusive and continuous processes – these remain to be properly designed and put into place. What we are bringing forward here therefore are simply suggestions.

The task at hand will undoubtedly be delicate. Most of all because it obliges us to realise our own mistakes and to learn from them. In our recent history, we have failed too often in delivering the results needed to foster trust in the societal ideals we defend, e.g. by pursuing such goals as equality and social justice through limited reforms that were, out of belief or necessity, pursued in cooperation with the Right and watered down as part of our entanglement in such uneasy alliances. Sometimes, our experimentation with Third Way and *Neue Mitte* politics has even been taken as a sign of us having lost our distinctive political ambition of shaping history and instead becoming a political current like any other that tries to sell mere tinkering with the symptoms of history as a success. To make matters even worse, our success is often hampered even when we pursue the right intentions with the necessary determination. Repeatedly, we have to acknowledge that we are unable to deliver results at a time when policy-making is becoming a nightmare of complexity involving multiple layers of government - and often proving to be an ineffective and inefficient endeavour. Our fight for global tax justice, where progress is painstakingly slow, is here a case in point.

Against this backdrop, we concur that social democracy requires a paradigm shift in order to survive as a political movement and thereby to preserve our model of an open, just, and democratic society. Below, we seek to provide some initial signposts as to what a successful future of social democracy might look like.

RENEWING PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION

To facilitate a renewal of social democracy, we regard two achievements as of paramount importance.

Firstly, social democracy must revive its ambition of shaping history instead of enduring it – even though the transformations we are living through today are probably more powerful, comprehensive, and dangerous than we could possibly wish for. This requires us to be in possession of the conceptual tools that allow us to manage the complexity of the world and guide us in the right direction. In so doing, our aim must not be to stop or reverse the developments we see today. Rather, our aim must be to change the logic of globalisation so that its benefits can be reaped while minimising its negative effects.

For us, the concept of sustainable development has what it takes to become a cornerstone of our endeavour by outlining a holistic and essentially normative agenda of societal renewal, economic modernisation, and environmental preservation. The all-embracing ambition behind this concept is more than evident in recent formulations of its full scope:

“Sustainable development calls for a world in which economic progress is widespread; (...) social trust is encouraged through policies that strengthen the community; and the environment is protected from human-induced degradation [...and thus formulates a vision of...] socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth”¹.

In this reading, the idea of sustainability stipulates that three interrelated dimensions must be balanced in the development of human societies and it provides guidance as to which principles this entails:

- **social sustainability:** a cohesive society based on mutual respect and well-being for all and where social bonds are constantly renewed through policies that integrate newcomers, foster social mobility, and empower citizens through democratic participation.
- **economic sustainability:** a productive economy that is managed with a view to fostering stability, where the long-term prosperity of society takes precedence over short-term gain and where forms of exploitation are countered by respect for the principles of democracy in economic processes.
- **environmental sustainability:** an organisation of economic and social structures in ways that make them durable given the limits of nature combined with management of the environment that seeks to minimise damaging interference with ecosystems and thus allow for their constant regeneration.

We concur that following the logic of sustainable development allows progressive policy-makers to lift globalisation to a different, much more benign level than is currently the case without neglecting its potential positives. The synergetic pursuit of inter-related objectives it encourages, i.e. social, economic, and environmental sustainability, is by no means a political innovation in itself. Yet, by making such a balancing act - embracing complexity instead of neglecting it - the starting point of policy-making, it holds the advantage of ensuring that the simultaneous nature and conflicting

¹ Jeffrey Sachs (2015): The Age of Sustainable Development, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 3

dynamics of globalisation are recognised and effectively managed. As such, it makes economic growth, environmental protection and social progress inseparable elements of one and the same struggle instead of presenting them as trade-offs or dilemmas.

Secondly, we need to rebuild our ability to fight effectively for our ideals. To impose the logic of sustainable development on the transformations marking the age of globalisation, collective action by progressive actors is of paramount importance. At a time when national politics is losing its ability to deliver results, we need to understand this exercise as necessarily a transnational project. And we continue to believe that such collective action is possible - despite social democracy's recent demise in terms of support and membership. Arguably, citizens worldwide - irrespective of their location, social class, or ethnic background - palpably share more concrete interests than ever before, as they are affected by the same forces of globalisation. Social democrats need to activate such a collective consciousness and build a transnational community that is cohesive and effective enough to become the driver of sustainable development.

Building this community will require a new balance between, on the one hand, ensuring that progressive political party organisations build up a stronger capacity and legitimacy to define political programmes, plans or positions, and, on the other hand, guaranteeing that these are the result of continuous, inclusive and participatory processes. In other words, while party organisations must retain their traditional role in integrating social struggles into coherent political programmes, they also need to evolve into becoming networked exchanges, permanently providing multiple and open, easy-to-access channels for citizens and civil society that wish to engage, to contribute, to exchange, and to mobilise. These channels can be structured around trade unions and non-governmental organisations, as well as around think tanks and academia, or various forms of thematic platforms that can be created outside - but nevertheless linked to - formal party structures.

This will establish a new permanent connection between progressive political organisations, progressive civil society, and ordinary people, as it must constantly be ensured that the former do not move away from the preferences, concerns, preoccupations or fears of the latter. Parties unable to meet these expectations in the future will be increasingly ignored and rejected, especially by younger generations.

Such processes should become the norm at all levels of political life, from local to global. At the European level, it will also require a strengthening of the Party of European Socialists (PES)' capacity and role in defining political vision and ideas in close collaboration with national parties and with its European parliamentary group. This should not only concern policies of European dimension. The PES should also provide new and powerful platforms upon which our national parties can work actively together on national policy experiences and solutions, in order to pool and share knowledge and best practice on the ground. The European parliamentary group can contribute to such an approach by strengthening and structuring relations and interaction with national parliamentary members. Ultimately, this should generate far greater policy coherence between the national and European levels, which will be crucial for transformational progressive policies to succeed.

Progressives also need to re-build their global capacity to work together. Social democrats must start to take progressive global dialogue much further and build more effective and engaging global platforms of political cooperation with other progressive forces around the world. This will not, in the foreseeable future, lead to common programmes, but any progress in the direction of shared political endeavours is more than welcome. There is no doubt that, in the longer run, this will become a vital imperative.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

The shaping of a progressive agenda fit for the transformations induced by globalisation - in short: transformational politics - lies ahead of us. We do not pretend, at this stage and within the format of this contribution, to provide a blueprint for such an agenda. We can, nevertheless, suggest several levels of transformational policy which, in our view, are relevant and necessary for future social democracy.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 1 - Fair and managed globalisation

As a general principle, progressives must ensure that economic systems become firmly *re-embedded* in society in order to improve the quality of life of all human beings, and at all levels from local to global. This applies particularly to certain sectors of economic activity, first and foremost the globalised financial industry. It requires significant step-changes in strengthening global governance structures and rules. Progressives need to demand a proper global balance between capital and labour, as we did a long time ago in our nation states. Globalisation must cease to be a playground for multinationals, as politics and citizens need to claim their due. Building on existing institutions and provisions, such as trade agreements, the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), as well as creating new global instruments such as a World Financial Register to track down global tax evasion, the terms on which fair and politically managed globalisation can be taken forward into the future must be considerably re-defined.

What difference would this make: *Financial activity disconnected from real economic activity will be strictly limited and regulated, and speculative, potentially destabilising, financial transactions will be properly taxed. Offshore tax centres will gradually be hollowed out, bringing back nearly seven trillion euros into the regulated economy, to serve real economic activity and ensure fair taxation. International trade – in line with core international labour standards - will no longer thrive on the basis of unfair social competition as fair trade will become the norm.*

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 2 - Sustainable development

A progressive value-driven vision of society needs to rest on a universally shareable and engaging concept. This is best provided by a contemporary version of *sustainable development*. This already benefits from the existence of the highly relevant, albeit still perfectible, United Nations agenda for Sustainable Development Goals 2030, which have the ambition of 'transforming the world'. By defining strong objectives across economic, social and environmental dimensions of development that are relevant to developed and less developed countries alike, the UNSDGs agenda provides an historic opportunity to anchor a truly progressive vision of human development within national policy-

making worldwide. However, its implementation will be uneven, at best, unless it can be reinforced in at least three ways: Major economic powers need to take its implementation seriously and show the way, not least the EU, where a strong sustainable development strategy is long overdue. The UNSDG agenda should be a regular part of G20 summits, measuring and discussing progress in implementation; nation states across the globe should be encouraged to fix quantitative and measurable national targets for each goal and sub-goal; this should be combined with incentivising the financial resources necessary to implement the goals, notably through United Nations Development Programme and World Bank funding and lending in developing countries, and through appropriate investment strategies and instruments in developed countries - as should be the case with the EU's European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI).

What difference would this make: *The 193 member states of the United Nations will pursue a common transformational agenda of development for a broad range of shared goals such as full employment, the eradication of poverty and hunger, or sustainable modes of production and consumption, to be achieved by 2030. The EU will be a leading and inspiring force on the path towards this transformed world, improving the quality of life of its own citizens and demonstrating that the pursuit of genuine sustainable development leads at the same time to improved economic performance, social cohesion and justice, and a preserved environment.*

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 3 - Economics of transformation

We cannot save our way into a new model of sustainable development. We must re-invest and re-ignite the economic engine, threatened by secular stagnation, not least in Europe. Eight years after the start of the crisis, European economic policy continues to fail in bringing full-scale recovery. The eurozone is not yet out of the woods, as several economies remain fragile after years of austerity, and its development into a proper economic and monetary union is at a standstill. Productive public investment, including not only investment in infrastructure but also social investment, needs to be fundamentally rehabilitated within an ambitious European investment strategy that is vital for sustainable growth. In Europe, this will require progressives to openly and actively challenge the prevailing economic policy paradigm of stability for its own sake. Even a stronger EFSI as now proposed by the European Commission is only part of the answer, as national public investment also needs to be boosted. However, the prevailing fiscal rules have long since disconnected narrow budget policy concerns from wider economic and social objectives, and need to be reformed into an instrument for growth and jobs. This is otherwise driving the euro area into the grave and with it the EU as a political project.

What difference would this make: *Far higher investment and stronger economic growth will create millions of new jobs and lift tens of millions of Europeans out of poverty and social exclusion within the next decade. Targeted investment will turn Europe into the world leader for renewable energies and energy efficiency, and significantly raise the quality of its public education systems.*

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 4 - Beyond GDP

The *measurement of economic performance and social progress beyond GDP*, being of central relevance to policy-making, must be put in line with the need for a new model of sustainable development. While this is not foreseen within the UNSDG agenda, we believe that such an approach requires a radically different way of measuring prosperity and well-being. The

recommendations of the 2009 Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report² on this matter remain fully valid and should be used as a basis for an overhaul of the European Union's measurements and, by implication, should become part and parcel of its sustainable development strategy. Other parts of the world should be encouraged to follow suit.

What difference would this make: *Emphasis will be shifted from measuring (and caring about) economic performance to measuring (and caring about) people's well-being, including education, health or social interconnections. Public policies and trade agreements will be assessed on a range of criteria encapsulated in this measurement, thereby averting the current problem that public policies and regulations can encourage forms of economic growth and wealth creation that lead to more inequality, not less, to more environmental degradation, not less, or to lower well-being, not greater.*

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 5 - Quality of existence

Quality of existence - defined by a whole range of factors such as access to decent childcare and education, work-life balance, quality employment throughout the life cycle with decent pay and social rights, equal rights regardless of gender identity, race, or sexual orientation, access to quality health services and social and cultural activities, but also physical security, or good governance and sound democracy - must become the standard for all. Progressives must reject a world in which a true quality of life remains, at best, a distant hope for the vast majority of people in the world, and even for more than half of Europeans. This means that we need to give a renewed meaning and relevance to the concept of equality, beyond the notion of material wealth distribution and its level - although this obviously remains an essential part of the equation. We have to change the prevailing paradigm. Quality of existence should not be conditioned by economic growth, or treated as a cost factor, but regarded as a major asset for a prosperous society. Countries with a high and broadly shared quality of life among their inhabitants are typically among the best performing nations economically. But how to move from words to political action? The concept of quality of existence needs to turn into a strong political concept, targetable and measurable. In some of its constituent dimensions, this is already the case and easy to achieve. But in others, much remains to be done. Quality must be made measurable in all the various dimensions, from education via employment to health: an operational political goal that progressives can then use and commit to reach out for.

What difference would this make: *Over time, the terms of the public debate and of political discourse will change, and with them the overall purpose and assessment of what is good public policy in the interest of ordinary people. The complexity of policy-making has to be brought down to essentials - understandable, easily measurable and tangible - that are relevant for people at large in their daily lives. This will favour progressive politics over those that, as we know, actually reduce quality of existence instead of improving it, whether these politics are promoted by the traditional right or by populist parties. By anchoring the quality dimension in a whole range of policies, expectations will change and such policies will be far more effective in reaching their ultimate goals within the overall concept of equality for all.*

² Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, 2009 (www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr)

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 6 - Fair wealth and earnings distribution

One of the most striking and intolerable consequences of economic and financial globalisation has been the sheer explosion of wealth concentration and earnings inequality across the world and within major economic power zones. These developments have been extensively exposed in recent years by leading experts, such as Joseph Stiglitz or Thomas Piketty, and show that inequality is embedded in our social structure. The search for a significant reduction requires us to examine all aspects of our society against the quality of existence policies set out in level 5. More concretely, a fair distribution of earnings and a more ethical and reasonable share of wealth must essentially be achieved, among others, by changing tax policy approaches at national, European and global levels in favour of a pro-equality income and wealth distribution agenda. This should be supported by putting a complete stop to highly damageable tax evasion and avoidance practices and thereby also raise the tax income and public resources needed for transforming our economic and social systems as outlined above.

What difference would this make: *The combined policy actions of changing tax policy in favour of greater equality in income and wealth distribution, and ending of illegal tax evasion and legal tax avoidance practices will have a powerful, multiple effect on social equality. Most importantly, it will provide essential new resources to finance the transformation from today's unsustainable to a future sustainable global society.*

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL 7 - European Union reloaded

It is widely recognised by now that the European Union, as a political project, is in its most troubled phase since its inception. There is a striking similarity between the threats confronted by social democracy and those haunting the EU, and this is no coincidence. Hence, the destiny of both appear to be far more intertwined than we may have thought in the past. The pressing challenges deriving from the migratory crisis should not overshadow the fact that EU integration is at risk of failing because it is ceasing to be regarded as a path to an improved quality of life for people at large. Instead, it can be too easily portrayed by anti-Europeans of all sorts as key to the existential problems a majority of Europeans confront daily. Many of us engaged in European politics know to a large extent how the EU needs to change up several gears in order to regain trust, whether in its political functioning, or in its policy orientations and choices. However, we remain unable to project a truly common vision and political agenda of transformation across the social democratic family essentially because we fail to bring together all our forces - national and European - into a common, clear and articulated, strategy for change. This is an old problem, caused by a range of different reasons; but now, time may truly be running out, for us and for the EU. We must rapidly come together on this, leapfrogging our differences in order to act together across all European institutions, including the Council of Ministers. Only then can we incarnate a sufficiently appealing and convincing alternative.

What difference would this make: *In the simplest words, the EU will be seen once more by a broad majority of people as part of the solution, not of the problem. Instead of appearing as the face of hardship, of social division, of mass unemployment, of distant and undemocratic policy-making, the EU will be a natural part of governance in the pursuit of greater welfare and security for all. By embracing a new vision of sustainable development and of furthering the quality of life, the EU will find new acceptance and meaning. By becoming an engine for investment, for new and fairly shared prosperity, for quality jobs, for economic and social re-convergence among countries, regions and people, European integration will stop being questioned and nationalistic populism will recede.*

THE SOCIAL DEMOCRACY TO COME

If social democrats are to play a leading role through future years and decades, there is a lot of work ahead. There is nothing less at stake than the future of humankind.

In a hundred years from now, most humans may live quite miserable lives on a conflict-ridden, depleted and polluted planet dominated by omnipotent and super-wealthy elites across the world. In light of recent global change, this is no longer scaremongering, but a real possibility. If we fail to demonstrate soon enough that another future is possible and in the making, people may end up losing their hope and ideals, and, if too many of them do so, progressive alternatives will be abandoned as fantasy.

To prevent this, we need to pull all our forces together now, and fight for our ideals more than we ever did. This will not be a defensive fight, but an offensive and assertive one.

For this, we need a strong and sufficiently common progressive narrative and vision, not just piecemeal political action here or there. It is a strong narrative and vision that will help people to understand that we offer a route to the future that they will want to take, and that will give full meaning and direction to our everyday struggles.

As we started this text with Willy Brandt, we would like to end it with him and this timeless truth he gave us: “What we need is the synthesis of practical thinking and idealistic striving”.

We can only hope that this contribution will be commented on and enriched by others across our political community, and that our political organisations at national and European levels will share our sense of urgency to move on.

About Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and Udo Bullmann

Poul Nyrup Rasmussen was Prime Minister of Denmark from 1993 to 2001 and President of the Party of European Socialists (PES) from 2004 to 2011. He was the leader of the Danish Social Democrats from 1992 to 2002 as well as a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2009.

Udo Bullmann was elected as a Member of the European Parliament in 1999, where he is serving on the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee in which he acted as the coordinator of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) from 2009 to 2012. Since 2012, he has been leading the German SPD delegation in the European Parliament. He has been a member of the SPD executive committee since 2015.

© Social Europe 2016

Published in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Europe Office

Social Europe (SE) is a leading digital media publisher. We use the values of 'Social Europe' as a viewpoint to examine issues in politics, economy and employment & labour and are committed to publishing cutting-edge thinking and new ideas from the most thought-provoking people.

Since its founding, SE has published thinkers and decision-makers of the highest calibre including Nobel laureates, global leaders and internationally acclaimed academics as well as some of the best young talent.

www.socialeurope.eu