



Real equality in France: but how?

The French Socialists have put in place a key building block for the Presidential campaign, but they will have to make some tough decisions to avoid the pitfalls which lie ahead

Antoine Colombani

With around 18 months until the next French presidential election, Martine Aubry's Parti Socialiste is back in the business of serious policy thinking.

Over the last five years the party spent most of its energy and time in internal strife, neglecting the opportunity to put itself forward as a credible alternative to Nicolas Sarkozy and his Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP).

But on November 9, better late than never, the executive council of the Socialist Party put in place one of the main building blocks of their agenda for the 2012 poll. They made a commitment to achieve "real equality" between French citizens.

With President Sarkozy's unpopularity now hitting record levels, the party has a reasonably promising chance of winning the 2012 presidential election. Yet the "real equality" road map is reawakening old ideological disputes within the party, not to mention the fact that its impact is diluted by the uncertainty over party leadership. The PS candidate, who will ultimately choose the platform on which to lead the socialist troops into the election, will not be selected until after a primary campaign starting in Spring 2011.

The "Real equality" programme

Unsurprisingly, the text itself is propped up by the reassertion that French socialism stands for reducing inequality and narrowing the gap between rich and poor. The requirement of fairer societal outcomes is presented both as an objective in itself and a precondition for real equality of opportunity. Freeing up talent and setting the conditions for more or less equitable meritocratic competition are not considered enough.

This reflects a critique of the shortcomings of third way politics that is widely shared today by traditionalists and modernisers alike and rooted in a longer tradition of social democratic thinking.

As is often the case, what follows is an odd synthesis of the various ideological strands that make up the party. For example, giving a nod to mainstream social democratic thinking over the past 15-20 years, there is much talk of devising new policies for social investment, with specific focus on human capital – from childcare to higher education – and the prevention of social ills.

Following on from this – aside from a bout of nostalgia for public monopolies in the energy sector – the role of the state is described as that of a "strategist" whose role is to anticipate and ensure that desired results are achieved, rather than act as a direct provider. It is also stressed that public services should be made more efficient and tailored to individual needs with more power given to users.

However, the agenda on "real equality" often falls short of translating these ideas into concrete policy proposals. In this respect the French socialists are no different from their European counterparts: they do not lack the concepts, but remain very timid when it comes to turning them into policies that are both credible and transformational.

On the one hand, it is true that the party line is now clearer on a range of major policy areas – such as education and health – where the need for profound structural reforms, not just more public funding, is explicitly recognised.

Yet, on the other hand, this agenda is reflective of a recurrent temptation to pander to left-wing habits of drawing up catalogues of public spending measures. As critics of the document have pointed out, the proposals are not accompanied with a precise estimate of their cost.

It is assumed that they will be financed, by introducing extra taxation on capital, reversing Sarkozy's tax cuts for the rich – which hardly suffices to make a credible strategy given the current strain on public finances – and through "growth".

Coincidentally, a previous agenda-setting document of the party – focusing on the definition of a "new model of development" – already gave a hint as to how the PS intends to boost economic growth. The answer was mostly the same: more spending.

Refusing to face up to new realities

There is no doubt that France needs to tackle a chronic lack of public investment in the fields that matter most for future economic growth (such as R&D and higher education), but the socialists still refuse to acknowledge the need for structural reforms.

This refusal to face reality is most blatant in the field of employment. For social democrats, solving the chronic structural unemployment that France has faced for a quarter of a century should be the first priority. In particular, youth unemployment, now at over 23 per cent, is unacceptably high.

In response, the PS suggests new schemes to help young people into employment, an increase in the number of university graduates and more and better student grants. Such proposals are of course most welcome – albeit expensive – but the French socialists remain silent on the heart of the matter: the exclusion of whole categories of the French population from the labour market.

The problem lies not only in such conspicuous silence on certain key issues, but also in the refusal to acknowledge the full implications of new proposals. It is indeed excellent news that the PS wants to offer progressive responses to the new social needs of our time – amongst others, the desire for more autonomy for the young, the reconciliation of family and professional life and the need to organise social care for the elderly – but they need to match these intentions with credible policy programmes.

If we take social care for the elderly as a case-in-point, it is evident that the social democratic answer is to organise provision by public means instead of leaving the elderly to the spheres of the market and the family. Yet such a political response will be expensive. Therefore if the PS is serious about making this a priority it should explain to voters where and how the corresponding financial resources will be found and, unavoidably, what other demands will have to be put on hold.

Moving beyond wishful thinking

In a recent statement, Martine Aubry sensibly claimed that if re-elected, the left “will not be able to do everything, but will do whatever it can”. The trouble is that a part of the French left, emboldened by the recent strikes against a flawed pension reform, now believes – or at least pretends to believe – that it can build the next welfare state while also maintaining the old one unchanged.

In its introduction, the document on “real equality” tells the tale of a glorious march towards economic and social progress that was fatally halted by the combined forces of globalisation, financial capitalism and neoliberal ideology. It almost feels as though we could simply go back to the golden age by reversing those nefarious forces. Such a narrative is delusional. It eschews the deep economic, social and demographic changes that equally contributed to the obsolescence of the French social model, such as changes in the family structure, increasing life expectancy, the rise of knowledge and service-intensive economy, or the new individualism, to name just a few.

If “real equality” is a philosophy that inspires the PS’ electoral platform, the most likely outcome once in office is that the interests of the current French social model “insiders” will continue to take precedence and also that, at some point, a “break” in reforms will be announced in a repeat of François Mitterrand’s 1983 austerity U-turn. In other words policies addressing the new social needs – such as the universal provision of childcare, new grants to foster “youth autonomy”, or an egalitarian social care system – will have to wait.

Some will no doubt be quite comfortable with blaming the disappearance of electoral promises on external forces such as the “dictatorship” of financial markets. But the truth is that equality in the 21st century will not be achieved by going back to the world of the early 1970s and resuming the incremental construction of socialism. This is why drawing up lists of concepts based on wishful thinking is simply not enough. What is needed, aside from more work on the concrete details of policies, is the setting of priorities based on what fairness most urgently requires here and now.

Choosing priorities is not just a matter of appearing credible to voters and being honest about the unprecedented strain on public finances that the country is now facing. It is also at the heart of any serious reflection about social justice.

As the 2007 election debacle demonstrated, waiting until the presidential candidate is chosen will be too late. It is therefore up to Martine Aubry to make a choice: she can either follow the self-styled “left-wingers” who mainly emphasise the preservation of the threatened *acquis sociaux*, or embrace a narrative of social transformation adapted to our times. The second option, if accompanied by bold choices in economic and social policy, would be both more realistic and de facto much more radical.

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