

The **crisis** of the democratic left in Europe

Denis MacShane

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The democratic left in Europe faces its gravest crisis in more than half a century. With the return of Silvio Berlusconi to power in Italy there now are only three of the 27 EU member states – Britain, Spain and Portugal – which are controlled exclusively by one of the member parties of the Party of European Socialists. In other countries like Germany, Austria and the Netherlands democratic left parties are in coalition. The election of nationalist xenophobic populists as Mayors of Rome and London underline the decline of the democratic left's electoral base.

Ten years ago the position was very different. In 12 of the then 15 EU member states, including Germany, France, Britain, Portugal, Italy, the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and in eastern Europe, the centre-left ruled.

No one has yet undertaken an analysis of why in the space of less than a decade the centre-left has been expelled from power. In each

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country, political analysts and party officials focus on national explanations. Little effort is made to seek Europe-wide reasons for the left's decline even as European nation states and their electorates come to resemble each other in a way never before seen in history.

Across Europe democratic left parties face turmoil as they seek a renewal of ideology, values, membership and leadership. Labour's difficulties in Britain need no underlining. In France, while the socialists pick up the anti-Sarkozy protest vote in regional and municipal elections, there is no settled programme or leadership capable of replacing the right in the right to control of the presidency and parliament. In Germany, the SPD are shrinking back to winning at best a third of votes in key elections. The arrival of a left populist nationalist party in the shape of Die Linke – an amalgam of leftover east German communists and the angry left always opposed to social democracy's historic compromises whether under a Willy Brandt, a Helmut Schmidt or a Gerhard Schroeder – has given Europe's key nation a giant left protest party. As with the French Communist party between 1950 and 1981, Die Linke may block the chances for some time of German social democracy winning outright control of the federal government.

For Britain, the crisis of the European left is almost precisely reflected in the difficulties that the post-Blair Labour party faces. In examining what is not working and what has gone wrong in Europe it will be possible to reveal some of what needs to be done in Britain. Achieving renewal and infusing party members and winning electoral support is infinitely more difficult when in government. Many centre-left parties can win a second election and even a third mandate. But to extend hegemonic electoral control for more than 10 or perhaps a dozen years means a party completely reinventing

itself while its key leaders are trapped in the difficulties of government administration and have no time to think.

New thinking is urgently needed. The parties of the right in power in Europe have shown and are showing themselves spectacularly incapable of managing the present crisis of world capitalism or addressing in a coherent and sensitive way the new demands from today's citizens. The management of the French economy and society, which has been in the hands of a rightist president since 1995 and a rightwing government since 2002, has never been worse. Silvio Berlusconi and Angela Merkel are managers of their nations not leaders of change. The democratic left still has a better record as we can see in today's Spain or Britain. But it is no use the democratic left proclaiming its intellectual or governance superiority if it fails to win the vote to put modern progressive reformism into practice.

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Some take cheer from what happens in Australia or fondly imagine that the protectionist Barack Obama, who seems to have given in entirely to strident elements of religious conservatism in America, is the answer. Kevin Rudd certainly is one of the most admirable politicians to appear on the world scene in the 21st century. But his victory owes more to the vanity of John Howard assuming he could stay in power eternally and people being thoroughly fed up with the very rightwing nature of the Australian government. Our admiration for Rudd should be tempered by

seeing his victory as being part of the eternal alternances of democratic politics. If he stays in power as long as Bob Hawke managed then it will be time indeed to place him on a pedestal, but Britain and the rest of Europe needs to refer to its own needs and traditions rather than seek inspiration from the South Pacific.

So what is going on and why is the left in such dire straights? Ten reasons can be identified. First, there is no real 21st century thinking on the left's part to put together a coherent, convincing corps of values that voters can associate with the democratic left. Albert Camus noted that: 'for the Greeks, values were pre-existent to every action, and marked out its exact limits. Modern philosophy places its values at the end of actions.' Exchange the word politics for philosophy and Camus' indictment sums up the dilemma of the modern left. The New Labour trope that whatever works is okay is, of course, derived from Pope's 'whatever is, is right' which was the guiding philosophy for British Conservatives throughout the centuries.

For good or ill, the democratic left has to have values which make coherent sense. This is a task of deep philosophy and not the kind of hurried political science books produced by thinktanks and well-meaning professors.

Second, the democratic left has given up on culture. A love and embrace of culture, including high culture of the most difficult and challenging sort, is what marks out the big-thinking politician from just the average political plumber who knows how to get the drains cleaned again in the government system. Culture can take many forms. For the politician the most important is history, which big Conservative political leaders like Churchill or Macmillan bathed in daily. Mitterrand and Brandt were infused by history, not the least for having lived and made so much. One has a sense of the current

European left being history-lite if not history-free. Labour, for example, has ennobled a number of academics but they have been mainly sociologists or political scientists. Labour has turned its back on the great British historians, many of whom should be listened to with greater respect as we try and shape a successful politics.

Third, what has been extraordinary about the left in Europe so far this century is its almost complete indifference to the material base of society. One does not have to have had early lessons in Marxism to consider the prospects of employment and

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income for the mass of the population to be at the heart of any intelligent left political project. Yet in country after country in Europe (and here Britain is an important exception) there has been a complacent refusal to embrace any of the necessary economic reforms to put people back into work. France 25 years ago had a GDP that was 15 per cent bigger than that of the UK's and much more stable employment. France today has a GDP 10 per cent smaller than that of the UK and continues to be ravaged by mass unemployment, especially among the five million French Muslim citizens of north African descent.

Gerhard Schroeder came into power in 1998 with four million unemployed and left power in 2005 with four million unemployed. There are examples that could be followed from Spain or the Nordic countries, particularly around the theme of so-called 'flex security', but these require telling truth to power in the trade union movement and to the power of old established special interests who

will not accept any reforms that require change and movement in income distribution or in the acquired rights of those in state employment who are protected from market pressures.

But the pressure to give up on labour market reform is intense. This is related to the fourth great dilemma for the European left and that is the slow shrinkage of the trade union movement in terms of mass membership organisation. France is perhaps the worst example: huge scandals are now coming to light of how employers literally paid for the wages of trade union officials in return for high-level agreements that did not challenge the way in which French firms were managed.

But across the whole of Europe the secular decline of trade union membership has now reached such depths that there is a massive problem for any democratic left party that wants to seek support from a mass working class that is no longer unionised. The one area where unions remain strong, of course, is in public sector employment but this is outside

the field of struggle against capitalism and any improvement for public sector employees usually depends on an increase in taxes or, to put it another way, a decline in autonomous purchasing power and living standards for those not in the public sector.

There are ways of managing this but political leaders have been extremely reluctant to have a frank discussion with the trade union movement about how trade unions need reinvention and reform to once again represent the new proletariat.

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Fifth, in place of a struggle for material improvement we have a fight over identity questions. This takes its most virulent form in the debate on immigration. On immigration and xenophobia the left always performs badly when it has to go on the defensive. There is nothing that centre-left ministers can say about immigration that cannot be easily trumped by their rightwing opponents or by the more vicious anti-foreign politicians of the hard-right. There has been a great collapse in basic education on this issue. People in Britain, as in other countries, use the term immigrant very loosely. Do they mean the 300,000 foreigners studying in British universities? Do they mean the 200,000 Americans or the 400,000 French who live in Britain? Do they mean the 800,000 Poles who now shuttle between east Europe and west Europe to find jobs with more and more going back to Poland because incomes are rising and the economy is growing?

The immigration debate, of course, has been muddled by the rise of political Islamism and the failure to develop a coherent democratic left politics about the obligation to live within the framework of national identity, especially in terms of national language and shared national history and culture. The one historic mistake has been to assume that the nation would wither away. In fact, the EU has if anything seen a massive increase in the autonomy and authority of the nation state with many more nations now existing in Europe than was the case when the treaty of Rome or, 30 years later, the Single European Act were adopted. In the end, the EU consumes only one per cent of Europe Gross National Income. Ninety nine per cent of Europe's income and wealth each is spent by and within the nation state.

Sixth, of course, is the question of Europe itself. Whenever the left panders to the kind of Euroscepticism – such as one saw from

Treasury political advisers after 1997 on the question of the Euro – then far from scotching the anti-European snake it simply grows with feeding. The French Socialist party thought it could harness Euroscepticism when many of its key leaders called for a No vote in the 2005 French referendum on the former constitutional treaty. They won their vote but lost the subsequent election as anti-Europeanism does not have the sticking power as attractive politics to intelligent voters who know full well that, for all its faults, membership of the EU is now an indispensable part of being a modern European nation.

Seventh, the one area where the left has had some success is becoming the political voice of women in society. The most extreme

example of this has been Spain where the Socialist party, which to give it its full title is the Socialist Workers Party of Spain, has given up on workerism. Instead the PSOE adopted a very rigorous balanced budget approach and became the proud, confident champion of women in Spain seeking to escape from the oppression of

religion and patriarchal backwardness. The majority of the new cabinet in Spain are women. In Sweden and Denmark the leaders of the two social democratic parties likely to win back power at the next election are women and the only credible hope for a socialist victory in France will be if the socialists can unite around the contested but communicative figure of Ségolène Royal. It is important that women appointed to high ministerial or political

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rank are not token and that the feminine side of social democratic politics is fully on view. This requires again a completely different approach from the traditional 20th century masculinisation of centre-left politics in Europe.

The eighth problem the centre-left has failed to address is the futility of the binary argument between state and the market. Between the left's state and the right's market lies the most important thing of all and that is the individual human being. The left in power and in opposition focuses too much on the administration of state machinery and not enough on the complexities of individual desires and needs. The great collectivised, industrialised, almost at times militarised populations of the 20th century are decomposing into a kaleidoscope of heterogeneous individuals whose membership of groups may overlap significantly. The left, therefore, has to find a language that talks to the individual in each of us instead of writing hardwire schemes for state administration and one-size-fits-all politics if it wins power.

Ninth, although obliged at times to go into coalition, the main centre-left parties remain extremely arrogant about their exclusive rights to win and hold power. Thirty years ago, in an interesting essay Ralph Miliband was pondering on the possibility of creating a new party in Britain. This, of course, was the eternal dream of the anti-Labour rejectionists of his and succeeding generations. It has always been easier to write an elegant article for the Guardian, the *Nouvel Observateur* or the London Review of Books – or even a whole book – than to actually engage in the hard, disciplined and often compromising obligations of teamwork within the framework of a mass democratic party able to make a serious claim for power.

Miliband's imagined party, he wrote, 'would have to start with the acknowledgement that it is a grouping of people bred in different

traditions, attracted to different perspectives and even belonging to different factions. It would have a left, a right and a centre co-existing and working together in a state of permanent tension and argument.' That, of course, sounds more like a recipe for permanently being excluded from power as a party so divided will never unite the people to vote for them. But Miliband was right in saying that there cannot be one exclusive tendency within a party or within a broader political project. In that sense the necessity of coalition or at least cohabitation with other political parties has to be taken more seriously by the centre-left.

In extremis, to be sure, compromises are made and parties enter into power with coalition junior partners. But the left has shied away from the greater need to build broader political and electoral coalitions before the moment of election and do so explicitly. Instead there has been the fake search of seeking perfect electoral systems as if the form of election was more important than the content of what people chose in an election. There simply doesn't seem to be anywhere in Europe a centre-left party able to get more than 30 to 35 per cent of the vote in a first round – though this can change when there is a run off final election or, as in Britain, simply a first-past-the-post system which allows parties to win power on minority votes. Labour in 1924 and 1974 had failed to do the hard thinking about political powersharing with other parties. The result was weak administration that opened the way to lengthy right wing periods of rule. Labour should be thinking now about what happens if no party wins an outright majority in the next electoral period. This requires an open admission of cooperation and teamwork between parties as well as within parties as the precondition for the centre-left to do well.

The 10th crisis the left in Europe has failed to resolve is that of its international or global politics. Foreign policy has been the Achilles

heel of the democratic left. Instinctively anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, the left has turned on the US as the main vector of modern imperial capitalism. This has left the left entering into bizarre alliances with the enemies of democracy as long as they parrot anti-American slogans.

Yet European social democrats who have stayed in power the longest have been pro-American and pro-market. Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt were denounced as CIA and Nato lackeys. Felipe Gonzalez took Spain into Nato against the wishes of the Spanish left and much of his own party. Harold Wilson kept British troops out of Vietnam but got no electoral reward for his failure to support democracy in south-east Asia. His pusillanimity over Zimbabwe created a disaster we and, more importantly Zimbabweans, still live with.

Tony Blair is usually accused by the European left of being a poodle of Washington. Yet his willingness to use military force on behalf of foreign policy coincided with three handsome election victories. The European left is unable to speak as one on Russia or China. It is divided on whether to support Chavez's populism in Venezuela or Lula and Cardoso's patient reformism in Brazil. There is a golden opportunity to resolve some of these problems by greater cooperation in the EU and Nato. But equivocation over Russia's semi-democracy, over Iran's language on exterminating Israel and its rush to get a nuclear weapon, and the unwillingness to stop

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genocidal wars in Rwanda, Darfur, or in the early 1990s in the Balkans, suggests that the European left flinches when faced with hard power foreign policy decisions.

In his important new book, *La fuerza de los pocos*, Andres Ortega, editor of the Spanish edition of *Foreign Policy* and chief foreign commentator for *El Pais*, lists the new forces that are changing the world, notably the communications and internet revolution as well as the return of religion as a mobilising force in global political relations. He is right, but the state remains still the supreme actor. The hard-soft power debate is redundant as European social democrats have to learn to use both. But the European democratic left is lazy about thinking on security and

military issues. Tony Blair's wish that Europe should be not a 'super-state but a super-power' will never be realised unless there is more integration, coordinating, and combined European control of Europe's defence industries and military doctrines. The Royal United Services Institute and Friedrich Ebert Foundation organise an annual seminar of Labour MPs

and SPD deputies to discuss military-defence-political matters in Berlin. But in general the European left leaves hard foreign and military issues to the right to debate and define.

Others may add to this list of areas where the 21st century European democratic left, taken as a whole, has failed to address the new agenda. The spirit of 1968 hovers as we dream again of being

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realistic and demanding the impossible, or putting imagination into power. But beyond the blogs and agreeable policy seminars are hundreds of millions of European voters living complex, challenged lives limited by poverty and other oppressions. They need and deserve a new 21st century social democracy fit for purpose and able to enthuse and keep support in order to stay in power with a democratic mandate and the will – as well as the ability – to reform and be progressive.

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