

How the Left Can Rise Again

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NEWSWEEK, from the magazine issue dated Jun 8, 2009

This should be the left's big chance in Europe. Capitalism is in crisis. Growth is collapsing. Unemployment is rising, and the state is back in business. The time is ripe for the left to push a coherent alternative to the right's free-market vision of the world. But no, the classic 20th-century parties of the left —social democrats in Northern Europe, socialists in the Mediterranean, Labour in Britain— are struggling, and 20 of the European Union's 27 member states have a right-wing government head. They include Nicolas Sarkozy in France, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Angela Merkel in Germany. Among the big four EU nations, only Britain's Gordon Brown hails from the left, and he's hanging on by a thread. Even supporters of the left look back a decade or more —to Willy Brandt in Germany, Felipe González in Spain or François Mitterrand in France— to find a political giant.

In many ways the left has become a victim of its own success. Years ago, Leszek Kolakowski, the exiled Polish political scientist, defined social-democratic politics as "an obstinate will to erode by inches the conditions which produce avoidable suffering, oppression, hunger, wars, radical and national hatred, insatiable greed and vindictive envy." Now the mid-20th-century horror of out-and-out poverty has been smothered by welfare statism, and old class conflicts have been replaced by a more complex proletariat, including immigrants and part-time women workers who don't fit neatly into the white, male party ranks. There are more small businesses than unionized workers in Europe's private sector. No

wonder fundamentally antibusiness parties of the left don't know how to respond to the worst financial crisis in memory.

Today no leader steps forward. In Athens in May, the bookish head of the Greek Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), George Papandreou, brought together fellow European left leaders like France's Ségolène Royal, Spain's veteran González and Italy's former leftist prime minister Massimo d'Alema in an attempt to essay a new synthesis. PASOK is only one seat short of being able to defeat the ruling right-wing New Democracy government, which makes Papandreou the closest the left now has to winning power in Europe. But his relevance did not help focus his peers. They offered only musty rhetoric against neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as if angry denunciations of contemporary capitalism or attacks on George W. Bush would persuade voters to return to social democracy.

Left-wing candidates for the European parliamentary elections this month are united only by a lack of focus. For months, the parties of the European left have been working to produce a joint manifesto, but they cannot even agree on a candidate to head the European Commission. The left-wing prime ministers of Britain, Spain and Portugal all back the current right-wing European Commission president, José Manuel Barroso. And without a common leader, what can the manifesto offer?

It is long on critiques, short on solutions. It does not support massive Keynesian public-spending boosts, in the style of Obama, because the German Social Democratic finance minister has denounced "crass Keynesianism" —the first time Keynes has been a taboo for the European left. It does not mention nuclear power as part of the solution

to climate change because German Social Democrats thought that would upset their Green allies. Nor does it call for the abolition of European agricultural subsidies —a major cause of poverty in Africa and Asia— because French Socialists always veto any cut in farm subsidies. Every attempt to advance traditional left-wing ideals was blocked by national parties, which were worried about domestic election lobbies. The manifesto does offer one credible answer to the current crisis —a smart plan to regulate the wilder extremes of banking and finance— but in party-functionary prose so leaden that it cannot possibly generate votes.

Today, social democrats give the impression that they prefer protest to power —better a clever op-ed in *The Guardian* than an appeal to people who feel there is too much state and taxation. Typical of this is Sorbonne professor Aquilino Morelle, who wrote speeches for former French Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin. He had a lengthy op-ed in *Le Monde* in May denouncing the right and praising what the socialists had done in the last century, with not a single policy proposal for today. And Morelle is a reformer; in French terms he is almost a Blair-like modernizer.

The left's attachment to old beliefs stops a new generation of left intellectuals from offering hard answers. Royal and her rival, French Socialist Party leader Martine Aubry, join any passing street demonstration. Their personal attacks on Sarkozy may make for vivid television, and Royal's call for "radicalité" pleases militants but does not attract voters to the mainstream left. When González in Athens urged younger comrades not to flirt with the nondemocratic forces of the radical left, he was ignored as a voice from the past, made to speak late

in the evening to a hall that had been crowded to hear the glamorous Royal, but half empty when the Spaniard representing the glory days of social democracy uttered his warning.

The crisis of today's social democrats is perhaps best embodied by the leader of the party for which I currently serve as an MP: Gordon Brown. He is acknowledged as a Tiger Woods on policy, and in May he gave a master class in international economic policy at a mesmerized annual dinner of British employers in the Confederation of British Industry. British bosses are fed up with the sudden collapse of the economy, dislike Brown's tax increases and in their hearts would prefer to see one of their own, David Cameron, in Downing Street. Yet they listened in rapt silence as Brown, without notes, explained the decisions he, Obama and other world leaders had to take.

But the low poll numbers of the social democrats show that policy-wonking is not enough. Brown, like other European social democrats, cannot find the populist and personalized politics that comes naturally to his conservative rival, David Cameron, or to the likes of Sarkozy or Berlusconi. The past success of the left rested on leaders like Brandt and González, who were willing to defy conventional wisdom—that the left should stay on the left—and instead build a coalition with business interests. Both were seen as too pro-NATO, in parties still infected with anti-Americanism. Today's social democrats must also be brave enough to speak truth to the power—in their own party. They must acknowledge that their parties still claim to speak for the working class but have become small university-educated elites, composed of full-time professional politicians. They must recognize there is no longer a classic industrial working class defined by Marxist-trained party officials, and

that the trade unions have hollowed out yet still claim grandfather rights as the main ally of social-democratic parties. Most trade unionists are employed in the public sector, so when they demand more pay, they are in effect saying fellow workers should pay more in taxes to cover their raises. Social democrats must begin crafting policies with the new proletariat in mind: immigrant, female, part time and in competition for better-paid unskilled work with the nativist, white working class. While social democrats like to proclaim their internationalism, the white working class in Europe does not like foreign workers, resents the left's multiculturalism and hates globalization.

The left must embrace the goal of strong economic growth, which allows room for both immigrant workers on low pay and a fair deal for the middle class. But it is business, not the state, that creates jobs—even if it is the state that shapes social justice. Social democracy without full or nearly full employment ends up as a bitter battle over shrinking revenue. Even in today's antibusiness, antibanking climate, social democracy has to learn to become pro-business.

Explaining why open trade, a.k.a. globalization, is good for European social democracy is a task most on the left shrink from. It is easier for them to go misty-eyed about Venezuela under the red beret of Hugo Chávez. The latest fashion is to admire China as a successful market economy run by the left, with little notice of Chinese gulags or the harassment of democracy activists. Like those who admired Stalin for building socialism in the 1930s, many of today's social democrats tend to admire the wrong people for the wrong reasons, undermining their standing with mainstream voters. They campaigned against the Iraq War, and saw voters reject the war's opponents, like Gerhard Schröder, and

reelect leaders like Blair or Berlusconi, who fought to remove Saddam Hussein and let Iraqis hold elections.

It's not hopeless for the left. Europe's leaders may be nominally conservative, but they are following quite orthodox social-democratic, mixed-economy models. The state is back and it is being run by the right, but no rightist party has a clear majority either. Sarkozy has to govern by bringing in smart socialists like Bernard Kouchner, Immigration Minister Eric Besson and anti-poverty czar Martin Hirsch. In Germany and the Netherlands, social democrats are in an uneasy coalition with the center-right. In Britain, Tory leader David Cameron dare not call for tax and public-spending cuts because recentering the conservatives means adopting much of social-democratic policy.

The dawn of the left could start in the Nordic states, long the leading innovators on the social-democratic model. In Sweden, Denmark and Finland, younger women are being pushed into party leadership and are serious about winning power, not just making protest speeches. In Denmark, a young mother of two, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, has been pushing her party back into position to win after the nation's prime minister quit to become NATO secretary-general. As a woman who is a former researcher at the European Parliament, fluent in three languages and married to a British citizen, Thorning-Schmidt represents the new face of the social democrats. They must reoccupy the center, either alone or in alliance with the powerful centrist parties —the Liberal Democrats in Britain, the Democratic Movement in France, the Free Democrats in Germany— to defeat the ruling right-wingers. They must forge coalitions for progressive and reformist politics with parties that dislike the pro-rich economics, the moralizing against single moms and,

often, foreigners, as well as the Euro-skeptic nationalism on offer from European conservatives.

Social democracy broke away from classical liberalism more than a century ago because liberals were protecting narrow middle-class interests at the expense of workers and a wider, more generous vision. Reforging that coalition is the best way back to power. But this time, social democracy has to acknowledge that history may not be on its side unless it sloughs off old skins; puts economic growth first and redistribution second; and learns that if the left treats as enemies the business community, goods made overseas and workers with another passport, it may please its militants but will continue to be rejected by voters.

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