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STILL A FUTURE?**

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Has Social Democracy Still A Future?

Rob Manwaring

These are generally dark days for the mainstream centre-left political parties. In many of their traditional homes they are out of office and languishing in opposition. In the Netherlands, Germany, France, UK, and Australia for example, the electoral fortunes of the left are bleak. Indeed, the term 'pasokification' was devised to describe the eventual end of a centre-left party – the Greek PASOK party. Of course, this is not a uniform picture and in New Zealand, Portugal, Spain and some of the Nordics, the left are in power, although mostly in coalition. Indeed, even when they are in office, they are faced with ongoing problems - as experienced by the recent government crisis faced up by the Swedish social democrat Prime Minister Stefan Löfven.

Yet, the centre-left are facing a structural problem in their overall vote share. In my recent book, 'The Politics of Social Democracy' (Routledge), I map out the structural electoral decline of the centre-left. Because across many advanced industrial societies, there is an apparent decline in the vote-share of the centre-left. From the 1980s-2010s, the vote share has declined across all the traditional groups of centre-left parties, including in Western European, the Nordics, the Mediterranean, and also the Anglo-Labour group (UK, Australia, New Zealand). To give but one example: In Australia, when Bob Hawke swept to power in 1983, he picked up nearly 50% of the vote share. At the recent 2019 defeat, where Labor were actually expected to win office, they managed 33% of the vote. In the recent work of Benedetto, Hix and Mastroiocco, the declining electoral fortunes are linked to a range of key factors, notably declining manufacturing sectors.

THREE SCENARIOS: TELOS, ANEMIA, AND LIGHTNING

Given these difficult times, what future or futures do centre-left parties face, especially confronted with the rise of populist and radical right challengers? Rather than offer a single, path-dependent view of the future of the centre-left, in my book I outline three main potential scenarios, which I call respectively 'telos', 'anemia', and 'lightning'.

In the first, 'telos' scenario, the future looks bleak for many centre-left parties. The core reason is that some writers, like Chris Pierson, remind us that there is something of a 'law of diminishing returns' in the centre-left project. When the first Labour and socialist parties were launched over a hundred years ago, many of them had an avowedly socialist goal – to replace the dominant capitalist economy - albeit through parliamentary means. Since that time, the shift away from socialism, to social democracy (and the Keynesian welfare state), and then through to its 'third way' iteration, has meant a slow and steady dilution of seeking radical egalitarian outcomes. Modern Labour parties have embraced a globalized economy, and seek modest, incremental welfare reforms, they have become professionalized machines which alienate their 'traditional' working class vote base. In this scenario, unless there is some deviation from this path of telos, it is likely other parties will displace them.

A second scenario is one of 'anemia'. In this scenario, the future of social democratic parties is tied more closely to the other ideological traditions that it might link with. The anemic patient is one that is low on iron, and then needs fortification from other sources to be 'healthy'. In my review of social democracy, there is a compelling case that in and of itself, social democracy has been a predominantly economic project. Moreover, it has often relied on other ideological traditions, at times social liberalism, nationalism, and even conservatism to offer a compelling political project. The future of the centre-left might well depend upon which other traditions it can successfully mesh with – for example environmentalism and the calls for a 'green new deal', or feminism, and a much more concerted effort to reduce the gender pay gap and tackle the scourge of male violence against women. For some, including a writer like Chantal Mouffe, the answer might be to appeal to a left 'populism', although the failure of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn might check this call. In sum, a newly fortified social democracy might well find new patterns of electoral appeal.

LIGHTNING: CAPITALIZING ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

The third scenario is described as 'lightning'. Here, we might think of the centre-left project linked to wider theories of social change, in particular that of 'punctuated equilibrium'. In this view of social change, many countries undergo long periods of stability, and then there is a rupture or significant social and political change, before a 'new normal' then takes hold. In the history of social democracy, we can identify a number of moments of punctuated equilibrium which have indeed had lasting systemic and social change. In these periods social democrats have often been the first to introduce new political institutions to achieve their longstanding goals to civilize capitalism, redistribute resources, wealth and power, and protect workers. After the Second World War many countries turned to the centre-left to rebuild their nations, the emblematic NHS in the UK, or the Curtin/Chifley governments in Australia. Or, after period of authoritarianism, the turn to the PSOE in Spain, saw a significant period of economic and social catch-up. We might also include the 'third way' of the 1990s and 2000s, with the Blair, Schröder, and Prodi governments, seeking to achieve a 'renewal' of social democracy. In this view of change, social democrats might well then be able to capitalize on the global COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, in speeches from Keir Starmer in the UK, or Anthony Albanese in Australia, there are analogies drawn between post-war Labour governments, post-war reconstruction and imagining a post-COVID society. However, a revival of social democracy would require some concrete institution-building, such as a new set of political and social institutions to tackle ongoing inequality and exploitation of vulnerable workers. However, it is far from clear across the centre-left party family if there is a coherent enough new political project underway to revitalize their electoral fortunes.

Rob Manwaring is a senior lecturer at Flinders University. He researches in the area of centre-left political parties, and his new book, 'The Politics of Social Democracy: Issues, Dilemmas and Future Directions for the Centre-Left' is published with Routledge.

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