What is Social Democracy?

An introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Social democracy, or socialism, is now the world’s predominant political movement. Of all the global political federations, the Socialist International (SI) has the most affiliated parties and is far larger than, say, the Liberal International or the Centrist Democrat International (which brings together various Christian Democrat parties). Even communism is no longer a dominant international political movement since its collapse in Eastern Europe. Social democrats are now in government in many countries, either as the sole ruling party or as members of a coalition.

Social democracy is a major political force and has been so for some time. However, this is not to say that it is the most powerful political movement. We shall return to consider the power and influence of social democracy later in this article. Before doing so, we consider its origins and history, and look at some of the currents of thought within the movement. It is also appropriate to consider the question of nomenclature. The use of two different terms – social democracy and socialism – can be seen as somewhat confusing. In theory, there is a difference. In practice, however, the distinction has faded to become almost negligible. The terms are often used interchangeably. Moreover, some countries use ‘social democratic’ to refer to parties or ideas which are actually very similar, if not identical, to those termed ‘socialist’ in another country. We shall also return to this point later.

ORIGINS

The roots of social democracy can be traced back to two major revolutions in ‘modern’ Western European history. The French Revolution of 1789 cleared the way for political views which focus on the interests of society, rather than those of the king or the church. The people became the basis for the sovereignty of the state, and for the government within that state. This enabled political movements such as liberalism to develop, followed somewhat later by social democracy.
opportunities presented by existing political systems (e.g. by taking part in elections or sitting on local government bodies), or whether all efforts should be directed to the putative revolution. In fact, those who pushed for participation in the existing system did not see this as a substitute for the revolution, which they believed would still be inevitable once capitalism collapsed. In the meantime, however, participation would enable them to further the cause of socialism while also bringing about some improvements, albeit minor, for the benefit of the working class. The struggle for universal suffrage (‘votes for all’), which involved collaboration with the Liberals, is an example of the politics of ‘small steps’. This development within socialism was termed ‘revisionism’ or ‘reformism’. The Revisionists contended that several of the principles and beliefs of Marxism were fundamentally flawed: capitalism, for example, would not merely collapse under its own weight. The German Eduard Bernstein can be seen as the major theorist of revisionism. He believed that social democracy should not pursue revolution, but should press for reforms in order to improve conditions for the working class. The term ‘reformism’ is therefore usually applied to the more practical aspects of revisionism, with a strong emphasis on those reforms which would be achieved through the existing democratic process, i.e. in parliament.

The First World War formed a turning point within socialism, in more ways than one. Previously, the general view even within the socialist movement was that the working class need not concern themselves with disputes between national states. Workers faced exactly the same problems no matter where they were, and should show solidarity with each other across national borders. Indeed, it was believed that this international solidarity could – and would – prevent a major armed conflict. This was not the case, and once hostilities had broken out, the socialists did support the national war effort, albeit sometimes grudgingly.

After the First World War, and in some countries even before, the general acceptance of Reformism within the workers’ movement had prompted the communists to form their own breakaway parties. They rejected the policies of reform, small steps and the acceptance of parliamentary democracy. They continued to believe in the overthrow of the established order through revolution and in the subsequent ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (a term used by Marx).
over the past fifteen years. Today, the social democrats regularly form part of the government of almost all European countries, and in a number of cases are the sole party in office.

A complete account of the development of social democracy in the various European countries is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that there were indeed marked differences, which were apparent in terms of rhetoric, use of symbols, the terminology of official policy statements, etc. One relevant factor was that the political competition, and particularly communism, made use of the terms and concepts which derive from the common past, before the split between social democracy and communism. The official name of the Soviet Union, for example, was ‘the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. The French Parti Socialiste gladly calls itself socialist, not least because the French communists adopted the name Parti Communiste Francais, thus making the difference between them clear. In other countries, the term ‘social democracy’ is preferred: the German SPD is the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands. The British Labour Party eschews both terms, but does describe itself as ‘socialist’. Nevertheless, all three parties are members of the European PES, a name which is construed variously as Party of European Socialists and Party of European Social Democrats. Both names are now official. In general, one could contend that the term ‘socialist’ sounds somewhat more radical than ‘social democratic’. However, the choice of nomenclature is more the result of historical factors and/or the mood of a party at any given moment, rather than a reflection of any deep-seated ideological differences.

IDEIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Social democracy started out as a political movement which expected a revolutionary change in social relationships, and indeed actively worked to bring about such a change. Following the (seemingly inevitable) collapse of the capitalist system, the means of production would become the communal property of all (i.e. the state) and in a society of equals, everyone would ‘work according to his ability and receive the rewards according to his needs’. People would be elevated through education, and the estrangement that capitalism had cre-
ated between the person and the product of his labour would be abolished. Socialism would thus create better people.

However, the capitalist system did not collapse, and it was only gradually, through a succession of small reforms, that the workers’ lot was improved (partly due to the efforts of the trade unions). Universal suffrage – votes for all – was introduced, somewhat earlier in some countries than in others. A start was made on the development of a system which would later become the ‘welfare state’ (although not at the initiative of social democrats in every case). The first social democrats cautiously took up public office, first at local level but then at national level in several countries. The ideological basis of these developments was provided by revisionism/reformism. The idea of the revolution was abandoned, and parliamentary democracy was accepted as the framework within which political aims must be pursued. The social democrats (or socialists) placed a strong emphasis on collective arrangements which would improve the position of the working class. Healthcare, education and pensions were often organized collectively, through the state. The state, previously seen as the ‘enemy’, now became the most significant channel through which solidarity could be achieved. At this time, equality and egalitarianism remained a key objective.

Between the two world wars, one major problem was the mounting international economic crisis which began with the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The stagnation in world trade and the resultant recession served to increase unemployment throughout Europe to unprecedented levels. Of course, this seriously affected those people who were entirely dependent on work for their income. The economic problems also had an adverse impact on the social and political climate. Of course, this was not the sole reason for the emergence of fascism in Italy and Germany, but it undoubtedly played a significant part. In Germany, the social democrats’ position had already been compromised by the collapse of the Weimar Republic and they were unable to offer adequate political resistance to the rise of Hitler’s fascists. We need no reminder of the terrible consequences.

The Second World War represented yet another major turning point. It became impossible for social democratic parties to develop their regular activities (and indeed it had been impossible for them to do so in countries such as Spain and Germany even before the war). As countries were invaded by enemy forces, normal political life was suspended indefinitely. Social democrats were unable to operate freely in any of the occupied territories.

After the war, attempts were made to broaden the appeal of social democracy to include groups other than the working class. At first, such attempts were largely unsuccessful, although social democratic parties did form part of the government in many countries, and in some cases were the sole ruling party. Throughout Western Europe, social democracy became an established and accepted political force, particularly once the dictatorships in southern Europe (Spain, Portugal and Greece) had been deposed.

The period immediately following the Second World War was not only one of reconstruction, in which the social democrats enthusiastically participated, but was the period in which the welfare state was established in large parts of Western Europe. Social democracy played a major role in this development. It had experienced a surge in support after the dominant political system of the inter-war years (‘laisser faire’ capitalism) had been discredited by the stubborn economic crisis of the day. The ‘interventionist’ principles espoused by the American economist John Maynard Keynes, whereby the government should actively stimulate demand by accepting a budget deficit, were very much in line with social democratic views. Moreover, since the war had destroyed much of the production potential of almost all European countries, it was necessary to embark on a planned and structured reconstruction process in which scarce resources would be distributed by central government. This made it almost impossible for free market forces to prevail. This combination of factors provided a strong filip to social democracy, with its emphasis on collective arrangements and the role of government within a planned economy.

During the post-war period, three themes were central to social democratic policies:
- Socialization of the means of production.
- Planned economy and government control of the economy.
- Social security and social equality.
In practice, little was accomplished with regard to the socialization of the means of production. Even where in power, the social democrats quickly came to accept the existing division of property. It was indeed relatively convenient to do so, since progress was being made on the other two points. The electorate itself was gradually changing. The traditional ‘working class’ disappeared; new groups emerged and secularization took hold in the traditional middle classes, whereupon they too were amenable to social democracy. The socialization of the means of production, a firm Marxist principle, was not appropriate to these developments. Nevertheless, many European countries arrived at a compromise supported by the social democrats in the form of the ‘liberal welfare state’, in which marked economic growth would provide for full employment, the incomes of all workers would rise, and an ever more comprehensive set of social provisions could be established to offer protection to the more vulnerable members of society. To make a very long story short, a mixed system emerged. Economic development was determined by market forces, while the government took responsibility for social security provisions so that no one need fear the financial consequences of illness, unemployment or old age.

This system held up reasonably well until the 1970s. The oil crisis once again brought about economic stagnation, negative growth and skyrocketing unemployment. New issues, such as environmental concerns and widespread criticism of the consumer society, had to be addressed. Social democracy had no ready answers. The Keynesian interventionist economic policy now seemed out of date. The welfare state was rapidly becoming seen as unaffordable, since the number of people claiming financial support was far greater than foreseen. This problem was partly due to the readily accessible, ‘low-threshold’ nature of the provisions, and partly due to the simple fact that more people are likely to seek financial help in times of economic decline and rising unemployment. Liberalism, with its monetary policy, lower taxes and promises of a smaller government apparatus, seemed to provide a better solution to the problems. There were further complicating factors: the war in Vietnam, international security and the related nuclear question, for example. These issues severely strained the transatlantic sympathies of many European social democratic parties.

The 1980s were marked by the emerging trend of ‘individualization’, particularly in western society. People came to regard themselves as individuals rather than part of a collective state, a view which is clearly diametrically opposed to the social democratic principles of solidarity and collectivism. When the communist regimes of Europe fell into discredit and finally collapsed in the early 1990s, so did the idea that society can be artificially ‘engineered’, and that governments should be the ones to do so. The failure of communism also had an adverse effect on the appeal and credibility of the social democratic message.

In response to these developments, social democracy amended its message in a number of respects. It did so to a far greater extent in some countries (Great Britain) than in others (Austria), but the general trend was the same. The policy of communal possession of the means of production was now officially abandoned (although it had long since been abandoned in practice). The social democrats further accepted that market forces should be allowed to determine economic development. In terms of social policy, the emphasis now shifted from egalitarianism and equality to non-discrimination and equal opportunity, and from the safety net of social security to reactivation and the acceptance of personal responsibility. The industries traditionally earmarked for nationalization (public transport, utilities, etc.) would continue to be privately run according to market principles, albeit subject to terms and conditions imposed by the government. By the beginning of this decade, it was difficult to find a social democrat who did not accept the market as a governing mechanism for the economy, just as it was difficult to find a liberal who was still in favour of abolishing the welfare state. In many respects, social democracy and liberalism had slowly but surely converged.

Liberalism and social democracy are both political movements which can attribute their existence, at least in part, to the French Revolution. Over the course of the years, the two movements have often opposed each other, but there have also been many points on which they have been united: the introduction of universal suffrage is just one example. While social democracy fared particularly well during the immediate
post-war decades, liberalism has taken the political fore since the 1980s. Although social democrats form the government in many countries, and may well be able to look forward to doing so in several others in future elections, it cannot be claimed that social democracy is the most powerful political movement in the world. In the most powerful country of all, the United States, social democracy as such barely exists at all. The current American government is formed by the conservative wing of the Republican Party. In Europe, liberal principles now seem to dominate the political debate. The social democratic movement is large and hence influential: that much is beyond doubt. However, it is not the most powerful political movement.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

There are several international social democratic organizations, of which the two most important are the worldwide Socialist International (SI), and the Party of European Social Democrats/Socialists (PES), which organizes social democracy in the European context.

SI

The Socialist International is, in its own words, the ‘worldwide alliance of social democratic, socialist and labour parties’. The Socialist International in its current form was founded in 1951, although there had been various predecessors both before and after World War II. Its membership comprises 161 political parties or political organizations. The SI is an alliance of autonomous parties and is therefore not entitled to make any binding decisions on behalf of its members. Its main forum is the Congress which convenes once every three or four years. In the intervening periods, the Council meets every other year. The current President of the SI is George A Papanreou, leader of the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK).

The Secretariat of the Socialist International is based in London. The e-mail address is: secretariat@socialistinternational.org

PES

The PES was founded in 1992 at a special European congress held in The Hague. The PES wishes to become a fully-fledged party at European level. The PES currently has 33 full members, being social democratic parties from the 25 European Union member states, plus Norway,
Romania and Bulgaria. There are five associate members, and a further five parties which have been accorded ‘observer’ status.

According to its statutes, the aims of the PES are:

- to strengthen the socialist and social democratic movement within the European Union and throughout Europe,
- to develop close cooperation between national parties, national parliamentary factions, the social democratic representatives in the European parliament and other social democratic organizations,
- to determine joint policies for the European Union and to produce a manifesto for European elections.

The senior forum of the PES is the Congress, which convenes every five years. In other years, there is a meeting of the Council. A meeting of national party leaders takes place three or four times each year.

That the PES is not yet a political party in its own right is demonstrated by the fact that the European policy programme is binding on the PES faction in the European parliament, but not on the national social democratic parties. Moreover, both the candidate lists for European elections and the campaign manifestos for European elections are produced at national level.

The current president of the PES is Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, former prime minister of Denmark. The secretariat is based in Brussels. Its e-mail address is: info@pes.org.

**European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity**

In January 1993, the social democratic parties and political foundations from EU countries founded the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity in order to support the transformation and democratisation processes in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

Serving as a platform for co-operation between social democratic parties, organisations and personalities, the European Forum aims to contribute to the development of social democracy in these regions. The European Forum unites 11 social democratic foundations and 18 social democratic parties within its supervision body; the Steering Committee.

The Secretariat of the European Forum is based in Amsterdam.

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NOTABLE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

Social democracy has produced many politicians who have enjoyed prominence in their own countries. There are also a number of notable social democrats, past and present, who have achieved international standing. Short biographies of some of the most notable social democrats of the post-war period are presented below.

WILLY BRANDT

Willy Brandt was born as Herbert Frahm in Lubeck, Germany, in 1913. He was the son of an unmarried shop assistant and was brought up by his grandfather, a staunch socialist. In 1930, he joined the SPD. This left-wing party was proscribed by Hitler in 1933, whereupon Herbert Frahm assumed the pseudonym Willy Brandt. To avoid arrest by the Nazis, he fled to Norway the same year, where he became a journalist. When Germany invaded Norway, Brandt once again fled, this time to Sweden. After the war, he returned to Norway and was posted to Berlin by the Norwegian foreign office. In 1948, he reclaimed German nationality, having been stripped of this by the Nazis. Brandt joined the office of the Berlin mayor and once again became active in the SPD. In 1949, he was elected to the Bundestag and in 1957 he was appointed mayor of Berlin. During this period he saw the Soviet blockade at extremely close quarters, and experienced all the ‘highlights’ of the Cold War. Brandt was the SDP candidate for Chancellor in 1961 and 1965, but was unsuccessful on both occasions. In 1966, however, following the formation of a coalition between the CDU and SPD parties, he was appointed vice chancellor and Minister for Foreign Affairs. In 1969, he eventually became Chancellor. In this post, he is particularly remembered for his Ostpolitik, the policy whereby West Germany sought to improve relations with its eastern neighbours, no attempt to do so having been made since the Second World War. West Germany formally accepted its new border (with Poland) and issued an apology for Germany's conduct during the war. In doing so, Brandt was attempting to reduce the Cold War tensions with regard to the divided Germany. He also succeeded in improving relations with the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) itself. In 1971, Brandt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1974, he resigned as Chancellor after one of his aides, Günter Guillaume, was revealed to be an intelligence agent working for the East German Stasi. Brandt nevertheless continued to lead the SDP until 1987, when he became its Honorary Chairman. He was president of the Socialist International from 1976 until his death in 1992 at the age of 78.

OLOF PALME

Sven Olof Joachim Palme was born in Östermalm, Sweden, in 1927. Following a successful ‘career’ as a student leader, he became secretary to the Swedish prime minister Tage Erlander, a social democrat, in 1953. Palme joined the government itself in 1963, going on to hold successive posts as minister (without portfolio), minister of transport and minister of education. In 1969 he succeeded Erlander as prime minister. He narrowly lost the 1976 elections, thus bringing to an end 44 years of unbroken social democratic government in Sweden. However, he led his party to victory in the 1982 and 1985 elections, once again becoming prime minister of a (minority) government. In February 1986, Olof Palme was assassinated as he and his wife walked home from a visit to the cinema. His killer has never been brought to justice. Olof Palme enjoyed considerable international respect. He maintained a strict policy of neutrality, sought to render northern Europe a ‘nuclear weapon-free zone’, acted as United Nations negotiator during the Iraq-Iran war, and was a tireless advocate of the interests of the developing nations.

FELIPE GONZÁLEZ

Felipe González (Márquez) was born in 1942, the son of a Spanish farm labourer. He joined the socialist PSOE party at a time when it was still proscribed under Franco’s dictatorship. In 1974, he became
its secretary general and in 1976 the party was legalized. Gonzáles modernized the PSOE, abandoning the final remnants of Marxist policy. The PSOE won the 1982 general election, whereupon González became Spain’s first socialist prime minister (and at the time, the youngest head of government in Europe). He remained in office for over 13 years. Under his administration, Spain (which had been a fascist dictatorship since the end of the civil war in 1939), became a member of NATO (in 1982) and of the European Union in 1986. It can justly be claimed that it was González who transformed Spain into a modern European country.

**TONY BLAIR**

Anthony Charles Lynton (‘Tony’) Blair was born on 6 May 1953 into a traditional conservative family. He joined the Labour Party in 1975 and successfully stood as the parliamentary candidate for Sedgefield in 1983. In 1988, he joined the Shadow Cabinet under Neil Kinnock. In 1994, Blair was elected leader of the Labour Party. He began a thorough modernization of the party, restricting the influence of the trade unions and scrapping traditional Labour policies such as the nationalization of public service industries. This process attracted fierce opposition from some colleagues, but Blair wished to make his ‘New Labour’ attractive to a wider electorate, whereupon it would be able to win a general election after eighteen years of Conservative rule. He placed the emphasis on encouraging personal responsibility rather than allowing people to be (or become) dependent on the welfare state. Within the broad context of social democracy, his reforms became known as the ‘third way’, representing a course somewhere between traditional socialism and the conservatism of Margaret Thatcher. Blair’s New Labour did indeed win the 1997 general election, largely due to a particularly well-run campaign. Since then, the party has won two further general elections under Tony Blair, who therefore became the first Labour prime minister to hold office for three consecutive terms.

A significant achievement of Blair’s first term was the signing of the Belfast Agreement, generally known as the Good Friday Agreement. (Negotiations aimed at bringing peace to Northern Ireland had begun under his conservative predecessor John Major, but had collapsed after the end of the first IRA ceasefire in the mid-1990s.) Tony Blair remains controversial, partly due to his support for Republican president George W. Bush’s foreign policy in Iraq, which many European social democratic parties find questionable.

**WIM KOK**

Wim Kok was born in 1938. After graduation, he joined the staff of the Netherlands’ largest trade union, the NVV, which had strong ties with the social democratic movement. In 1973, he became president of the NVV (which later merged with the Catholic union NKV to form the FNV; Kok assumed presidency of the new organization). From 1979 to 1982, Kok was also president of the European Trade Union Federation. After stepping down from his position with the FNV in 1986, Wim Kok became a member of the Dutch parliament, representing the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA). Soon after, he became leader of the PvdA faction in the house, and hence leader of the opposition.

In 1989, the PvdA formed a coalition government with the Christian Democrat Alliance. Kok became deputy prime minister and Minister of Finance. In 1994, he became prime minister of the Netherlands’ first coalition government comprised solely of social democrat and liberal parties. This ‘purple coalition’ held two consecutive terms of office and was extremely successful, not least in the economic sphere. As Minister of Finance and later as prime minister, Wim Kok acquired a reputation for austerity, prudence and expertise. He introduced a number of measures to cut public expenditure. They included restrictions on incapacity benefit entitlement, a move which was seen as controversial even within his own party. Wim Kok urged the PvdA to abandon the hard-line socialist ideology. As prime minister, he was regarded as a statesman who transceded party politics. Under his administration, the ‘polder model’ attracted international attention and respect. It is a decision-making approach which entails negotiation, compromise and consensus-forming between those of differing interests, whether social or political, in order to arrive at a solution which is acceptable to all. After Kok’s term in office, this
founders of a socialist political movement, *Accao Socialista Portuguesa* (the Portuguese Socialist Action), which was set up in Switzerland. In 1968, he was once again arrested by the PIDE and exiled to Sao Tome. He returned to Portugal later that year when Salazar was replaced by prime minister Marcello Caetano. True opposition parties remained banned, however, and in 1970 Soares was once again expelled. He lived in Italy and later in France, where the Portuguese Socialist Party was eventually founded. Soares became its secretary-general.

Following the ‘Carnation Revolution’ of 25 April 1974, the exiled opposition leaders returned to Portugal. The *Movimento das Forças Armadas* (‘Movement of Armed Forces’) which had instigated the revolution appointed Mario Soares as Minister Overseas Negotiations, charged with organising the independence of Portugal’s colonies. Severe conflicts soon emerged between the communists and the socialists within Portugal’s new government. Soares played a key role as a moderate who opposed the radical aspirations of the communists and revolutionary forces. In 1976, the first free democratic elections were held in Portugal. Soares’ Portuguese Socialist Party won the most seats, whereupon Mario Soares became the country’s first socialist prime minister (first with a minority government and later in coalition with the Christian Democrats). This government fell in 1978, but Soares once again served as prime minister from 1983 to 1985. During this period, the negotiations for Portugal’s accession to the European Union were held, resulting in its entry in 1986. Soares was later elected President of Portugal on two occasions, in 1986 and again in 1991. He retired in 1996, but once again stood in the 2006 presidential elections. He gained 14% of the vote, coming third.

**ANDREAS PAPANDREOU**

Andreas Papandreou was born in 1919, the son of George Papandreou, a leading Greek liberal politician of the day. As a student, Andreas was active in the Trotskyite groups. In 1939, when Greece was under the authoritarian regime of Ionassis Metaxas, Andreas Papandreou was arrested and tortured. Upon release, he
was permitted to leave the country and he moved to the United States. He took American citizenship and taught at various American universities.

He returned to Greece in 1959 and was primarily active as an economist. In 1963, his father George became prime minister of Greece and Andreas became his main economic advisor. He renounced his American citizenship and was himself elected to the Greek parliament in 1964. In 1965, he was implicated in the ‘Aspida Conspiracy’, accused of colluding with extreme left-wing factions within the Greek military.

When the right-wing Greek Colonels seized power in 1967, both George and Andreas Papandreou were imprisoned. George died in 1968 while under house arrest, and Andreas was once again expelled from the country. In exile, he formed a new anti-dictatorial organization, the Pan-Hellenic Liberation Movement (PAK). Following the fall of the military junta in 1974, Andreas in 1974 returned to Greece where he established a new party based on the PAK, the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK). The party did not enjoy immediate success at the polls, but in the 1981 election, PASOK won a landslide victory and Andreas Papandreou became the first socialist prime minister of Greece. His period in office marked a distinct break with the past in many respects. He opposed Greek’s entry into the European Union, and called for its withdrawal from NATO. (He was unsuccessful in both cases). Many sweeping social and economic reforms were implemented. In political terms, this was a time of marked polarization. PASOK enjoyed another election victory in 1985, but failed to do so in 1989. In 1990, following a long political crisis, the right-wing New Democracy party took office.

In the final years of his life, Papandreou was increasingly embroiled in controversy and scandal. In 1989, he divorced his first wife and married a much younger woman. This led to estrangement from his adult children, including his son George who by this time was himself a PASOK minister. In the same year, he was also indicted by parliament in connection with the Bank of Crete embezzlement scandal. He was eventually cleared of all involvement and went on to confound his critics by winning the 1993 elections. However, poor health prevented him from governing effectively. He retired from office in January 1996 and died in June that year.

Andreas Papandreou was an extremely controversial politician. He was the champion of the working class, the elderly and the poor of the rural regions, but he was reviled by the right.