

Leading Party in Government in July 2017



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THE EUROPEAN LEFT IS AT RISK

by Marc Lazar

The Labour party, despite an overall gain of 32 seats, lost the general election in Britain for the third time since 2010. In France, the Socialist Party (PS) has been plunged into a devastating crisis. The Socialist presidential candidate Benoît Hamon secured only 6% of the votes during the first round of the presidential election whilst the results from the general election on 11 and 18 June were catastrophic.

The reasons which form the foundation of this crisis are well known having taken root nearly forty years ago. Historically social-democratic parties tend to encounter a significant number of challenges: including globalisation, Europeanisation, societal changes, changes within democracy or the weakening of other mainstream ideologies. What was once their strength - namely the use of Keynesian welfare-based policies within the national framework, a solid organisation, a coherent doctrine, close relationships with trade unions - no longer work in their favour. Contrastingly, the parties which form part of the reformist left have experienced

a voter downturn; loss of members, erosion of their voter base amongst the mainstream groups alongside weakening middle class support and the disintegration of their cultural hegemony. Whilst this did not prevent them from winning the election, the general trend is indicative of widespread destabilisation.

In the 1990s, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder wanted to end this political stalemate by advocating a "Third Way" between liberalism and social democracy. This position takes into account the transformation of capitalism and is based on the assertion that globalisation itself creates inequalities but also provides opportunities to individuals. Furthermore, it attempts to

reconcile with liberalism at least in part, and advocates equality of opportunities for all through education and training for the most

disadvantaged. The position also reconsiders the role of the State, particularly in relation to policies which seek to address the rising middle classes whilst protecting the working classes. Those who support the "Third Way" consider that the left-right political divide favours conflict between the progressives and the conservatives. Almost all the Social Democratic parties have implemented such concepts and adapted them to the circumstances which exist within their respective countries.

"Third Way" supporters have suffered since 2003 following Tony Blair's involvement in the Iraq war and have struggled to progress given the 2008 financial crisis. Around the world austerity measures have created unemployment

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and, even where unemployment has subsequently declined, social inequality has widened further. Europe has disappointed in the past and continues to do so. Our societies are shaken by fears such as immigration and migrants. Widespread mistrust of institutions, politicians and political parties is commonplace, with fewer and fewer exceptions, whilst the populists continue to make advances.

A divide has developed between the reformist left and the radical left. Yet, whatever their chosen strategy, these parties have remained unable to secure power. Benoît Hamon campaigned on a very left-wing program and consequently his voter-base shifted to vote for Emmanuel Macron or Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Contrastingly, Jeremy Corbyn campaigned on a conventional left-wing program which saw him make significant progress when compared to 2015 whilst imposing his presence as the true leader of the party - however, this was not enough to secure victory

over Theresa May. Pedro Sanchez successfully re-assumed control of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) by shifting his focus left and advocating for an alliance with Podemos ("We Can" Spanish left-wing political party) which may ultimately benefit the latter rather than the former. Whilst, the German SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the Italian PD (Democratic Party) continue to explore balancing social-liberal policies with social and ecological measures (more so in Germany), but with limited success. Whilst in Spain, Greece, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, a process of radicalisation is transforming reformist parties on the left.

For the time being however, Social-Democracy has not found a solution. This is particularly important given the present paradigm shift. The divide which exists between the left and the right has not disappeared as some might argue, particularly on societal issues. However, it is reasonable to argue that

such political divide no longer structures society with the same vigour as recent history would suggest and voting behaviour is much more fluid. The political spectrum is intertwined with other areas of division within society; conflict between pro-Europe and those who oppose Europe, between those who support open

to reconnect with the public who have been shaken by recent events, that is, if the voters are willing to accept such changes. If they are unsuccessful, however, the social democratic left as we know it could disappear just as the communist parties disappeared from history. This would have anthropological implications for the history of Europe.

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society and those who believe in a closed society. It is vital that those on the left take this opportunity to review their policies, to rethink their proposals, to thoroughly rejuvenate themselves, to transform the way in which they operate and to take steps



> AUTHOR

Marc Lazar is a professor of political history and political sociology at Sciences Po and has been a director at the Institute since 2000. He also leads the Multidisciplinary Research Group on Contemporary Italy (GREPIC) at CERI (Centre for International Research and Studies).