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Lessons for the Left

Europe's left-wing parties are facing an identity crisis

Across Europe, September marks the time the leaves fall, the air becomes crisp, and politicians return to work from their long summer recess. Many will have felt need of a break, following a dramatic year which started with the EU referendum vote in the UK, and finished with Macron and Trump standing together on the Champs-Élysées.

As we have sought to digest these political shocks, it has become clear that the real battle of ideas today is not between the political left and right but between different visions of identity.

'Internationalists', who support open borders, free trade and multilateralism, have come under severe pressure since the financial crisis from 'nativists' who call for closed borders and a return to a nation-first view of the world. The nativists secured a double-whammy with the Brexit referendum and the election of President Trump, but Macron's victory in France proves the battle is far from over.

Merkel: the quintessential internationalist

All eyes are now on Berlin to see whether and how this dynamic plays out in the German elections on 24 September. Most bets are on a government led by the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU), with the internationalist Merkel at the helm, emerging victorious. And indeed, with some notable exceptions, such as Portugal in late 2015, the centre-right or Right has won the majority of elections across the EU in recent years.

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There is a question of where this political landscape leaves the future of the left. A fascinating article by Anetole Kaletsky for Project Syndicate looks at the interplay between economic policy since the financial crisis and politics across the West. He notes that the

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'trickle down' effect anticipated by market fundamentalism has not occurred, partly because this effect requires certain fiscal, monetary and structural reforms happening in a logical sequence. But, he says, *"The dominant ideology of government non-intervention naturally intensifies resistance to change among the losers from globalisation and technology, and creates overwhelming problems in sequencing economic reforms."*

In other words, improvements to the market system are being blocked by the very people who have most to gain from them.

Leaving the Left behind

But there is another option, as Kaletsky himself acknowledges: that instead of looking for improvements within the market fundamentalist system, the interests of all but the top earners could be better looked after in a more redistributive economy, where a larger state takes more responsibility for providing higher quality public services for all at a higher cost.

This argument is of course the central ideology of the traditional Left. However, over the past two decades – broadly since Tony Blair swept into power in 1997 with New Labour – it is not an argument that political parties who define themselves as left wing have been comfortable making.

Instead it has been accepted that, to win elections, left and right need to battle over the middle ground, with the result that the left has moved closer to the centre in the past two decades. Seen by their traditional voters as increasingly indistinct from the right given their links with the very banks and businesses who were at the root of the financial crisis, and at the same time unable or unwilling to fight for policies to protect lower earners from the effects of that crisis, parties of the left have lost their *raison d'etre* in many European states. From the Labour party in the UK, to the Parti Socialiste in France to the PSOE in Spain, this has led to huge internal dissent and dysfunctionality and, as a result, an inability to put on a convincing enough front to win elections.

The spoils from this decline of the left have gone in most cases to the nativists, who have been only too quick to present themselves as the real defenders of 'the people'; the only ones who have the interests of ordinary working men and women at heart. One clear illustration of this in the

UK was the strong support for Brexit in former Labour heartlands such as the north East of England and parts of Wales.

Macron's middle way

Much analysis has been offered of the successful battle that Macron fought against nativist populism in France in the form of the Front National. He recognised that the Fifth Republic was in a difficult moment, disillusioned with mainstream parties and their politicians, and susceptible to the call of Marine Le Pen. His answer was to show that she was not the only one with an offer of something different, and to take what he saw as the best of Left and Right and bring them together as a new political movement.

Electorally, the Macron model of 'neither left nor right' worked. But it is perhaps also interesting to look at two recent efforts at political renewal *within* the Left.

The surprisingly strong showings by Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Jean-Luc Melenchon in France suggest that left-leaning voters have not lost their belief in the socialist model, but were rather were searching for a convincing champion. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party was ridiculed as a throwback to the 1970s, but his pledge to defend the interests of 'the many, not the few' delivered the shock of the summer by depriving Theresa May of a parliamentary majority. In France, Jean-Luc Melenchon's far-left party trounced the mainstream socialist candidate Benoit Hamon and gave Francois Fillon a run for his money for third place.

Of course, neither of these defenders of the left won the elections they were fighting. And, in thinking about how the Left might build on their momentum and actually take power, it is worth returning to the issue of nativism vs internationalism and the lessons of the victorious internationalists, Macron in France and Mark Rutte's VVD in the Netherlands.

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Both identified that the first way in which internationalists had been losing was approaching elections defensively, adopting more and more of the populists' policies for fear of losing voters to them. By contrast, Macron and Rutte tackled the nativists' key positions head on. On immigration, on free trade, and on the European Union, they had the courage to put forward positive cases. Neither Corbyn nor

Melenchon, on the other hand, had very clear arguments on these things, preferring to defensively change the subject or, worse (in the case of the EU), adapt their positions to the shifting polls.

It is here that the Left still has a lot of work to do, in setting out exactly where it stands on many issues associated with globalisation. To become a credible political force across the EU again, the Left will need to come to terms with the realities of the globalised world that we live in: one in which people will always migrate for a better life, businesses will always seek larger markets overseas, and small and medium sized states (such as those in the EU) will always see an advantage in working together as a bloc. If voters want to support a positive vision, the parties of the left will need to define what they are for, not just what they are against. They must create a clear narrative about how the many can thrive in an open, internationally engaged nation state, and then bring that narrative to life.

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Turning back to the German elections, with support for the centre-left SPD on a fairly steady decline from 35% in March to below 25% today, and the far left die Linke struggling to get their support above 10%, these observations might provide pause for thought. The debate on how socialism should advance in an international environment goes back at least as far as Stalin and Trotsky in the early days of the Soviet Union. Yet recent years suggest that the European left has still not found its answer.



Susi Dennison
London

Susi Dennison is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank. There she leads the European Power programme, which focuses on the strategy, politics and governance of

European foreign policy.