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The dreaded 'M-word'

When did Europe's centre-left stop listening to voters' concerns about migration?

Are you familiar with Wile E. Coyote - the hapless Looney Toons character who uses absurdly complex gimmicks to catch the Roadrunner as he whizzes by – but fails every time. At the end of each episode, Wile E. is often seen squatting on a flying cannonball headed towards a pile of TNT, or winds up on the canyon floor in a cloud of dust. Wile E. Coyote and Germany's social democrats have a fair bit in common.

Fortunately, the social democrats are still some way from total collapse – at least compared with their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. But they are heading in a worrying direction. Having suffered a third election defeat, described by some as 'historic', we should perhaps ask at what point such results became not the exception, but the new rule. Not least because the German election fits in seamlessly with a European trend in which centre-left parties are routinely punished at the polls.

Pundits have dedicated many column inches to the whys and wherefores of the centre-left's predicament. When did the relationship between Europe's centre-left parties and the electorate turn sour? Have the parties gone too far to the right, or to the left? Are they stuck too firmly in the centre-ground? Are the categories 'right' and 'left' redundant in any case? Are centre-left candidates too old? Too young? Too bearded or too sleek? Are they naïve in their choice of issues? Or simply grist to the mill of the opposition? Yes, no, maybe! And round they go in an endless cycle.

The main reason for the centre-left's decline is as painful as it is banal: social democrats across Europe are losing traditional voters and are failing to attract new supporters in sufficient numbers. This pain was made manifest following September's elections in Germany. In January 2017, the centre-left SPD celebrated a sudden upsurge in support, with lost voters appearing to turn back to the party. Its leader, Martin Schulz, was even hailed a saint by German weekly Der Spiegel. By the time Germans came to vote, support for the SPD had fallen 12 points behind Angela Merkel's centre-right CDU.

Some have pinned the centre-left's malaise on its failure to present convincing political narratives, or on a lack of vision. But perhaps the real explanation is far simpler. Political parties can be considered to exist within a system of coordinates made up of one cultural and one economic axis. Since the European left began following the Third Way, the position of most social democratic parties in the West has moved towards the centre on the economic axis. At the same time, and in many cases probably in response to that, the parties have moved closer towards post-materialist left-liberalism on the cultural axis.

This shift initially led to some spectacular election successes and often made sense at policy level. At the same time, however, it represents a double salvo against the cultural and economic fixed firmly in place by the centre-left over many decades in their traditional electoral heartlands. The social democrats have lost their ability to connect with parts of their most loyal base of supporters. Too often the response of the political establishment to uncertainty, and the fear of loss of status in the face of global unpredictability and economic polarisation, has been incomprehension and even contempt.

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Which of the two axes is the more important, and what kind of alienation is the more acute? There is no simple answer. But the cultural axis appears to be decisive. We see this in the recent debate over the existence of a single German *Leitkultur* – a common understanding of what it is to be German, to which 'outsiders' are expected to adapt and adhere.

Within 'progressive' circles, any article published on the subject is preceded by a disclaimer, whereby the debate itself is first dismissed as absurd. Thence follows a statement on how 'difficult', indeed how 'reprehensible' the concept of a *Leitkultur* is. Journalists, decision makers, philosophers and constitutional lawyers all come to the same conclusion: 'A single guiding culture? There isn't one!' The concept, they say, is undefinable, divisive and damaging – if not outright unconstitutional.

Admittedly, that is in part down to dialectics. The more the German right bandied the term *Leitkultur* as a counter-project to multiculturalism, the more the progressive groups would distance themselves from the concept. The critics may well be right to doubt the existence of a single, homogenous German culture. As former SPD group chairman Thomas Oppermann reasoned, it is not the state's place to tell its citizens what to do when it comes to 'religious beliefs, political views or sexual preferences'. And of course he is right.

But is that really the crucial issue for the population at large? Or are there two entirely different discussions going on here: on the one hand a normative, elite political discourse; on the other the citizens' rational, down-to-earth demands, which are anything but chauvinistic?

Some progressives may have major issues with privileges for long-term residents and demands that immigrants assimilate, but the majority opinion among the German public is clear: they consider a German *Leitkultur* to be largely unproblematic in everyday life. According to a recent YouGov survey, only 25 per cent of Germans express serious misgivings about the concept. A separate 2014 survey by the social research institute INSA found that 90 per cent of German citizens expect foreigners coming into the country to adapt to the 'prevailing culture'. Among SPD voters, that figure fell by a mere percentage point. Even among Germans with immigrant backgrounds, 83 per cent expect newly-arrived immigrants to 'adjust to German culture' according to a survey by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung last year.

Do these adherents to the *Leitkultur* concept really want to tell immigrants what their 'religious, political or sexual preferences' should be, as Thomas Oppermann fears? Or are the 90 per cent thinking along different lines? Are they, for example, looking to manage the challenge of migration with a degree of social adaptation by new immigrants in those areas that are not covered by the fundamental rights articles provided in the constitution? Because as admirable as the German constitution may be, as a guide to dealing with day-to-day migration-related problems the articles on constitutional rights are about as suitable as a globe is for navigating city streets.

Seen this way, the scepticism of some German social democrats towards a 'guiding culture' seems little more than snobbery. Over the past few years, Europe's progressive parties have lost majorities wherever they have positioned themselves as the driving force of a cosmopolitan migration, or have dismissed the national state as reactionary atavism that must be quashed.

Today, in the academic, left-liberal milieu of European social democracy, commentators rarely describe global migration flows as anything but inevitable. More often than not, their arguments seem aimed less at fostering discussion than ending it.

This 'no alternative' perspective on migration is ironic, given the centre-left generally over- rather than underestimates the power of politics to control and govern. When it comes to global finance and trade flows, climate change, gender roles, digitisation and even political discourse, the

left not only believes it is possible to shape and control policy – it demands it.

Migration is the glaring exception. Social democrats are resigned to believe they cannot determine 'whether' migration happens, only 'how'. Why doesn't the otherwise so confident 'Yes, we can!' brigade take action here – particularly since that is exactly what voters expect from them?

Of course, the centre-left should not try and outdo right-wing populists, reversing social progress just so they can win back their former supporters. But between the more extreme positions there is a political space that is crying out to be occupied, and that can help to at least partially close the gulf between Europe's social democratic parties and their former voters. That is exactly what the focus should be over the coming months if social democracy is to avoid ending up in a cloud of dust alongside Wile E. Coyote.



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