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The downfall of left-wing heroes

Tsipras, Corbyn, Iglesias, Sanders: in 2015 the new dawn of the left made political waves. Now, their stars are fading away

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Alexis Tsipras, the most successful left-wing politician of the last five years, has been voted out of office. And so another left-wing star fades away. Pablo Iglesias of Podemos, Bernie Sanders in the US, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK: they were all riding high at the beginning of 2015. Since then, they have slowly, one after the other, run out of steam.

It all looked so promising back then. In July 2015, people in Athens were dancing in Syntagma Square and celebrating the 'Oxi' vote in the referendum. In Greece at least, that was one of the last moments when one could feel a breeze of left-wing success in the air. Athens was meant to be the catalyst for the New Left's breakthrough, revitalised by social protests. In Spain, the comrades of Podemos, led by charismatic lecturer Pablo Iglesias, set down a marker around the end of 2015 when they polled more than 20 per cent in the parliamentary elections, finishing narrowly behind the social democratic PSOE.

Just two months after the Greek referendum, left-wing outsider Jeremy Corbyn was elected as Labour leader with a large majority. As it happens, he is friends with the enfant terrible of the first few months of SYRIZA, Yanis Varoufakis, who could, right after his resignation, tell him how he had tried to disrupt the mainstream. Left-wing ideas became acceptable even in the US. Bernie Sanders, a self-styled democratic socialist, became a serious contender for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination.

The rise of the left came a few years after the devastating financial crisis that plunged Europe and the US into deep recession in 2008. From afar at least, little Greece came to embody the way in which financial markets and speculators profited at the expense of ordinary people. After all, what unfolded there at both ends of the scale at the hands of the troika and German finance minister Schäuble found its echo in many Western societies. Many states managed to afford a bail-out of the banks only by

taking on new debt. And the neoliberal economic mainstream demanded rigorous austerity to reduce these debts. All this resulted in public-sector job cuts, tax increases and reduced government spending, particularly in the social sector.

What the troika pushed through in Greece from 2010 while PASOK was in power was implemented in Spain by the Zapatero (PSOE) government and in the UK, first under Labour prime minister Gordon Brown and then under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Only the US pursued a more expansive strategy, yet many Americans still lost their homes during the crisis, while social inequality massively increased.

The left wasn't ready

The deep crisis of financial capitalism and its far-reaching social repercussions triggered a political reaction. Newcomers such as Tsipras and Iglesias and veterans of the left such as Corbyn and Sanders suddenly found themselves thrust into the political spotlight. Their message struck a chord with new and old voters alike. Embracing protest and dissatisfaction, they also raised hope of a different style of politics. They were bolstered by a blend of old party structures and modern social movements set up in response to social injustice. Indignados in Spain, the grassroots movement Momentum in the UK and the many social initiatives in Greece seemed to become a breeding ground for a new type of politics. Electoral slogans such as 'Hope is coming' (SYRIZA), 'Change is coming' (Podemos) and 'For the many, not the few' (Labour) reflected the new brand of rhetoric.

Today, things seem somewhat gloomier. Tsipras has reverted to leader of the opposition, albeit with a respectable election result. Podemos has undergone a steady decline since the 2015 parliamentary elections. Corbyn's Labour lost the 2017 general election despite scoring a sensational 40 per cent of the vote. Since then, Corbyn has been mired in the Brexit mess, and has failed to find a clear answer to the current crunch question of UK politics. Moreover, the party is plagued by a failure to get to grips with some of its members' anti-Semitic remarks. As a result, it has slipped to around 20 per cent in the polls. Bernie Sanders is running as candidate for the Democrats again this time, but the drive and dynamism of his last campaign have evaporated. Their stars burned briefly in the political sky, then swiftly faded out.

The time was ripe, but the left wasn't ready.

The new dawn of the left

Much of the drive that thrust Tsipras and his comrades on the political scene stemmed from

made political waves, but essentially it hasn't changed anything yet.

dissatisfaction with the status quo and their open opposition to the dominant dogma of neoliberalism. Yet what SYRIZA and the others lack is a clear sense of different kind of policies and an accompanying narrative. So far, there are still no left-wing equivalents to the conceptual groundwork and thinking that Thatcher and Reagan embraced in the late 1970s as they launched their conservative revolution.

Instead, there is nothing but fragments of ideas. In Greece and Spain, what started out as a fight against the system soon became a fight against the elites. Expectations at home and in left-wing circles worldwide were very high. There were hopes of instant and radical change, especially among younger voters who joined SYRIZA. All they saw instead was more of the same belt-tightening routine from a different cast. The dashed expectations caused these newly engaged groups of voters to grow frustrated and disillusioned. It isn't enough to keep on doing the same as previous governments, like Tsipras. Or simply to play a tactical game like Corbyn and try to exploit Brexit, the symbol of a desire for more control, as a stepping stone to power.

The right is on the rise again

Left-wing politics needs a coherent rationale and a manual for implementation in a generally hostile environment. Only then will it be possible to give people long-term belief and credible evidence that a different society can be built.

The celebration of left-wing hopefuls by the media was a factor in their swift demise: the downfall of the left-wing trailblazers happened partly because they soon became part of the system during their few years in government or opposition. Cronyism, pandering to ship-owners and ongoing tax evasion by the upper middle class remained the order of the day under SYRIZA. Labour has lost the momentum of its election campaigns and become embroiled in tactical infighting. Pablo Iglesias attracted attention only when he bought a posh house and then dispatched his party rivals in time-honoured fashion.

None of this struck the politically disaffected as particularly left-wing or redolent of solidarity. In an age of extensive media transparency, a new brand of left-wing politics also needs an appropriate style: decency with a human face, cooperative solidarity and personal integrity. When he first became leader, Jeremy Corbyn embodied this almost to the point of caricature: an MP who cultivates his allotment, makes jam and is on the

front row of every demonstration. However, his actions in and with the party were rather less exemplary, a discrepancy that is held against him – unlike his Conservative adversaries.

The new dawn of the left made political waves, but essentially it hasn't changed anything yet. Instead, left-wing opponents of the system have become generally disenchanted, while the right is on the rise once more. They can pick up the anti-elite discourse of the failed left and push their own agenda. If this is to change, the left must adopt a more international approach, become more strategic and, above all, clearly set out what form of society it wants. Just being against the status quo may help to win an election. But it will make things hard next time round.



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