FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 08.09.2023 | Lauri Finér

It’s all about continuity

The Finnish Social Democrats have a new leader. To regain momentum for his party, Antti Lindtman still has a lot of work to do

The Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) elected its new leader, Antti Lindtman, at its party congress last weekend. But the change of leadership is not due to dissatisfaction with the SDP's political line. Sanna Marin, the previous leader and prime minister, had announced shortly after last April’s parliamentary elections that she would not run for another term, even though she enjoys great respect within the party.

The reason for Marin's departure was not a bad election result. On the contrary, her leadership gained the party two percentage points in support compared to the previous parliamentary election in 2019 — and it is not common in Finland for the prime minister's party to win additional seats. Thus, Lindtman emphasised continuity in his campaign rather than the need to change the party's agenda. Continuity is also highlighted by the political programme approved at the party congress, which is more of an update rather than a major turn compared to the previous programme.

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While some commentators have tried to place Lindtman on the right wing of the SDP as opposed to Marin, it is difficult to draw this conclusion based on his recent statements. Instead of right or left, Lindtman calls himself ‘a future social democrat’.

Antti Lindtman also represents continuity in the sense that, at the age of 41, he has already held various leadership positions in the party for more than 10 years, most recently as the chairman of the Social Democratic Parliamentary Group. In his first policy speech as the new party leader, Lindtman emphasised traditional themes of the SDP: a Nordic welfare state, labour and human rights, as well as democracy. He has also long underlined the importance of tackling climate change and biodiversity loss.

A shift to the right

Despite their relatively good result, the SDP came third in the April election and ended up in the opposition. Only one percentage point more would have probably won the party the post of prime minister in the Finnish system. Now, however, an extreme right-wing government by Finnish standards was formed, in which the traditionally right-wing National Coalition Party (NCP) was joined by the populist Finns Party, known for their anti-foreigner and anti-EU stance. Despite the other two, smaller supporting parties, the government's majority in the parliament is slim. Nevertheless, it seems to be aiming for a systemic change with its program.

Before the elections, the NCP and the Finns Party distinguished themselves from the left by advocating a significant reduction in the budget deficit, i.e. austerity measures. However, their government program seems to focus on weakening the negotiating position of employees and trade unions in various ways, as well as shrinking the welfare state. Compared to the pre-election promises, the government's fiscal consolidation seems to remain moderate, but it consists almost exclusively of cuts to social security benefits and public services. At the same time, the government intends to allocate significant tax reductions to the highest earners. Although the total net tax reduction in the government program is relatively small, taxation is predicted to decrease by 1–2 per cent in relation to GDP during the four-year term. This is largely due to the decline in emissions, which also reduces the base for carbon-based taxes.

Along with its right-wing economic policies, the new government has been criticised for racist statements when the old writings and actions of several Finns Party ministers were brought into the spotlight. Vilhelm Junnila, for example, had to resign after just two weeks as a minister. The racism debate is picking up again now as the parliament just returned from its summer break.

An SDP revival?

In August, the SDP had already risen to the top of the polls with 22 per cent support, which is higher than in any election for almost two decades. In this environment, it should be relatively easy for Lindtman to unite his party against a common opponent, the government. At the same time, he gets the opportunity to prepare the party’s concepts for future elections in the background. It will therefore take time to see the possible essential changes brought by the new leadership.

The differences in Marin's and Lindtman's personality will come to the fore more quickly. During her relatively short term, Marin became an international political superstar who inspired the youth with her directness and appeal. Hence, SDP's support among younger people and in the capital, Helsinki, increased again following years of decline.

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Lindtman is also a sovereign performer whose speeches raise standing ovations from the party congress and who makes a populist politician's argument sound null in a TV debate. He is more cautious in his words than Marin though and prefers emphasising cooperation rather than differences between opposing political parties. The new party leader also prioritised foreign policy in his first policy speech. He emphasised the importance of supporting Ukraine and traditional progressive goals, such as the rule of law, human rights and active cooperation within the EU, UN – and now also NATO.

Finnish foreign policy has traditionally been made with the support of a strong consensus, and changes in government have not led to major policy changes. The current government seems to continue on this path, even though the Finns Party supports leaving the EU in their programs and is generally critical of cooperation. However, Russia's attack on Ukraine seems to have pushed such discussions into the background. In addition, Finnish foreign policy has been characterised by the fact that its nuances do not interest the general public or the media. Therefore, a populist party could have the chance to ignore the foreign policy debate without anybody even noticing.

Lindtman's election, therefore, hardly means a quick change for the SDP. However, it is worth asking how the Finnish progressive project is doing, after the centre-left government led by the SDP changed to a right-wing one following the April elections. First, the election result may not have reflected such a dramatic change after all. In Finland, the left-wing parties have not had a majority in parliament for more than five decades, so they have only entered the government in coalitions with the right or centre-right. Progressive reforms have also been hindered by the fact that in recent decades, the economic policy of even the centrist parties has been close to the right.

The new government's

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a turning point, when Finland slightly loosened the rather strict public spending practices of previous decades. In addition, significant reforms were implemented in social and health services as well as public education. For instance, secondary education became obligatory and free of charge for all. Finland also committed to an ambitious goal of carbon neutrality by 2035.

On the other hand, the changes were in many respects only fractional as the centre-right parties in the government prevented major changes to taxation, social security and labour rights. The concentration of wealth among the richest one percent, that has continued in Finland since the early 1990s, is not stopping.

Now, the new government is pulling in the other direction. It looks more unified in many ways than previously, so it could be defined as a right-wing bloc government. However, Finland lacks a left-wing bloc that could challenge it unitedly. On the other hand, the new government's policy seems already unpopular even before it has implemented its first budget, so the next four years will perhaps give an opportunity to lay the groundwork for a bigger change by the 2027 elections. Lindtman and the new party leadership still have plenty work to do to succeed.



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