On the road to nowhere

The long decline of social democracy began with the 'Third Way'. Since then, it has been searching for a new direction

A dull ache permeates Europe's social democrats as they look back to former glory days, full of regrets and recriminations, whilst looking ahead in alarm. Yet bright sparks do illuminate their glum landscape. The Dutch centre-left of Rob Jetten's D66 has seen off the far right of Geert Wilders. Despite a long coalition-building process, the Netherlands' democratic battle has been won against the fascist-flavoured xenophobic parties threatening the continent.

At first sight, the progressive cause is not doing as badly as glum social democrats often feel. Their parties lead governments or in polls in Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. In Germany, the centre-right held off the far right. In the UK, Labour won a resounding victory last year — a rarity for a party out of power for over two-thirds of the post-war years. But social democrats face the bitter fact that the days when they regularly scored over 40 per cent have passed in a fragmenting political landscape.

A vanquishing vision

My own best memory of the glory days was captured in the splendid Palazzo Vecchio in Florence in November 1999 at a conference of progressive leaders, celebrating their combined high-water mark. Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, Lionel Jospin, Massimo D'Alema, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Romano Prodi assembled to present to the world a future of progressive optimism — a vanquishing vision for the new century to come.

In that bitterly cold but stunningly beautiful hall, some 500 of us gazed at the Vasari paintings, uplifted as ever by Clinton's grand, sweeping speechmaking. Surprisingly, his was the most left-wing contribution, as UK Europe minister Denis MacShane recalled in his diaries: 'There are people and places that are completely left behind in the United States',

Clinton said, speaking of the plight of poverty at home and bringing justice to the developing world by lifting their debts — a great social democratic vision. But it was an *esprit d'escalier*, a thought on the way out, arriving far too late with only a year left in office before handing over not to another progressive, but to the rightist George W. Bush. As ever, Clinton's flights of rhetoric touched the heart but not the substance of his policies. So often leaders turn more radical once it's all over.

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This was not, alas, the new dawn of a great social democratic century. Lionel Jospin lost the presidential election in 2002 not only to Jacques Chirac but also finished behind far-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen. Massimo D'Alema would be gone the next year. Schröder would last until 2005, but handed over to the 16-year reign of Angela Merkel. Labour lasted another fine 11 years but passed the baton to Brexit-causing Conservatives for the next 14.

Looking back, that celebratory turn-of-the-millennium event was indeed a marker for social democracy, but not in the good way its hubristic leaders thought. It marked a rightward shift that evangelised the idea of the Third Way — neither right nor left, but somewhere else (no compass was provided). That year, Blair and Schröder had published 'Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte', selling it to the other progressives as the stairway to power, shedding their old trade union imagery, promoting welfare cost-cutting and pro-business globalising, outsourcing and privatising. Look, it works, Blair could boast as he won an unprecedented three elections in a row, despite the Iraq war, blending social fairness with free markets. But for the long-term future of progressivism, it was a kiss of death from which we still suffer now. The words 'Third Way' drained the life and daring out of the centre-left: centrism has become a dead duck.

Someone made a joke that Savonarola had been condemned right there in that hall before being taken out, hanged and burned — meaning to suggest this congregation of the Third Way was similarly chasing away extremism. Not all were in agreement, especially socialist Lionel Jospin. The spirit of the EU itself was slowly smothered in Third Way unimaginative caution, slow-moving and conventional, unable or unwilling to excite. That caused Beppe Grillo's meaningless Five Star Movement, anti-Brussels Syriza and Jean-Luc Mélenchon to dub it a businessmen's club. Brexit's one benefit was to shock EU rejectionists into backing off, as the impoverished UK finds its treasury losing £80 billion a year as a direct result.

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The yearning for change, for political drama, for meaning and identity is sending voters scurrying to the further left and further right, with the centre struggling to hold on. The Labour Party is stunned to find that within a year its remarkable win has been reduced to a mere 18 per cent in the polls. The Greens, renewed under dynamic new leadership, are chasing their tail, whilst Liberal Democrats daily score points by standing up for principles that Labour shies away from. As soon as Donald Trump threatened the BBC with a shocking £1 billion lawsuit, it was Liberal Democrats who jumped up in defence of the national broadcaster. Labour was silenced by the responsibility of government, fearing what Trump could do, hurling his 100 per cent tariff threats.

Paralysis is the great risk for social democrats in power, seeming cowardly and, in times of scarce funds, ungenerous in their social justice policies. Nigel Farage's Reform UK soars ahead at 31 per cent. As elsewhere in Europe, the far right tempts Labour to chase those lost voters, above all on the toxic immigration issue. Yet pollsters can show that Labour is losing many more voters leftwards.

The prevailing mood everywhere is mostly anti-government, whoever is in power. 'Throw the bastards out' might be Europe's biggest movement. Politics is more fun for opposition insurgents, whilst Labour is finding government no fun at all. The spark of life has been ground out of them by harsh circumstances. Looking back, I would date the time when the centre-left started to lose its *joie de vivre* and sense of mission from that wrong turning into a Third Way that leads nowhere much.

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