Organisational Identity and Reform of Social Democratic Parties in Europe

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- The traditional major parties find themselves immersed in deep crisis. Social democratic parties are still national parties, »parties of the masses« and workers' parties only for historical reasons and because that is how they see themselves.

- Many attempts at reform which, in general and often unilaterally, are viewed positively, on closer examination reveal problematic unintended side-effects. Nevertheless, internationally there are a number of promising innovations, ranging from the recruitment of candidates in Amsterdam, through attracting members in Styria, to the mobilisation of party supporters in Spain.

- Substantive changes of direction are not without risk, even if the previous course appears to have led to election defeats, loss of members and the tarnishing of a party's image. Strategic readjustments must be credible, and to that end any changes embarked upon have to be more far-reaching and sustainable than shifts of emphasis soon after election defeats tend to be.

- Technical innovations – for example, an Internet presence – change little on their own. A coherent objective, a narrative which points beyond the here and now and what might be called a »utopian surplus« are also required. To put it another way: »If there is no vision the best spin-doctors and websites in the world will not make any difference.«

Content

The Crisis of Social Democracy: Loss of Voters

Social democratic parties are in deep crisis. This diagnosis clearly applies to virtually all the EU member states, whose governments were still predominantly headed by social democrats at the end of the 1990s, but only five of which – out of 27 – are led by social democrats in 2010. This even applies, with minor qualifications, to the proud social democratic parties, accustomed to success, in Spain, the Netherlands, Austria and the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Spain, Austria and Norway still have social democrat heads of government, but in 1995 all six of these countries did (see Ismayr 2009).

A glance at recent election results makes it even plainer that it is justified to talk of social democratic parties suffering a decline. It is also evident how dramatic this development is. In Denmark, in the past two elections

to the Folketing, only a quarter of the votes were cast for the Social Democratic Party, having averaged around 38 per cent between 1945 and 1973 in general elections (taken from Koole 1992: 84). In its heyday, Sweden's SAP was used to winning an absolute majority. In the most recent election, it won only 30 per cent plus x, although even that was better than the SPÖ in Austria: its three successive absolute majorities in general elections in the 1970s make it the most successful social democratic party of all time, but in 2008 its vote had dwindled to a mere 29.3 per cent.

In the Netherlands, the Partij van de Arbeid's (PvdA) incessant haemorrhaging of votes was masked in the parliamentary election of June 2010 only by the even heavier losses of its Christian Democrat opponents. But an exclusive concern with its traditional opponent hides the fact that the PvdA has been plumbing lower and lower electoral depths and both in the European elections of 2009, with 12.5 per cent, and the local elections in

Table 1 Social Democratic Governments in Western Europe since 1990

	Spain	Austria	Netherlands	Sweden	Denmark	Norway
1993	++−	++−	+− −	− −+	++−	++−
1994	++−	++−	++−	++−	++−	++−
1995	++−	++−	++−	++−	++−	++−
1996	− −+	++−	++−	++−	++−	++−
1997	− −+	++−	++−	++−	++−	− −+
1998	− −+	++−	++−	++−	++−	− −+
1999	− −+	++−	++−	++−	++−	− −+
2000	− −+	− −+	++−	++−	++−	++−
2001	− −+	− −+	++−	++−	− −+	− −+
2002	− −+	− −+	− −+	++−	− −+	− −+
2003	− −+	− −+	− −+	++−	− −+	− −+
2004	++−	− −+	− −+	++−	− −+	− −+
2005	++−	− −+	− −+	++−	− −+	++−
2006	++−	− −+	− −+	− −+	− −+	++−
2007	++−	++−	+− −	− −+	− −+	++−
2008	++−	++−	+− −	− −+	− −+	++−
2009	++−	++−	+− −	− −+	− −+	++−
2010	++−	++−	− −+	− −+	− −+	++−

Note: Government participation/head of government/opposition (+/–). In other words: government participation without providing the head of government (+/–/–); opposition party (–/–/+); government party and social democratic head of government (+/+/–).

March 2010, with 15.7 per cent, is approaching the status of a minor party. Even the perceived victory in the most recent parliamentary election turns out to be the second worst result since the Second World War: in this election, too, it failed to reach the 20 per cent mark (19.6 per cent).

Exceptions to the rule are the PSOE in Spain and the Norwegian Workers' Party, both of which have recently celebrated victories, winning and retaining power. It is true that the current level of support for Norway's social democratic party is a far cry from what it was accustomed to in the 1950s and 1960s and which it continued to enjoy into the 1980s. The current perception of success is largely based on the electoral debacle of 2001, when it lost more than ten percentage points and reached rock bottom, with only 24.3 per cent of the vote. In comparison to this, its results of 32.7 per cent in the general election in 2005 and 35.4 per cent in 2009 are indeed worthy of celebration.

Party Financing and Membership Development

However, losing ground among the electorate does not necessarily mean that all is lost. The example of Austria shows that it is wrong to draw direct conclusions about government participation from lost votes, and even historically poor election results can be sufficient for the appointment of a social democratic Chancellor. Party members can even benefit from a loss of voters. Take party financing. Declining election results lead to a reduction in state subsidies to political parties, which are based mainly on the number of votes obtained, and to that extent give rise to a restructuring of the various sources of party funding. For example, the significance of member contributions is likely to increase, thereby increasing the influence of the party membership. At least in theory. In fact, however, the share of membership contributions in total party funding has not increased, quite the contrary. In 1974, membership contributions made up 37 per cent of the total budget of the Danish social democratic party: by 2008 they accounted for less than ten per cent (see Bille 1997 and 2010). The financial weight of the membership is equally insignificant in Scandinavian neighbours Sweden and Norway, as well as in Spain. Only in Austria and the Netherlands do the social democratic parties take in more from their members than from state subsidies in terms of party funding, in both cases amounting to

around one-third of total revenues (see Ucakar 2006 and PvaD 2007).

The reasons for this development include, on the one hand, a massive increase in state funding of political parties. In Denmark, for example, public subsidy for each vote cast in Folketing elections rose from five Danish kroner in 1987 to 27.5 Danish kroner at the last election in 2007 (see Bille 1996: 157). On the other hand, in parallel to the losses at the ballot box the membership of social democratic parties is shrinking. There were 290,000 card-carrying social democrats in Denmark in 1950, after which a decline set in, interrupted only by a period of stability in the 1980s, since when it has accelerated incessantly. For 2009, the party's own statistics reported for the first time a membership of below 50,000 (48,236). The membership of the PvdA is of a similar size, at around 54,000, in comparison to around twice that number at the end of the 1980s.

Even more dramatic are the losses suffered by the other Scandinavian social democratic parties, as well as by the SPÖ. The decline in Sweden amounts to just under two-thirds or 160,000 party members since 1990–91, while its Norwegian sister party has lost just over two-thirds since 1985, a loss of 130,000 social democrats. But this is relatively modest in comparison to the collapse in membership in Austria. The SPÖ was once the most densely organised social democratic party in Europe: in 1979, out of around 8 million Austrians, over 720,000 carried the red party membership book. Today, party membership has fallen to 243,000, signalling the departure or decease of almost 500,000 people.[1] Internal party estimates exist projecting, if things carry on as they are, the loss of the last SPÖ member as early as 2018![2]

It is unlikely that this trend could be slowed or halted, still less reversed by reducing membership contributions. For example, while one often reads complaints in the Internet blogs of French Socialists about the high level of contributions, on the other hand, it is frequently retorted that if contributions were too low it would devalue party membership even further. There is certainly a lively debate

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1.   For Denmark, see Beretning 2009; for Norway, see Arbeiderpartiets 200); for Sweden, see Wrede and Ruin 2008; the figures for Austria were given by Dr Michael Rosecker, of the Renner-Institut, on 5 July 2010, in conversation with the author.

2.   The author would like to thank Friedrich Graf-Götz of the Renner-Institut for this information.

about contributions in the French PS, not least because all new members pay only 20 euros for the first year, after which the annual contribution sharply increases, either at a flat rate or in accordance with wages, and therefore in particular for normal or higher earners. Decision-making about this and about the precise level of contributions is the task of party sections. In any case, every member after the first year is confronted by the question of whether to accept the rise in contributions or to leave the party. Indeed, 84 per cent of the new members recruited in the course of the »Membership for 20 Euros« campaign in 2006 left when the first year was up. This example also shows that the relevance of the level of contribution is largely dependent on individual motives for joining: 83 per cent of these »20-euro members« signed up primarily so that they could have a say in the selection of the Socialist presidential candidate. After this had been done, this motive no longer applied and with it the mean reason for joining. In short, the level of contribution is likely to be decisive for those whose motives for joining are slight, short-term and volatile.

Membership numbers in general have been declining for decades. In parallel with this, the experiences of socialisation, perceptions and expectations of professed social democrats are increasingly contracting within the compass of the influences, mentalities and interests of a single generation. Dominating social democratic parties are the so-called »participation cohorts« who joined in droves in the 1960s and early 1970s. Initially, they shook their parties up with their enthusiasm, ruthlessly displacing the older generation and later preventing a younger generation from rising; now they are largely all that is left in local party organisations. In the Netherlands, at the time of the last major study of PvdA membership in 1999, over 60 per cent of party members were above 50 years of age (Koole and van Holsteyn, Joop 1993: 93). Particularly dramatic is the increase in the percentage of older people in precisely those parties which, in the past, experienced the largest membership increases. A decade before this, in 1990, 65 per cent of members of the Danish »Socialdemokraterne« were already 50 years of age and above (see Bille 1996: 155) – and, for Austria, Anton Pelinka stated recently that the dramatic« decline in the level of organisation of the SPÖ could be traced back only to a very limited extent to people leaving the party; instead, the »generation factor« was the main reason for the decline in the 1980s and 1990s (see Pelinka 2005: 67). »In general«, in the assessment of Franz Walter,

»social democrats in Europe have turned into political ›grey panther‹ groups« (Walter 2010: 65).

Similarly, their youth organisations are afflicted by galloping consumption. The youth organisation of the Swedish SAP – with 100,000 members the largest Swedish political party – has only 5,500 members, making it only the third largest youth organisation, behind even the Pirates Party (see Westerberg 2008). In particular with regard to their elite recruitment, which the social democratic parties still carry out largely via their youth organisations, the emaciation and infirmity of the latter is a major problem.

Structural Conservatism with regard to Organisation

In particular the current state of the youth organisations anticipates the immediate future of the parent parties, which serve as a telescope, clearly indicating general developments. The organisational life of parties is considered to be ritualised and boring and likely to put off party newcomers for life. The »backroom culture« of local party organisations represents the daunting reality of everyday party life. Such generalisations might be unfair. The fact is, however, that only some local social democratic party organisations function in accordance with party statutes and members generally receive no information from them which they could not have got some other way. Not to mention the fact that local party activities are not perceived as particularly attractive, lively and varied or as likely to encourage sympathisers and interested outsiders.

This is probably due not least to the structural conservatism of social democratic parties. Although membership numbers in recent decades have fallen dramatically, the number of local associations, sections and municipal organisations has largely remained stable, and in some instances has even grown. In 1980, there were 700,000 party members in Austria, in 3,445 local associations and sections; today, although the SPÖ has barely 250,000 members, they are distributed among 3,589 local associations and sections (see Müller 1996: 330p). Even fundamental local government reform has only a limited effect on party structures. In Denmark, as a result of major local government reform at the beginning of 2007, the number of separate municipalities was reduced from 271 to 98. The number of party organisations in the

Danish social democratic party largely remained the same, however, as a result of which »Socialdemokratiet« now has 260 local party organisations in Denmark's 98 municipalities.

Needless to say, the French example can be put forward as evidence in favour of the opposite standpoint. The strength of the national Parti Socialiste (PS) – which has been in the doldrums for some considerable time, not having provided a president since 1995 or a prime minister since 2002 – lies in its exceptional local roots. Its reputation as the »parti de municipalités« (local council party) manifests itself in the results of local, departmental and regional elections, in which the PS regularly outdistances its political rivals as the strongest party.[3] At the same time, studies of political parties can point to numerous examples of the electoral superiority of close-meshed political organisational structures and the mobilising force of public visibility and presence even in the remotest corners of electoral space. However, this applies largely to growing or stable parties. In the case of markedly shrinking organisations such structural persistence is problematic, resulting in a growing proportion of local mini-organisations which, apart from anything else for personnel reasons, are unable to do the kind of creative work needed to draw attention to the party, and prefer the intimacy of pubs and back rooms to alternative premises which, in any case, would be much too large for their functions and in this way give constant nourishment to widespread adverse perceptions of parties and party activities.

In short, social democratic membership-based parties are becoming smaller and smaller. The sole exception is the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), which had to start almost from scratch when, after the demise of the Franco regime, it became the official opposition in 1977, and from this starting point has experienced rapid development, combined with exponential growth (see Kennedy 2009). Otherwise, social democratic parties are dwindling, increasingly representative only of the older generation and, on top of all that, losing a great deal of their colour and variety, socially, culturally and intellectually.

In particular, social democratic parties are no longer workers' parties since, within the framework of the ex-

pansion of education, the universities became accessible even for young people from outside the middle classes, as a result of which the ambitious offspring of skilled workers emerged from the working classes – both occupationally, through well paid employment in the growing tertiary sector and also spatially, by moving to more attractive residential areas, and then also socially, through new contact groups and circles of friends as their everyday lives were reshaped. It is almost exclusively from the ranks of these young people, emerging from the working classes, who benefited from the expansion of higher education and deindustrialisation that, beginning in the 1980s, social democratic party activists were recruited. The old working class and the new underclass lost, at the same time, their natural political allies and gradually turned away from social democratic parties which were now colonised by better educated representatives of the new middle class.

In the Netherlands, as early as 1999 only ten per cent of PvdA members were categorised as »working class«. This process is also far advanced in the Scandinavian countries. In Denmark, 76 per cent of social democrats were working class in 1971. This had halved to 34 per cent by 1990, but ten years later it had fallen to only 16 per cent. That was not even proportionate to their numbers within the population: in the same year, 24 per cent of the Danish population were categorised as working class. The marginalisation of the working class is even more marked in France. While the working class makes up 27.8 per cent of French society, a mere five per cent of PS members are working class. Significantly overrepresented in the PS, on the other hand, are members who have matriculated and are employed in the public sector, especially in the teaching profession.[4]

Social democratic parties today are parties of the new middle classes »with a tendency towards elitism« (see Stephan 2000: 165). In Norway, social democrats are now described as a »social democratic noblesse d'état« Marsdal 2007: 81pp.) (to borrow Bourdieu's expression); in Austria the »bourgeoisification« *(Vergroßbürgerlichung)* of the SPÖ is supposed to have taken place in the 1990s and a »new class« holds sway in the party (Leser 2008: 195; Leser 2002: 154). The process seems to be particularly advanced in the Netherlands, where scholars talk of a »democracy of academia«, referring to the astonishing

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3. This term was coined by MEP and »national secretary« of the PS, Harlem Desir, in conversation with Daniela Kallinich in June 2010.

4. For the Netherlands, see Koole and van Holsteyn 1999: 93–124; for Denmark, see Bille 2003; for France, see Stephan 2000: 165.

number of professors in leading political positions (see Aarts et al. 2007: 153). PvdA politician Wouter Gortzak has written sardonically, with reference to his own party, of the fact that 75 per cent of MPs come from the civil service and the rest from academia (in Gortzak 2002: 30).

Social democratic parties have lost the working class, but without winning over the middle classes. Among workers in the private sector, in the modern, young and well qualified social milieus of the future in prosperous cities, they are faring badly. The SPÖ, for example, has not only been haemorrhaging voters among the working classes, falling from 65 per cent of their votes in 1979 to 35 per cent in 1999, but has suffered meltdown in the urban centres and even in a former stronghold such as Graz, instead of absolute majorities, as in the past, its vote has collapsed to an all-time low of 19 per cent. Turning to the SAP in Sweden, in Stockholm, the booming symbol of Swedish modernity, social democrats are at risk of becoming a diaspora. At the parliamentary elections in 2006 the SAP in Stockholm registered the worst result in the whole country, while in the European elections they came in fourth, behind the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Greens. Here too, the SAP lost out massively among its core supporters – pensioners and members of the industrial trade union LO.

Indeed, cities symbolise the problems of modern social democracy. Once central to the social democratic movement, today they are paradigmatic of its increasing inability to bring together heterogeneous groups of supporters. It is particularly difficult for the major parties to build bridges in urban areas as far as integration is concerned because here the split between supporters into post-materialists and materialists, middle class and underclass, libertarian and value conservative is especially wide and deep. As a result, all too often every group is dissatisfied with social democratic attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable. Social democratic parties tend to be too establishment for the modern underclass, too old-fashioned for middle class high achievers, too bland for the better educated, too much of a cop-out for young people and, to many voters with an immigrant background, too insensitive to their particular problems (see Noormofidi and Pölsler 2010).

In any case, social democratic parties are workers' parties, major parties and mass parties only for historical reasons and in their own eyes – they are no longer any of these

things in reality. To be more precise, in their heyday social democratic parties were »both x and y« parties: both class-based parties and major parties, as well as both parties of the lower classes and parties of intermediate groups with regard to education, income and status. Today, they are »neither nor« parties, able to maintain their support neither among those losing out due to modernisation nor among those benefiting from globalisation, despite the fact – or is it precisely because? – they put themselves forward as political advocates now of the former, and then of the latter.

The Next Generation of Leaders

This general and rapid decline and the social, occupational and cultural narrowing of the parties' supporter base has repercussions for social democratic elites. As ever, the youth organisations represent an important reservoir for the recruitment of the next generation. This was also the case in the 1970s, but at that time they were also »training camps« and arenas for up and coming politicians. It was in the party youth organisations that the young generation acquired the skills needed for higher political office later on; unruly congresses provided training in debating skills and rhetoric; the surplus of applicants for posts schooled young people in the art of wheeling and dealing, including intrigue and surprise attacks; and factional conflicts hardened activists. Today, factions have degenerated everywhere into personnel machines, and the few remaining young people no longer have to fight bitter battles and selection fights in marginalised youth groups. It is fair to say that it has never been so easy as it is today to ascend to high positions in social democratic parties; the young have never had such favourable prospects of promotion – apart from anything else, because young activists, due to the ageing of political party memberships, become the protégées of party leaderships, receive sponsorship to go on training courses and are taken under the wings of mentors.

But genuine political know-how – instinct, chutzpah, situational intelligence and the like – cannot be picked up on courses, and a stronger, more power-conscious young generation cannot be brought on in party schools, weekend seminars and leadership training courses. In recent years, all social democratic parties have strongly emphasised such things. There has been a universal boom in training courses for party officials: in Salzburg,

for example, there is the »Zukunftsakademie« (Academy of the Future), while at the national level in Austria – and in other countries – there is the Party School. In addition – again, with reference to Austria – the Renner-Institut organises a youth academy and there is a mentoring programme to bring on promising women. The Dutch PvdA offers a wide variety of courses which, in keeping with the party's image of itself, are a cross between a weekend seminar and training at a party school. The effects of all these measures are debatable, however.

It is indicative that what the younger generation formed in this way tends to demand of the party leadership is not so much changes in policy or a new political culture as earlier promotion, better career prospects, swifter advancement and higher youth quotas. The importance of patronage means that the younger generation no longer seeks to hold the party establishment to account, ideas are dutifully fed into the party via committees and public controversies are conducted at best half-heartedly. In fact, young people are pragmatists, not would-be revolutionaries, and more concerned with maintaining existing structures than changing them, still less overthrowing them (see Ortner 2010).

Extra-parliamentary activities, networking with civil society organisations or NGOs; in other words, looking beyond the rim of the professional political goldfish bowl has, as a consequence, become devalued. Furthermore, the career paths of advancing cohorts afford few insights into social realities, worries and desires beyond the political sphere. The four-step career path of secondary school, university, working as an assistant for an MP and then being elected to parliament is generating a political class which is woefully short of life experience – »young officials without a profession«, as Bruno Kreisky likes to call young career politicians (in Leser 2008: 208). No wonder, therefore, that in Denmark there are complaints about the lack of strong conviction politicians and that commentaries on the death of the political heavyweight Svend Auken sounded the death knell of the left-wing of the social democratic party. It is also not surprising that the social democrats in Norway have been accused of trying to create an elite caste of politicians and of being out of touch with the grassroots (see Marsdal 2007: 81 pp.). In short, charismatic leaders, tenacious conviction politicians and distinctive figures are not emerging in social democratic parties, which instead are dominated – at least this is the general impression – by interchange-able career politicians, middle-of-the-road experts in negotiation and fickle consumers of opinion polls who respond to opposition by beating a hasty retreat.

Also characteristic of social democratic parties in recent years is rapid changes in leadership. Personnel changes have, on the one hand, exacerbated the problem of discontinuity. Promising measures, such as the project »PvdA in the Neighbourhood« in the Netherlands, which organised visits by leading party figures to disadvantaged areas in large cities in 2002 and 2003, through which the PvdA sought to re-establish contact with the people after the disastrous election defeat of 2002, restored confidence and laid the foundations for victory in the 2003 elections, were not followed through, and fizzled out (see Hippe et al. 2004). Resignations by politicians for trivial reasons, moreover, diminish politics and deprive it of its seriousness and even its dignity. The casual way in which offices steeped in history are cast away does little for the reputation and public esteem of the political establishment. In the first century of its existence, from its founding in 1888/89 to 1983, the SPÖ had only five party leaders – this is also how many have held the post over the past 25 years. Perhaps the European social democratic parties should take a leaf out of the book of their Japanese sister party, where dependability and endurance are particular virtues. Weathering storms, not only in the figurative sense standing firm in the face of strong headwinds and unwaveringly spreading the political message, these virtues are of paramount importance in Japan, counting for at least as much as the political substance (Klein 2008: 163).

Recurring Reform Debates

Social democratic parties are therefore losing voters and members. Their party organisations, especially local associations, are rather off-putting to outsiders, and party elites do not appear particularly trustworthy due to their inscrutable decisions concerning various appointments. In that respect, it is hardly surprising that numerous proposals for renewal are currently being discussed in social democratic parties. Social democratic parties traditionally respond with reform debates to electoral defeat, membership losses and low approval ratings. The same pattern has been followed over the past decade, with documents proposing innovations corresponding to election defeats and losing government power. Certainly, these

often remained ephemeral drafts and in the best case, proposals were incorporated in the party statutes, but there has been no significant and lasting organisational change – which also means that social democratic parties have been ruminating over the same reform measures, with only minor modifications, for decades. »It would be going too far to assert«, concludes Austrian political scientist Karl Ucakar with reference to the SPÖ, »that all the provisions in the party statutes which are supposed to ensure internal party democracy only exist on paper … It would be even more hazardous to claim that actual internal party structures really – that is, substantially – conform to the standard of internal party democracy which the statutes would make possible if they were applied meaningfully and not just formally« (Ucakar2006: 331).

The frequent failure of party reform in the past does not mean, however, that we can give up on breaking the logjams in social democratic parties, stemming their oligarchisation, halting the trend towards insider-parties or conducting dialogue with the citizens and society more intensively than hitherto. The sobering assessment of reform so far does not mean, either, that promising approaches and models are lacking. One innovation which would help to open up social democratic parties and improve the quality of their leaderships would be to bring in people from other walks of life.

Deus Ex Machina: The Debate about Bringing People in from Outside Politics

The call for candidates with unconventional – in terms of modern party politics – career paths reflects a real problem: the far-reaching introversion and homogeneity of political elites. Accordingly, in a country such as France, with its high level of elite mobility between politics, academia and the business world, there is neither demand for nor a debate on bringing people in from other walks of life – so-called »career changers« – to infuse new blood into political parties. At the same time, the sixty-four thousand dollar question is whether this would have the hoped-for results. Careful analyses of the issue are available for Austria and the SPÖ (on this and what follows see Wolf 2005). According to these analyses, a strong party leadership is needed if important, well-paid positions and seats are to be filled by »career-changers« rather than by party functionaries who consider that such positions are rightly theirs. To that extent, people from other walks of life are

dependent on patronage, at least at the outset of their political careers. It is fanciful to suggest that they will be independent: they owe their political advancement to powerful figures in the party, on whose whim they will be even more dependent than traditional career politicians. The career-changers in the SPÖ – whose recruitment began in earnest only in the 1990s, having previously been largely unknown – came, furthermore, from the business world and were, in terms of their background, dispositions and status, from more privileged strata than the largely middle class party functionaries. The restoration of ties with former core supporters, if that is the aim, is hindered by their appointment rather than enhanced.

Furthermore, the recruitment of people from other walks of life is by no means easy. It isn't just a matter of wooing prominent figures in the business world, academia and culture; they must also have a real urge to enter politics. Such an inclination is most likely to arise during periods of exceptional political conflict, when important decisions have to be made and a place in the history books beckons for those who participate. Also susceptible are charismatic leaders, people who emanate a certain aura and are also widely respected among social elites, who also appeal to decision-makers beyond the political sphere. The latter, a charismatic elite, even a party which exudes self-assurance, is presently lacking, which is why political parties are courting career-changers. In fact, the hopes attached to such outsiders merely confirms the disrepute into which traditional politicians have fallen. In the words of Konrad Paul Liessmann, »the fact that career-changers have not been made use of indicates that active participation in political parties tends to wear people out and diminish their appeal« (cited in Wolf 2005: 81).

But in particular career-changers from the preferred fields of business and academia do not bring with them the kind of key skills needed for a long-term political career. Not accustomed to incessant criticism in their own domains, which, such as it is, tends to be technical criticism directed towards their work, not ad hominem or in public, they tend to be rather sensitive when they find themselves in the media spotlight. Professors and managers are used to dealing largely with their own kind; business and academic elites are elites of cooptation and up-and-coming members are selected and appointed by the establishment. Many people from such backgrounds are markedly reluctant when it comes to dealing with

the party rank and file, the constant need to drum up support at local level and cultivating an instinct for the concerns of ordinary voters, all of which are indispensable in politics. Furthermore, academics and top businessmen are used to pursuing a given objective by rigorous means, but in democracies based on bargaining »master plans« tend to be subjected to carping criticism from the outset. As a result, people who come into politics from other walks of life frequently return to them again relatively soon, and their ineffectiveness and speedy demise serve only to exacerbate the crisis of confidence in politics and political parties. This is certainly why the SPÖ's experiences with career-changers has been catastrophic: neither the well-known journalist Hans-Peter Martin nor Gertraud Knoll, superintendent of the Evangelical Church, nor Josef Broukal, one of Austria's best-known TV presenters, even came close to meeting expectations and turned out to be permanent sources of discord, potentially divisive elements in the party and vehement critics of the leadership.

Perhaps the selection procedure which the PvdA applied for the first time in Amsterdam at the local elections in 2010 represents an opportunity to recruit a new elite combining the virtues of career politicians and career-changers: political experience, on the one hand, and professional know-how, on the other. The first step in Amsterdam was to distinguish between »internal« »external« candidates, the newcomers. These candidates, at least the external ones, had to undergo a five-stage procedure. In the first phase, candidates were informally interviewed and assessed by a candidate committee. After that, the external candidates were given a »practice task«, for example, the planning and implementation of a campaign event. The third phase consisted of a selection interview, in which the external candidates' suitability and the work already done by the internal candidates were assessed.

In this way, the committee drew up a provisional list of candidates. This was followed by a two-day seminar and after further discussions the selection committee drew up a list which was then put before the general meeting of the Amsterdam PvdA for a final decision (see PvaD 2010). The procedure implemented in Amsterdam to screen candidates ensures or at least increases the probability that no candidates are nominated who, although of some social standing, in due course turn out to be totally unsuited to politics. Candidates are screened not only

with regard to professional competence, knowledge and achievements, but equally with regard to their social and emotional skills, in other words, how they come across and their willingness to work as part of a team (ibid).

Green Shoots: The Local Level and Membership Consultation

Currently, social democratic parties in Europe have their eyes on the local level as the arena in which to get their regeneration under way. Starting from the base, the idea is to establish new social networks with sympathetic groups, attract new members and win over new voters. The Spanish PSOE has described the party's opening up at local level and tentative alliances with civil society as an »*impulso democrático*«. Other parties are doing something similar, under various names: Norway's social democratic party is organising, within the framework of a »coastal offensive«, appearances by leading politicians in out-of-the-way regions and engaging with the citizens by knocking on their doors. In Denmark, campaign weeks are being organised in a growing number of constituencies, again with a view to attracting support face to face, listening patiently and boosting their public profile, ultimately doing more or less the same thing as the PvdA, with its »Meer Rood op Straat« (More red on the streets) campaign. Perhaps the prime example among social democratic parties of such efforts to boost their local presence is Sweden, with its »Houses of the People«. Houses of the People are to be found in many municipalities, encompassing a multitude of organisations, activities and events of the old workers' movement and representing a visible and recognised meeting point for citizens. These Houses have done a great deal to establish the Swedish social democratic party's reputation as the »caring party« and long underpinned its political hegemony. Even today, caring parties can be successful, as, for example, the Dutch left-wing Socialistische Partij (SP) has proved in recent years, which in its early years was a champion of specific popular interests and made significant gains in the past two parliamentary elections.

A caring party which is active at local level, attractive at close quarters and rooted in the local community must satisfy three conditions: First, the party's direct presence and everyday visibility are important. This can be achieved, as in Vienna, by regular visits by party activists to areas of

subsidised housing. As the SPÖ mayor of Vienna Michael Häupl puts it, departing from how things were done in the 1990s: »People want people, not call-centres«. This requires, second, an active, mobilised membership. Ordinary members want to be taken seriously and to feel that their views count and that they can exert some influence: the personal attention of the party leadership encourages them. In Denmark, the social democratic parties have had some success with phone calls to inactive members. After being assured of their importance by telephone and asked, for example, to participate in an election campaign, around half of those called in this way expressed their willingness to do so and – more importantly – around a third of them did actually participate. In Norway, within the framework of a pilot project, AP members systematically carried out home visits, spoke to people, gave them a red rose and asked them whether they would be interested in joining the Labour Party. In fact, ten per cent of those asked expressed a wish to become a party member and many did so. On being asked why they had not joined the party before, the answer was: »Because no one ever asked me«.

»Caring« strategies, then, are particularly successful when the party organisation is closely involved with the provision of services to people. The Swedish Houses of the People, for example, in many instances are also cultural clubs, youth clubs and leisure facilities; their party-political character is often not immediately apparent and they exert influence subtly and indirectly. The Swedish Tenants' Association operates in a similar way, getting potential social democratic supporters on board via specific, not directly political services, provisions and discounts. But the basis of local vitality, as well as successful caring strategies is, thirdly – and not surprisingly – a strong party organisation. It is easier for parties to maintain a constant presence, beyond the mobilisation of hidden reserves, by means of growing membership and support. To be sure, this is also where the problems begin. Organisational strength is diminishing, memberships are declining, sometimes rapidly, and local party ranks have been depleted. Of those who are still committed, under such circumstances, the maintenance of a busy, visible party life requires an increasingly unreasonable and unrealistic level of activity.

The hopes of European social democracy shifted to the strengthening of local party organisations only recently. Traditionally, hopes were pinned – and this remains un-

challenged – on referenda on specific and personal issues; in other words, member surveys and primary elections. As a result of the expansion of education and the knowledge revolution, so the story goes, people's ability to participate is greater than ever. The willingness to participate also remains high, as indicated by the wealth of citizens' initiatives and the considerable interest in belonging to organisations. However, this kind of commitment tends to bypass political parties, thanks to outmoded party structures, top-down opinion-forming and local associations which concern themselves exclusively with the minutiae of local politics. Since virtually every member survey expresses people's desire for more far-reaching opportunities for participation and influence as one of the most important demands on parties, the solution to the dilemma of falling memberships and lack of appeal to party outsiders is sought in experiments with election primaries.

Experiences so far confirm that election primaries are able to mobilise a much broader spectrum of the membership than conventional party work. With regard to the latter, participation rates are mainly extremely low: general meetings attract barely ten per cent of the membership – one study in the Netherlands revealed that this could fall as low as five per cent in the case of the PvdA.[5] In 2002, in contrast, around 50 per cent of the membership took part in the election of top candidates, which has been subject to primaries among members for the past ten years. In France, too, the majority of PS members exercised their right to vote in referenda: for example, participation in the vote on the European constitutional treaty in December 2004 was exceptionally high, at 83 per cent of the membership, while the vote on organisational reform of the party in October 2009 was below average, at 46 per cent. It is possible that the latter has something to do with member survey fatigue. Comparative studies show, in any case, that the frequency of referenda has a marked effect on participation. Also relevant is national traditions in this regard, which explains why the relatively low general inclination to participate in Austria gave rise to comparatively low responses to SPÖ member surveys (Nick 1995).

Participation would seem to favour election primaries. But direct party democracy has hidden risks. Referenda turn

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5.   See the report on the party organisation in Leiden, in: De Jong 2007: 23.

well-organised quota and proportional representation systems, which major parties in particular cannot do without, upside down. Ultimately, they give rise to demands for broader integration of different generations, social strata, gender, regional identities and lifestyles, to reflect modern society. This requires, among other things, representatives who are not at the mercy of the imponderables of majority decision-making. Balance can be achieved among officials and elected politicians only by party elites with experience and perspective: it will not come from vague notions about grassroots opinion. As a result, where the party base is permitted a say in candidate nominations primaries are usually combined with certain restrictions and corrective powers on the part of the party leadership. All social democratic parties have quota regulations which are intended to guarantee adequate gender representation. The reach of party central office generally goes further, however. For example, the leadership of the SPÖ in Austria, in addition to the quota for women, reserves 20 per cent of places on the party list for candidates in accordance with »the needs of the national party«. In addition, the party statutes call for »adequate« representation of young people, although this is not really binding. In France, the leadership of the PS threatens and cajoles subordinate federations with penalties and rewards in order to ensure the desired colour and variety on party lists.

The contradiction between referenda and proportional representation is pointed up more clearly in the PvdA candidate lists. The PvdA lists were the most varied in the Netherlands, including candidates from all 12 Dutch provinces and ten out of the 12 occupational groups included in Dutch occupational statistics. There were also numerous women and every fifth PvdA candidate was an immigrant, and as many as 40 per cent were newcomers, seeking election to parliament for the first time. Admittedly, the process of drawing up the lists had nothing to do with grassroots democracy. There were repeated criticisms that the nomination procedure was damaging internal party democracy; former PvdA minister Marcel van Dam even spoke of »North Korean conditions«. The party committees, according to van Dam, would decide everything, there were no rival candidates and there was virtually no point in attempting to change the list rankings at the party conference (van Dam 2010). Furthermore, primary elections make little sense in particularly pluralistic societies. In New Zealand, the Labour Party (NZLP) must perform a particularly difficult balancing

act. Apart from the fact that there are considerable cultural differences between the inhabitants of the two main islands, the NZLP is the political representative of the indigenous Maori population. Making it mandatory for the (party) members to draw up the list of candidates in accordance with multidimensional quotas has never been tried in New Zealand (see Aimer 2006: 362).

Furthermore, grassroots democracy has an inherent tendency towards polarisation. Referenda divide the membership into groups of supporters of rival candidates, raise the level of conflicts in the party organisation, introduce discord into party structures, bodies and teams and thereby paralyse party work. This was the case in Spain, for example, where the election primary for the top candidate on the party list in the run up to the election to the parliament in 2000 led to bitter conflicts and ended up dividing the leadership, since the top candidate and the party chair were deadly enemies. From this experience the PSOE drew the conclusion that, in future, election primaries were to be avoided. Although the PvdA is sticking with primaries for the time being, the introduction of grassroots elections for the top candidate *(lijstrekker)* in 2002 exacerbated internal party strife, and there is a widespread desire to see this come to an end. Opinion is therefore divided on election primaries in the Netherlands. In the *Trouw* newspaper a smart commentator recently expressed the view that in the USA election primaries make sense because the victorious candidate is unhesitatingly supported by the backers of his internal party rivals in the ensuing election. In the Dutch multi-party system, by contrast, the switch by PvdA voters to, for example, SP or D66 in response to the defeat of their own desired candidate was much more likely than in the two-party US system. In the Netherlands, therefore, election primaries »guarantee suicide« (van Holsteyn 2009).

Finally, people's expectations with regard to referenda are often utterly unrealistic. Wherever election primaries have been held so far, everything has remained the same. The SPÖ provides a good illustration of this. Rainer Nick comes to the conclusion with regard to the election primaries for list candidates for the parliamentary elections in 1994 that this procedure had virtually no effect because the process of nominating candidates had nevertheless remained in the hands of the party leadership – for the simple reason that the level of participation for a binding decision by the members had been set so high that in only one out of nine federal states and individual districts

would it not have been possible for the party committees to revise the vote of the members. But even if much lower participation rates had been sufficient for binding decisions nothing would have changed with regard to the lists. Almost without exception the majority of members confirmed the proposals of their committees.

As a result, there was only one instance in which the ranking was changed with regard to seats with goods prospects. Despite election primaries virtually no new-comers entered parliament, and the SPÖ parliamentary party showed very little interest in them. Largely, the old familiar faces were chosen once again – Nick refers to them, significantly, as the »logical« candidates (Nick 1995: 7pp.). Furthermore, what sense does it make to in-stigate such an apparently ambitious project as the open election primaries planned by the French PS to select its next presidential candidate if in the run up to them top politicians are already working behind the scenes to ensure that representatives of the most important wings of the party do not stand against one another, thereby removing any real choice?

Voting by the membership and election primaries, then, do not represent a panacea, apart from anything else because they are, first and foremost, purely technical reforms – in other words, procedural innovations with regard to opinion-forming and changes in the regulations governing candidate selection. In the 1990s, it was hoped that this kind of reconstruction of internal procedures and structures would solve every problem. The idea was to reorganise parties into efficient service agencies, to outsource key elements of policy planning to external service providers and to deal with voters in terms of voter markets, along the lines of advertising for consumer goods. At least, that was the idea of policy technocrats in the final decade of the twentieth century. However, politics and political parties are not consumer goods. A decision *for* one and *against* another party, despite the erosion of social milieus and the diminution of class con-sciousness, amounts to a confession of political faith (see Biehl 2005). Parties are chosen on the basis of sympathy for their political orientation. A long-term connection with a party political actor in particular usually requires identification with a party's profile, the impression that there is at least a general normative agreement and that it is worth supporting the party's aims.

To that extent, social democratic parties cannot do without a distinct party platform, characteristic issues and a recognisable value profile. Only if they provide credible reasons for their actions will they be able to get a momentum going which will carry people with it – only if they are inspired by something and have clear goals will they have any appeal. *Organisational reforms have no effect if the parties do not know what they want; when it remains unclear who they are in politics for, on what path, with what goals and with what allies*. The experiences of the Spanish and Norwegian social democratic parties also point in this direction. In recent years, they have succeeded in the teeth of the general trend, although, in accordance with tradition, the party leaderships draw up candidate lists and the possibilities for grassroots inter-vention for their members are very limited (see Méndez Lago 2006).

Party Programme: The Economy and Society

Clearly, the fact that work on a new social democratic project came to be neglected is not the sole responsibility of party leaderships. The membership, too, ultimately has shown little enthusiasm for contributing to a sub-stantive repositioning. Grassroots democracy leads to high participation rates in European social democratic parties when the effort needed is low, such as in election primaries, which demand no more than filling in a ballot paper. Substantive intervention requires considerably more effort and time, among other things for reading and mulling over party programmes and the drafting of alternative proposals. Participation rates in substantive member surveys are correspondingly very low. The fate of the French PS's discussion platform »Laboratoire des idées« is typical in this respect. This internet forum was for the purpose of exchanging ideas, enabling party members to debate with academics, intellectuals and artists on a new direction for the PS. The outcome was sobering. The level of interest was so low that in the end the comment function was terminated and now only commissioned articles are displayed on the website.[6]

Although in recent years systematic conceptual reflection has come to be viewed as an irksome imposition, that does not mean that no substantive and strategic real-

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6. This can be inferred from monitoring the »Laboratoire des idées« homepage over a period of months. See also Normand 2009 und 2009a.

ignments have been made. *Since the 1990s, the majority of social democratic parties have turned their attention to society's »achievers«.* Slogans about modernisation and efficiency and the rhetoric about equality of opportunity were directed towards the well qualified middle classes and those on the way up. Success in life was supposed to be independent of a person's origins and parental home and achievement should be rewarded. Distributive justice was a subordinate value, if not to be rejected entirely. Objections according to which equality involves more than merely an equal start for all – in the sense of an equal opportunity for each individual to develop unequally and the Devil take the hindmost – were ignored or swept aside.

The semantic fixation on middle class achievers has only served to heighten the alienation of the lowest third of society. The gulf is now so deep that social democratic parties were unable to regain the trust lost in the 1990s among the victims of globalisation and those failed by the education system when they began to sing once again from a more traditionalist hymn sheet on finding themselves in opposition in the new millennium and in the wake of the global economic crisis in 2008. Now all of a sudden, in Austria, the previously brash SPÖ began calling for »basic insurance according to need«, an EU-wide referendum on a transaction tax and also »socially just taxes« – in other words, tax increases for speculators and the wealthy. In Holland, the PvdA – from 2002 – lent its support to the anti-neoliberal platform »Keer het Tij« (see PvdA Partijbestuur 2006; Hoove 2004) and its leadership candidate Job Cohen proclaimed – in the 2010 election campaign – the »decent society« with an egalitarian education system, but also an expansion of the state sector (see the speech by Cohen 2010).

But the former electoral support of lower social strata cannot be won back in this way. There are good reasons for regarding the social democratic parties' decision to throw in their lot with economic liberalism, as well as the politics of the New Middle and of the Third Way in general, as causing the social democratic malaise of the past decade. The social democrats' political turn in the 1990s rendered them untrustworthy in the eyes of large parts of the population, as well as incompetent when it came to issues of fairness. Furthermore, they will not be able to take advantage of the newly awakened need for social security and the conjuncture of such problems as unemployment, injustice and social cohesion because in the recent past it was in many instances *they* who

liberalised economic structures, stimulated location competition, deregulated the financial markets, gifted bankers and executives unimaginable wealth and privatised state-owned companies. In fact, the sudden about-turn towards a more traditionalist line will, if anything, exacerbate the problems of social democratic parties and serve only to deepen their crisis of credibility and support. What is more, the new language of recent years has also put off voters from the new middle class. And no rapprochement is likely with their clientele among the socially vulnerable because the preceding alienation lasted too long and the political expediency of their sudden resumption of the old ways is too transparent in the wake of bitter election defeats.

A Fractious Partnership: The Trade Unions

Re-establishing relations with their old allies from the trade unions will also not be possible without overcoming considerable difficulties. Indeed, a common pattern may be observed in the Scandinavian countries, as well as in the Netherlands, Spain and Austria since the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s. In periods of government, relations cool and discord grows. While the trade unions seek to defend the level of influence and redistribution they once enjoyed, social democratic parties in government find themselves increasingly faced by the problems of balancing the budget, curbing the national debt and reducing mass unemployment. During periods of opposition, however, social democratic parties turn once more towards their traditional allies. Now both sides talk of different organisations engaged in different fields of activity and in different tasks, but held together by a common ideological basis and unifying ideas about the future (see Bengtsson 2008). Where social democrats and trade unionists at local level continue to cooperate closely despite the vicissitudes of politics, as is the case in Sweden, for example, with its »Houses of the People«, the consciousness of a shared identity may survive intervening breaks and periods of disagreement relatively unscathed.

But even in this instance such problems surface nevertheless. Even the legacy of the Swedish workers' movement is not exempt from the general trend towards a loosening of former sibling ties. Although in the end 52 per cent of members of the industrial trade union LO voted SAP, a higher proportion than in most other

countries, in the first half of the 1970s the figure was 71 per cent. By way of comparison, in Denmark at the polls the social democrats score barely above average among trade union members: the voting behaviour of trade union members simply reflects that of the wider society. Furthermore, in the Scandinavian countries some time between the late 1980s and early 1990s collective membership of (LO) trade union members in the SAP was abolished. In Austria, in the wake of the BAWAG affair in 2006, the positions of ÖGB president and chair of an affiliated trade union with a seat on the SPÖ National Council were declared incompatible. In other words, co-operation between trade unions and social democrats is now based, by and large, less on emotional attachment than on rational calculation. This is why the mutual desire to find common positions is most pronounced where, on the one hand, the social democrats do well at elections and, on the other, the trade unions attain a high organisation rate, so that both sides benefit significantly from the alliance.

The cyclical fluctuations on the surface can do little to mask the more robust changes in the relationship between social democratic parties and trade unions; they cannot really conceal the fundamental loss of trust. Trust is easily squandered, but terribly difficult to restore. The importance of trust is illustrated by the cases of Spain and Norway. There, in contrast to their sister parties, the social democratic parties have been able to capitalise on their new welfare state rhetoric. In Norway, because in the 1990s the social democrats only half-heartedly embraced the »Third Way« its return to the »Nordic model« and commitment to comprehensive public services, high taxes and close cooperation with the trade unions were taken seriously. In Spain, because the change of direction in 2000 was associated with a new party leader and extensive change in the party leadership, the policy shift reflected a thoroughgoing reshuffle in personnel (see Field 2009).

Untapped Reservoir?
Immigrants and »Soft Issues«

Economic policy is one thing, social policy quite another. In this area, the majority of social democrats position themselves as a progressive force, the representatives of more humane, environmental and multicultural, as well as feminist and pro-European interests. And with some

success, at least as far as voter groups with an immigrant background are concerned. Approval among immigrants and their progeny is based, on the one hand, on the direct appeal of a relatively liberal integration policy, but also on immigrant representation. Generally speaking, social democratic parties make more of an effort to get more candidates with an immigrant background on their party lists, and although proportionality is rarely attained some progress has been made.

More generally, contacts with various ethnic interest groups at local level pay dividends among immigrants at the ballot box, but also close relations with the trade unions since voters with an immigrant background are often disproportionately active in traditional blue-collar jobs. Trade unions open doors for social democrats; trade union membership is often the first step towards the social democratic party. Where formal ties to trade unions are lacking, as in France, where the party for this reason among others is regarded as elitist and out of touch, immigrant votes are hard to come by. If, on the other hand, an inclusive education system enables a considerable number of students of immigrant descent to leave school with good qualifications, candidates, officials and elected representatives can often be recruited from among them. Norway's social democratic party is prototypical in this respect.

The fact of the matter is, then, that all social democratic parties – with the exception of the French PS, as just mentioned – do well among immigrants, perhaps most strikingly in Denmark and the Netherlands, which are polarised in terms of immigration policy. In Denmark, if it was up to immigrants and their descendents alone, according to opinion polls, left-wing parties would romp home in the next elections, capturing 169 out of 175 seats in the Folketing, giving the social democrats an absolute majority. In the Netherlands, the PvdA has been by far the strongest party among immigrant groups surveyed; even in the north-western part of the country neighbouring Germany, the social democratic party would be certain of an absolute majority if only immigrants – in other words, the so-called »Allochtoons« (Dutch: »originating from another country«) – had the vote.

When summarising the strategies of social democratic parties with regard to voter groups with an immigrant background one is immediately struck – scarcely surprisingly – by the growing interest in this segment of the

population in keeping with its increasing share of the electorate. All social democratic parties are trying to appeal to immigrants by means of so-called »micro-targeting«. Micro-targeting involves addressing immigrants along ethnic lines using tailored approaches: campaign materials are produced in different languages, in other words those of the most important immigrant groups, as in Norway; specific terms of representation are offered to different ethnic groups when it comes to list candidacies – for example, the SPÖ provides the Islamic community with integration representatives with one eye on Turkish immigrants; and targeted access to immigrant communities is sought via separate ethnic party associations – for example, the Swedish social democratic party in Göteborg has Gambian, Kurdish, Turkish and Somali associations. This micro-targeting is therefore an appropriate response to social differentiation also within population groups with an immigrant background and represents a refined and developed strategy by means of which the various ethnic groups, members of both the lower and the middle classes, workers and entrepreneurs of foreign origin, as well as young people, women and older people can be addressed much more effectively than by treating immigrants as a homogenous group.

Extending one's gaze to society as a whole puts this relative success into perspective. Although in Spain the strong emphasis on »soft« political issues, such as equal rights, abortion legislation, gay rights, the environment and coming to terms with the past met with a positive response and established the PSOE as the natural partner for the so-called progressive part of the population, in Sweden this post-materialistic, New Middle Class approach undermined the SAP's alliance with its core support among the working class. Among urban, young and educated voters, on the other hand, it did not make much headway, and certainly too little to make up for its losses among workers and trade union members. Furthermore, the difficulties encountered by social democrats in gaining ground among their core supporters are often intensified by their efforts to bring immigrants on board, and especially in countries where the immigration debate is fraught with conflict. The Dutch experience points in this direction, leading to the PvdA being characterised as the »Allochtoons' party«.

Any inference that taking the contrary approach would automatically lead to success, however, is invalid. The Danish social democrats, for example, have pursued this course for several years, combining a left-wing line in economic and social policy with a restrictive immigration policy and a rigid security policy. In the Folketing elections in 2001 the then social democratic Home Secretary Karen Jespersen gained notoriety as »Island Karen« after suggesting that immigrant criminals be deported to a desert island (Ertel 2001). Even so, Denmark's social democrats have received less than 30 per cent of the vote in every election over the past 10 years.

The probable cause of this dilemma is the fact that the different policies have not been properly linked up; that social democratic political action lacks focus. Social democratic parties must be managers of heterogeneity: the most successful campaigns in recent years have combined social fairness and an orientation towards achievement, security and change, transformation and preservation. But the outcome of the lack of prospective underpinning and also practical implementation in the ensuing period was that the two sides were perceived as in conflict, and therefore their combination was perceived on all sides and by specific interest groups as inadequate. In particular, large sections of young voters were put off by this and rejected everything that was blurred, vague and indistinct as mere opportunism. In short, social democratic parties needed ideas and objectives to resolve the apparent contradictions and to link them together as the two sides of the same coin: fairness and achievement, economy and environment, openness and order. Ideas which also meet the needs of the growing number of so-called »value shifters«. Interestingly, recent opinion polls conducted among immigrants in Austria indicate, for example, that they too are keen on peace and order and that the overwhelming majority of them value security and rules, as well as tougher penalties for lawbreakers, including foreign ones (Apfl and Toth 2010).

Presumably, the dilemma described here is connected to the pronounced pragmatism which the Danish »Socialdemokraterne« share with their sister parties. This pragmatism was the opposite of the old ideological baggage and in the end degenerated into an ideology based on jettisoning ideology and so into a vulgar pragmatism. But even pragmatic – that is, goal-oriented – action needs an aim and must occasionally be punctuated by reflections on what has been achieved and how much distance remains to be covered. The conviction that the practical constraints are overwhelming – which Austrian Chancellor and SPÖ leader Franz Vranitzky once expressed

as follows: »The situation being what it is, there is nothing we can do, from a pragmatic point of view« (cited in Menasse 2005) – is the very opposite of pragmatism and, indeed, leads to an inability to reflect on and correct one's own actions: in other words, to fossilisation rather than to flexibility.

Major Parties a Thing of the Past?

The reasons for the social democratic decline may lie deeper, however. All social democratic parties, from Norway to Spain, are oriented towards the concept of the national party. Although they are increasingly falling short of the conditions necessary for a national party with regard to composition and membership size, they refuse to renounce what they see as their birthright. But their efforts in this direction are more and more a matter of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. Furthermore, the fact that their positions are often fuzzy is because – as a PvdA committee once admonished the Dutch social democrats – they are always »a little in favour of something and a little against it« (see PvdA 2009). Social democratic parties send signals in every direction in the hope of hanging on to their imperilled national party status, but in so doing they tend to come over as ambivalent, as a result of which all their target groups end up disappointed and the damage turns out to be even worse than they had feared.

It may well be that social democratic parties will have to distance themselves from the national party model in their own interest – in the final analysis, as already mentioned, they now barely meet the criteria anyway. Useful lessons can be learned from the strategies and outline papers drawn up by a number of Christian Democratic parties, however. The Austrian ÖVP can thank its election victory in 2002 for the fact that it has been able to ditch its catch-all strategy in favour of a more distinct profile, thereby gaining considerably in terms of clarity, transparency and credibility. At the last local elections, the CDA in the Netherlands, too, had a strategy paper in reserve whose authors advised the party to give up trying to be all things to all people and instead to concentrate on a judicious selection of those whose lifestyles would be likely to make them particularly responsive. These proposals were never applied, which might at least partly explain the party's catastrophic defeat at the parliamentary elections in 2010 (vgl. Mik 2009).
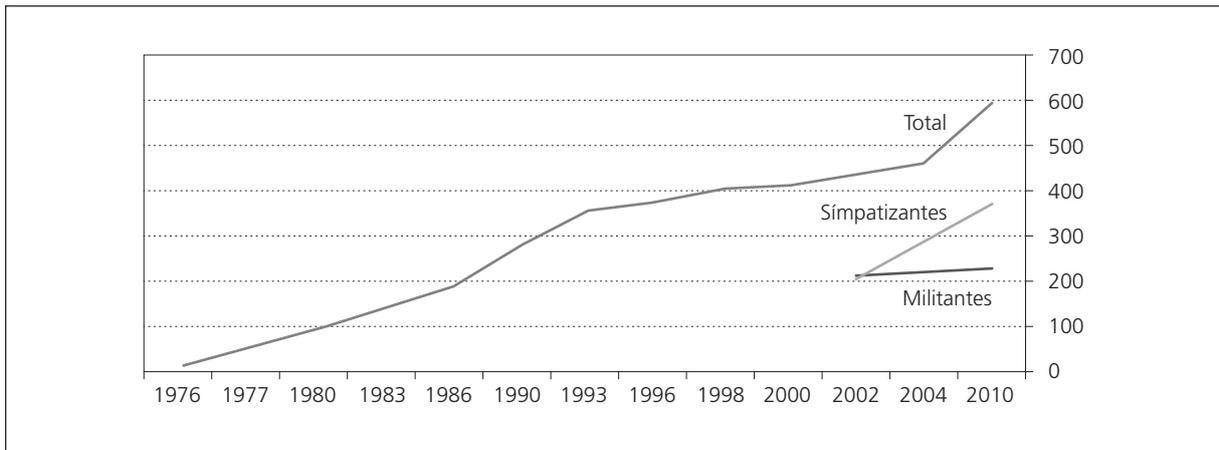
In these circumstances, therefore, social democratic parties might be well advised to renounce their fixation on the notion of the national party. Having said that, there is no reason for them to switch over to the idea that small is beautiful. It is possible to give up trying to be a catch-all party without thereby relinquishing the aim of acquiring as many members as possible. Rather the opposite is the case if one accepts the assumption that it is precisely the fuzziness and lack of focus of national parties which has caused the social democratic decline of the past 20 years.

Revitalisation by Growing the Membership

For some time, many social democratic parties have been trying to boost their membership by taking away some of the hurdles which have to be overcome to join the party. One approach is to make available also to non-members different kinds of information, cooperation and opportunities to exert influence in »thematic initiatives«. In principle, thematic initiatives offer many advantages. They are in keeping with the transformed mobility characteristic of working people today, who often are either travelling or return home exhausted after a long day at work and, at the most, have time, patience and motivation only for results-oriented involvement on issues that really concern them. Thematic initiatives also suit contemporary needs with regard to participation. Young people, in particular, no longer want to commit themselves long-term, but to be active on a selective basis, for a limited time and on a given project. Thematic initiatives make this possible and, at the same time, offer an opportunity for »smart activism« and to bring to bear their own skills (see Walter 2000). In the event, however, the success or failure of thematic initiatives depends fundamentally on the approach taken by the party leadership and party officials. If the establishment of thematic initiatives is not supported by party committees; if their results have no influence on opinion-forming with the party; or if the majority of local officials are sceptical of this parallel structure set up alongside regional organisations, then thematic initiatives or the possibility of creating them remain on paper, with no practical consequences.

Obstacles to joining the party can also be removed by introducing new membership categories – trial memberships, for example – which waive membership contributions and offer restricted opportunities for participation. In the case of the Spanish PSOE this involves opening up the party

Figure 1 Membership of the PSOE ('000)

to so-called »*símpatizantes*« (»sympathisers«). In contrast to full members, so-called »*militantes*«, *símpatizantes* are exempt from membership contributions, but are included in distribution lists for internal party information, can participate in training courses and seminars and can work in »thematic working groups« (»*organizationes sectoriales*«). The expansion of membership to include *símpatizantes* in 2000, on the one hand, made it possible to adjust PSOE membership statistics, since those whose membership contributions were overdue slid into this new category, from which they could be restored to full membership as soon as they paid their fees. On the other hand, it considerably accelerated PSOE membership growth – in other words, it encouraged a large number of Spaniards to opt for »membership lite«. Between 1993 and 2000, the membership of the Spanish social democratic party increased by around 50,000, and between 2000 and 2010 by almost 200,000. *Símpatizantes* constitute a substantial group, even outnumbering full members. At the beginning of the decade PSOE statistics counted around 200,000 *símpatizantes*; a decade later, this had rise to 400,000, out of a total membership of about 600,000 (on this and on what follows, see Méndez Lago and Orte 2005).

An important element of this slimmed down membership which enhanced its attractiveness for many *símpatizantes* was its concentration on issue-oriented working groups. As a consequence, the interests of *símpatizantes* could not be passed over, still less ignored. Also crucial to the success of part membership was the influence guaranteed by the *organizationes sectoriales* on consensus-building in the PSOE. Similar to party organisation, issue-oriented

groups are structured in terms of local, provincial, regional and national levels. At each level, they having a vote in party bodies and are actively involved in work on developing the party platform. Their weight is reflected not least by the fact that their leadership structure is independent of the party.

This contrasts with France, where the SP has also experimented with subdividing members into full members and sympathisers. The Spanish success was not repeated, however: the lack of opportunities for participation and of their own structures, together with the outvoting of »supporters« and the fact that full members rode roughshod over them did nothing to encourage sympathisers in France. In Spain, by contrast, the organisational involvement of *símpatizantes* and their strategic importance for the party leadership, also in terms of the development of the party programme, overlap: the issue-oriented working groups play an important role in integrating Spanish civil society in the work of the party by their intensive efforts to cooperate with the leaders of civil society organisations and the provision of *organizaciones sectoriales* as arenas for participation.

But paying regular dues and the full membership that goes with it does retain its value in Spain, too, because personnel-related decision-making remains with full members. This represents yet another striking contrast with what the French Socialists have done. The French notion of sympathiser combines a lack of influence with an opportunity to vote in the election of the Socialist presidential candidate in the run up to the forthcoming presidential election. This may give rise to a twofold

problem: since sympathiser status brings with it no opportunities to participate with regard to either party policy or internal organisation – for example, sympathisers are stuck in »reception structures« which according to the party statutes are explicitly »without political power« since sympathisers are not integrated in the party organisation and have the right to speak or vote only at meetings to which they have been invited, which rarely happens – this status has little appeal. But because personnel decisions have always been the privilege of full members, indeed in all the countries under examination here, opening up the party on this issue would upset party loyalists and therefore do more harm than good.

Inadequate opportunities for participation also frequently cause the failure of traditional campaigns to attract more members, although disdain for the membership is rarely as blunt as in the case of Swedish SAP leader Mona Sahlin during the membership campaign in 2008, which expressly sought »supporters«, not members, cheering »claqueurs«[7] rather than self-confident and committed co-designers of social democratic policy with minds of their own. Another reason for failures in attracting members is inadequate preparation of campaigns, their implementation on the hoof, without taking the trouble to establish beforehand what potential members expect from the party, what kinds of things the party will have to provide and also how members can be not only attracted but also retained. The latter, indeed, is the real problem: virtually every membership drive results in at least a short-term increase in numbers. As a consequence of the 2009 membership campaign by the social democrats in Norway party central office recorded around 2,000 more members than in the previous year. The French PS's »membership for 20 euros« campaign in 2006 was also promising at first: over 75,000 new members joined the party in the space of a few months. After the introductory year expired, however, 84 per cent of the 20-euro members left the party.

This shows that retaining members is the decisive factor, not merely their acquisition. By neglecting precisely this most membership drives fail in the medium term. In contrast, the SPÖ's membership campaign in Styria was a big success because the campaign planners gave some thought to the future, carrying out field research

and attaching considerable importance to hanging on to members, not just winning them over. The party leadership in Styria learned a lot from the membership campaign in 2000 about the motives for joining the party, as well as what the concerns of the people of Styria are and their expectations with regard to the SPÖ. They discovered that what people really wanted was more opportunities to participate and more information; better services came a distant third. A total of 3,500 new members were eventually recruited and most of them remained in the party, including a large number of women and young people, as well as, by integrating works councils into the campaign at an early stage, many workers (in the traditional sense) and low-level salaried employees (see Graf-Götz, Pirker and Strassegger 2001; also, conversation with Graf-Götz on 29 July 2010).

In the case of the SPÖ in Styria, the backing of the party leadership turned out well. Centralist party structures were an advantage and hierarchical internal party decision-making processes strengthened the hand of the reformers, at least until a new party secretary took office, which spelled the end of the membership project. In other cases, the trend towards centralist consensus building and strengthening the party leadership is often problematic – in particular, against the background of party reforms aimed at stronger grassroots participation, membership mobilisation and the opening up of the party organisation. Despite all the plebiscitary gestures, since the 1990s members of political parties have usually been regarded as potentially a disruptive factor with regard to structural adaptation to a changing environment and the need for quicker decision-making than as a stabilising foundation or supporting pillar. Members' contributions have often been seen as superfluous, since as disseminators of ideas and information they could be replaced by the media, as financial contributors by state subsidies and as seismographs of public opinion by polling organisations. Centralist tendencies became apparent in Denmark in the reduction and consolidation of leadership bodies, in Austria in the clandestine appointment of the leader and generally in the loss of significance of formal as opposed to informal bodies. The dominance of social democratic leaderships also often characterised the manner in which party reforms were tackled. For example, in the Netherlands Bart Tromp criticised the reform process for leading to a »dissipation of party democracy« and revealing a lack of »democratic constitutionalism« (cited in Depla 1996: 195).

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7.   A claque (from the French »claquer«, »to clap«) is an organised body of professional applauders in French theatres and opera houses.

By way of qualification, it has to be said that centralist party structures and consensus building processes tend to reduce conflict. There are also conflict mediators or ombudsmen in parties with considerable reach at the national level and lacking a dominant party leadership. In France, by contrast, where the local and regional levels, on the one hand, and the national level, on the other, are largely independent of or detached from one another, there is at the same time a plethora of arrangements for conflict moderation. This detachment of the national from subordinate levels in the French PS has led rather to encourage the development of internal cliques and, in addition to their detachment from the party base, the disconnection of the party leadership from the voters. It has also paralysed internal party communication. In short, a hierarchical party structure and elite-centred decision-making should not be ruled out completely.

In the recent past, party leaderships have been all too keen to ignore the fact that, although the devaluation of the membership may have reduced the pressure on them to justify themselves and was intended to make things easier for themselves, at the same time it has left supporters demotivated and demobilised. That is also the reason why, at the beginning of the 2000s, many members no longer found themselves able to summon up the will to give up their time to get involved and had to put up with demanding forms of participation despite a general lack of interest, on top of which there was no momentum with regard to developing the party programme. Opening up must not be done merely for the sake of it. Where this was taken to heart – for example, with regard to the earlier »Politiek Forum« and the present »Politieke Ledenraad«, a PvdA advisory body directly subordinate to the party executive, and so with privileged access to the leadership – attempts at opening up succeeded. On the other hand, comparative studies show that a party base which has real influence and is not restricted to merely formal contributions to policy- and decision-making is a characteristic of social democratic mini-parties, like those in the Philippines and in the USA in the form of the sectarian »Democratic Socialists of America« (DSA). For social democratic parties with aspirations to govern in today's media democracies a decisive leadership is probably indispensable.

The Internet: Opportunity and Illusion

However, the inner contradictions and inconsistencies of reform social democratic parties not only spoil the effects of their plebiscitary reform impulses but also hinder their initiatives on the Internet. The oscillation of social democratic leaderships between grassroots posturing and authoritarianism undermines the credibility and cogency of online campaigns. For several years, all social democratic parties have pinned their hopes on cyber-space; even their individual approaches are similar. Once local party associations had obtained access to the World Wide Web, intranets were established to speed up inter-nal party communication and, as time went on, more and more was spent on website design. Today, no ambitious MP can afford to neglect such social networking sites as Facebook or refrain from tweeting or blogging. Political parties also have high hopes of Web 2.0, starting dis-cussion forums and enabling comment functionality for visitors to their sites. The spectacle of the USA and the model of Barack Obama's successful election campaign gave this movement further impetus, especially perhaps in Norway, where what the Labour Party is doing is strongly reminiscent of the »My Obama« campaign. Its online presence has already won it many awards.

The opportunities provided by the Internet are indisput-able, particularly in large countries and countries with sharp contrasts between centre and periphery. In France, for example, working class communities, target group organisations or topical groups were in the past largely limited to Paris and interested members of associations living far from the capital had few opportunities to get involved. The Internet community »La Coopol« (La Co-opérative Politique) for the first time offers members and non-members the opportunity to participate in par-ticular projects, regardless of their specific affiliation, and to make a difference even from far-flung corners of the country.

Also indisputable is the utility of the Internet for every-day party work, for example, networking and exchang-ing information with local party groups. For example, the Spanish PSOE, under the leadership of a coordinator for local political issues, has established a »best practice database« for local politics. The aim is to bring together experiences of local politics by issue area and to make information available country-wide. The database can be accessed by the public and searches are possible in terms

of a wide variety of aspects. For example, all municipalities where the PSOE is in charge upload their plans concerning various policy areas, as well as a brief description and contact details for further information.

It is also obvious that in recent years people's propensity to participate has generally increased rather than diminished, across society, in particular the younger generation and that this can be addressed or exploited only via a wide range of approaches, including the Internet. Furthermore, the success of Internet strategies depends on a professional, but also uniform presence and the involvement of experts in homepage design.

At the same time, it is evident that to date use of the Internet has not managed to halt either the decline in membership nor the loss of voters. That is also connected to the fact that all further Internet developments require stronger interactivity and networking, as well as a high level of participation, creativity and openness to exchange. However, that clashes head on with the oligarchisation of party structures, the centralisation of opinion-forming and the dogma of discipline and unity in »Third Way«-oriented parties. Regarding members as troops to be deployed high-handedly in election campaigns; dismissing the initiatives of local activists; making all decisions on policy, personnel and alliances primarily behind closed doors and enforcing them in an authoritarian manner – all this tends to generate obedience, allegiance and passivity and does nothing to encourage people to get involved, to comment on the contributions of others and to formulate their own views. In particular, the Internet formats and e-mailing activities of the parties rarely foster serious debate on political positions and limit online communication between party central offices and party members to announcing events and conferences and superficial party propaganda. This does nothing to encourage members' inclinations to participate, but it also counteracts the goal of boosting the party's popularity among potentially receptive social groups and helps to thwart the high expectations invested in a professional online presence.

Even more fundamentally, and specifically against the background of the Obamania of Internet strategists in particular, »Obama's speeches«, according to Austrian intellectual Robert Misik, »have a utopian surplus – they depict a ›better society‹«. It was only this that generated that »momentum« which Obama was able to turn to his advantage so brilliantly. Those who get worked up about Obama's Internet campaign – which undoubtedly raised the bar – without taking into account the methodical finesse with which his campaign workers electronically catalogued millions of voters overlook the fact that his team combined the latest technology with old-fashioned organisational techniques and that his election campaign was essentially a traditional grassroots effort. To quote Misik again: »They networked via the Internet. They bombarded supporters with e-mails. However, the aim was to turn supporters into tireless activists. It should not be forgotten that no spin doctor can breath life into someone who lacks vision and even the best homepage can do nothing to rectify that, either.« Also, and in particular in relation to such a modern campaign as Obama's, it can be shown that parties, perhaps in contrast to companies, cannot find their way back to the road to success by means of purely technological innovation, a more upbeat presence, a snazzier image or sexier product marketing. Parties are more like concentric circles. The innermost circle, the party leadership, needs a set of logical and consistent basic ideas which guide its daily political actions and orient its policy measures. These orientational visions of the future motivate and mobilise the second circle, the party membership, and thereby lay the foundation stone for powerful election campaigns and a diversity of voluntary involvement. Only by convincing the members – or rather: the opinion-formers – to commit themselves to something and through the everyday proselytising for the party that ensues from that among family members, acquaintances, friends and colleagues can the conditions be created for cultivating an attractive party image and bringing on board the outermost concentric circle, the voters.

Two things result from this. First, those who are interested desire influence: they want to be able to shape developments, make decisions and change things. Until social democratic parties credibly address this motive for participation the Internet will do nothing to halt their decline. Second, without transcendent goals or visionary underpinnings technological innovations, of whatever kind, will ultimately fall flat.

Conclusions

(1) »Caring parties« are in the ascendant. To that extent, the aim of strengthening local party organisations makes sense. It is local organisations that enable parties to make contact with the people. Through an active, engaging and lively local level, parties can counteract the impression that they are out of touch, win people's support and open up to new target groups. By means of a stronger presence in their traditional strongholds in areas of subsidised housing the SPÖ in Vienna repelled the right-wing populist FPÖ, which was threatening to become a force there, and regained its former dominance. The potential and utility of caring strategies are also illustrated by the Swedish »Houses of the People«, Danish mobilisation campaigns and the results of systematic home visits in Norwegian pilot communities. To be sure, for this to be effective among the public, local organisations have to be a certain size. The reality is a growing number of mini local organisations, however, which risks reinforcing people's impressions of decision-making behind closed doors and an off-putting backroom culture. This would only aggravate the problems of social democratic parties.

(2) Career politicians have an extremely bad reputation among the public. They represent only a small segment of society and their career paths tend to prevent them from obtaining much experience outside politics. People who enter politics from other walks of life (so-called »career changers«) without practical experience, on the other hand, are as a rule unsuited for politics, in particular when they are unwilling or unable to accede to its requirements, obligations and ways of doing things. In that case, ultimately, they only increase the crisis of confidence in politics. The selection procedure which the PvdA in Amsterdam rolled out for the first time at the local elections in 2010, in contrast, offers an opportunity to recruit a new elite which would combine the strengths of career politicians and of career changers: political experience, on the one hand, and professional know-how, on the other.

(3) Plebiscitary forms of participation mobilise the membership. In all the countries considered here, participation rates in election primaries and membership polls are substantial. For instance, they are far above the participation figures of conventional committee work. Take the Netherlands, for example: a mere 5 per cent of members of the PvdA attend general meetings. Participation in the leadership election, however, which for the past ten years has taken the form of an election primary, was around 50 per cent in 2002. Certainly, it must be taken into account that the high participation rates confront a number of dangers with regard to the introduction of elements of grassroots democracy: from internal party polarisation to the marginalisation of minorities. Primary elections are therefore no panacea.

(4) Effective membership drives require sound planning and serious foundations. Campaigns can achieve sustainable success, then, only if first – for example, by means of focus groups – people's expectations of political parties and motives for joining them are ascertained and if, besides gaining members in the first place, measures to retain them over the long term are not overlooked. The example of the Austrian September in Styria shows that, in such cases, negative trends need not be irreversible: they can be halted. Otherwise, the same applies to membership drives as to all other reform projects: successful innovations must be based on steadiness, persistence and consistency.

(5) Micro-targeting has proved to be a promising strategy in attracting voters with an immigrant background. Micro-targeting enables a differentiated approach when addressing immigrant communities and is adapted to the ethnic, social and cultural heterogeneity of immigrant groups. The results speak for themselves: social democratic parties in all the countries analysed here, with the exception of the French PS, receive an above-average share of the votes of those with an immigrant background in general and from voters of Turkish origin in particular.

(6) Changes of direction pay off for social democratic parties electorally only if they are credible and unlikely to give rise to suspicions of opportunism in response to bitter election defeats. Indeed, in retrospect, the fixation with the up-and-coming achievers of the »New Middle« did social democratic parties more harm than good. Furthermore, gains among the middle classes did not even come close to making up for the losses among the lowest third of the population. However, that does not change the fact that social democratic parties in the recent past have taken this path and defended it doggedly against criticisms from the left, often even denying that there was any alternative. However, credible repeated about-turns require a thoroughgoing transformation. The Spanish social democratic party is a good illustration. In 2000, the

PSOE underwent a substantive revamp, approached the trade unions once again, moved generally to the left and in social policy put the emphasis on the soft issues characteristic of urban alternative subcultures. At the same time, they varied their political strategy, turning more towards regeneration from the local level and deliberately embracing social movements. This metamorphosis was credible not least because the PSOE also acted decisively in terms of personnel and brought in a new leadership.

(7) Maintaining close ties with the trade unions remains a profitable course for social democratic parties. Trade union members are still an important voter group and how well social democrats do at the polls depends not least on the extent to which they are able to draw on this pool. At the same time, the trade unions can still offer social democratic parties many services, from material and moral support during election campaigns to passing on information on trade union members, on which, for example, the Swedish social democratic party was able to base a membership drive. Ties to trade unions also make it easier for social democratic parties, for example, to address voters with an immigrant background. To be sure, relations between the two pillars of the old workers' movement have cooled in most countries. Surface fluctuations with difficulty conceal the more substantive transformation of relations between social democratic parties and trade unions; there is little they can do to hide the fundamental loss of trust.

(8) Technological innovations are not enough. They are no substitute for long traditions, common reference points and far-reaching goals. The various groups of actors in political parties are related to one another like concentric circles. The innermost circle, the party leadership, needs a set of logical and consistent basic ideas to guide its daily political actions and give direction to concrete policy measures. These orientational visions of the future motivate and mobilise the second circle, that of the party membership, and so lay the foundations for effective election campaigns and a diversity of voluntary involvement. Only by convincing the members – or rather: the opinion-formers – to commit themselves to something and through the everyday proselytising for the party that ensues from that among family members, acquaintances, friends and colleagues can the conditions be created for cultivating an attractive party image and bringing on board the outermost concentric circle, the voters.

Abbreviations

AP	Det norske Arbeiderparti / Norwegian Labour Party
BAWAG	Bank für Arbeit und Wirtschaft AG
CDA	Christen Democratisch Appèl / Christian Democratic Appeal
DAS	Democratic Socialists of America
D66	Partei Democraten 66 / Democrats 66
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs / Freedom Party of Austria
LO	Landsorganisationen i Sverige / Swedish Trade Union Confederation
NZLP	New Zealand Labour Party
PS	Parti socialiste / Socialist Party of France
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español / Spanish Socialist Workers' Party
PvdA	Partij van de Arbeid / Dutch Labour Party
SAP	Socialdemokratiska Arbetarepartiet / Swedish Social Democratic Party
SP	Socialistische Partij / Socialist Party of the Netherlands
SPÖ	Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs / Social Democratic Party of Austria

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