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The SPD and the Debacle of the 2009 German Federal Elections:

An opportunity for renewal

The result of the 2009 German federal elections was disastrous for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Germany's oldest party slumped to its worst result in the history of the Federal Republic, polling only 23% of the vote (down from 34% in 2005) (SBD 2009a and 2009b). The authors, William E Paterson and James Sloam, however, argue that this devastating defeat must be placed into the wider context of long-term developments in German and European politics: the decline of the German catch-all parties (and rise of the three smaller parties); and, the changing role of political parties in general and social democratic parties in modern politics. The election result is not the end or even the beginning of the end of social democracy. What the SPD now needs are a new generation of charismatic leaders, a post crisis narrative and new more porous and responsive structures.

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The result of the 2009 German federal elections was disastrous for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Germany's oldest party slumped to its worst result in the history of the Federal Republic, polling only 23% of the vote (down from 34% in 2005) (SBD 2009a and 2009b). Furthermore, the historically low turnout disguised the depths of the SPD's result in 2009, as the party lost over six million voters who either stayed at home or switched party (almost 40% of the 16 million Germans who had

voted for the party only four years earlier). For German party politics . unused to political land-slides . this marked an extraordinary turn of events. Trust in the SPD's competence, identification with its values, and belief in its credibility all nosedived. The loss among younger voters was particularly damaging. Whilst SPD-inspired reforms to the welfare state (particularly to unemployment benefits and provisions for retirement) blurred the boundaries with the centre-right, strategic uncertainty (illustrated by the SPD's approach to the Left Party leading to the debacle following the Hessen state elections in 2008) undermined the party's credibility. The re-

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sulting political catastrophe inspired a raft of political commentary . from Der Spiegel to the British Financial Times . that speculated on the end of social democracy (Dahrendorf 1990).

Although we would not wish to understate the devastating nature of this defeat, we argue that it must be placed into the wider context of long-term developments in German and European politics: the decline of the German catch-all parties (and rise of the three smaller parties); and, the changing role of political parties in general and social democratic parties in modern politics. The first section of this article will address the rise and fall of the SPD in the 1990s and 2000s. We then turn to the bigger picture, placing the SPD's defeat within the framework of European social democracy. In that context, we draw parallels with the survival (and likely demise in 2010) of the New Labour project in the UK.

The Rise and Fall of the SPD

1. 'Loosely Coupled Anarchy' (Lösche 1993)

The predictions of the demise of social democracy in Germany and elsewhere in Europe are not new (e.g. Przeworski 1985; Dahrendorf 1983), but have often been overstated (Pater-son and Sloam 2007). The German SPD from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s was riven by internal tensions, suffering from organisational, ideological and strategic pluralism (Lösche 1993; Sloam 2004). Organisational pluralism allowed ambitious Länder princes i.e. Oskar Lafontaine, Rudolf Scharping and Gerhard Schröder, to agitate against each other and official party policy from their regional powerbases. Ideological pluralism came about with the rise of the new post-materialist left, who were often ill at ease with the economic orthodoxy of the federal party in Berlin (and defined themselves

through their opposition to nuclear weapons and the participation of the Bundeswehr in out of area activities). Ideological pluralism was mirrored by strategic uncertainty . in particular the party oscillated between appeals to the centre-ground (CDU/CSU voters) and the post-materialist left (Green voters).

2. The Rise of the Neue Mitte and the Fall of the SPD

One solution to the problems of the 1980s and 1990s was the dual leadership of Lafontaine (appealing to the left and core voters) and Schröder (appealing to the centre and floating voters), which together mobilised enough support for the SPD to come to power in 1998.ⁱ Once Lafontaine had resigned as Finance Minister and party chairman in 1999, the way was open for the SPD to move to the centre in government in the strategic and ideological direction of the Neue Mitte. This began in earnest after the party's re-election in 2002 in the form of the Agenda 2000 reform programme.

Under the Schröder chancellorship, the strategic purpose of the SPD was transformed from a catch-all party to a rally party in support of the Chancellor (almost a Kanzlerwahlverein). This was illustrated by Schröder's attempts to put his own fate ahead of the party in the game of coalition poker pursued shortly after the 2005 election. Agenda 2010, the centrepiece of the second Schröder government, nevertheless proved to be a step too far for the party. Reform of the benefits system (symbolised by the so-called Hartz IV laws and an increase in the retirement age) resulted in the implosion of SPD membership, a collapse in support for the party in the polls, and enabled the eventual emergence of the Left Party (a force on the left that could challenge the SPD for votes across the country).

3. 'Failing successfully' in the Grand Coalition (the rise of the technocrats)

Aided by Schröder's charismatic leadership and brilliant campaigning skills, the SPD was able to achieve a competitive result and enter government in 2005, despite the fact that the party had lost four million votes (approximately 20% of SPD voters) and nearly a quarter of its members in only seven years (SBD 2009b; SPD 2009). However, within the Grand Coalition, the SPD lacked both Schröder's ability to lead the party from the centre and the luxury of being able to fall back on its core support. Successive chairmen of the party – Franz Müntefering (twice), Matthias Platzeck, Kurt Beck, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (as acting chair) – failed because they were not capable of differentiating the SPD from the Grand Coalition dominated by Angela Merkel. The technocratic leadership of Müntefering and Steinmeier was effectively fenced in by a Chancellor who was happy to steal the centre-ground from the junior coalition partner and an opposition Left Party that successfully mopped up SPD voters disaffected by the party's role in the Grand Coalition. While centrist welfare and labour market policies – such as the raising of the retirement age to 67 (pushed through by Müntefering as Minister for Labour and Social Affairs) – gained no new voters in the centre, more traditional left-wing policies – such as the introduction of a basic minimum wage in a few sectors of the labour market – gained no new voters on the left. Agenda 2010 and participation as the junior partner in the Grand Coalition has essentially robbed the SPD of its identity as the party of *social justice*. The leaders who had helped to pioneer these reforms and led the SPD in government thus lacked the credibility to mobilise the party's support base.

Putting the Defeat into Context

1. The Bigger Picture: the decline of the Volksparteien

Although the decline of the SPD has been dramatic since 1998, losing approximately half of its voters and a third of its members (SBD 2009a and 2009b; SPD 2009), the defeat must be put into context. First, the SPD was in power for eleven years. One of the reasons why governments tend to have a shelf-life is that they inevitably lose some of their distinctiveness within the constraints of government. In this sense, opposition can be seen as an opportunity for renewal. Second, the decline of the SPD must be related to the steady decline in the fortunes of both Germany's catch-all parties. In federal elections, the CDU/CSU and SPD combined scored on average over 90% in the 1970s, 85% in the 1980s, 77% in the 1990s, and only 68% in the current decade (SBD 2009b). The CDU/CSU received almost two million fewer votes in 2009 than in 2005 (losing over 10% of its voters) and almost six million votes fewer (nearly 30% of its voters) than in the historic unification election of 1990 (SBD 2009b). So, what we have seen is a gradual evolution away from the two-and-a-half party system that characterised the Bonn Republic towards a more complex five party system, opening up the possibility even of three party coalitions (as in the case of the new CDU-FDP-Green 'Jamaica' coalition in the Saarland). Are we seeing the 'normalisation' of German party politics towards a European model of bloc politics (Poguntke 2005)? As yet, we cannot be sure.ⁱⁱ Certainly the SPD will have to have a more flexible attitude to potential coalition partners (including the Left Party) if it stands a chance of returning to power in the near future.

2. The Bigger Picture: European Social Democracy

It is helpful to take a further step backwards, to look at the bigger picture for European social democracy. Social democracy is certainly in decline if one looks at the political map of Europe today compared to the highpoint of 2000 when centre-left parties were in power in twelve of the fifteen EU states. Yet the comparison is unfair, as it ignores the cyclical nature of party politics. Between 1993 and 1997, social democrats were in opposition in the EU big three (France, Germany and the UK) and after the time of the UK general election (probably in summer 2010) we are likely to be back in the same situation. Furthermore, as others have shown (Merkel 1993), the poor performance of centre-left parties in the 1980s and 1990s was never the full story. During this period social democrats were dominant elsewhere in Europe e.g. Spain, Sweden. Today we should therefore talk of the retreat rather than the defeat (and certainly not *the end*) of European social democracy. The re-election of Jose Zapatero and the Spanish Socialist Party in 2008, the victory of the Greek Socialist Movement (PASOK) and of the Norwegian Labour Party this year all show that national political and economic circumstances are paramount in the success of individual parties.

On the other hand, the defeat of the SPD does show the limits of revisionism for social democratic parties. Here, the story is not dissimilar to that of New Labour in the UK. For social democratic parties to move to the centre and recast social democratic values in new policies, they require a strong charismatic leader (e.g. Blair and Schröder) capable of establishing a direct relationship with voters and individual party members (so obviating traditional party organ-

isational structures). That leader then pursues a reformist path in government, but at the cost of alienating the party's core supporters. There is a natural shelf-life for this type of leader. Eventually their political capital runs out (e.g. Blair over Iraq, Schröder over Agenda 2010) and their charisma wears thin. The new, less charismatic leaders who replace these reformers (e.g. Brown and Steinmeier) are then unable to bring back core supporters because they either: a) lack credibility/trust (i.e. returning to core values when they have helped pioneer revisionist policies); and/or, b) lack the charisma to unite the party or the country. Meanwhile, centre-right parties moved towards more centrist policies (Merkel after the failure of the Leipzig agenda in 2005 and David Cameron in the UK) claiming to be *compassionate conservatives*. The correction of the paths of the SPD and the British Labour Party in opposition - towards more traditional social democratic values - is, thus, highly likely.ⁱⁱⁱ We might even decide to call this the *revisionist cycle*.

In the battle of ideas the New Labour/Third Way/Neue Mitte agenda is terminally enfeebled. It had overinvested in globalisation without bringing obvious benefits to its core supporters. At present the poll figures for Labour make grim reading, so that a victory in the next election appears unlikely. The UK Conservative Party, which had planned a *son of Blair* strategy, were wrong-footed by the financial crisis and have retreated somewhat from *compassionate conservatism* to a leaner state agenda much closer to their traditional goals. If the view continues to gain ground that the Conservatives are using the crisis to push an ideologically driven narrow interest agenda then they could find themselves as unpopular as Mrs Thatcher was till she was rescued by the Falklands. This is

only likely to happen after an electoral defeat and the replacement of an exhausted Labour leadership and the adoption of a slightly more socially protectionist agenda by a new leadership.

Of course, European social democracy does face some genuine structural problems. The prediction of the demise of social democracy by Dahrendorf and others was founded on the fact that society had changed i.e. the shrinkage of the blue-collar workforce, voter dealignment, and the individualisation of values and lifestyles (Giddens 1991; Inglehart 1997), and that mass membership workers parties would not be able to cope. There is certainly some truth in the assertion that the typical social democratic organisational model (bottom-up power structures crystallised in the party conference and supported by a large membership base) has been threatened by these changes. Mair and Van Biezen (2001) dramatically depict the collapse in party membership across Europe in recent decades. In this regard, the hierarchical party structures more often found in parties of the centre-right are perhaps more efficient in an age of individualisation and the 24-hour media.

As we have argued previously (Paterson and Sloam 2007), one of the reasons why many social democratic parties were only failing successfully in the late 1990s, was because they had neglected underlying linkage issues with core supporters (Lawson and Merkl 1988). Centre-left parties need to re-think the social dimension of social democracy. The missing ingredient of the Third Way and the Neue Mitte was the communitarian aspect of progressive politics . building up democracy from the grassroots up through horizontal relationships between voters and the state that stress rights and

obligations.^{iv} From a party political perspective, revisionist social democratic parties did not recalibrate party organisational structures to encourage the socialisation of new members and supporters. In the personalised, hierarchical leadership networks established by Schröder and Blair, there was little room for or attention paid to this approach.^v One small example would be to remove the bar of membership from access to SPD (or Labour Party) online communities.

In terms of party identity, European social democratic parties need to develop new identities in their domestic environments that appeal to the new milieus in the centre of the society. They need to offer more than technocratic competence. Whilst it is sometimes enough for the centre-right to appeal to citizens' wallets, the centre-left must appeal to citizens' hearts as well. The big challenge for European social democracy is how to re-define policies when the spending cuts come (as they inevitably will given the surge in deficit spending since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008). In this context, social democratic parties must sharpen their focus on core areas of *social investment*. If they can do this, it may be a strategic advantage to be in opposition when the axe falls on public services (in Germany as elsewhere). When the axe does fall, it may also provide a window of opportunity for the social democratic parties to achieve policy goals at the EU-level that promote social cohesion though the weakened position of the Socialists in the European Parliament is a weakness.

Challenges for the SPD

The SPD faces a number of challenges . organisational, ideological, and strategic. First, it

needs to find the right personnel to keep activists happy, mobilise core supporters and appeal to the centre (the Gabriel-Nahles-Steinmeier axis seems to move in this direction if the protagonists can actually work together) and, above all, be able to communicate their message. One complication here is Steinmeier's reluctance to disavow Agenda 2010. The party needs to build up support at state and local levels, to provide a springboard to power at federal level. Here, the Land Election in North-Rhine Westphalia in May 2010 is crucial. In organisational terms, the party needs to open up its structures and encourage outsiders to come in as it tried to do (unsuccessfully) in the 1990s (Blessing 2000) and again in 2001 (Machnig 2001) e.g. the idea of primary elections for parliamentary candidates and party leaders. The use of projects to engage non members is already widespread.

To achieve these goals, the SPD requires a clear narrative. This may involve ideological adjustment. It should not, however, focus on policies of the past e.g. Hartz IV and retirement at 67, but concentrate on the development of a forward-looking social democratic identity: In short, a progressive, socially liberal position in favour of a state that ensures equality of opportunity (e.g. focus on education) social cohesion (fair taxation and social legislation). Furthermore, this position will have increasing resonance once the public spending cuts come.

How the new narrative is deployed . at the next stage . will depend on strategic choices. At this stage, however, the party should concentrate on re-motivating the two million SPD supporters who voted in 2005 but stayed at home in 2009. All things being equal, this would make the party competitive with the CDU/CSU. Within a multi-

party system it would be unwise to think too much about strategic options (although flexibility is required). After all, their competitor parties have challenges of their own . the Christian Democrats in government must manage the gathering crisis public expenditure (and take responsibility for large spending cuts). The Left Party must hold together in the context of ongoing tensions between East and West and the strains of drafting a new programme. The Green Party, a winner in the Federal Election have the fewest challenges and are now a much desired coalition partner.

So, in the face of the humiliation in the 2009 federal elections, what should be the central goals for the SPD? The rehabilitation should concentrate on re-organisation and mobilisation . developing and communicating a distinctive policy . rather than moving too much to the left or centre though a move to the left will be inevitable in the run up to the Land Election in North Rhine Westphalia in May 2010

Conclusion

With the exception of the period of the first post-war Labour Government and the early days of the Blair Government the SPD has been the most influential party in European social democracy for over a century. The defeat of the SPD in September thus weakens social democracy for the foreseeable future. Perhaps as importantly the poor showing of the SPD in the European elections and the shrinking of the Socialists in the European Parliament seriously constrains the impact of social democracy. It is however not the end or even the beginning of the end of social democracy. It is rather part of a general crisis of political parties in representative democracies .The weakness of the right of

centre parties in the battle of ideas is as striking as that of social democracy. What social democracy now needs are a new generation of charismatic leaders, a post crisis narrative and new more porous and responsive structures. These are more likely to develop in opposition than government.

Endnotes:

ⁱ The so-called leadership *Trio* was completed by the dull but reliable Scharping (as head of the parliamentary party). Fast forward to 2009 as Nahles (representing the left) takes on the role of General Secretary with Gabriel (rhetorically appealing to the centre-ground) as party chairman with Steinmeier as chair of the parliamentary group.

ⁱⁱ Interestingly, there has been relatively little change in share of the vote between the left (SPD-Green-PDS/Left Party) and right (CDU/CSU-FDP) blocs in recent elections. In the three elections between 1998 and 2005, the SPD-Green-PDS/Left Party vote captured between 51% and 53% of the vote. In 2009, the share of the vote captured by the Left fell below 50% for the first time since 1994.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although the return to *core values* may be less likely in the British Labour Party than in the German SPD, given the centripetal force of the UK's *first-past-the-post* electoral system.

^{iv} In the words of President Kennedy: *ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country*

^v The Obama campaign of 2008 in the US showed in an innovative way how political socialisation might be achieved through the use of the new media. To remain a catch-all party, social democratic party organisations need to be opened up. Of course, the opening up of social democratic parties to new political, economic and social groups is not a new phenomenon e.g. Willy Brandt's integration of new political forces into the SPD in the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, maybe a party needs a Brandt or an Obama – a *charismatic unifier* – to make this possible.

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the FES London.

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