DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

BUILDING THE GOOD SOCIETY

Looking Back and Forward:
A Personal Take on the Good Society Project

Neal Lawson
April 2020

→ What follows is a personal account of how and why *Building the Good Society – The Project of the Democratic Left* was published and its impact.

→ It then provides the authors' personal views about the challenges ahead for social democrats. It is necessarily UK-biased and focused.

→ The author is keen to hear and explore the German take on the origins, successes and failures of the project and what next for German and UK social democracy.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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Contents

I. INTRODUCTION

We are meeting in London in difficult times. For social democrats in the UK and Germany but also across the world, our parties are struggling. Even where social democrats are in office the ambition is usually defensive and far from transformative.

We meet a little over ten years since the start of the Good Society project. The journey began as a consequence of bilateral discussions between leading thinkers in the SPD and the Labour Party in Berlin and then London. The FES London office played a brokering and hosting role, in particular Karl-Heinz Spiegel. Labour MP Jon Cruddas and Andrea Nahles, then the elected Vice-President of the SPD, were the two leading politicians. Thorben Albrecht from Andrea Nahles' office supported the writing process, as did Jonathan Rutherford and Neal Lawson from Compass, a UK-based ideas and campaigning organisation that had championed the Good Society since its inception in 2003. Henning Meyer from the Social Europe website offered crucial support.

The initiative was timed to mark a decade since the publication of the Blair-Schroeder Third Way / New Middle paper of April 1999. After meetings and papers delivered in Berlin and London *Building the Good Society – The Project of the Democratic Left*[1] was published simultaneously in both countries. This article by Andrea Nahles and Jon Cruddas appeared in the *Guardian* on 7 April 2009.[2] The publication met with some interest – not least a large number of downloads across the Continent on the Social Europe site.

Facilitated by FES offices, the Good Society project then went on the road across Europe, with meetings on a wide range of issues, such as democracy, sustainability and the new economy, in capital cities such as Lisbon, Stockholm and Budapest. For the past few years there has been an annual gathering in Berlin to sustain thinking and contacts.

The project has also spawned two books: *The Future of European Social Democracy Building the Good Society* (Palgrave 2012), edited by Jonathan Rutherford and Henning Meyer, and in Germany *Die Gute Gesellschaft – Soziale und demokratische Politik im 21. Jahrhundert* (Suhrkamp 2013), edited by Christian Kellermann and Henning Meyer.

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT AND ITS IMPACT

The publication was billed as *a new joint declaration of European social democracy.* The intention of the original publication was to attempt to change the nature of the debate

around the future of the European social democratic project and through that, to help renew the parties' domestic fortunes.

It was a conscious and deliberate attempt to build a strong relationship between social democrats in the UK and Germany first, and then build out to other countries and parties from there. The judgement was that including too many countries at the start would be too bewildering.

The contemporary context is important. There was a feeling on both sides that the social democratic project was in trouble but not to the extent that it is now. The impact of the 2008 crash was less obvious then. Populism was just a rumble. Labour was still in government and the SPD were polling more respectably. There was a sense of urgency but not crisis. It wasn't existential.

Reading back over the publication there is much to commend it. In its moment, it was hopeful and forward-looking. Quite daring even. The process itself was relatively novel. Bringing senior politicians and thinkers together for an intense period with the goal of producing a political paper to make an impact.

The two sides gelled well. There was good chemistry and it was fun. One moment stands out, deep into a long afternoon session. Someone from the UK side asked how long the paper was in its current form. Someone else from the UK side responded by saying about 5000 words. No, said one of the Germans, ›there are precisely 4678 words‹. Everyone laughed.

The publication started where every political project should – with values. It spoke of a politics that was plural, collective and democratic. It defined the good society as one that was more equal, democratic and sustainable.

It then looked at the issues of the economy, work, security and sustainability in measured terms. The analysis and the prescriptions were expansive rather than transformative. It demanded a post-Lisbon strategy for social democracy – calling for ›social productivity‹, a term that never took off. It also called for Europe-wide reforms for finance and a big boost in EU budgets and spending for greater social protection and a European minimum wage. It even thought that this could prepare the ground for the UK to successfully apply for membership of the euro! Well, maybe one day?

But like every document it was a creature of its time. As already mentioned, the thinking was carried out too soon after the 2008 crash to really understand the scale of what had happened and the impact of austerity on the Left. Certainly, in the UK, Labour got the blame for the crash, deservedly or not. There were electoral and cultural ramifications of this that we are still grappling with today, but not addressed in the paper. There was no sense that the populist wave was coming and the possible effects of the rise of parties like UKIP and the AfD, let alone Brexit. And while new

1   https://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/good-society-english-WEB.pdf

2   https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/apr/08/g20-capitalism-john-cruddas-andrea-nahles

digital technologies and the networked society were mentioned, they hardly feature in the report. There was nothing about culture in the paper and little about aspects of political behaviour. Indeed, the paper gave little clue about what a good life in a good society would look and feel like. In the vein of most social democratic thinking it was too technocratic and too top-down.

Perhaps the biggest omission was the lack of analysis of the forces that make social democracy possible. It was all about what, not how. There was nothing about class, agency or the alliances that can usher in a new social democratic moment and nothing about the nature of social democratic parties. This Good Society was going to happen, or so it seemed, through sound analysis and rigorous policies. There was no space for party members, movements and alliances.

The project continued and continues – but it has remained at the level of ideas and papers and has never taken root in parties and movements. This is the fault of the political actors, not the FES. From a UK and a Compass perspective, it is frustrating and disappointing that we weren't able to get other senior Labour politicians to take an interest in the project. If we had, then, just maybe, 23 June 2016 would have turned out differently. Labour, then and since, has been either for a rather bland Europe or for no Europe – dare it be said, a third way never evolved.

Since the publication of the report we have of course had Brexit. Labour has been in the wilderness ever since and the SPD have been locked into a grand coalition with too little room for manoeuvre. The SPD, from a London vantage point, have tried to calibrate their way back to office. It hasn't worked. Labour tried a radically different path via Corbyn. Neither have worked in the sense that both a return to office and deeper political and cultural power have been elusive. The SPD have recently turned towards a more Corbyn style of leadership – but the December 2019 UK elections must act as a warning about the dangers and limitations of that approach. More on that below.

As the paper tentatively – probably too tentatively – sets out, then as now, there is no going back to the Third Way/New Middle approach. Despite the electoral success of those years and the welcome reforms to the economy and society, much of today's crisis was created back then. The accommodation with globalisation and financialisation sowed the seeds of the electoral and cultural whirlwind social democrats now face. But while greater radicalism is clearly required, it has to be a radicalism that is electable.

Something different is going to be needed. It is beholden on us to ask ourselves again:

> *What sort of society do we want to build, what is the context in which we have to attempt it and what are the strategies, forces, ideas and policies that will get us there?*

III. WHERE ARE WE NOW?

If we were now starting the Good Society project from scratch, here are some ideas about how we might go about it.

1. THE ZEITGEIST OF TECH, CLIMATE AND IDENTITY

The world of the 2020s is driven by two major forces that were more dimly apparent in 2009, technology and climate. Both are global in their impact and both present social democrats with huge challenges and opportunities. Together, they help us to understand the political crisis of social democracy.

Take tech. Social democracy was conceived in the age of the machine; productive and service systems were linear, predominantly top-down, predictable and largely controllable from the centre. Social democracy was defined by the age of the technician, the planner and the manager.

But this age, defined by the culture and sentiments of the factory, has been replaced by an age defined by the sentiments and culture of Facebook: one of platforms, networks and both concentrated and dispersed forms of power. Like it or not, we understand ourselves and our society not as workers and producers, but as networked consumers and citizens. It is a world in which we are surveilled by both the state and the market as never before, and a world in which platforms ensure that everyone has a voice and can say, know anything and connect to anyone. Mass organisation is possible at scale, globally, and at the touch of a button.

Whether we are tech optimists or pessimists is beside the point, what matters is that the technology is here, it isn't going away and it is probably going to impact our lives further and deeper – in good ways and in bad. The task, as ever for social democrats, is how to bend the new modernity to our values.

This networked society breeds a very different set of ambitions, needs, expectations and behaviours. Power is both more concentrated and also in the hands of the many, not just the few. This demands a different set of relationships between the citizen, society, the state and the party. The idea that the social democratic party will be the sole or even predominant agent of change is now, to say the least, contested. In all the complexity of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the idea that one political creed can monopolise change and meet the challenges of automation and algorithms, aging and loneliness, big tech and big media – all from a shrinking and fracturing base – is fanciful.

What then of climate change? The original document paid more than lip service to the threat to the environment, but the response was technical, not political or cultural. The electoral impact of environmental concerns, at least in Germany with its PR system, is obvious, particularly in relation

to the Greens. In the UK, the Green vote is suppressed by the first-past-the-post system and is therefore sadly less evident.

Climate, and the wider effects of globalisation, have clearly had an impact on the fortunes of social democrats. Mass migration as a product of climate change, along with economic migration, has put real pressures on domestic welfare systems. This is not to argue against free movement, but it is to recognise both the material and cultural pressures of large-scale migration to which social democrats haven't yet responded effectively, in terms of both providing additional resources and dealing with the dislocating effect of fast and seemingly uncontrollable cultural change in many communities.

There is perhaps a deep subliminal impact of globalisation on social democracy and other reason-based political approaches here. If the world is going to hell in a handcart then why bother to invest in social democratic responses – as technical fixes are clearly not working? Either deny climate change or go with the flow of populism. On a more obvious level, climate change seems to exacerbate the cultural divide between towns and cities, communitarians and cosmopolitans, with the former in each case reputedly more interested in growth and jobs and less concerned about the environment than the middle class.

The decade since the Good Society paper was published has seen a flourishing of ideas and plans for a Green New Deal or a green industrial revolution. While social democrats must help lead this political development and often do so – ensuring that it is something more than just big-state ›Keynesianism‹ is key. Instead it must be about local, civic society and entrepreneurial responses to the climate crisis, not just the big state, and the opening up of cultural spaces to imagine different but seductive and appealing forms of the good society and the good life.

The original Good Society paper never managed to examine the emotional issues that ought to underpin such a society. The quality of our relationships, the time to care, the freedom and resources to be creative and have air to breath – there is a post-material agenda here that someone will own. At the moment its more the territory of the Greens.

But there is another pressing concern. Brexit was about many things that drive the growth of parties like the AfD and the League in Italy, but the urge to ›take back control‹ was more than a cynical slogan. It struck a real chord. Many working-class voters and other citizens in the UK backed Brexit to try and do just that, knowing that it could hit the economy, and therefore them, materially. That identity, belonging and democratic sovereignty, however ill-judged it might be, were deemed more important than economic well-being says something important about the moment and any progressive future. The promise of good jobs is fine but are they possible to deliver and do they offer enough to empower citizens in the twenty-first century and meet the seeming threat of globalisation to people's sense of self and

place? Here, certainly in the UK, the democratic ground has been ceded to the right, not least through the reinvention of the Brexit Party into a force of democratic reform.

The challenge for social democrats from all of this is deep. Technology, climate and identity present five big opportunities/threats to us:

1. How can the new digital platforms be socialised?

2. How can social democrats offer a politics that doesn't impose a future, but rather negotiates it through deep democratic, devolved and participatory structures?

3. How do we negotiate a fully red/green future?

4. How can we move beyond trying to win the war of cultural polarisation, for one side or the other, and instead transcend seemingly polar differences in the knowledge of our social complexity? After all, most of us feel like we are from somewhere, not just anywhere.

5. How do social democrats push both a politics of greater equality and a post-material notion of the good society in tune with all living on one planet?

2. CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

This all sounds unrelentingly tough, because it is. It isn't just policy, strategy and structures that social democrats must change but their culture. Social democrats must learn to let go and trust – not just their members, but citizens and other progressive political parties and forces. Along the way they must temper their love of growth and materialism that has morphed into consumerism – offering a different vision of the good society and the good life.

But while all this suggests the worst of times for social democrats, there is emerging ground for optimism. As austerity has bitten and the remote state and the free market have failed to offer spaces and structures for people, organisations and communities to meet their needs and the challenge of climate change, there has been a flourishing of new self-organisation.

This demand side has been met with a supply side push in the shape of the kind of networked society mentioned earlier, which is allowing self-organisation faster than ever before. In localities, different sectors and the economy, new entities are being formed that are about social and environmental needs and work in ways that are collaborative and participatory. From caring to renewables, from community organising to social investment, people are finding new ways to decide things and do things in tune with the spirit and demands of the twenty-first century.

The future will be hotly contested, and nothing is determined, but in a flattening world there is a chance to develop a more democratic and egalitarian society in ways that

the hierarchical twentieth century could never offer. A good society can only be brought into being *with* people, never imposed on them.

This emerging way of behaving has energy and creativity and is in many ways reminiscent of the cultural soil social democracy was first formed in – through the trade unions, mutual and cooperative sectors – before the twentieth century turn to change imposed from the centre and top-down. But many, if not most of these new initiatives are forged in adversity, despite the system and not because of it, often reliant on the efforts of one or a handful of activists. The challenge is to find out how these practices can be scaled up, accelerated, amplified and aggregated. We return to this challenge below. But before that, let's address the way the UK Labour Party has responded to the crisis of social democracy over the past five years.

3. SOCIAL DEMOCRAT RESPONSES: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CORBYNISM?

If you had asked any of the UK participants in the original Good Society project whether it was at all likely that the Labour Party would be led by, in effect, a 1970s Bennite (that is, a follower of Tony Benn [1925–2014], a key proponent of democratic socialism) in the space of little more than five years, they would have been astonished. No one expected the rise of Corbyn, not least Jeremy himself.

But it should have been possible to spot its rise. Corbynism was a direct and in some ways logical response to everything outlined above. The failure to develop a desirable and feasible alternative to the Third Way/New Middle left a huge space. The years of kowtowing to global finance, big media and US imperialism inevitably spawned a backlash. The anti-war and anti-austerity movements that had developed in the UK were looking for a political home. Since 2008 the Greens and the Lib Dems had both enjoyed big membership surges. The Corbyn candidacy offered a bigger home to those in search of radical alternatives.

These were big and powerful movements, but it was wider than just movements. A generation of millennials were not just politically ready for a change but materially too. Mounting student debt, insecure jobs and unaffordable homes mean that millions have little invested in the capitalist system. Set against a bunch of largely continuation New Labour candidates, it's little wonder Corbyn triumphed in leadership elections of 2015 and 2016.

The surprisingly good 2017 election result is easier to reconcile in hindsight. It was then assumed that Brexit was done, Theresa May was regarded poorly, Corbyn still looked refreshing and the impact of Momentum was untested. Roll on two and a half years to the election in December 2019, with Brexit to the fore, Corbyn looking tired, widespread accusations of anti-Semitism and Johnson ascendant, the result was only going to go one way – and in many ways Labour was lucky to return the historically low number of MPs it did.

The loss of formerly safe working-class seats – the so called ›Red Wall‹ – has thrown Labour into an existential crisis that its current leadership election looks incapable of addressing, at least for the time being.

The Corbyn wing of the party, and others, contest that the manifesto policies were popular. Judgement should await deeper studies of the election. But of course there is a strong argument for Corbynism without Corbyn – in other words, while he was personally unpopular but will soon be gone, post-Brexit the manifesto and the general thrust of Corbynite politics might still play well.

It would be wise to be sceptical of such an argument.

The debate in the party is still between a return to Third Way centralism and a continuation of Corbynism – with some effort to triangulate between the two. This isn't anywhere near good enough. There needs to be a deep and thoroughgoing revaluation of the place of social democracy in the twenty-first century.

While Corbynism was right to focus on a new economic model, it didn't do this on anywhere near radical enough terms. It was far too centralising, preferring more traditional forms of ownership. Alternative models were proposed but were undercooked. Radical policies such as the four-day week and basic income were never developed or embedded. Other initiatives, such as free broadband, seemed to be plucked from thin air. And while the party had grown dramatically, there was little idea or intention of using the new members for anything other than internal and general election voting fodder.

It was this cultural failure that lay at the heart of the Corbyn project. The leadership cabal, which emerges in every party, was this time too tight-knit. Too few were trusted inside and outside of the party. While hostile opposition inside the Parliamentary Labour Party was real – and unjustified – after Corbyn had legitimately won twice, the decision to circle the wagons even tighter, rather than to open out and negotiate a future, doomed the project from early on.

Given terribly tricky issues such as positioning on Brexit, how to deal with anti-Semitism or managing a dispersed campaign, the centre misjudged and calculated wrongly – for the simple reason that in a complex and networked society, the centre cannot successfully dictate. Labour councils were not to be trusted, neither was anyone who hadn't been part of the long Corbyn journey. In electoral terms, Labour under Corbyn could not reach out to other progressive parties and build a broader alliance against the Tories. Not even with the left-wing Greens. Instead of being an expansive project, since its height in 2016 and 2017, it just started to shrink – as an inner core determined everything.

The challenge for Labour, and maybe the SPD and other social democratic parties, is to work out how to reconcile the need for radical responses to the economic crash, globalisation and the environmental crisis and still be open and electable.

IV. A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR A GOOD SOCIETY: PARTIES, MOVEMENTS AND CITIZENS

But a future for social democracy has to be more than an electoral affair – as critical and difficult as that is. It is necessary for social democrats to be in office, but insufficient. Social democrats have to be *in* power – that means in elected office – but also to *have* the power of ideas and extra-parliamentary forces that enable social democracy to be transformative.

There are four issues here: the ideas and narrative for change, a theory of change, an agent of change and a programme for change.
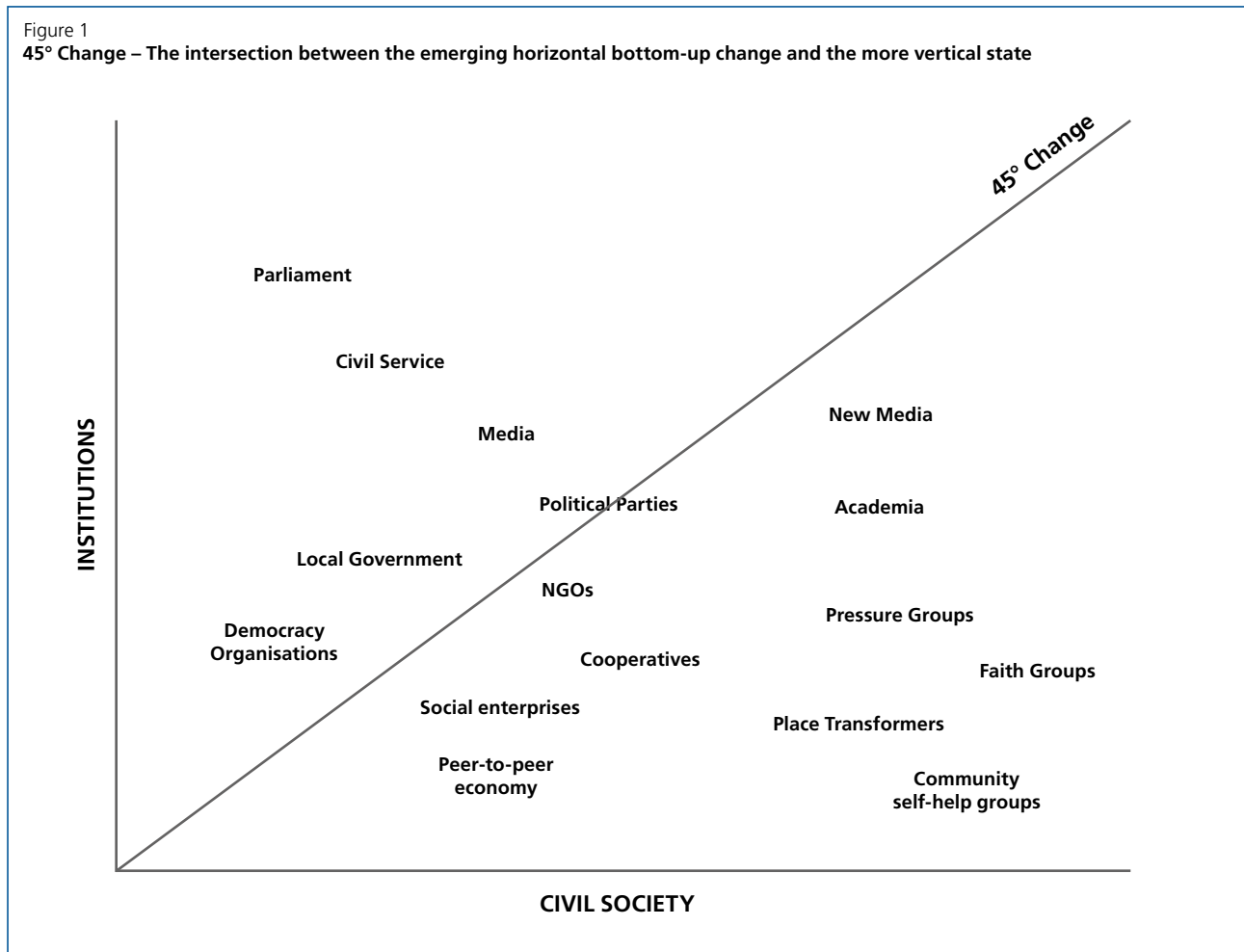
The narrative for change is the vision of the good society and good life. This, social democrats should return to in a much deeper, seductive and popular way than we did in 2009 or have done since. The elements of this are scattered in this paper and elsewhere and are rooted in ideas of collective freedom, time, creativity, autonomy, sustainability, security and democratic agency. We need to paint a vivid and compelling picture of the society we want to create.

And then we have to make the desirable feel feasible.

This starts with a theory of change that is deeper and more radical than ›elect a social democratic government‹, however necessary that is. Building on the insights already presented, concerning collaborative and participatory emergence, Compass has been developing the idea of what we call *45° Change*[3]. This is simply the diagonal meeting point between emerging and mostly civil society organisations, and the state and other more vertical or designed institutions. Because of how fragile the emerging forces are, and how easily they can collapse, the new role of the state in particular is to resource, support, legitimise and regulate in favour of these collaborative organisations. That doesn't mean that the ›big state‹ isn't needed, it is. But the prime role of the state shifts to one of service to the new forces of the twenty-first century.

A key issue here for social democrats is to devise a new concept of twenty-first century leadership, such that what matters is not power over others, but power *with* them and *for* them. The goal is to flip the system to a new paradigm in which these collaborative forms become the predominant way in which society decides things and does things – just as the machine and the market have dominated other, recent eras.

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3   https://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Compass_45-degree-change.pdf

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Figure 1
45° Change – The intersection between the emerging horizontal bottom-up change and the more vertical state

Next comes an agent of change. In the past the motor force of social democracy was the working class. The factories of the twentieth century didn't just produce goods, such as cars, they produced social solidarity. But while class still matters, it's not the basis on which enough people identify and see themselves today. Social democrats need a new political sociology of the forces that not only elect a government, but sustain it against establishment opposition. In Gramscian terms we need to build a new bloc. Some of this is socially based and some issue based – for example, the environment. But to work, it needs more than a ›rainbow alliance‹ and instead it needs to weave together a compelling narrative that transcends sectional interests and creates a new unity out of diversity, beliefs, values and material interests. Here the idea of the networked citizen and the historical agent of change in the twenty-first century needs to be fully explored.

Finally, all this needs a realistic but ambitious policy programme. This does not translate as the usual social democratic manifesto that throws everything but the kitchen sink at all the ills in society, from the top down. Instead, while it will have elements of what government can do for people, it must predominantly be about how people can help each other and the means to achieve that.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

If the task facing social democrats seemed steep in 2009, ten years on we're standing below the sheer face of the Eiger. In the past decade, social democrats have gone backwards, not forwards. The original *Building the Good Society* thinking was a reasonable response, given the moment, but, at least in hindsight, it wasn't ambitious enough and was never rigorously pushed or applied. Today the stakes are much higher, as is the urgency for change. Electoral annihilation, the Pasokification of all of us, still beckons. Maybe only in such adversity will we find the courage to really change.

But even in a post-Brexit world, the bond between social democrats is still strong. Especially between Germany and the UK. Even Nigel Farage can't stop globalised markets, migrants or climate change from impacting on the UK. And he can't stop us talking and working together in the same way Bannon does for the right.

It is vital and urgent that we rekindle and amplify the spirit of optimism, inquiry and shared endeavour we found ten years ago.

If we don't find the time, energy and resources to think and plan, and this time to act and organise too, then we are likely to die as a political creed – and we will deserve to.

A politics that is social and democratic is necessary for the twenty-first century, but it has to be wholly different from the social democracy of the twentieth century. Can social democracy change like the world around us has?

To repurpose a famous line from Kenneth Wolstenholme's 1966 World Cup final commentary: ›They think it's all over … [but is it?]‹

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neal Lawson is the Chair of Compass and was author of *All Consuming* (Penguin, 2008). Compass is the pressure group for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. Their aim is to build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen.

FES LONDON OFFICE

The London Office is part of the international network of FES. It was established in 1988 to promote better understanding of British- German relations, mainly by means of seminars and reports on political trends in the UK and Germany.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in the United Kingdom focuses in particular on the exchange of ideas and discussion on the following topics:

– common challenges facing Germany, the United King-dom and the European Union

– economic and social policy
– experiences gained from the differing regional and local policies and practices
– a continuing dialogue between politicians in both coun-tries, particularly through a series of meetings for MPs
– a continuing dialogue between the trades unions, par-ticularly via the annual British-German Trade Union Fo-rum launched in 2002

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