



The Amsterdam Process

The ideological renewal of European Social Democracy – A new revisionism for the 21st century

European social democracy is in desperate need of a period of ideological renewal. In order to reconnect with voters and regain widespread support it will have to reconcile its values with new and emerging socio-economic trends. To this end, Policy Network, the international progressive thinktank, and the Wiardi Beckman Stichting, the Dutch social democratic thinktank, have jointly initiated a new and ambitious process of reflection and strategic thinking.

Launched and conceptualised at a high-level brainstorming session in Amsterdam, November 2009, which brought together distinguished academics, policymakers, political leaders and thinkers from across the European centre-left, the process is based on two major premises:

- The left in Europe has been guilty of what can be described as the “politics of evasion”: it has failed to confront the fundamental causes of its vulnerability, loss of trust and élan in past years.
- The left in Europe has become increasingly insular. It has cut itself off from wider developments in the world of ideas and the anxieties of its traditional supporters, and become dismissive of the electorate’s apparently contradictory desire for freedom and security.

If social democrats are to recover their ability to set the political agenda in an era of insecurity, complexity and constant change, then this cannot continue. Instead, we have to face up to hard truths and, if necessary, shatter the cosy and comfortable consensus that surrounds the deliberations of so many fora which social democratic parties inhabit.

Over the coming 24 months, Policy Network and the Wiardi Beckman Stichting will bring together an "*avant-garde* group" of individuals and organisations from across Europe to generate bold, forward-looking and imaginative thinking on the future of social democracy.

We will seek the direct involvement of senior experts and policymakers from countries outside Europe where the success of the centre-left offers a number of compelling lessons for European social democracy. This will include, among others, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Japan and the US.

The "Amsterdam process" will be organised around a series of small, informal and interactive high-level meetings across Europe, underpinned by original research from top academics and experts who will identify and address the key political and policy dilemmas the centre-left is currently facing.

Point of departure

The European Parliamentary elections of June 2009 may have represented a spectacular all time low for the centre left in most EU member states – both west and east – but they also fit within a wider trend: the long term structural decline of European social democracy.

The simple truth is that the majority of Europe's social democratic parties have performed poorly, in both national and European elections, long before the global economic crisis or even before the latest wave of social democratic revisionism. Of course, there have been great victories for the centre-left, for example in Norway and most recently in Greece – but these are exceptions to the rule.

In this context, the central question for social democrats is twofold: how do we analyse the roots of this long term decline: and why has the global economic crisis in itself not proved a sufficient opportunity to end the centre-left malaise?

Our interim conclusion is that, far from social democracy presenting clear answers to the crisis, the root of the problem is the ideological vacuum the crisis has exposed in European social democracy, alongside the low levels of trust in centre-left parties and in their governing ideas.

This vacuum cannot be filled by any tactical re-positioning, questioning of leadership or any other short-term fixes. Instead, what is needed is a new round of ideological renewal which brings about a new social democratic revisionism capable of overcoming traditionalist inertia as well as the mistakes made during the latest revisionist projects, such as the "Third Way".

The “Amsterdam Process” will put forward a programme of research around the following five thematic clusters:

1. The social democratic idea in the 21st century

- Social democracy needs to redefine and clarify its moral purpose. In its early stages of evolution, social democracy’s rationale centred on forging solidarity among the working class across all spatial divisions. In the post World War II era, our guiding principles encompassed working class emancipation and improving the position of the least well-off through the pursuit of social justice and economic security within the boundaries of the nation state. Yet today, how can we redefine our overarching moral purpose?
- Social democracy as a political and popular movement anchored in local communities faces a sustained challenge in light of worrying levels of distrust, higher levels of voter absenteeism and the advance of populist parties. To compound this, core political institutions in our liberal democracies face questions of adequacy in relation to alleviating new economic and social risks. For centre-left parties who advocate the “primacy of politics” and trust in state action this creates a fundamental dilemma: how do we redefine the role of the state in the new economic and social paradigm? And how do we reaffirm social democracy’s role at the local level?
- Global markets, capital mobility and advancements in technology have weakened the impact individual nation state intervention has in a global age. Managing globalisation in an equitable and sustainable way requires social democrats to effectively shape and utilise global, national and regional institutions. Yet, under pressure from (conservative) intergovernmentalism and nationalist populism, we have been unable to successfully develop a political message which combines internationalisation and democracy in this fashion. How can social democracy reverse this trend and rally the electorate behind trans-national and global action to resolve certain domestic problems?

2. Demographics, constituency and coalitions

- The European centre-left finds itself in a fragmented electoral playing field. Social democracy’s traditional working class vote has significantly declined and a split has arisen in our “old” constituency. If our objective is to avoid “clientele politics” and continue to form majority parties capable of building the widest possible coalitions across our societies, then there is an urgent need to rethink the focus and direction of our political programmes. How can we continue to be “Volkspartei”, reconnect with our traditional supporters and reach out to “new constituencies” and electoral groups? And who are our actual opponents in a shifting political space?

- Globalisation, the advent of the post-industrial knowledge-based economy and other sweeping societal transformations have all combined to radically change voter preferences and the electoral map. As new class structures, interest groups and political milieus emerge, can social democracy simultaneously reach out to different societal groups and bridge the gap between the individual and the collective, or the high skilled and the low skilled?
- The pressures of division and fragmented constituencies necessitate progressive coalition building among parties and actors on the centre left, in particular within systems of proportional representation. Who are our potential allies, and what would a common agenda for social liberals, social democrats, greens and even new parties on the left look like?

3. Political economy and welfare state reform

- The financial and economic crisis has shaken the very foundations of our economic system. Government interventions have prevented our societies from sinking into depression, but the response to the crisis cannot stop at bank bail-outs and industry-specific rescue packages. How do we reconsider the core principles of our economy to frame a new, equitable, responsible and sustainable capitalism which compliments the welfare state rather than challenges it?
- Labour market developments have implications for our approach to delivering a new business model and system of economic governance. Our knowledge-based economy tends to create a divide between skilled and unskilled workers, between lovely and lousy jobs. As contract security and trade union membership decline and social mobility remains very limited for lower skilled workers in many countries, how can we promote new forms of solidarity which complement and sustain industrial activism?
- While the acceleration of economic integration has increased prosperity for many groups, it has also served to exacerbate wealth and income inequalities, leading to the emergence of a large and vulnerable “precarious” group in our society. As widely held principles of fairness, such as equality of opportunity, the avoidance of material hardship and reciprocity become increasingly diluted, how can we provide this group with a sense of security and fairness in our rapidly changing world?

4. Identity, community and culture

- Economic developments, structural changes and value shifts in recent decades have created new opportunities and risks in our societies which people are unequally equipped to manage and benefit from. These trends have caused a dramatic shift in post-war traditions and institutions and produced (perceived and real) “winners” and “losers”. As societies become more secular, heterogeneous, diverse, individualist and post-materialist, what are the fundamental social democratic beliefs in this context and how can they best be promoted?
- The “communitarian” legacy of social democracy seems to be under threat. How do we maintain social cohesion and a sense of community in our rapidly changing society? How do we respond to the rise of individualism? How do we respond to the populist narrative of a “lost heartland” and frame identities and traditions in a mobile, flexible and global world?

5. European integration

- Over the next decade the EU must be ready to redefine itself: what its role is as a political entity in a rapidly changing world and how should it reform itself both internally and externally, in order to overcome and respond to the multifaceted challenges of the global age we now live in? How can social democrats present Europe as a political project with a distinctive vision, both ambitious and realistic?
- As the EU expands into new areas under the pressure of both internal and external factors it will need to be re-justified in order to sustain its relevance. The legitimacy deficit and the wide gap between elite and public perceptions need to be addressed head on. How can social democrats help break this vicious circle of high expectations and a fragile basis of legitimacy? How can we engage the electorate on issues of European governance and regain the confidence of European citizens?

Output and dissemination

Over the coming two years, *Policy Network* and the *Wiardi Beckman Stichting* will publish a series of research papers and edited volumes which aim to inform the debate among key stakeholders on the centre-left on these issues.

A “social democratic observatory”, a new online portal for progressive centre-left ideas and comparative analysis (to be launched in early 2010), will help to present fresh thinking and offer new insight into political developments from across the globe.

Finally, results and ideas will be disseminated and debated at informal meetings and workshops as well as major conferences scheduled for 2010/11.

For more information, please visit:

Policy Network

www.policy-network.net

Wiardi Beckman Stichting

www.wbs.nl