



## The right side of the argument? The centre-left's response to migration and multiculturalism

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**Social democrats have failed to recognise the inelasticity of the fairness code which drives most European voters. In running out of kilter with mainstream public opinion they have lost trust and support across the social spectrum to a resurgent right. Confronting reality and winning back public trust requires taking on some uneasy questions about the extent of the centre-left's transformational powers and the limits to well intentioned approaches to migration and multiculturalism**

On December 10 2010, British judges blocked a bid by the government to deport a failed asylum seeker from Iraq with criminal convictions in the UK for offences involving drugs, theft, burglary, criminal damage and harassment who, seven years earlier, had been involved in a hit and run incident that cost a 12 year-old girl her life. In so doing, they supported an earlier finding that, since the man in question had formed a stable relationship, and had fathered children with his British partner in the meantime, his deportation would breach his right to a family life under the UK's Human Rights Act, which embeds in British law the European Convention. The father of the girl who the man had run over before fleeing the scene was understandably angry. "I work hard, play by the rules, pay my taxes and this is how I get treated", he protested. "What does that say about politicians, our leaders and the legal system? It's a joke." His words were all the more pointed in view of the fact that the UK's Conservative prime minister had, when in opposition, written to him implying that once in government, his party would make legislative changes that would supposedly ensure something like this would never happen again.

Although the press was predictably outraged, the leader of the British Labour Party appears neither to have criticised the judges' decision nor, on the other hand, to have followed suggestions that he stand up for the Act which had been passed into law by the Blair government in three years after its landslide victory in 1997.

Hard cases, as the saying goes, make bad law. But the point made here is a political rather than legal one. Episodes like this are litmus tests. Reactions – or the lack of them – are very revealing. Judging from what people were prepared (or not prepared) to say in public at least, many actively involved in centre-left politics may have sympathised with the dead girl's father but in the end tacitly accepted that the man who killed her nonetheless retained his right to stay in the country. That they would do so is arguably a measure of how far removed social democrats have become from the people they could once, with some justification, have claimed to represent. No wonder then that critics suggest that centre-left parties only have themselves to blame for the dire electoral straits in which they find themselves nowadays.

Much has been written recently about the left's failure to strike a chord with the public when it comes to responding to the economic downturn. But, despite some early and repeated warnings, the continuing disconnect between centre-left parties and the bulk of the electorate on what are sometimes referred to (euphemistically or otherwise) as cultural issues is every bit as serious. Unless it is addressed, the pendulum may never swing back sufficiently to see them back in power for any length of time.

Just as the devil is sometimes said to have all the best tunes, the right – whether we’re talking Conservative, Christian Democratic or Market Liberal parties in the mainstream or populist radical right parties towards the extreme – seems to possess most of today’s politically most potent messages. In as much as today’s more globalised and individualised consumer societies can be characterised by a consensus or a common sense, it is far from ‘progressive’ – at least in the sense in which that term is commonly understood by Europe’s social democrats. As a result, the centre-left is struggling, shipping support both to the right, where conventional conservatives are often prepared to do deals with their more outspoken counterparts in order to get into government, and to the left, where former communist and/or left libertarians compete with Green parties to mop up the votes of Labour/Social Democratic supporters disillusioned by their former champions’ failure to stand their ground.

On the big questions, economic and cultural, the right – helped it must be said by its friends in the media – seems to be able to supply answers that resonate with, and solutions which cut through to, ordinary people, be they working or middle class. Economy in trouble, for instance? The state takes and spends too much of our money. Big government has stifled enterprise, robbed people of their initiative, and left us up to our eyeballs in debt. Time to let business do what it does best and create some real rather than pretend public sector jobs, to end the welfare dependency that’s created a permanent, feckless underclass, and to cut back in order to balance the books just like we all have to do at home.

Or perhaps you’re feeling like you don’t belong in your own country, like you’re losing out to foreigners when it comes to getting a job, a home, a doctor’s appointment, a place for your kids at a good school – or at least one in which most of the kids can speak the language? The answer is equally obvious: the liberal elite has let us all down, made us part of a multi-racial, multicultural experiment that none of us ever voted for but that suited them perfectly, providing the nannies, the nurses, the builders and the barristas that make their lives easier but keep our wages down and render some parts of our towns and cities unrecognisable or even turn them into virtual no-go zones, fit only for scroungers, criminals and even terrorists. The tide has to be turned, borders have to be closed, rules have to be obeyed, political correctness and this human rights nonsense has to end. Those who don’t like it know where they can go.

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### How should social democrats respond?

The centre-left has three options when it comes to responding to these populist, but undoubtedly popular, takes on what is easily portrayed as some sort of hydra-headed crisis. The first, heroic, option is to seek to counter or at least disrupt the dominant narrative with stories of its own, reminding people, for instance, of our moral responsibilities toward the dispossessed of the developing world, of our honourable tradition of providing a safe haven for the persecuted, of the obvious benefits – economic, demographic, and international – of bringing in a big bunch of newcomers, most of whom, despite the stereotypes, are not only relatively young and healthy but prepared to work hard and happy to try to fit in.

The second option is to dodge or at least play down the question, to move on to topics that look electorally more promising – the need, for example, to do something to reign in the financial sector,

to defend popular public services like healthcare, education and pension provision.

The third option is to go with the grain, to acknowledge that 21st century political economy and the media systems which both support and reflect it, mean there is little or no point trying to argue the toss. Better to recognise the reality of the financial markets and to limit the damage and make cuts (or at least pretend to make them) before the other lot get the chance. And, on the cultural as opposed to the economic front, better to acknowledge (and so do something to assuage) the anger felt by those whose fear and loathing of the unfamiliar, the unfair and the offensive, risks driving them either into abstention or into the arms of less scrupulous politicians who claim to tell it like it is but surely know they stand no chance of delivering even half of what they promise.

Each of these three options, taken in turn, has its own logic and rationale. Option one recognises that politics is as much about story-telling as delivering tangible goods, symbols as well as substance. It makes sense, then, to ensure that it's your version rather than your opponent's which is on everyone's lips – and all the better if it's a tale that you truly believe and that your members and core supporters find comfortingly familiar. Option two recognises that elections aren't so much about the clash of ideas as about getting the voters and the media to focus on the issues you 'own' and to ignore those owned by other parties. Focusing on the old favourites, then, especially (once again) if it hits the spot with people whose sympathy you can probably count on but need to really motivate to actually get out and vote. Option three acknowledges that democracy is ultimately about giving as many people as possible what they want. Only governments get the chance to do that: if you're out of office and out of sync with the mass media, victory sometimes requires that you admit defeat, that (to coin a phrase) you concede and move on.

In the real world, of course, these options are not mutually exclusive. Centre-left parties often oscillate between them, split on the principles; worried about selling out and unable to make up their minds whether one strategy really is superior to another. The choice between them can depend on what other parties are up to. Perhaps, for example, the centre-right can be persuaded to join a cross-party consensus which excludes discussion of potentially explosive issues. On the other hand, it may be too late for that – the media may refuse to join in what will undoubtedly be dubbed a conspiracy of silence and parties on the far right and the far (or ecological) left may be more than happy to step into the breach.

Which strategy is chosen can also depend on just how united and/or hierarchical the centre-left party in question is. Will the grassroots be prepared to let the leadership concede and move on? Or perhaps it's the leadership, insulated from the anger and alienation of constituents on cultural questions, who refuse to respond to the pleas of their activists and local councillors that something has to be done? The choice of strategy also depends on what seems to be working – something that can only be judged retrospectively by elections or prospectively (and perhaps less reliably) by the opinion polls to which many politicians are understandably reluctant to enslave themselves. Parties, after all, are as prone as any other complex organisation to inertia; sometimes only the severest of shocks will shake them out of their complacency.

### Conceding and moving on

The most likely response on the centre left, then, is to meander and muddle through. But that is an empirical observation rather than a political or normative recommendation. Leaving aside what actually happens, or is likely to happen, and concentrating for a moment on which course of action

constitutes the best – or, more accurately, the least worst – option, then it may be that biting the bullet is the way to go. Just as the centre-right has had to accept, say, the effective permanency of welfare provision and the outlawing of overt discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, and disability, then today's social democrats may have to admit that there are limits to the tolerance and understanding of ordinary people and recognise that it is fundamentally undemocratic, as well as unrealistic, to stretch things beyond that limit.

Few people come into politics without a set of principles. And no one gets anywhere in politics unless they are convinced that they can persuade others to share or at least act in accordance with those principles. As a result, politicians are by their very nature, inclined towards the heroic assumption that the electorate's views are endogenous rather than exogenous, influenced by the cut and thrust of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political debate rather than by experiences (social, cultural and occupational) gleaned outside of that sphere and by preferences hard-wired by genetics and evolution.

Research suggests that we are not blank slates and that most of us are prepared to show, let alone feel, only so much understanding of those we see, rightly or wrongly, as strangers.

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It also means that such understanding will be in particularly short supply when times are tough or when we feel that people are acting unfairly, abusing our hospitality, or taking us for a ride. As altruistic beings, we are prepared to help – but only up to a point. Charity doesn't end at home but it does begin there; those to whom we give assistance and shelter must be genuinely (and, ideally, only temporarily) in need. As self-interested beings, we can appreciate that we might need to bring in foreigners to fill skill shortages and maybe even to make up for our ageing society – but again only up to a point. If governments and employers can rely on an inflow of people prepared to work long hours on low wages, then what incentive do they have to improve the employability of those born and raised here, whether by carrots (higher wages, better education and training) or sticks (making it less and less easy for those out of work to refuse to do the jobs they see as beneath them)? Is it really so simplistic (or so right-wing) to ask whether it makes sense to import labour (legally or illegally, openly or via the back door) when we have millions – and it is now literally millions – of people out of work and claiming benefits, some of whom are desperate to find a job, some of whom regard the work that migrants will gladly do as somehow beneath them.

If it is the case that politicians have less influence on people than they like to think, then it makes little or no sense to believe that avoiding a sticky subject will prove any more successful than trying to change their minds. The suggestion that talking about it instead will provide some sort of silver bullet is clearly misguided – banging endlessly on about migration and multiculturalism inevitably risks making both issues even more salient than they are already. But not talking about it at all seems, as Swedish politicians have recently discovered, to do little more than postpone rather than cure the problem. In any case, the chances that everyone – be they politician or journalist – can be persuaded to remain quiet forever are virtually non-existent: the rewards for defection, be they measured in votes or in fame and fortune, are simply too high for some to resist. And, in any case, those who defect often do so with the best of intentions.

As the 20th century came to a close, the centre-left had to admit that there were limits to decommodification and state ownership. Those policies made sense (and continue to make

sense) when it came to redressing market failure, but taken to their logical conclusion they clearly conflicted with individual liberty, with economic success, and even (irony of ironies) with effective welfare provision. As the 21st century gets properly underway, the centre-left should, by the same token, acknowledge that migration and multiculturalism, whilst wholly well-intentioned and far from the complete disaster conjured up by their opponents, nevertheless went further than most people wanted or were told would happen. It should recognise that, while we have a continuing and non-negotiable responsibility to ensure, by legal and educational means, that minorities are treated fairly, the time has come to listen to the majority rather than simply serve up more of what we think is good for them. This after all, is the essence of democracy.

### Contracting out

Social democracy is not, has never been, nor should ever allow itself to become, the vanguard of a post-materialism that shows few signs of filtering down – at least wholesale – from the educationally privileged middle classes. There are other parties even more willing and much better able to play that role. Just as the centre-right finds it convenient to contract out some of the really mean stuff to the far right – and sometimes ride back into government with its help – the centre left should consider contracting some of its more generous impulses out to the radical left and the Greens.

Obviously, this contracting out is much easier in countries where such alternatives exist, are capable of translating votes into parliamentary seats, and are happy to compromise in order to form coalitions or at least to support a social democratic minority government. In other countries, it will be much harder. The British Labour Party, for example, will inevitably find things far harder going than its European counterparts that operate in proportional systems. Before May 2010, it was axiomatic that those disillusioned with its supposed shift to the right would vote either for a party like the Greens, who apparently stood no chance of making it into parliament, or, more obviously, for a Liberal Democratic Party that was surely bound, if it came to the crunch, to do a deal with Labour rather than the Conservatives.

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After May 2010 things look very different. Some of those disillusioned with what they see as Labour's disrespect for civil liberties will stick with the Greens, convinced (almost certainly wrongly) that the latter will be able to build on the single seat they managed to win at the last election. Others, feeling betrayed by the Lib Dems, will no doubt flock back to Labour, thereby piling pressure on its new leader to pursue a softer line on law and order and immigration. They will be supported by many who stuck with Labour but who were never convinced that tough talk on such issues ever did much good – forgetting perhaps that the real problem was not so much the tough talk as the patent failure to back up words with deeds. All mouth and no trousers is never an election winning strategy.

### Confronting reality

If this small-l liberal pressure on the British Labour Party proves effective, the consequences for it could be disastrous. Tony Blair's genius – if it can be called that – was to understand the bleeding obvious, namely that in Britain, as in most European countries, the electorate was often located just to the left of centre on the state-market dimension but pretty far to the right on the dimension whose two poles political scientists like to label libertarian and authoritarian. That authoritarianism, however, is qualified by that same sense of fairness which, together with a dash of self interest, drives

most European voters, most of the time, towards the centre on the economy and welfare. However, that sense of fairness is not infinitely elastic.

Liberals on the centre left have been able to rely on this strong, shared and arguably hard-wired sense of fairness in order to gradually construct a legislative framework and a social consensus (most marked among the young) rooted in the idea that it is simply wrong to discriminate against someone because they are black, or female, or gay, or disabled – and quite rightly so. But they have also made the mistake of bundling up a duty to accept the principle and the practice of non-discrimination with consent (tacit or otherwise), firstly, to levels of migration that (even discounting the often misleading figures thrown around by populist politicians, press and pressure groups) were never really wanted and, secondly, to laws that make a nonsense of both innate and learned notions of justice, rehabilitation and, yes, retribution. In so doing they have lost the trust and support of people across the social spectrum but in particular ordinary working people who look at what populists call ‘the political class’ and see no-one – not even in social democratic parties – who looks and sounds like they have any personal experience of life lived at the sharp end.

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kilter with, or run too far ahead of, public opinion. Human beings have a terrible tendency to believe that their own values are self-evidently right and shared by everyone of goodwill, and it can often come as something of a surprise to realise that it’s not (or no longer) the case. But that excuse won’t wash any more. Decades of research show that the liberal instincts of many centre-left parties aren’t always (and in some cases are seldom) shared by most of those to whom they seek to appeal. Efforts to change that, whether concerted or halting, have had some but not enough impact. Maybe, a few years back, a redoubling of those efforts may have made a difference. But not now. The right, whether extreme or mainstream, will have no hesitation in pressing home the huge advantage this gives them, even if business concerns about labour mobility will occasionally encourage them to do less in reality than they promise in their rhetoric.

Rational argument may make some difference, but it won’t on its own prove sufficient. Changing the subject can make sense, but it offers no long-term solution. In the end, listening, even if you don’t like what you hear, and then actually acting on it, is probably the only way forward. That doesn’t, however, mean it will be easy: what we are talking about here is not just a change of tune but also a change of heart.

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