

## Commentary

# Left Behind

In a new world, Europe's social democratic parties are struggling to stay relevant

**Josef Joffe**

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comes naturally;  
it splinters**

ANGELA MERKEL WILL BE RE-ELECTED AS Chancellor of Germany on Sept. 27. That's one of the safest bets around. The only question is whether she will be in a coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD), as in the last four years, or with the Free Democrats (FDP), a center-right party out of power for 11. In Merkel's success hangs a tale of significance beyond Germany.

Call the story "The Decline of the European Democratic Left." The SPD has been trailing Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) by up to 15 points for months. The French Socialists were trounced by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 and have never recovered. The Italian left was bested by Silvio Berlusconi last year. And in Britain, the Labour party is staring at near certain defeat at the hands of Tory leader David Cameron in elections to be held by next year.

This is a puzzle; after all, we are talking about a left that not so long ago produced Prime Ministers such as Romano Prodi in Italy, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in Britain, Gerhard Schröder in Germany, and Presidents, like François Mitterrand, who ruled France for 14 years. The puzzle is sharpened by the current crop of center-right leaders, who are either not very exciting (Merkel) or much too exciting (Sarkozy and Berlusconi, with their flashy or *buffo* theatrics.)

So what is happening? First, all over the map, Conservative or Christian Democratic parties have been moving to the left. They have given us social democracy without the Social Democrats. They have gone environmentalist and welfarist; they are slowly but purposefully appropriating even the cultural issues of the left, like gay rights and feminism. Why should voters shop on the left if they can get what they want from the likes of Cameron or Merkel? When did you last

hear of radical pro-market reforms from Sarkozy and Berlusconi?

All those right-of-center leaders have taken a page from Bill Clinton's breviary on "triangulation." Here is the right, there is the left, and we sail straight through the middle. Or from Winnie-the-Pooh who answered, when asked whether he preferred honey or condensed milk on his toast, that he would take both, but could do without the bread. Pooh is us.

Still, there may be more to this tale than the electoral cycle. The longer-term forces go back to the late 19th century, when industrialization threw up reformist parties of the left everywhere. Their natural clientele was a rising industrial proletariat; their natural program was the welfare state and income redistribution. But those days in Europe are gone. The milieu of such parties is evaporating, and that is why even in this economic crisis, social democratic parties are not scoring with more spending, taxes and goodies. Where is the working class in Britain, the first industrialized nation, where manufacturing contributes only 16% to GDP? Or even in Germany?

As goes industry, so goes social democracy. Merkel is winning in Germany because support for the SPD, once in the mid-forties at the polls, is now down to less than 25%. With its base cracking, the left does what comes naturally; it splinters. In Germany, the first to bolt were the Greens in the 1970s, with a policy mix of anarchy, culture wars, environmentalism and pacifism. They are now safely on the road to *embourgeoisement*, and no wonder: the bulk of their supporters—teachers, social workers, the "caring classes"—are employed by the state. Next to go was the hard left, Die Linke, an amalgam of former East German communists and West German leftists who could not stomach the reformism of Schröder when he led

the SPD. In some regional elections in former East Germany, Die Linke has moved ahead of the Social Democrats.

So in Germany, the Social Democrats are battered by both the hard left—Die Linke—and the soft left, Merkel's Christian Democrats. At least they have a good chance of returning to government as the CDU's junior partner. Merkel might find it too onerous to link up with the FDP, which favors more market and less state.

There is no such hope on the horizon for Italy's, France's and Britain's moderate left. They will have to reinvent themselves and recruit a wider clientele, as the Democrats in the U.S. did in 1992

and again in 2008. The Democrats put together a coalition not just of declining and disadvantaged groups—industrial workers and African Americans—but also of rising forces like Hispanics, Asians, and well-to-do whites in the expanding service sector. But strategic repositioning—offering both honey and condensed milk—is easier in the Anglo-American two-party system that doesn't throw up parties to the left of the left. ■

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