

## What next for European social democracy?

### The Good Society Debate and beyond

Henning Meyer and Karl-Heinz Spiegel

#### I. Introduction

The Good Society Debate, which was hosted on the website of the *Social Europe* journal in cooperation with *Soundings*, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and Compass, was the first of its kind. Our intention was to use the opportunities that easily accessible new media provide to bring together thinkers from all over Europe (and beyond). The future of European social democracy, with Jon Cruddas and Andrea Nahles's *Building the Good Society* paper as point of reference, was the guiding topic of the debate, and the series of election defeats for social democratic parties in most European countries provided the political background.

When we conceived the idea of the debate, we were hoping to get forty contributors together. In the end it was ninety people who contributed, many of whom took the initiative and contacted us to offer their contribution as the debate progressed. We had more than 22,000 visitors who viewed more than 51,000 pages over the course of the debate. This is a remarkable result given the very specialist nature of the discourse. These statistics clearly show that there was a strong desire amongst left-of-centre academics, politicians and activists to openly debate the current state of social democracy in Europe, and that there were many more who took an interest in our deliberations, from Tasmania in the south to Alaska in the north.

Such a long and broad debate invariably presents a lot of different viewpoints and it was sometimes hard to keep up with the reading due to the number of articles published each day. For this reason, we will attempt to present a thematic summary of the online debate in this article. Such a summary necessarily omits many arguments. We will nevertheless try to present recurring themes and points of analysis as well as elaborate some initial lessons from the debate. The Good Society Debate was of course only a starting point. A lot of more detailed work still needs to be done.

## II. The social democratic crisis

Many authors took the opportunity of the debate to discuss the origins of the social democratic crisis in the national as well as European context and two questions in particular:

First, why is social democracy in crisis? And second – partially related to the first question – why did the economic crisis not benefit social democrats and why are they losing so many elections?

### *Why is social democracy in crisis?*

Almost all commentators tried to give an answer to this central question, referring to the situation in either their respective country or Europe in general. Many were very critical of the performance of their political parties, criticising above all the 'Third Way' and associated political reform projects of the 1990s and early 2000s for the loss of direction, credibility and public trust. Philippe Marlière of University College London in particular criticised the fact that

since the 1980s, social democrats have blindly promoted free markets. They forgot that the most economically successful and fairest societies have been those where the state has kept a strong regulating role, and where public services have been consistently funded and kept in public hands. With Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, uncritical support of globalisation became the new mantra ... In reality, the gap between rich and poor has significantly increased while social democrats have been in government. And the middle classes, who cannot any longer rely on effective and cheap public services, are also increasingly struggling. Peter Mandelson once famously said that he was 'relaxed about people getting filthy rich'. His wish has come true.

According to Colin Crouch of Warwick University, the Blair-Schröder project claimed

that it had the answer to the problems of social democracy for post-industrial society, but it failed to develop anything that distinguished itself from neo-liberalism, especially in the UK. This is because it failed to develop a popular base, to root its position in society.

This view was also shared by the freelance writer Fredrik Jansson, who tried to answer the more general question of 'Who are the social democrats in a post-industrial society?', and suggested that to find an answer one has to look beyond the traditional social democratic constituencies to trade unions and social movements.

The notion that social democracy has lost credibility and trust as a direct result of the modernisation programmes of the last decade and a half was a recurring theme in many contributions (see for instance Klaus Mehrens, Jenny Andersson, Henri Weber and Rene Cuperus). Rene Cuperus of the Dutch Wiardi Beckmann Stichting summarised this impression eloquently when he argued that

European social democracy faces an existential crisis for one reason: the electorate is of the opinion that social democracy is betraying the good society it once promised and stood for – the good society of equal citizenship, solidarity, social mobility, trust and strong community. The electorate thinks that this good society has been undermined and destroyed by an elitist, pseudo-cosmopolitan concept of the good society, built around neo-liberal globalisation, European unification, permanent welfare state reform, ill managed mass migration, the rise of individualism and a knowledge-based meritocracy.

French MEP Henry Weber in his contribution provided a variety of explanations for the defeat of social democracy in Europe. Reminding us that in 2002 eleven out of fifteen European Union governments were socialist, Weber identified more profound reasons for electoral defeats:

They are to be found in the exhaustion of the ‘social-democratic crisis compromise’ agreed upon in the 1990s. Furthermore, the non-cooperative national strategies that European socialist and social democratic parties were led to implement at the turn of the century (whether with good grace or bad) have also contributed to the impasse.

For Weber it is the European level which is the main battleground for a return to power: ‘In short, the crisis of social democracy comes from its inability to implement a European response to the challenges of globalisation’.

Weber’s view of the deep-seated nature of the malaise was echoed by David Marquand of Oxford University, who sees an ‘ominous paradox’ for European social democracy.

By rights, this should be a social democratic moment. The economic crisis of the last two years has shown beyond doubt that the neo-liberal economic paradigm which has dominated theory and practice for nearly thirty years is – quite simply – wrong ... Yet, so far, the only response has been a deafening silence.

In his video contribution to the debate, former London Mayor Ken Livingstone sought to explain this silence. Livingstone argued that because of the gradual adjustment of social democratic politics to the neo-liberal mainstream, social democratic parties have neglected the development of an alternative political programme. In contrast to conservatives, who used the ‘golden years’ of social democracy to develop an alternative political project to be ready to step in once the social democratic consensus appeared vulnerable, social democrats in recent years have not done the same. As a consequence, social democrats had no political alternative to offer when the confidence in neo-liberalism started to wane in the wake of the financial crisis and subsequent recession.

Other authors went even further in their criticism of social democracy. Mike Cole (Bishop Grosseteste University College) and Jeremy Gilbert (University of East London), for instance, argued that the dual

crisis of capitalism and social democracy revealed deeper philosophical flaws that required a radical cure. Gilbert argued

the lesson we must draw is that social democrats were always quite mistaken to imagine that they had somehow tamed capitalism, domesticated it, reinvented it. This was never what had really happened. Capitalism had been fought back, pushed out of large areas of social life, kept at bay by the threat of labour militancy or even military conquest; but it had never been transformed. In fact it could never have been transformed: the history of the past few decades has made very clear that it cannot be. It can only be contained, regulated, opposed to various degrees (or not, as the case may be). The language of much contemporary social democracy continues to imply that there are many possible kinds of capitalism, from the fierce purity of American liberal capitalism to the cosy egalitarianism of the German or even Scandinavian models of 'welfare capitalism'. In fact, this is a catastrophic analytical mistake.

So in sum many of the contributors judged that 'Third Way' reformism left social democrats without 'political clothes' and at the same time destroyed trust and credibility amongst the public. When the crisis struck, social democrats not only had little to offer in terms of an alternative model, but were perceived by many as collaborators in a failing project.

*Why did the economic crisis not benefit social democrats, and why are they losing so many elections?*

The British MP Denis McShane pointed out that it was simply wrong to assume that an economic crisis would naturally benefit the centre-left. McShane argued that 'when citizens are scared for their jobs and salaries, or the future of their children, they vote defensively and stay with conservatives'. Adding to the electoral puzzle, former Spanish Minister for Labour and Social Affairs Jesus Caldera formulated one of the key questions:

58 per cent of European citizens position themselves as centre-left or left, (but) the European People's Party won more seats in the European parliament than the Party of European Socialists. It is crucial to understand how it is that the right can win more votes in European Parliament elections when a majority of European citizens place themselves on the left of the political spectrum.

Also referring to the European elections, PES President Poul Nyrup Rasmussen stressed that 'the biggest vote winner in 2009 was without a doubt the "sofa" party. It is apathy that has topped the polls across almost the whole European Union – 57 per cent of Europe's 375 million citizens did not turn up to vote in June [2009].' Rasmussen further referred to the rise of extremist parties as one of the reasons for the poor social democratic election showings.

It became clear in the debate that for most authors, paradoxically, the crisis of social democracy is closely linked to the crisis of capitalism, and in particular to its latest ideological incarnation, 'neo-

liberalism'. This created a fundamental dilemma for social democrats which David Marquand described as follows:

During the long ascendancy of the neo-liberal paradigm, social democrats were trapped. If they echoed the neo-liberal mantras of individualism, deregulation, privatisation and marketisation – as the New Democrats did in the United States and New Labour did in Britain – they risked losing their souls. If they rejected them, they lost all hope of influencing events.

Social democracy has linked its own fate to the fortune of the ideology it sought to oppose and therefore has manoeuvred itself into a position in which it is almost certain to lose politically.

A similar criticism was formulated by Henning Meyer who pointed out that the focus on interest politics associated with 'Third Way' big tent strategies was wrong because it was based on a rather simplistic behaviouralist view of the voter as utility maximiser (on this point see also David Marquand and Neal Lawson). The concentration on policies for particular electorates in the 'centre' was one of the driving forces that alienated large parts of the traditional social democratic electorate.

People are prepared to vote against their economic interest (as has happened recently in many elections where social democrats have lost) as long as they can identify with a person, a party and its policies, and as long as the politics is trustworthy and believable. People still do not like all the bad news, but they trust in a particular person or party to do their best to prevent things getting worse; other candidates, on the other hand, might not be trusted to deliver on the good things they have promised. This is the reason why trustworthiness, authenticity and programmatic identity are so important. And in this department social democrats throughout Europe have lost out dramatically in recent years. Political identity and trust are gone.

The poor performance of most mainstream centre-left parties in recent national and European elections is a clear sign that there is an intellectual vacuum and space for a political alternative to neo-liberalism.

Andrew Watt of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) pointed out in his analysis that

social democrats seeking to associate themselves with 'modernity' have become enamoured of financial capitalism and liberal policies and values. Their post-crisis critiques of neo-liberalism have thus been unconvincing. Linked with this, alliances with the broader labour movement and other progressive social movements have become strained or have been neglected. Voters have lost faith that social democrats are better able than the right to manage capitalism ... in the interests of ordinary people.

Pursuing a similar line of argument, the social democratic parties' general loss of social roots was a main point of criticism for several authors (see, for instance, Arjun Singh-Muchelle and Lucile Schmidt).

### III. The future of European social democracy

Moving on from the analysis of social democracy's plight, the future of social democratic politics in Europe was the focus of attention for many contributors to the Good Society Debate. Radical changes to the general approach of social democracy appeared necessary to many authors.

#### *Challenge no. 1: a European and global vision*

Stefan Berger of Manchester University, for instance, stressed the need for a new utopian social democratic vision, the value of which was put in question by the mantra of pragmatism in the 1990s and 2000s.

In the early 1990s utopia was as dead as communism, and social democracy was in deep crisis. In many countries in Europe it underwent an often painful transition process, involving changes in leadership and changes in programmatic orientation. The latter usually included a partial endorsement of the liberal market economics that had seemed so successful in sweeping everything before it in the neo-conservative era of the 1980s. It also involved high doses of pragmatism: social democracy was redefined as that which worked.

Berger further stressed the continued relevance of an international utopia for our times:

Utopias were necessary in the nineteenth century – for thinking outside the box, thinking about alternatives to a system of untrammelled greed. And who could deny that the contemporary world is also in dire need of utopias, to enable us to think about alternatives to a system that is about to condemn humankind to oblivion.

The importance of democratic, multi-level internationalism was emphasised by many authors. Referring to the European Union, Stefan Collignon (St. Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa) argued that

modern social democratic policy must be European if it seeks to correct the inequality created by the single market, and if it wishes to ensure that the losers of Europeanisation can live an emancipated and dignified life in the European Union. Modern social democratic policy must find the means to make sure that fairness and justice can be re-established in the European single market, and find ways of redistributing the gains generated by European integration across the borders of the nation state through a new model of solidarity. But it is not enough for European social democracy merely to demand the creation of a social Europe. It must also conquer the instruments by which a social Europe can be created.

Authors such as Mary Kaldor of the London School of Economics and Zygmunt Bauman (Universities of Leeds and Warsaw) argued that the instruments referred to by Collignon as necessary to achieve social democracy must also be created on a global level. 'Social democracy has to rediscover its internationalist and humanitarian roots ... If social democracy is to be relevant for the twenty-first

century, it has to be green, global and bottom-up' (Mary Kaldor). Exposing the limits of the 'nation state' to provide existential security to all its citizens, Zygmunt Bauman concluded:

Globally produced problems can be only solved globally. The only thinkable solution to the globally generated tide of existential insecurity is to match the powers of the already globalised forces with the powers of politics, popular representation, law, jurisdiction; in other words, there is a need for the remarriage of power and politics – currently divorced – but this time at the global, planetary, all-humanity level.

On the basis of the need to change the social democratic approach to become truly internationalist and integrate an utopian vision, more concrete policy issues were addressed by a variety of authors. Five areas seemed to be of particular importance: inequality; sustainability; the reform of capitalism; the role of the state; and democracy and party organising.

### *Challenge no. 2: inequality*

A widespread criticism was that the crucial question of inequality has taken a backseat in recent years and that social policy – with mixed success – was targeted at poverty reduction at the very bottom of society (see for instance David Clark, Lorenzo Marsili, Niccolo Milanese and Leszek Lachowiecki). Under the veil of this mission, general inequality in many countries has further widened – also under social democratic leadership.

Philip Golub and Noelle Burgi (University of Paris) therefore called for the reinvention of the politics of equality:

The first step in this direction must be to restore the legitimacy of the notion of equality, and the essential link between equality, fairness and liberty, and between freedom and social justice. Equality, which entails the notion of rights, is of course understood here as the right of all individuals who are members of a democratic polity to equal universal access to public services such as health, education, energy, infrastructure, etc.

The intellectual and political challenge lies in the winning back of the hegemonic ideology:

In the name of 'modernisation' and 'competitiveness', governments have devised and implemented illiberal policies, threatening civil liberties and weaving administrative webs of constraint and control to keep the poor and other vulnerable social groups in submission. During the course of this process many social democrats have abandoned the power/knowledge battlefield, and behaved as if there were no alternative.

### *Challenge no. 3: sustainability*

Another policy area often referred to was that of the green economy, sustainability and climate change (see for instance David Ritter, Jesus Caldera and Caroline Lucas). Margot Wallstrom (former Vice-President of the European Commission) underlined the importance of linking the economic recovery with green policies when she argued that

we believe that a socially and ecologically sustainable society can create new opportunities for economic growth, employment creation, social protection and a cohesive society. Climate change policies should be considered as opportunities to realise a triple dividend – protect the environment and boost economic growth and employment creation at the same time. Countering global warming is, as a matter of fact, maybe the only option if we wish to get our economy back on track and ensure a viable economic system. ‘Going green’ is thus a win-win strategy!

For Caroline Lucas (leader of the British Green Party) a genuine political commitment to social and environmental justice in Europe is the answer to secure the future of the progressive left. Social democracy has to rise to the challenges of our times:

While the vast majority of Europe’s citizens have become vastly more wealthy in the past four decades, our levels of well-being and happiness have not increased (3). At the same time, environmental problems, above all the climate crisis, suggest that our current lifestyles have potentially catastrophic consequences.

### *Challenge no. 4: reforming capitalism*

Unsurprisingly, the reform of capitalism was also a key debating point. Some authors tried to answer the question of John Monks who asked in his contribution: ‘what kind of capitalism?’ The discourse addressed the issues of a fairer tax system (Will Straw and Karin Roth), the rebalancing of the mixed economy (Tapio Bergholm, Jaakko Kiander and Remi Nilsen), a new ethical growth strategy through investment as well as better employment conditions (Paolo Borioni ), and the reaction to the financial crisis.

On this last point, Duncan Weldon, who is a partner in a fund management firm, argued in favour of a rebalancing of finance capitalism and the ‘real economy’:

Finance capitalism represents the subordination of production (and hence much employment) to the pursuit of money profits in financial markets through trading in stocks, bonds and other instruments. This can lead to the ‘real’ economy being starved of the investment it needs. One of the largest drivers of the current recession is a collapse in investment levels – at least partially driven by the failure of finance capitalists to supply credit. We are now in a perverse situation whereby banks that were for a decade prepared to lend for consumption and speculation on



property and financial instruments are currently not prepared to lend for the financing of the necessary rebalancing of economies towards greener, sustainable growth.

This topic also linked the Good Society Debate with the wider discussion about 'socially useless' activities of financial institutions and how to deal with these business models in the future.

Apart from policy issues, the debate generated also many articles that focused on institutional questions. Here two areas were of particular importance: first, the future role of the state and second, social democratic parties' organisation and societal reach.

#### *Challenge no. 5: the role of the state*

As the state has seen a political revival as the insurer of last resort, there was a vivid debate about how this momentum could be used for a more positive concept of state interventionism for progressive purposes. On this point it was German MP Karin Roth who remained sceptical and warned:

As has already been the case, the high levels of debt will be used as an excuse for further privatisation by the state, including public services and social security systems. And higher state debt, incurred as a result of unjustifiable tax cuts, will exacerbate conflicts over the distribution of resources between rich and poor, which could lead to the abolition of social benefits, or to a situation in which compensation for the loss of benefits would only be available to those who had the means for private insurance.

This debate is of course linked to the above-mentioned discourse about the need for a true internationalism with multi-level governance. The need to introduce European-wide reforms in financial and economic governance was mentioned in the original document on the Good Society by Jon Cruddas and Andrea Nahles. This is in line with what Roth demands on a more positive note:

social democrats in Europe must give priority to clarifying the relationship between nation states and the European Union, in order to avoid social Europe being weakened from within. European integration must be deepened through a new form of democratic statehood, in order to safeguard the primacy of politics over economics, ensure cultural diversity, and allow citizens to realise their full potential.

Ernst Stetter, General Secretary of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), made this clear as well when he argued that 'clarifying the role of the state, and through that the mission for the European Union, will allow social democracy to sharpen its image and reemphasise the cleavages between them, the conservatives and the liberals'.

A more radical approach to the role of the state from an Eastern European point of view was presented by Attila Agh of Corvinus University in Budapest, who concluded that 'both the absolute and relative losers in the recent crisis have realised that the state around them is boring, slow and passive; it has not been able to maintain the proper workings of society in the global age'. For Agh it is the 'developmental' state instead of the 'traditional' state which

offers an opportunity for a new social democratic narrative with an innovative political leadership ... The developmental state has the capacity to revitalise social democracy by inventing social Europe for the twenty-first century, turning the recent global crisis into a creative crisis.

#### *Challenge no. 6: democracy and party organising*

The strengthening of democracy, links to other progressive forces such as trade unions and NGOs, and a serious opening up to new media, as well as new forms of party organisation were also discussed on several occasions.

The damage inflicted on the traditional labour movement alliance with trade unions in particular was an often-mentioned issue. Dimitris Tsarouhas of Bilkent University in Ankara underlined the continuous strategic importance of this link and called for a renewal of this alliance when he wrote:

What is remarkable about the party-union link is how much it has been underestimated by social democrats themselves. The 'golden age' was made possible by many different components, but one of them was certainly successful party-union links: these were instrumental in forging governmental coalitions that enhanced women's rights, gave employees a say in the workplace and secured safe work conditions for employees. Even today, and despite all the changes that the link has gone through, unions continue to form the backbone of the progressive movement in a number of countries.

James Sloam of the University of London went much further in his contribution in claiming that 'social democracy also needs a strong demand-side perspective, focused on rebuilding trust in communities, empowering local government, and creating new linkages with communities of party members and sympathisers'.

The latter aspects were also essential for Niels Annen, member of the German SPD Executive, who argued that

our organisations and leaders have lost contact with an essential part of the left, without filling this gap by attracting other important groups of voters. One important example of such ineptitude is the failure to integrate progressive bloggers and campaigners into political discourse, because we are not willing to accept the necessary preconditions – being open and

responsive to new ways of communicating and debating. This is all too much for our aging male-dominated political elites.

Colin Crouch was even more critical of party organisations and their capacity to change. He argued that ‘the dynamic forces in today’s world are global, especially global corporations that cannot easily be managed nationally’. According to Crouch, the future of social democracy will be shaped by transnational campaigns, ‘for example by uniting unions in the west with those in developing countries to combat the exploitation of women and children in supply chains. It is here that we find the pioneers of the next historical stage of social democracy.’

### **The cleavage within Europe**

One of the striking characteristics of the Good Society Debate was an often fundamentally different assessment between contributors from North, West, and Southern Europe and those coming from Central and Eastern Europe. To be very clear, we do not want to blame anybody for their views or analyses, but it is important to stress that closing the sometimes wide political cleavage running through Europe is one of the most important tasks for social democrats if a real European social democracy is the aim. What political activist Carl Rowland, who himself lives in Hungary, referred to as a ‘core versus periphery’ situation became also clear in some of the debate contributions.

First, it was often stressed that different historic backgrounds mean that social democratic traditions are very different. Leszek Lachowiecki, Director of the Index Academic Centre, for instance strongly criticised social democracy in his native Poland when he wrote that

it is strange but true that Polish Post-Communists – having converted themselves into social democrats – have been in power for about half of the period since the downfall of their dictatorship. But in fact this group, which is led by people like Aleksander Kwasniewski and Leszek Miller, has hardly any genuine Communist roots either. The label of social democracy was acquired by these politicians for purely tactical reasons. In reality, they were leaders of a narrow group of technocratic businessmen (former apparatchiks of the ruling party), who sought to enrich themselves in the process of selling off state-owned industry. Having no ideological background and aiming exclusively at their own individual success, they have eagerly participated in the building of our current social and economical system, which could not be regarded as acceptable in any imaginable system of left values.

A similar criticism was voiced about social democracy in Ukraine by Oleksandr Svyetlov, an adviser to NGOs and the Ukrainian League of Political Scientists:

The SDPU(u) has been pithily described as being social democratic to about the same extent as a guinea pig is a pig (M. Tomenko). It has also been described as a 'bandit party' (V. Malynkovich) and 'oligarch's club' that has privatised the state (Y. Durkot). The party has made use of its staffing of public offices and state functions for the self-enrichment of its members; and it has promoted their business interests through the 'privatisation' of most of the lucrative state-owned enterprises, and the preferential allocation of the land in national parks for building private real estate.

Almantas Samalavicius of Vilnius Technical University was another contributor who emphasised the different historic dimensions of social democracy in 'old' and 'new' Europe in his pledge for a convivial society and the importance of restructuring social democratic parties all over Europe. He had more questions than answers:

So how can social democrats win back their electorate in Eastern and Central Europe, where distrust in their policies has grown constantly over almost two decades? And how can Eastern and Western social democracies remarry, bearing in mind their different genealogies and different social experiences?

Samalavicius raised fundamental questions that require urgent answers.

Mart Valjatage, editor of the Estonian Magazine *Vikerkaar*, argued in his article that the

Cruddas-Nahles paper and the Good Society Debate in general does not pay sufficient attention to two issues that – unfortunately – are influencing the political atmosphere in Europe today, especially in the post-communist countries. These are the issues of fear and security, and of memory and history. These two factors give sustenance to an angry political outlook that is heavily orientated towards the past and fearful of the future.

Valjatage further referred to history as a burden in the former communist countries when he wrote that

though the memories of Soviet communism have discredited some social democratic ideas in these [Eastern European] countries, the confusion of social democracy with communism is relatively easy to disentangle. But there has been a strong tendency towards becoming over-entangled in historical issues, particularly in poring over the lessons of the Second World War, and the relative evils of Stalinism and Nazism, and this feature of recent political discourse needs to be firmly resisted. History should be left to historians.

But apart from important differences in social democratic traditions and national histories, there were also some deep-seated philosophical discrepancies presented by some contributors. Florin Abraham of the Ovidiu Sincai Institute in Romania for instance presented a viewpoint referring to the Cruddas-Nahles paper that few other commentators would share:

Another contentious thesis promoted by Jon Cruddas and Andrea Nahles is the need for the restoration of the primacy of politics, and rejection of the subordination of political interests to

the economic. If we considered this idea in the arena of pure ethics it could be accepted as a desirable objective. But if we try to apply it concretely there are three possible options: (a) politics would turn into ideology, more specifically into communism; (b) since it is implicit in the drastic separation of economic interests from politics that the financial support of companies during electoral campaigns would not be permitted, parties could expect certain failure, as in the current conditions no single party can fund its electoral campaign solely through the contribution of its members; (c) we risk becoming hypocrites, in tacitly accepting the influence of economic interest groups over parties but publicly denying it. All three options are unacceptable.

Christian Ghinea, Director of the Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE), put an equally controversial claim forward when he stated that

social dumping is the best thing that has happened to Romanian workers in recent years, as Western companies have relocated jobs here. Of course, we would prefer to have Western levels of income here, but the real choice is between the jobs we currently have and no jobs. (Although these salaries may appear derisory to people in the West, the wages paid by companies that have relocated to Romania pushed nominal income up by 75 per cent between 2005 and 2008). So, what is the best option for a Romanian willing to build the Good Society? – to prevent social dumping to protect Western jobs? I don't think so.

## **Conclusion**

The Good Society Debate achieved its main purpose of bringing together an unprecedented number and variety of discussants to debate the future of European social democracy. The diversity of viewpoints and specialist knowledge represented in the debate provided a rich basis from which the work on new political solutions can begin.

This paper summarised the main arguments on the sources of the social democratic crisis and outlined some key challenges for the future of European social democracy. It also highlighted the apparent friction within Europe that has to be urgently addressed. The Good Society Debate has provided a framework and a point of reference that will be helpful to guide future efforts. Most of the work of course remains to be done.

How difficult it is to come to grips with all the tasks and challenges social democracy faces was shown by Jan N. Engels and Gero Maass (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) who developed different 'levers of political success' to measure social democratic benchmarks. To turn around the social democratic fortune it is essential to have

a clear social democratic 'narrative' ...; a credible and persuasive political leadership based on a vigorous and democratic party ...; making use of all the possibilities provided by the political

culture and the electoral system against political opponents; a balance of activities which is skilfully implemented, substantial and communicated effectively ...; the ability to mobilise strategic partners ...; and the necessity, in a globalising world, of embedding national considerations in a European and international approach to strategy.

These and other critical areas will need much more work and will be addressed in a series of conferences, online debates and seminars. We invited participants from nineteen European countries to the FES/Compass conference on the Good Society in London in January 2010 to reflect on four aspects of the Good Society, which are crucial and will be focussed on in the near future: equality, democracy, sustainability and organising.

The exchange of experiences and ideas were similar to what was discussed in the online debate: the ways to achieve a Good Society might be different, depending on the country's background, but nevertheless the vision of a Good Society, based on an equal, sustainable and democratic system, remains a unifying idea in all European countries.

What we have in common was pointed out by Jonathan Rutherford of Middlesex University in his reflection on the online debate:

We need to reclaim our philosophical foundations. People want to know what we stand for. Reclaiming our beliefs will restore historical, conceptual and moral depth to our politics. They are the lodestar that will guide us into the future. The question of which principles we hold passionately need to be distinguished from the strategic questions of how we build popular support and win elections.

The Good Society Debate is an ongoing project. We would like to invite you to be a part of it.

**Henning Meyer** is Head of the European Programme at the Global Policy Institute, London Metropolitan University, and Managing Editor of *Social Europe*. **Karl-Heinz Spiegel** is the Director of the London office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES).

*Contributions to the Good Society Debate can be read in full at <http://www.socialeurope.eu/category/good-society-debate>*