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An infant's cry that has never fallen silent

The Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SP) celebrated its 125-year anniversary in October. What has social democracy achieved in Switzerland and are the party's policies at the time of its foundation still relevant today? An analysis by Hans Ulrich Jost, a professor of history

“The Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, which was baptised last Sunday, could not have begun life with a more delightful infant’s cry,” wrote the NZZ on 29 October 1888. The “delightful” was, however, meant ironically as the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” bemoaned the lack of commitment to the army in the SP’s policy agenda. The newspaper continued: “What right does such a party have to call itself Swiss?”

The SP was effectively ostracised, vilified and monitored by the political police. This nevertheless failed to halt its growth. It was actually the strongest party in the National Council from 1935 to 1943 and during the 1960s and 1970s. However, faced with the block of conservative parties it always remained in the minority and never obtained more than 30 percent of the vote. The SP has reluctantly become accustomed to the role of an unloved junior partner of the conservative parties.

Its good deeds

Despite its minority position and the defeats in referendum campaigns, some of its ideas have gained acceptance. These include the system of proportional representation, the right to vote for women, old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV) and accession to the UN – these were key policies of the Social Democrats long before the conservative majority came around to them. There have also been times when the SP's position has been of monumental importance to Switzerland's destiny. One such occasion was in 1935 when it helped to defeat the initiative for the complete revision of the federal constitution. The fascist factions, the Catholic Conservatives (today the CVP), parts of the BGB (today the SVP) and some Young Liberals were behind the initiative. Adoption would have resulted in an authoritarian corporative state, moving Switzerland towards the fascist camp.

In relation to the current difficulties being experienced by the Swiss financial centre, it should also be remembered that the banking initiative launched by the SP in 1979 would have saved Switzerland much anguish had it been adopted. This provided for the rescission of banking confidentiality in cases of tax evasion and tighter controls over the financial centre. As a result of a large-scale campaign of intimidation by the banks and conservative parties, the Swiss people rejected the initiative by a large majority in 1984.

The SP long perceived itself as a “revolutionary” party – but not, as Robert Grimm underlined in the National Council in 1918, in the sense of seeking a pitchfork revolt. Yet Grimm, the instigator of the national strike in 1918 and the party’s intellectual leader, loved expressions like “class war” and “dictatorship of the proletariat”. The fact that the conservatives also fought with the gloves off during the industrial disputes at the beginning of the 20th century should not be overlooked either. The entrepreneurs fought a “class war from above” supported by the state, which willingly deployed the police force and the army.

A lot of nonsense has been written about the SP's revolutionary potential. The SP was at most as revolutionary in the 20th century

as the liberals were in 1848. It fought for political change, a social state and restraints on capitalism. A solution along the lines of that in Sweden would have been possible after the First World War had it not been for the militant anti-socialist position of the right-wing parties.

The gross errors

The SP has not been a workers' party for quite some time. Public officials and teachers, for example, have played a significant role since as far back as the end of the First World War. Ernst Nobs, who was elected as the first SP Federal Councillor in 1943, was a teacher and a journalist. However, it should not be assumed that a membership extending into the conservative centre ground automatically means the end of socialist ideals.

The “magic formula” was famously introduced in 1959. This meant two seats each on the Federal Council for the liberals, the CVP and the SP and one for the SVP. There is actually little that is magical about it. The CVP, which presented this solution at the time, was primarily focusing on breaking the liberals’ monopoly on power. Two socialists were accepted in return, albeit only candidates acceptable to the conservatives.

People may refuse to believe it but the SP has stabilised the government coalition over the past fifty years and has defended the federal state of 1848. It took Article 2 of the Federal Constitution seriously. This says that federal government shall “promote common welfare” and “ensure the greatest possible equality of opportunity among its citizens”. There is no talk of “more freedom, less state” – the slogan of the liberals since the 1980s.

The SP has, of course, also committed gross errors. To give just one example, when it adopted the three-pillar principle in the 1970s, it helped the financial sector to get its clutches on old-age pensions. Not only did this prevent the extension of old-age and survivors' insurance advocated by SP Federal Councillor Hans-Peter Tschudi, it also put the accrued capital of those insured under the second pillar at the disposal of the banks and stock markets. In light of the moral and material decline of the financial markets, this is anything but reassuring.

Embracing its heritage

The SP launched its first initiative – the right to work – in 1893. This sought to give employment the same status as much-revered private ownership in the constitution. The initiative was resoundingly defeated at referendum. However, the principle of work before capital addressed at the time is still extremely relevant today. If the SP does not want to lose its soul, it must continue this fight. The protection of employment and of the people who depend on it from the caprices of the capitalist economy is not just a question of material prosperity. It is a question of the survival of democracy.

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