

# opini3n

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## THE CATALAN ELECTIONS AND THE SITUATION OF THE LEFT IN EUROPE

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The elections held in Catalonia on 28 November finished up with a major setback for the different left-wing political groups. The tripartite coalition that put an end to the *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) hegemony in 2003 now, seven years on, has to face up to its combined loss of half a million votes and more than twenty members of parliament. The CiU, a conservative nationalist coalition will take up the reins of government again while the *Partido Popular* (PP – People’s party) has also gained votes and representation in parliament. The significant swing of the citizens of Europe towards more conservative political positions and the generalised backslide of social-democratic or left-wing options have thus been confirmed in Catalonia too.

The great economic, technological and social transformations of recent years, along with the pall hanging over the chances of maintaining the levels of welfare attained in Western Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century, would seem to be tipping growing sectors of the citizenry towards positions that augur more restrictive immigration policies, or challenges to the universal applicability of social benefits, or calls for a firmer hand against those who violate or infringe law and order. At times like the present, and with the sensation of threat that many citizens might be feeling with regard to the sustainability of all kinds of welfare benefits, the response could start out as xenophobic, blaming “others” for what is happening to us, and end up with straight-out racist positions that, in fact, have no racial basis. This has happened with the classical “others” (the Roma population), has been happening with the new “others” (Islamophobia) and, in the end, could end up as extending rejection of the “so many” who are abusing “our” hard-earned rights and jeopardising the little work or the scant or generous welfare that “we” presently enjoy. It is clear that today’s Europe has been constructed over countless religion-based conflicts and that, as a result, religious freedom became unavoidable. However, fear of the radicalism of people who have not yet come to grips with the secularised guidelines for their public and political conduct has aggravated differences and even turned religion into a cultural dividing line and frontier of incorporation into full citizenship. I have singled out these issues because, in Catalonia as in other parts of Europe, they have been among the spectres brandished by the conservative parties in the electoral campaign.

Then again, the serious impact of the electoral results on the Catalan political sys-

tem is yet to be digested. On the left, hardest hit by the rout are the PSC (Catalan Socialist Party) and the pro-independence party ERC (Republican Left of Catalonia). Hitherto, the discussion has mixed names and ideas, but more names of people than ideas for renovation. In the PSC, the debate links up with the revamping of social democracy all round Europe. As is well known, social democracy appeared as a predominant force in Europe after the Second World War since it was adeptly able to combine acceptance of the market economy with a redistributive emphasis manifested in social policies of universalising a basis of shared welfare. The problem is that the structural foundations of this combination are now well and truly moot. We have neither a stable class structure, nor an economy based on a national market, nor the ability to guarantee the future of welfare policies for an evermore vulnerable population facing increasingly precarious conditions of employment. After so many years of management by capitalism-with-a-human-face it may well be that, when the economic system tends to rejig and attempts to shed the costs of redistribution, social democracy ceases to be part of the solution to become part of the problem.

Even someone so little susceptible to the label of radical as Michael Walzer recently stated in *Dissent* that the problem of social democracy in the western world is that its position cannot be labelled either as revolutionary or as reformist and that it is morphing into something that is mere convention. Walzer asks, what characterises social democracy? Answer: a combination of democracy, regulation of the market economy and a set of welfare policies. In none these three areas can social democracy offer any innovative approach to the new problems that have arisen. What prevails is low-intensity democracy, with a tendency to manage, as best as may be, the finance-dominated drift of capitalism and, after uncritical acceptance of New Public Management and its efficiency-focused logic, there seems to be no capacity for reformulating social contracts in defence of a refurbished vision of social inclusion. Walzer asserts that if the aim is to keep struggling for the basic component of left-wing values – equality – then politics, insurgency, must be brought back.

The accrual of question marks now facing the European left is not insignificant. What do we mean when we speak of growth? Does the horizon of progress still consist of the construction of more infrastructure, more cars, more abusive occupation of the land and more waste of resources? Are immigrants or the idle poor the ones who are endangering welfare policies? Must the advance towards the new knowledge society be on the basis of maintaining the privileges of those that have always enjoyed them? With whom should the new left make alliances? What are the agents of change and transformation in the twenty-first century? Immanuel Wallerstein recently said that social democracy has ceased to be a political movement to become a cultural expression. This has the ring of an epitaph but the fact is that the social and political muscle of European social democracy is still very considerable and it is therefore conceivable that there are still forces that can come together to hammer out new proposals for dealing with old and new problems. This is what seems to be happening in Catalonia.