

More stirrings on the Left

The debates in the German Bundestag are, apparently, pretty soporific affairs most of the time but there are a few exceptions to the rule. One such occasion was this remarkable tirade by Sahra Wagenknecht, the economics spokesman and deputy leader of *Die Linke*, party translated simply as “The Left.” *Die Linke*’s ideology lies very much to the left of the German Social Democratic Party. It is profoundly anti-capitalistic and the party’s MEPs are part of the Nordic Green Left group in the European Parliament, sitting alongside MEPs from, among others, Sinn Féin, Greece’s Syriza and Spain’s Podemos.

As this blog has pointed out before, the EU’s handling of the latest Greek bailout has upset many on the Left. Whether they are justified to be so upset is another matter. As Richard North points out, the media’s treatment of Greece as an innocent victim is somewhat one-sided. For years, Greeks have not been very good at paying taxes (or collecting them, for that matter), the public sector is very large and blessed with a very generous retirement package. You do not have to hold right-of-centre views to believe that a smaller, more efficient Greek state might help the country to recover economically or that pumping money unconditionally into a country in such a dire economic state is not money well spent. Indeed, one of the most vocal opponents of any further bailout has been the left-of-centre government in Slovakia. “It would be impossible to explain to the public that ‘poor’ Slovakia . . . should compensate Greece,” said Robert Fico, the Slovak Prime Minister last February

Perception, however, is as important as reality – indeed, more so, in some cases – and Dr Wagenknecht puts forward her perception of how badly her country’s leaders have handled the bailout in a remarkably forthright manner. Followers of the UK’s eurosceptic MEPs will note that Frau Merkel’s face wears

that same expression as the likes of Hermann van Rompuy or Jean-Claude Juncker when being verbally assaulted by Nigel Farage or Dan Hannan. "Europe is a non-democratic colony controlled by banksters," she declares. "You are postponing the bankruptcy announcement to avoid admitted that you've wasted millions of euros." Tellingly, she quotes from Paul Krugman, the influential Keynesian economist beloved by many on the Left, whose long-standing criticism of so-called "austerity" has metamorphosised into criticism of the whole EU project, especially the single currency, as a consequence of the latest Greek bailout.

Will we see *Die Linke* developing an increasingly eurosceptic position? The concept of any even remotely eurosceptic party emerging in Germany seemed like a fantasy a decade ago, but the arrival on the scene of *Alternative für Deutschland* on the right shows that all things are now possible. With some factions within Greece's Syriza movement now openly supporting Greek withdrawal from the euro and no fewer than three *Guardian* columnists – Owen Jones, George Monbiot and Suzanne Moore – publicly proclaiming their willingness to consider voting "No" in a referendum, evidence is pointing to growing disillusion with the EU on the left across several different countries. While Greece, whether rightly or wrongly, has been a catalyst, there is a wider issue here, which Dr Wagenkencht also mentions. In the 1980s, the largest political grouping within the European Parliament was the Socialist group. The most influential Commission president of that era, Jacques Delors, was a socialist. The EU had a strongly socialist feel to it in those days, which Mrs Thatcher disliked as much as its federalism. Fast forward to 2015 and socialists are no longer a majority in the European Parliament. Centre-right governments are in the majority in the EU member states, with Denmark being the latest to eject a socialist administration in a general election earlier this year. Socialists are looking in vain for Delors' European Social Model and its absence is making them feel less and less comfortable in

today's EU of lobbyists and multinationals with its willingness to reduce workers' rights and dilute the Social Chapter..

The EU will achieve a remarkable feat if it manages to alienate both left and right. At the moment, right-of-centre withdrawalism is largely confined to the UK, while the mainstream left parties of the PSE group remain solidly behind the European project. It is quite clear, however, that if the widely-reported rumours of a new treaty in the offing, involving closer integration for the Eurozone countries, become reality that it will face considerable opposition, especially from the Left, many of whom have become convinced that a democratically-elected socialist government cannot fulfil its mandate from within the Eurozone. Still, that is for the future. For now, in this political quiet season, Dr Wagenknecht's diatribe, complete with English subtitles, is a treat for anyone who enjoys seeing EU grandees like Merkel and Schäuble being given a thorough lambasting.