

Sp.a: Taking the Offensive

Carl Devos

Ghent Institute for Political Studies (GhIPS)

In spite of the crisis in financial capitalism, Socialism is ideologically still on the defensive in many European countries where the problems are older and run deeper than the current economic malaise. Nothing seems to have done the Socialist cause much good. In Flanders, the Socialists of the Sp.a have been unable to set the tone of the debates which the economic collapse around us has made possible. That is not so much because of any intrinsic weakness in their analysis and remedies, but because they are haunted by the issue of legitimacy. The great challenge is not only or even mainly intellectual or communicative; it is emotional and, in particular, moral. Nevertheless, with its new 'statement of principle', which was approved at the party conference 'Flanders of Tomorrow' (8 June 2013) the Sp.a should now be in a position to meet the challenge. The local and provincial elections in 2012 were anything but a success for the party, and 2014 promises to be another difficult year.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

The difficulties in resurrecting the party are partly due to pessimism about the social model with which Socialists in particular are associated. It remains in an unresolved state of latent crisis. The debate still seems to be dominated by analyses showing how indefensible the present system of redistribution is. The reassuring counterarguments that in the long term, if we remain calm and stick to some modest reforms, things will work out all right, ... leaves many unconvinced.

For some time now, the thought that children will find life more difficult than their parents did, has undermined faith in the future. It is not even a question of having objective evidence to support that fear and despair. If the property-owning middle class is fearful and the underclass sees itself dropping further behind, Socialists pay an electoral price on two fronts. But even worse, in the eyes of both groups they become irrelevant.

Socialists have made history with the steady improvement of people's condition. But as that development seems to have peaked and thoughts of decline have taken over, they are constantly being reminded of what has been: a history, rather than a future. The belief in what could be is eroded by general uncertainty and feelings of loss of control. It is quite obvious that the crisis of Social Democracy is not specifically a Flemish nor a recent phenomenon. The crisis is structural. Socialists have attempted to compensate for these challenges in all kinds of ways. For instance, by taking up some of the criticisms and adopting market mechanisms or shifting the goal to equality of opportunity. But this 'Third Way' was only temporarily successful and in the long term even harmful to the party's image. It became difficult to see any difference between some Socialists and Social Liberals.

Socialism never fares well in an atmosphere of fear and pessimism, of cut-backs and introspection. As an ideology of liberation, it blossoms at the prospect of freedom and improvement. Crises are

more easily exploited by populist parties who can always conjure up an external enemy to blame and are not hampered by the intellectualism that left-wing parties like to engage in. Incidentally, there is nothing wrong with left-wing populism so long as behind the slogans there is a powerful narrative based on a well-founded body of truthful facts and figures.

When Socialists are in coalition, they have their own approach and they do make a difference, as for instance in combating fraud or modifying the tax system. But all too often they are simply there to salvage the system, modifying and softening EU changes to the social model to make them more acceptable. Furthermore, in order to make the social model more durable, Socialists often have to tighten up the rules: obligations are given greater emphasis, rights become more conditional. Reciprocity and responsibility towards the system were always inherent elements of the concept of solidarity, but the Socialists have had to make those aspects even more prominent in order to keep the system workable. At times, this makes them seem just as tight-fisted as the most right-wing critics. It has widened the distance from the radical left, creating ever larger openings on the left wing. That wing has come to regard mainstream social democracy as a hollow shell of what it once used to be. It muddles along in the centre, competing with liberals and conservatives, who long ago accepted the existence of the welfare state. For a time, powerful personalities and marketing were able to keep up appearances. But gradually the Socialists have lost their grip of the situation and have become a variation on a theme.

TAKING THE OFFENSIVE

As the global financial - and later the economic - crisis has evolved, the situation now appears to be changing. The idea is returning that the left can fight back, that collective resistance to fatalism is possible, that it is possible to economise, that managing the economy is not only possible but necessary. That a gentle recovery of the economy is achievable. Disbelief has changed to doubt; despair is turning into cautious, uncertain hope. Consumer cooperatives are growing, national savings plans are being tried, steps are being taken to combat fiscal fraud and to regulate financial traffic and so on. A change of direction is observable, but it is too soon to say whether it will lead to a structural renaissance. The old guard still has not recovered from the collapse following the implosion of the Third Way. In Flanders, since the successful episode 'free socialism' [*Gratis*] of Steve Stevaert and the 'Teletubbies' (the Sp.a's big four: Steve Stevaert, Johan Vande Lanotte, Frank Vandenbroucke and Patrick Janssens), there has not been another creative phase of new and meaningful ideas. Perhaps that moment is now approaching. But if the centre-left misses this opportunity, it will no longer deserve to be taken seriously.

66

With its spruced up 'statement of principle' and the project 'Flanders of Tomorrow', adopted in June 2013, the Sp.a choose for an offensive approach. At long last. For the first time since 2003, a path for electoral success has been mapped out. The party has gone through a decade of electoral disappointments. When in coalition, it has been able to use its accumulated experience and make-weight role to fight considerably above its electoral weight. But its uncertain dependence on the results and the strategy of other parties means that the sp.a has little control over strategic political issues. In a fragmented, volatile landscape with several coalition possibilities, that is far from reassuring.

So a substantive improvement is absolutely essential, though much will depend on the political context, and the specific issues that arise during the 'mother of all elections' (federal, regional and European) in May 2014, and of course the performance of the party's political personnel. But in that respect too there is some good news: it looks as if the Sp.a leaders have rediscovered each other. The atmosphere is no longer so chilly and individualistic as it has often been in the past and the party has found a degree of inner calm and mutual understanding. For a time it was believed, fortunately wrongly, that this would be its most important achievement under the leadership of chairman

Bruno Tobback. Although the party possesses a number of heavyweights, the layer below needs strengthening and support. A well thought-out personnel policy is absolutely crucial and more needs to be invested in party activists than a few big names in each constituency. The party still seems to rely too heavily on a number of heavyweights neatly distributed over the region. It is by no means certain that in future there will be enough heavyweights to go round.

SOCIALISM IS A MORAL ATTITUDE

The ideological revival made a positive start with the launch of the party's 'statement of principle' at its conference on 8 June 2013, even though it lost some of its shine in the Aalstgate affair when the local Sp.a joined up with ex-members of the ultra-right wing Vlaams Belang party, much against the wishes of the party leadership. The party is working on its image and still has some way to go. But it has no choice: some of its supporters have turned away because they disagree on principle with the party's message, others no longer recognize the party that they once knew and reject its vague imprecision, preferring other more interesting and clearly defined party profiles. The party cannot win all of those voters back. Some of the first group might be persuaded but if they disagree fundamentally, they are not going to support the Sp.a. That statement may sound trite but it is not as self-evident as it seems. There have been times in the past when it was assumed that every elector was a potential sp.a voter who should be kept on board. The second group, on the other hand, might be rescued, but only with a great deal of understanding and clearly presented choices with which, of course, they might disagree. The Sp.a should sum up what it stands for in a few key sentences. Its message should not just be a series of clever one-liners, but a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Socialism is an ideology and therefore also a set of moral attitudes.

Clarity is always important, but it has become all the more important in light of the approaching multiple elections of 2014. Because so many parties, so many candidates and so many ideas will be jostling for attention and votes, it is essential that long before the campaign even starts, the parties are already up to speed in putting across their core message and their ideological look and feel. A handful of key concepts will enable even those without much interest to make an informed guess as to where the party stands on an issue, so long as it follows on logically from the principles which it has laid down. This is the opposite of what was once described as the people's 'ideas factory' [*ideeënfabriek*], when former chairman Steve Stevaert called on each party member to contribute one brilliant idea for a future political agenda. Every party now realises the importance of a clear message, which makes the challenge to differentiate the Sp.a from the others all the more important.

67

CLARITY HAS NOT COME A DAY TOO SOON

The ideological profile of the Sp.a desperately needed to be clarified. In recent years, the Sp.a has not been losing out to the right, nor to the left. By and large, the party has lost out to itself. It became too much of everything and not enough of anything. Because of internal disagreements it failed to take crucial decisions on such matters as diversity. Its relationship with the unions was difficult: privileged partners who were often rubbed up the wrong way. The party would do well to make its relationship with the unions explicit and keep them at the right distance. This can be reflected symbolically at party headquarters. The party and the trades unions were born in the same nest, but they have different roles to play and contribute to Socialism in different ways. They should not get in each other's way. Today, unfortunately all too often, the unions have become a millstone, a conservative force who, also because of internal divisions, are all too ready to throw up the barricades of refusal. Sp.a must also collaborate with other progressive movements, such as for instance the umbrella organisation for Christian trades unions (the ACW). The Socialist community does not have a monopoly of Social Democracy.

The Sp.a should also be clear about what it means by 'Flemish'. It seems to be working on it, especially in view of the future Flemish powers that come to the regional governments (from 2015 onwards) in execution of the sixth constitutional reform of the federal state. But the party must be quite explicit about what it wants with these new regional competences: what kind of Flanders does Sp.a want? Flanders is right nor left by definition. 'Flemish' was in the past often wrongly regarded as firmly right-wing or conservative. But there is nothing right-wing or left-wing about 'Flemish' and the left must take 'Flemish' on board. The future of Flanders is wide open and will only be settled by a contest of power and ideology. In that respect, good relations with its Walloon sister party will do no harm. On the contrary. Nevertheless, the differences between the two parties and between Socialism in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders are undeniable, despite its being an essentially international movement. These differences become very clear at the federal level.

A debate aimed at creating greater clarity is therefore very welcome. Nevertheless, organizing a large-scale thinking exercise is no guarantee of a sharply-defined profile. The risk of the opposite happening has often been demonstrated. Few parties have spent more time brushing up their fundamental principles than the Flemish Socialists. If one thinks of such campaigns as '*The Signal*' (1996), '*The Congress of the Future*' (1998) and '*The Major Overhaul*' (2002), one might wonder whether the party has tried to rediscover itself rather too often. Occasionally, when the time was favourable, the party got away with a dual approach such as the strict Frank Vandenbroucke together with the genial Steve Stevaert in the Teletubby period. But as a rule, such ideological duality is electorally untenable. The Sp.a is now tackling that problem. Of course, offering clear choices and refusing to flirt with the public does not guarantee anything, but the fact that the party has made the decision gives one hope. Incidentally, presenting a sharper image does not mean that the party should waste time on the question whether it is now left-wing, more left-wing or extreme left-wing. What will count are clear, consistent choices based on a set of core values, not how they fit into any preordained scheme.

Because of the constant attempts to revitalise itself and the numerous reformulation of benchmarks and principles, often driven by the urge for something new, the party seemed in the past to shrivel into little more than a modern electoral association. Why should it be any different now?

68

Perhaps because this time the above diagnosis is accepted by the policy makers and because the dangers and the temptations are now well known. We shall have to see. The present leadership is aware of the criticisms which have been repeated *ad nauseam* during recent years of being a lefty, rather intellectual, establishment party of primarily urban, cosmopolitan, elegant and trendy progressives, system managers, corrupted by power and alienated from their shrinking rank and file, a party of arrogant bureaucrats with too much marketing and too little authenticity, too clever and too little indignation, too many pleasures and too few choices, too much 'glossy magazine' and too little 'serious newspaper' and so on. Now, however, it seems that the Sp.a is again allowing the raised fist.

OVER-EGGING IT

The measure of this umpteenth attempt is not whether Socialism has again been rediscovered or modernised. That kind of pressure caused earlier attempts to revive the party to fail. The question is whether it is possible to deduce from a number of clearly expressed basic principles, a program of ambitious but feasible proposals, which will make a difference towards 2014. All those proposals about social issues must together amount to more than the sum of the individual resolutions. The whole must trumpet forth; it must create a special atmosphere and radiate militancy and self-belief.

The core values of Socialism are timeless and are always topical. They must be held up critically and should mobilize people and hope positively. They may not seem especially inspired against

something or someone. Defending Socialism implies intellectual honesty, which does not caricature those who disagree or their ideas. Socialism should stand morally above the ideas that it fights, never about people with which it discusses. Those who cannot treat opponents with respect, do not themselves come across as trustworthy. Even if there are parties that successfully employ stereotyping, a Socialist party should be above such behaviour. It is a matter of morality and political decorum, and also respect for the voters who deserve to be honestly informed about opposing views. Socialism is a moral movement that should lead by example, constructing rather than destroying, uniting rather than dividing. Socialism is about us and together, therefore Socialists must avoid splitting up the general interest that they defend.

That should provide an answer to the key question: what does the Sp.a stand for and for whom? The call to rediscover the fundamentals, a quest shared by the Dutch Labour party (PvdA), has resounded for some time and the answer will not be found in a glossy election manifesto or government program. In the past, ideological prevarication was often the result of a failure of nerve, of being startled by one's own shadow. The resultant gap was filled with all kinds of petty notions from which one had to build an overall construct that more or less held everything together. Today it is the opposite: coherent and consistent proposals must now be deduced from basic principles.

THE CORE VALUES

There is a place for a centre-left party that gives people the feeling that they have some control over their lives and environment. People need a party that can help them to make a stand and improve their lot through cooperation and constructive resistance, as the Dutch Labour party put it. Four central values stand out as a compass and reflect Social-democratic values:

- ☞ Security of acceptable living standards for everybody.
- ☞ 'Social improvement', through equal opportunities to live in freedom and pursue social goals.
- ☞ Thirdly, 'good work for all', the opportunity for personal development for everyone.
- ☞ Finally, 'relationships', the forming of communities that provide support against the trends that suppress individuals and intensify social conflicts. In short, bringing and keeping things together.

69

The Sp.a's values are similar to those of the French Revolution, even though differently formulated. This opens up an interesting debate with Edmund Burke's followers about the modern meaning of freedom, equality and solidarity. Those powerful terms breathe optimism. A kind of militancy, pulling together for greater equality and justice, together. Some may march ahead, but no-one should be left behind.

The reintroduction of 'us' and 'we' is also of crucial importance. For too long, Socialists have allowed those terms to be hijacked by others, such as the Nationalists. When danger threatens, the feeling that nobody will be left behind or left to fend for themselves is worth more than its weight in gold. Socialists can apply equality to give more people the freedom to take control of their lives, for instance by modernizing instead of cutting back the welfare state. A re-evaluation of collectivism, which is not the same as a suffocating egalitarianism or clumsy limitations, is a powerful force for robust political efficiency and change. Furthermore, in the Sp.a's declaration of principles, solidarity is explicitly linked to reciprocity as 'a fundamental requirement for durable cooperation. The strong must be prepared to share with the weak (...) But in return we should expect complete honesty and wherever possible a serious effort to become self-sufficient. If they neglect this, the basis for solidarity will fall away.' It is a key element in the defence of political and economic redistribution. It is crucial for the legitimacy not only of the model of society but of Socialism itself.

Our society has arrived at a critical juncture. We have not yet sorted everything out: neither Belgium nor Flanders is completely ready for tomorrow. If Socialists want a say in what direction we should

take, they must first work out the path to their own ideals and values, and from there track back to the here and now. In the chaos of the 2014 elections, such guidelines will be invaluable. The Sp.a must be absolutely clear about what is 'of value' and for whom and for what it is fighting.

The Sp.a party conference of 8 June 2013 came up with some, but not all of the answers. Other issues have yet to be considered and the message that comes across must be convincing and believable. No single individual can do that alone, not even chairman Bruno Tobback. The Sp.a will have to find a strong, coherent and active 'dream team'. It will take a great deal of effort to persuade the public to listen to the Sp.a. But not to attempt it would be to guarantee failure. The elections of 2014 are important for a whole host of reasons. It would reverse the trend if the Sp.a were finally to win an election again. Naturally, in the end it is votes that make the difference, but even more important for Socialists is the legitimacy of what they say and of the social model that they represent.