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ParliamentMagazine, édition spéciale : "Challenging
Europe. UK presidency special, pp 22-23

Best of both worlds

- Vie publique - Articles et débats -



Date de mise en ligne : Monday 11 July 2005

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Alain Lipietz MEP contrasts the Anglo-Saxon approach to the European social model.

On May 29, France voted against the European Constitution partly in opposition to the market oriented model the EU is currently imposing, not just in Europe, but all over the world - especially in developing countries. On July 1, UK prime minister Tony Blair, became the president of the EU for six months. These two dates, even if they do not seem historical, could nevertheless be the beginning of a radical change for the European Union and the "social model".

As a French Green MEP I have many reasons to be apprehensive, or at least pessimistic about the UK's EU presidency. When Blair became prime minister in 1997 after the so-called "Thatcher era", Britain was a social disaster: few social protection rules were in place, there were minimal social rights for the workers, and no efficient public services. We can only understand the support Tony Blair receives in Great Britain if we remember that important point. It also must be recognized that the social conditions in the UK in general have been widely improved during his nine years in office. Among other things, a minimum wage has been set up, unemployment has been reduced and public services have been reinforced. Nevertheless this does not mean that the Anglo-Saxon model of Europe is a model we should all be aiming for - it remains far from our hopes of what could be achieved in Europe.

Tony Blair's social model has been good for Great Britain, but is not acceptable for the European Union.

The prime minister's recent speech to MEPs in Brussels was impressive, but he still has to prove to us that he is able to put rhetoric into practice. Unfortunately his last nine years as prime minister prove the contrary - Great Britain still remains a country where inequality prevails. The weak rate of unemployment is always given as an example in the rest of the EU; especially in France where the unemployment is high. But in reality it is not so simple. The low figures are largely due to the fact that people aged 50 and above who do not find jobs are integrated in the invalidity regime or quit the labour market, and as a consequence they are not included in the unemployment statistics. Unemployment benefits are so low and difficult to obtain, many people prefer not to apply, and part time jobs are twice as high as in France. Given the precarious context - and most of the time not by choice - of those kinds of job, workers in Britain are in a difficult situation - regardless of the fact that they are protected by very weak social legislation.

Concerning the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), I fully agree with Blair's argument about the misuse of the subsidies. But CAP funds, especially with regards to eastern European countries - should be reformed, not reduced. Like Tony Blair I think that new resources should be granted to research and development or education - I support entirely an economy based on research and education. But it should be remembered that the workforce in Great Britain is still one of the least well educated among the developed countries. The resources granted to the research represent only 1.9 per cent of GDP, whereas we spend 2.3 per cent of GDP in France.

In the European Parliament Blair promised to support the Kyoto agreement - great - but, to in the fight against climate change, we need more public transport that is efficient and less expensive - Britain is still lagging behind in this respect. Also, Tony Blair said very little concerning the environment in his statement to MEPs, even though the EU plays a strong role in this field and could do much more.

Add to this the fact that Britain remains opposed to a federal EU, and against the fiscal harmonisation which follows from it. It is opposed to European social regulation, and has even obtained some exceptions in relation to the Charter of fundamental rights. "Opting out" is the main British contribution to European political thought! It is my view that the European Union cannot only be a free trade area. We need a political capacity of regulation in Europe. The EU will only become a social model when the same basic social regulations apply all over its territory. The solidarity between all member states - with the poorest countries - is the key to the fight against unemployment and poverty, and to imposing a new model of society in connection with its citizens' needs.

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For us, the Greens, a good model should favour an evolution to a more ecologically responsible Europe, and to more social solidarity, where governments are better controlled by the citizens, and show greater solidarity with the poorest countries. This model will be a mix between the different models which currently coexist, and take the best parts of each of them. And every citizen must be involved in this process because ultimately it is a choice that will shape his or her own future.