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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN FINLAND: A GREAT MOVING FORWARD SHOW?

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A few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case Studies is by now a well-established new publication series in the FEPS and Karl Renner Institut Next Left Research Programme, which is soon entering its 17th year of existence. This extraordinary collection of books is designed to provide readers with answers to reoccurring questions such as: *how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Is their current situation resulting from a long-term process or just an electoral blip?* These and many other queries are covered in the volumes that are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to zoom in, they also provide incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies – being an innovative assemblage that feeds in an obvious void within the world of think tanks and contemporary academic writings. As such, they are a relevant contribution for political scientists interested in the party systems and contemporary political thought, as well as those who wish to gain a more nuanced understanding of the connection between the European processes and the specific national political contexts.

The volume "Social Democracy in Finland: A great show moving forward" at hand, was written by two outstanding scholars - Antti Alaja and Johan Wahlsten - and is an enthralling story of one of the oldest social democratic parties in Europe – the Finnish Social Democratic

Party (SDP). The brief genesis, the post-war period, the challenges of the Third Way and the impact of the financial crisis, as also the recent journey to the government and back, are all depicted with exceptional diligence and attention to key details, which, however, does not prevent a necessary simplification. The latter allows for encapsulating the most relevant conclusions and articulating the reflections that are relatable to progressives from across the continent. Consequently, this fascinating journey through the diverse past and present chapters depicts SDP as both an integral part of the grand historical political family and a party that exists within an explicit context. So much so that a reader will find oneself equipped to detect further the characteristics that derive from the Nordic dimension alongside those that constitute the more specific Finnish component in the SDP's unique political and organizational DNA.

Against that backdrop, it is fascinating to discover the tensions that have been challenging SDP to define its developmental trajectory and determine what kind of a political party it aspired to be. The waves of modernization have been, according to Alaja and Wahlsten, inseparably connected with the moments of grand transformations. This is exemplified by the reprofiling allowing the party to position itself to represent the workers amid the new industrial strategy of the post-war period. The downside of such an organizational philosophy, as the authors show when deliberating on the times of post-politics, is an inclination to manage more and design less. This is a very interesting observation, as indeed this would substantiate a diagnosis that centre-left in Finland and elsewhere may have in the respective moment appear more as a force to preserve, safeguard and defend – and not so much as a powerhouse where the determinants of a new kind of social progress for all are being designed. Consequently, the reader is left here with an important matter to ponder, namely, how to escape

such traps and find ways to frame programmes that respond not only to anxieties, but also to aspirations.

Another delightful aspect of the volume is that Alaja and Wahlsten anchor their writings in an impressive bibliography, which includes some of the freshest arrivals to the market of books that examine social democracy. The connection allows comparatives but also points to where SDP may be exceptions to the rules. To illustrate it, the authors show that some of the reasons for which the party may feel today greatly pressured by the rise of right-wing and right-wing radicalism is connected with the deterioration of the welfare state and rise of inequalities. This phenomenon is naturally not unknown elsewhere, but what is an interesting twist is that in consequence the SDP electorate does not exactly mirror the ones that persistently continue supporting its sister parties elsewhere. Thus far, the SDP has not fared well in the big cities (with the exception of Tampere and Vantaa), but it does remain popular among those with lower educational levels and income, as also unemployed. The party still sees a disproportionally better reception among the older cohorts, even if some of the recent leaders (such as Prime Minister Sanna Marin) contributed to modernizing party's image. But while those differences exist, SDP is faced with a similar challenge as others – namely, how to expand its outreach and build new coalitions, not only for the sake of the party but also with a mission to preserve pluralism and resilience of the democratic aspect of the party system in Finland.

It is true that those, who will dive into this publication may finish reading both sager and more concerned at the same time. But the fact is that Alaja and Wahlsten are absolutely right when they point to the conclusion that these are extraordinary times and the ordinary, adaptive and somewhat determinist in nature answers will not suffice. The welfare state that has been a bedrock of Nordic countries is

undergoing deterioration, while the reality is marked by global shifts and rapid transformations. To that end, what is needed, as they argue, is a progressive project, a strong leadership and innovative ways of thinking about political agency, institutions and state. To that end, Alaja and Wahlsten make a strong case for rethinking the relation between the answers to eminent hardships that people face (unemployment, lack of adequate care, occupational risks) and a programme of empowerment. This calls for a new articulation of representation principles (including here the role of the government and state), and there, despite the electoral misfortunes, a traditional party, such as SDP, should have enough tradition and experience to stand out. In other words, when *there is a concept of socially just progress, there is a hope to persevere and rise as a significant political force again.*

Brussels / Vienna, 31st March 2025

Executive summary

Since 2023, the Finnish polity has been governed by one of the most conservative and right-wing governments in the republic's history. Composed of the bourgeoisie National Coalition Party (NCP), the far-right Finns Party and two smaller parties, the government has resolutely sought to weaken the Finnish labour movement and implemented considerable cutbacks to public services and social programs. Indeed, the global intensification of social and political antagonisms is also evident in Finland, and the empowerment of the Finns Party in the early 2010s shattered the consensus-oriented and managerial political field that had characterised Finnish society at least since the 1990s. Together with a decade-long decay in the party's support, the emergence of the far right as a noteworthy political force also pushed the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) to adjust its orientation.

In the mid- and late 2010s, Finnish social democrats undertook a contested shift away from the centrism and right-wing rapprochement that had marked the party for a long time and moved towards a more progressive position that, for example, questioned permanent austerity. This adjustment enabled the SDP to bring its decade-long electoral slide to a halt and subsequently build on the party's revitalised support; the party notably headed a centre-left government between 2019 and 2023. More recently, the right-wing government's fiscal conservatism and attack on labour rights and welfare state institutions has also steadily chipped away at the Finns Party's support. In the opinion polls

published by the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE in February 2025, SDP polled at 24.5%, which is the strongest result in the polls since the mid-2000s. Since 2023, the SDP has returned to a more centric position and presents itself as a political movement for sustainable public finances under the leadership of Antti Lindtman.

As this case study shows, however, the Finnish social democratic movement can barely afford to be complacent, despite its rehabilitation. For one, during the 21st century, the SDP's social base has grown older, with the demographic imbalance between older and younger supporters having become exacerbated over time, and the social democrats have struggled to galvanise younger citizens. Indeed, the occupational group whose support the SDP most depends upon are the pensioners. However, contrary to the rise of the Brahmin left in some Western democracies, Finnish social democrats have also retained relatively strong support among employees who are less educated and in lower and less autonomous positions in occupational hierarchies.

In terms of political sociology, the key challenge for social democrats is to hold onto its older voter base and find a way to inspire younger voters. The SDP must also cultivate a coalition between "blue- and pink-collar" employees and the ideologically progressive citizens of major cities who are often relatively highly educated and working in the public sector or cultural industries. While some of these voters may disagree on cultural issues, employee rights, greater occupational autonomy, tackling inequalities and public services are some of the ingredients that may facilitate and advance such a coalition.

A key danger for the social democratic movement in Finland is that its bureaucratic disposition, which has been a prominent political tendency of the SDP for many decades, strengthens. In this bureaucratic approach to politics, the SDP is first and foremost a state

manager, which governs emerging issues, defends the welfare state and the labour market model, but refuses to consider how the party might change society. However, visions of transforming society are critical for mobilising and empowering citizenry, especially the younger segment of the electorate that the SDP seeks to galvanise. Concrete transformative visions also provide a compass to be employed in orienting oneself in the day-to-day turmoil of politics. Representation and governance, undoubtedly two central aspects of politics in representative democracies, tend to operate in a relatively short time frame. Without concrete ideas of the long-term changes one hopes to see in society, however, a political party is unable to fulfil a third function that historically has been fundamental to Finnish social democracy: leadership. In formulating such transformative ideas and visions, social democrats can take inspiration from their history when they were committed to a future-oriented project that sought to bring about social relations and institutions that were distinct from the unsatisfactory present.

The case study also highlights three main policy issues that Finnish social democracy and progressive forces need to tackle in the coming years. Firstly, there is the need to formulate an economic strategy for overcoming the economic stagnation that has characterised Finnish economic development since the global financial crisis and for greening Finnish industries and society. Such a strategy not only requires a reassessment of the prevailing macroeconomic policy orthodoxies, but also a combination of both horizontal public investments (i.e., education and R&D) and vertical industrial policy (selection of promising industries and technologies). Secondly, there is a need to find a way to once again strengthen labour rights and welfare services, as the policies of recent years have taken Finland another step away from the traditional Nordic model. Thirdly, Russia's belligerence and the

unreliability and authoritarian penchant of the USA has made the geopolitical landscape considerably more troublesome for Finland. Finland must continue to harness its strong national defence and advance security and defence cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic states, the EU, and the UK.

1 Introduction

During the first two decades of the 21st century, it was commonplace in Finland, as elsewhere in Europe, to lament the state of the left and social democracy. For instance, the writer Tommi Uschanov wrote a well-received pamphlet asking "What is wrong with the left?".[1] The piece was published in the immediate aftermath of one of the worst parliamentary election results (21% of votes) in the 100-year history of the Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP). In the ensuing years, newspaper editorials often predicted the eventual electoral abyss of the SDP. The party did, in fact, lurch from defeat to defeat – 19% in 2011; 16.5% in 2015. At the same time, the party's membership base was eroding. The direction of travel seemed clear.

After four years of right-wing government, however, in 2019, the SDP came out on top in the parliamentary elections with approximately 18% of the vote, with the party heading a centre-left coalition in the next four turbulent years. Under the premiership of Sanna Marin (2019-2023), the SDP was also able to build on the party's revitalised support in the 2023 elections, garnering approximately 20% of the votes for the first time since the 2000s. Although the SDP's – like most other parties' – membership continued to decrease, the rumours of Finnish social democracy withering away had proven premature. Nonetheless,

altogether, the "progressive bloc"[2] – the SDP, the Left Alliance and the Green Party – that had constituted the core of the SDP-led government experienced an electoral defeat in 2023.

Indeed, the first Finnish "popular front" government since the 1960s-1970s heyday of leftism in Finland was followed by what many commentators have considered one of the most conservative and economically right-wing governments in the republic's history.[3] The governing coalition that took office in June 2023 includes pro-business, fiscal and national conservative, and nativist positions.

Led by the right-wing National Coalition Party (NCP) and supported by the far-right Finns Party and two smaller parties, the government launched a historic assault on the already deteriorated Finnish welfare state and trade unions. The government's considerable cuts to public services and labour market policies geared to weaken the power of the labour movement[4] have evoked repeated comparisons[5] with the Thatcher administration and its "authoritarian populism".[6] Much like Thatcherism, the coalition of the NCP and the Finns Party combines law and order policies, national security and anti-immigrant orientations, and fearmongering about the erosion of conservative values with pleasing business interests at the cost of employees and the public sector.

In the mid-2020s, social democracy in Finland is facing relatively consolidated right-wing and bourgeoisie forces with considerable command over state, economic and social power.[7] Much water has flowed under the bridge since the turn of the millennium milquetoast Finnish politics of largely indistinguishable parties forming broad-based governments cutting across the political spectrum. Instead, a discernible *social* division between a right-wing bloc and the left-liberal progressive bloc has emerged since the 2007-2008 financial crisis.[8]

In the rest of this case study, we provide a more thorough analysis of the present political conjuncture in which Finnish social democracy finds itself and has contributed to – and how we have arrived here. Social democracy is understood here not as a set of ideal-typical ideas or socioeconomic and political institutional arrangements,[9] but as a historically varying political project carried by those who have worked under and subscribed to the social democratic identifier. This leads us to focus on the primary political actor of the modern era, the political party, and more specifically the SDP.[10]

In the first section, we sketch the varying "phases" of Finnish social democracy from the 1960s to the present day. A premium is placed on the changing social democratic conceptions of the future. After this, we offer a brief sociological analysis of social democracy's and the "progressive bloc's" support in the 2020s. Finally, we consider some important political and policy questions social democracy and progressive politics are currently facing in Finland – primarily in the domain of political economy, but also in the realm of international politics. Unsurprisingly, in light of the scholarship on the history of social democracy globally,[11] many of the developmental contours of Finnish social democracy are reminiscent of processes elsewhere. However, there is also always local diversity,[12] and this case study allows us to derive nuanced lessons from the specific experiences of social democracy in Finland.

Historically, Finnish social democracy was at the height of its powers between the 1960s and 1980s, with the SDP being a leading political and social force in Finland. From the 1990s to the early 2010s, in turn, the party was slowly but surely losing its influence in Finnish society, a development not unconnected to the SDP's move to managerial, centrist and reactive politics at the end of the 20th century. After the emergence of the Finns Party as a notable force blew up the

Finnish political field's extant consensual and centrist parameters in the early 2010s, social democrats undertook an internally contested and careful adjustment towards the left and a more proactive disposition. Subsequently, the decades-long electoral slide was brought to a halt. We argue that, if Finnish social democracy wishes to regain and extend the power it possessed in the latter half of the 20th century, it could do worse than to more emphatically continue this propitious reorientation.

In particular, if social democratic and progressive politics at large are to achieve a more enduringly powerful position in Finland, this will likely mandate that social democrats are able to discard the managerial and reactive political tendency that has been so prominent among them, especially since the 1980s. Instead of such a bureaucratic, cautious and overtly estimative disposition, ascending to a *position* of leadership tends to require just that: the *act* of leadership, and hence, concrete visions of socio-economic institutions and relations distinctly different from those deemed unsatisfactory in the present – visions that also conceptualise citizens as the masters of their own social fates, not as the recipients of the prowess and goodwill of decisionmakers. Such a reformation seems particularly important given the continuing inability of contemporary social democracy to mobilise younger Finns relative to other political groups. The task is urgent given that the far right has been particularly successful in this endeavour.

Additionally, elucidating concretely the novel social institutions and relations social democracy wants to bring about in the long term would help in developing answers to some of the most central policy questions facing Finland and social democracy in the short and medium term. Key among these questions are long-standing lacklustre economic development, the green transition, and the undermining of welfare state institutions and the rights and power of employees. Social democrats will in any event have to continuously decide how

to approach these issues. Having concrete ideas of desirable and transformative, if necessarily tentative, long-term objectives at hand increases the probability that the answers developed facilitate progress towards these goals, are thus better coupled with social democratic values, and are in the interest of those social democracy wishes to represent and galvanise. In all of this, Finnish social democrats have much to draw from their own history.

2
Historical phases of social democracy in Finland

The contemporary history of Finnish social democracy can be separated into three different periods: social democracy's empowerment in the 1960s and 1970s; its rapprochement with traditional right-wing parties and employers and centrism between the 1980s and 2000s;[13] and a relatively brittle leftward and progressive shift after the "post-politics" of the turn of the century came to an end in the 2010s. In each of these periods, the SDP has had distinct dispositions regarding short-term action and more long-term futures.

2.1 Social democracy's road to state power

It can be fairly argued that thus far the apex of social democracy's state and social power in Finland can be located to the period between the 1960s and 1980s. In the immediate decades after the Second World War, the SDP was an outlier among the ranks of Nordic social democrats. While the SDP's Nordic "sister parties" became the dominant forces in their respective societies,[14] in Finland, this position was vacated by the centrist Agrarian League (the Centre Party after 1965),[15] to which the SDP played second fiddle. This secondary position

was partly because the Cold War Finnish polity was also characterised by the presence of a highly prominent Communist party – again in contrast to the country's Nordic neighbours. The party coalition Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL), which brought together parties left of the SDP and was headed by the Communist Party of Finland, accrued between one quarter and one fifth of the parliamentary seats from the end of World War II to the 1960s. Simultaneously, the SDP was riddled with acrimonious internal conflicts, which led to a party split. This internal discord reached its height in the late 1950s.[16]

Finnish social democracy's abasement came to an end in the mid-1960s. After a historically poor election outcome, a new leadership changed tack away from the right-wing tendency that had characterised the SDP in the recent past and had been closer to bourgeoisie forces than either the Centre Party or SKDL.[17] Finnish social democracy now caught up with its Nordic peers in particular in more fully developing a conception of action that has been characterised as "functional socialism". A strong emphasis was put on modernising and rationalising Finnish society and the economy, fostering GDP growth, capital-intensive industries, economic efficiency, full employment, and expanding the sphere of public services through the means of indicative economic planning and regulation and modern social scientific knowledge. The party also created a working group structure tasked with developing plans for social democratic programs and their implementation across the whole spectrum of policy domains.[18]

Moreover, the party committed more coherently to a vision of transformation around further democratisation – increasing and deepening the power of citizens "over those matters which affect their collective fate"[19] – of society and the economy. This vision, which among international social democrats had likewise become prominent after the war, was already incipient within the SDP in the 1950s. However, at

that time, there were still remnants of the original early 20th century labour movement's orthodox conception of socialisation of the means of production as the movement's long-term objective. When this vision of progressive democratisation emerged at the core of Finnish social democracy's ideology in the 1960s, it was now also connected to more short-term conceptions of action through ideas about public economic planning and regulation, workplace democracy, enhancing the power of trade unions, and more state control over finance.[20]

This reconceptualisation of social democracy's ends and means and the party's relative unification behind its new disposition proved to be a significant success. Together with the industrialisation and de-agrarisation of Finland's socioeconomic structure, the troubles of other parties and the continuing strength of the labour movement's cultural organisation, the SDP's re-evaluation translated to a notable change in its political fortunes. From 1966 to 1987, the SDP prevailed in all parliamentary elections – mostly with a considerable margin. The Centre Party was now left to a supportive role in the era's repeated social democratic led centre-left or popular front governments. The SDP's then party leader Kalevi Sorsa became, thus far, the longest serving prime minister in Finnish history, and in 1982, the SDP's Mauno Koivisto was chosen as the republic's first president originating from the labour movement. Simultaneously, the SDP increased its membership from a little over 50,000 in 1965 to approximately 100,000 by the 1980s (in a country of around 4.5 million inhabitants). The party retained and increased its core support among the expanded urban blue-collar working class but was also able to inspire the growingly educated post-war generation with its transformative objectives.[21]

The functionalist-rationalist conception of action, an overarching policy working group structure, and the hitherto unprecedented influx of educated individuals to the party also allowed the social democratic

movement to gain a vastly improved ideational initiative in Finnish politics. Not least in the sphere of economic policy in which – and in stark contrast, for example, to Sweden or England[22] – the SDP had been relatively impotent, acquiescent and reactive to right-wing explanations and cures. This impotency had also contributed to the growingly strained relationships between the SDP and organised labour.[23] Now Finnish social democracy elucidated its own, albeit in many ways borrowed, economic policy conceptions and visions based on functional socialism and economic democracy.

More concretely, the SDP doubled down on the extant Finnish investment-led economic and industrial strategy, but with a more regulative and planned approach to the public steering of this investment to societally important and beneficial sectors. A premium was put on creating conditions for strong capital accumulation and savings, also through accommodative monetary policy, and to directing capital to large-scale and productive industrial investments – both private and public. Furthermore, during the social democratic reign, labour and capital were accommodated through the institutionalisation of corporatist tripartite income policy negotiations over prices and functional income distribution. One key aim of income policy was also to further facilitate the accumulation process and enhance investment conditions.[24] In addition, social policy was moulded towards a distinctly economistic bent, as social democrats conceptualised distributive, egalitarian and universalistic social reforms through the lens of cumulative causation and the idea that such reforms would enhance economic activity and efficiency.[25]

From a bird's eye view, the 1960s to 1980s in Finland was an era of industrialisation, high employment of productive resources and the creation of various key universalistic welfare state institutions. Indeed, the expansion of public services can be, and often has been, understood

as making progress in the objective of democratising society outside the narrow purview of formal political institutions. Some progress was also made in extending democracy to the economic sphere, perhaps most notably through the increased power of organised labour.[26] Many of the breakthroughs of this era, however, were later made void, often under the leadership or with the support of social democrats themselves.

2.2 Charming capital and consensus politics

If the Finnish social democratic movement's post-war developments were somewhat distinct from particularly its Nordic neighbours, it stayed firmly on track with the general trends of the late 20th century. The broad sketches of the story are familiar to the point of banality.[27] From the 1970s onwards, social democratic movements were confronted with inflation, unemployment, information and communication technology, growing world economic interdependencies, new economic ideas, and the weakening of class identities. In the face of these developments, social democrats resigned from their extant belief in the possibilities for strong public management and the democratisation and decommodification of the economy. Instead, they began to de-emphasise their representation of the working class and grudgingly acknowledged, and in some respects embraced, the novel orthodoxy that "economic realities" imposed strict limitations on egalitarianism and economic policy and that markets and competition were prudent for the organisation of society – or at least the economy.

The changing contours of Finnish social democracy were already apparent in the 1980s. Social policy researchers have observed that, in Finland, the development of the Nordic welfare state reached its

zenith in the 1980s, when inequality was historically low.[28] Among Finnish social democrats, however, full employment through planned and public-led economic development gradually made way for an economic policy conception of supporting private-led economic activity through internal and external monetary stability and competitiveness by way of lower wages, taxes and social security fees.[29] Corporate taxation, for instance, was substantially reduced throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s under a social democratic finance minister.[30] Moreover, if in the 1970s an important ideological tenet of the SDP had still been improved public and democratic control over finance,[31] in the following decade, Finland's financial markets were swiftly liberalised with the support of the governing social democrats.[32]

As elsewhere, this internal and external financial liberalisation shifted the public-private and labour-capital balance of power decidedly in favour of the latter and intensified the world economic pressures that Finnish social democrats had also begun to fret over.[33] Besides financial liberalisation, Finland's entry to the EU in 1995 also changed the institutional context for the country's economic and social policy. For example, it was well understood by key policymakers that an economic strategy that allocated funding for state-owned companies, industrial investments and regional development was incompatible with the EU's common market rules and the prevailing conception of horizontal industrial policy.[34]

With respect to the liberalisation of finance, in Finland, it was not only that this deregulation changed the political-economic context of economic policymaking, but also unchaining the money markets contributed to a wholesale financial collapse in the early 1990s. The implosion of the financial system, together with the austere economic policy pursued by the first right-wing government in nearly 30 years and the collapse of Soviet trade, created a perfect storm: between 1990

and 1994, Finland experienced the worst economic downfall in the republic's history, with unemployment rising to almost one fifth of the working population.[35]

It was after this great depression that the Finnish social democrats' new disposition came fully manifest. By then, the SDP had embraced the cutting of social programs in the name of labour supply and work incentives, competition, and "flexible" labour markets within the confines of corporatism, and the objective of securing the trust of global capital over the SDP's capacity for managing the affairs of the republic.[36] Industrial policy, in turn, had shifted from an emphasis on selectively subsidising industrial investment to a horizontal emphasis on education and research and development.

At the same time, orientation towards building a different kind of society had changed to a backward-looking defence of an historical achievement – the welfare state – of the social democratic and labour movements.[37] Long gone was the confidence over the capacity to transform and democratise society and the economy and empower citizens and employees through incremental social reforms, institutions and decommodification. Instead, managerial governance, on the one hand, and ethics and abstract values such as human rights, responsibility and justice on the other took their place at the heart of Finnish social democracy.[38]

This renouncement of a progressive social democratic historical project and convergence with the viewpoints of business and right-wing parties did not create immediate electoral problems for the SDP. Instead, the unprecedented economic depression guaranteed that the party's stint away from the highest echelons of state power was short-lived. As citizens sought relief from social democracy, in 1995, the party achieved a noteworthy electoral victory – its greatest since its time as the only open left-wing political group of the inter-war republic,

when communists had been driven to clandestinity and conservatives were triumphant.

With this mandate, the social democrats led the republic to the European Monetary Union, and by and large continued the austere policies of its predecessor, and invested in R&D and technology that had become a cross-party tenet of the country's economic strategy. The rise of Nokia and the Finnish information and communications sector led to strong productivity and exports growth, which contributed to the surplus in public finances and reduction of debt-to-GDP ratio in the late 1990s and 2000s. Yet the period was also characterised by growing inequality, as there was less redistribution than before and as capital incomes grew during the Nokia boom.[39]

The social democrats' post-depression electoral victory was not, however, representative of the more fundamental political tendencies at play. In the subsequent two decades, electoral support for the social democratic movement was on a steady downward trend. In Finland, as in various European countries, welfare state revisions, such as increasing conditionalities and tightening eligibility of social programs, envisioned by third-way social democrats often went against the interests of many traditional supporters of social democracy.[40] Simultaneously – and again in line with more general processes in European politics[41] – the party's membership and organisation were deteriorating, and internally power was shifting from party membership and intermediating actors, such as the party council and office, towards the leadership and the parliamentary group. If in 1980 the party had approximately 100,000 members, by 2005 this had almost halved.[42]

What were instead emblematic of more structural trends in the Finnish polity were the SDP's metamorphosis and the right-wing government of the early 1990s. The bourgeoisie NCP had gradually increased its support for decades among the increasingly affluent

Finns. Moreover, if until the 1980s the Soviet influence over Finnish politics had made the NCP an inadmissible governing party, during the Gorbachev years, this state of affairs changed. Simultaneously, a new socially and economically liberal green party entrenched itself in the political field as the representative of environmentally conscious urban professionals. Together with its old partners, it was with these novel forces that social democrats governed the Finnish republic at the turn of century, for instance, offloading public assets[43] and outsourcing state responsibilities to private businesses.[44] All of this was done with relative mutual understanding between different political groupings of the apparent necessity of such and similar measures – measures that both the social democrats and the now reinvented former communists had formerly staunchly opposed. Indeed, Finnish politics became "cartelised"[45] and depoliticised to the extent that, no matter how hard one looked, differences between different fractions were increasingly difficult to establish.

2.3 Disoriented but not defeated: Muddling through after post-politics

The early 2010s marked the beginning of a new conjuncture in the Finnish political milieu. Having remained a negligible if vocal anti-establishment and nativist political group since its founding in the 1990s, in the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Finns Party emerged as a force to be reckoned with. Channelling dissatisfaction with the cartelised status quo politics, the Finns Party mustered an unprecedented electoral victory by gaining almost one fifth of the parliamentary seats – an increase of almost 800%. Four years later, the Finns entered government for the first time, joining a right-wing coalition together with the NCP and the Centre Party but finding it hard to govern

and leave a distinct mark on government policy. Indeed, during this term, a more authoritarian, ethnonationalist, fiscally conservative and pro-business fraction ousted the established leadership with agrarian populist roots, leading to the dissolution and the further rightward shift of the Finns Party.

For one, the successes of the Finns Party deepened the fragmentation of the Finnish political system that had already been its hallmark for much of the republic's history.[46] Furthermore, the rise of the Finns Party, the other right-wing parties' appropriation of many of the former's more conservative stances, and the Finnish bourgeoisie's increasingly aggressive offensive against the republic's 20th century institutions has marked a decisive break from the "post-political" and cartelised landscape of the turn of the century.

In the first place, Finnish social democrats – like others – had difficulties reorienting to the incipient emergence of this new political environment. As has been characteristic of many social democratic parties in recent decades, anxious of the drift of some its working class support in deindustrialising regions to the Finns Party, originally the SDP attempted to moderately co-opt the nationalist populists.[47] As a consequence, the SDP, amongst other things, adopted a highly critical stance towards lending to the southern EU member states during the eurozone sovereign debt crisis of the early 2010s.[48]

In general, however, the Finnish social democrats offered more of the same: emphasising its capacity to better and more fairly consolidate public finances than others; "ethical markets"; and the defence of welfare state institutions.[49] Performing "credibility" and "responsibility" to market participants and the media persisted as the name of the game for the SDP.[50] Notably, amid the eurozone crisis and recession, the party participated in a broad-based "rainbow coalition" government that, under a social democratic finance minister, remained devoted to

fiscal austerity. Among other measures, the government implemented historically vast reductions to the taxation of corporations, created tax privileges for the wealthiest, made several billion cutbacks to public services and sold a publicly owned power grid – a "natural monopoly" – to private international capital.

With no end to the gradual decay of the social democratic movement's support in sight and "post-politics" looking ever more anachronistic, something had to give. Indeed, from the mid-2010s onwards, the SDP embarked on a somewhat tenuous but nevertheless discernible attempt to gradually shift away from its centrist tendencies and the right-wing rapprochement that had characterised the party since the 1990s. After 2008, the SDP had already adopted the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities as an important objective. For instance, the party had begun to stress that "fiscal consolidation" should be pursued through balanced tax increases and expenditure cuts. The increasing popularity of the Finns Party among former social democratic supporters and the continuing slide of the SDP strengthened the hand of intra-party groups that hoped to see further leftward reorientation. Such change was forthcoming when in 2014 the party left succeeded in making Antti Rinne, a long-standing trade union leader, the SDP chair. Now more emphasis was put on labour rights, taxation of wealth, public investments and services, inequality, and the "green transition". Social democrats also began to establish themselves more forcefully as a counterforce against the incipiently radicalising right-wing bloc.[51]

Much of the new emphasis made its way to the plans and policies of the SDP-led "popular front" government formed after the social democrats came out on top in the 2019 elections with a thin margin. The government was initially led by prime minister Rinne, but his resignation led to Sanna Marin taking the helm. In the face of the COVID-19 recession and the economic predicaments resulting from

Russia's invasion of Ukraine being greatly intensified, the government also implemented substantial fiscal stimuli – a marked contrast to the mid-recession austerity a decade before.[52] The SDP's early 2010s ventures to co-opt the nationalist-populist challenge were also mostly short-lived. Instead, the party embraced a relatively resolute "cultural liberalism" while apparently decidedly striving to refrain from getting mired up in the "hyperpoliticised"[53] cultural issues that have often dominated much of the contemporary political struggles in Finland.

It would be an overstatement to say that these somewhat brittle changes of the last ten years completely turned around the fortunes of the Finnish social democratic movement. Nevertheless, for now, they seem to have put a stop to the previous downward direction of travel, at least in its electoral support. This experience also finds support from recent political science literature.[54] Many scholars have argued that, even from a purely tactical perspective, it is likely not in the advantage of social democratic parties to try and appropriate narratives and solutions not compatible with the principles and objectives of social democracy. The entrenchment of these narratives and solutions that such appropriation tends to facilitate will instead be beneficial for their begetters.

In addition to these developments in the conceptions of action of Finnish social democracy, in the late 2010s, the SDP also attempted to revitalise its policy and political programmatic work. For example, the party reinvigorated a working group structure in which its members were tasked with debating and drafting policy programmes for the party.[55] As such an institutional arrangement allows individuals an ideational participatory channel, this seems like a sensible course of action in the context of a relatively "cognitively mobilised" Finnish society with high levels of education and access to information. In such a society, individuals tend to be more politically self-reliant, cognitively

resourceful and strive for ways to employ these resources. Insofar as these participatory channels also in fact translate into party practice, leads to the more distinct articulation of competing interests and values within the party, or balances the power between party leadership/parliamentary group and its active membership, such arrangements may also be conducive to contributing to the rehabilitation of party democracy.[56]

This newly found focus on programmatic work was also part of an evident attempt to rekindle the Finnish social democratic movement's historically emblematic orientation to what might and ought to be in the future and to move away from the defensive stance of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Emblematic of such an attempt has also been, for example, the SDP's "Program for the future",[57] bi-annual "Future forums" and a habitual invoking of the "future" in political language.[58] However, there have been apparent tensions and limitations in this attempt to "reclaim the future".

Certainly, there seems to have been an increasing willingness to conceive the future as a place that can be actively shaped and created through political action and organisation.[59] Another orientation towards the future, a legacy of "post-politics", has nevertheless continued to be extremely prominent among Finnish social democracy. "Anticipating", "responding", "protecting", "securing", "strengthening" and "supporting" are the verbal manifestations of this orientation and the safeguarding of the welfare state its enduring kernel.[60] The orientation can be similarly recognised in the continuing and widespread preoccupation with gauging the extant attitudes of individual voters through surveys, trying to calculate the exact consequences of policy and political actions, and anticipating emerging prospects. In a word, this is a managerial orientation that does not consider the future from the perspective of what can and

should be, but from the viewpoint of what is probable and how to limit emerging risks. The future in question is simply a projection from existing institutional arrangements and trends. This is a lens that has historically been more connected to state bureaucracy, consultancy and businesses than political projects.[61]

Such a managerial, adaptative and estimative future orientation stands in stark contrast with the simultaneously espoused more open-ended and fundamentally democratic idea of "making the future". Simultaneously, it may leave little leeway for seeing citizens' politics as something that may be altered or for contemplating more long-term and far-reaching horizons of expectation and visions of transformation that do not fall within the purview of estimation and foresight, but rather that of *experimentation*.[62] Indeed, even with this newly found interest in the future, the contemporary Finnish social democratic movement seems to continue to have the same self-understanding it set at end of the millennium: its duty is to *cope* better than other political actors "with whatever problems that appear, rather than to transform anything".[63] This coping is now simply done with moderately different tools than two decades ago.

2.4 Social democratic futures past and present

Much of the above sketch of the historical "phases" of Finnish social democracy has focused on the question of the future. For good reason. Political parties that in the 20th century emerged as the preeminent political organisation often arose precisely as an institutional "future-oriented collective",[64] which could be used to manoeuvre from the present towards the long-term goals of a particular political project.

This was true particularly of the early international social democratic movement. This movement was emphatically committed to prospective visions of transformation – visions of a future with institutions and relations different from the present. The combination of such visions that unveil the plausible incompleteness of existing arrangements with an organisational carrier of these ideas incited unprecedented democratic participation and partisanship. The party created a collective institutional actor in which faith could be placed – even in the face of defeats – for the struggle to cumulatively make these visions reality in the uncertain long run.[65] In the late 20th century, along with its international peers, Finnish social democracy lost such a vision that offered something "beyond a program for the next election".[66] Extending co-operation and the power of citizens to new social domains and increasingly freeing them from the vagaries of unconstrained competition and accumulation changed to protecting past accomplishments and managing emerging issues.

However, without the signposts that concrete visions of transformation can provide, conceptions of political action become unmoored and disoriented. As the direction of travel that one hopes to see and aims to advance becomes murky, action itself succumbs to term-length managerialism or reactive and acquiescent protection of existing institutional arrangements. Lacking the compass of concrete future-oriented visions, measures of all kinds easily become conceived as being pragmatic and necessary because they are judged only on their merits for the task at hand, not by their capacity to function also as stepping stones towards greater progress.[67]

A fastening to specific values, an important tenet of contemporary Finnish social democracy, cannot by itself do the work of institutional visions. Values certainly are some of the most fundamental material of politics.[68] However, without an elucidation of these values' desirable

and plausible institutional manifestations and programmatic ideas on how to change society, they may remain rhetorical hot air or be discouraging instead of empowering. And to reiterate, without such institutional concretisations, action may become highly disconnected from particular values.[69] Additionally, transformative institutional visions can enable an analysis of specific measures' political feedback effects that might influence the balance of forces in society and facilitate further progressive developments. As such, the value-embedded action and power-attuned analysis that concrete visions of transformative institutions may enable can then be put in the service of attempts to bridge the temporal gap between an unsatisfactory present condition and a preferable future one in a particular social domain.[70]

These postulated future conditions, however, can themselves only ever be "working hypotheses" that, through events, experience, experimentation and deliberation, future actors may deem lacking in given respects.[71] Be this as it may, arguably, the orienting, mobilising and empowering qualities of such working hypotheses tend to be a necessary condition for purposeful social change, and thus, essential for any political project worth its salt. At their best, these working hypotheses are not developed simply from the idealistic world of "desires and dreams", but instead cultivated through a dialogue with and analysis of existing socio-economic reality, people's lived experience, and actual – if often frail – processes and tendencies.[72]

Here, it is not expedient to explicate in detail what such working hypotheses should or could look like in the case of Finnish SDP. Suffice it to say that if democracy is in fact a key principle of social democracy, then there may be much to learn from the 20th century social democrats' visions of progressive democratisation across social domains. Not least the democratisation of the economic domain, which, perhaps more than any other part of the social realm, affects people's fates but

in which power remains predominantly out of their hands – increasingly so with the weakening of trade unions. More recently, new 21st century visions of economic democracy have also emerged,[73] and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), for instance, is actively seeking ways to advance democracy in the workplace.[74] Indeed, contrary to what the frequent remarks of "democracy's death" seem to unwittingly imply, our present is not a world of democracy's apex – instead, in many ways, democracy continues to be an elusive ideal.[75]

Additionally, any attempts to construct novel social democratic visions of transformation in Finland would do well to begin from a realistic analysis of the current condition of the much-hallowed Finnish welfare state. The gradual dismantling of its institutions in past decades, the recent right-wing offensive, steadily increasing inequalities[76] and under-resourced public services should give pause to invocations of the ideal-typical social-democratic Nordic welfare regimes Esping-Andersen[77] famously conceptualised over three decades ago. Such a grounded analysis may lead one to conclude that instead of "securing" or "protecting", a reconstruction is in fact in order.

Of course, there are several other questions, many possibly more pressing, for contemporary Finnish social democracy than its lack of concrete future visions – a question of transformative leadership if you like.[78] Politics is a difficult endeavour of trying to balance various requirements of leadership, representation and governing. It is to the last two aspects that we turn next. Firstly, we consider what has recently been social democracy's social basis in Finland and what this might imply. After this, we examine in more detail the contemporary political conjuncture in Finland.

3
The political sociology of Finnish social democracy

Who among Finnish citizens support social democrats in the 21st century? In what follows, we assess the political sociology of Finnish social democracy in particular and Finland more generally along five dimensions: age; geography; education; occupation (social status and class); and gender. As a very broad generalisation, we can say that the supporters and proponents of Finnish social democracy tend to be relatively old citizens with rather low educational attainment and modest income living in mid-sized and smallish Finnish cities or those with a strong industrial or labour movement history. In terms of their occupational status, they are in great part positioned in the lower levels of workplace hierarchies, retired or unemployed. Historically, there has been no strong gender divide in social democracy's support, but it is an open question whether one is about to emerge.

3.1 An aging social democratic base

Generational variation is a well-acknowledged phenomenon in politics. For instance, in recent years, pensioners have been a core support group for the Conservatives in the UK, while the Labour Party

has been stronger among younger voter groups. In Germany, the political support for the historical "people's parties", the SDP and the Christian Democratic Union (and its Bavarian sister party), is strong among older voters. The 2025 German federal elections, which saw a historical 83% turnout, provided a good illustration of the phenomenon. Among those between 18 and 24 years, the social and Christian democrats accrued only 12% and 13% of the votes respectively. The Left party and the far-right Alternative for Germany, in turn, got 25% and 21% of votes in this age group.[79]

In Finland likewise the social democrats are highly popular among the older voter groups but have struggled to receive equal political support among younger voters. Take, for example, the 2023 parliamentary elections.[80] The SDP was the largest party among over 65-year-olds (28%) and found considerable support among the 50-64 age group. Yet the younger the voter, the less support the SDP garnered: it acquired 15% of the vote from the 35-49 age group and 12% from those 34 and under. In stark contrast, the Finns Party – with whom the social democrats compete over the votes of workers in many smaller cities and municipalities (see below) – does well among younger citizens, gaining 21% of the vote from those under 34 and 24% from those between their mid-30s and late-40s.

The age profile of Finnish social democrats' support has been similar for most of the 21st century, although becoming more imbalanced over time. How do we go about accounting for this generational disparity in social democrat's support in Finland? For one, the baby boomer generation, born during and after World War II, is an exceptionally large age cohort in Finnish demographic history. The political socialisation of this generation took place in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. As we have seen, during much of this era, the political left strengthened, the economy and society "modernised", and the Nordic

welfare state expanded. This may, to some extent, explain why the baby boomer generation has tended to be more left-leaning and social democratic than other generations.[81] Furthermore, during the Cold War decades, the labour movement culture that socialised people to see themselves as workers or employees was still very much alive. There were a myriad of educational organisations, theatres and sports clubs that had a labour movement ethos. Thus, these cultural organisations helped to create a solid supporter base for the left-wing parties.

To critics, social democratic politicians from the post-war generations have had an outsized role within the SDP, with too little space for new policy ideas and a conservative orientation towards preserving the existing social model. As social democrats abandoned their previous transformative future orientation for a managerial disposition and moved to the centre, at the turn of the century young citizens interested in progressive causes often became engaged in non-governmental organisations or other parties instead of joining the social democratic ranks. Even those representatives of the younger generations who did join the SDP had, until the 2010s, difficulties in rising to important positions within the party. The lack of young social democratic members of parliament in the early 2000s was emblematic of this state of affairs.

In the past two decades, however, there has been a partial breakthrough of younger politicians in the SDP, with millennial figures like Sanna Marin, Antti Lindtman, Nasima Razmyar and Matias Mäkynen rising to leadership positions. This has somewhat transformed the party's public image. Furthermore, the SDP now fares better in informal youth elections than was the case a decade ago. Nevertheless, thus far, social democrats' attempts to balance the age distribution of their support base has not led to radical adjustments – SDP members and voters continue to be much older than the median Finn.

3.2 Progressivism in the cities

Across the world, major cities have evolved into strongholds for the left and progressive politics.[82] Left-wing mayors typically govern cities such as London, Paris and Berlin. Large cities tend to have highly educated, young and diverse populations; this goes some length to explain the strength of this urban progressivism. In Finland, social democrats have barely been at the forefront of this tendency. Instead, it is the social-liberal Green League and the Left Alliance in Finland that do best in major university cities, such as Helsinki (682,000 inhabitants) and Turku (202,000 inhabitants), while at the same time struggle to develop strong nationwide support. For instance, in the Finnish capital city, Helsinki, the SDP polls well below its national support. The party has also struggled in Espoo (population 314,000), the second-largest Finnish city, neighbouring Helsinki and the bastion of the centre-right and the home of the Finnish high-tech cluster. Indeed, in recent parliamentary elections, the NCP has overpowered the SDP in both Helsinki and Uusimaa (by far, the country's largest electoral district that surrounds Helsinki and which Espoo is a part of).

There are two primary exceptions to SDP's relatively weak support in major urban centres: Tampere (population 255,000) and Vantaa (population 250,000), which are both important bases of the social democrats' support. Tampere has a distinct place in the history of Finnish industry and the labour movement, and in the 2023 elections, the SDP acquired over 27% of the vote in the city. It is emblematic that Sanna Marin started her political career in the city's council in which she early on gained central political positions. Notwithstanding these two major cities with prominent industrial histories, the SDP's strongholds are particularly in smaller and mid-sized cities – that often also have industrial roots. Among these are Lahti (population 121,000), Pori (population 83,000),

Joensuu (population 78,000), Hämeenlinna (population 68,000), Kotka (population 50,000), Rauma (population 39,000), Varkaus (population 20,000) and Valkeakoski (population 21,000).

In many of the major cities, the SDP competes for support from progressives with the Left Alliance and the Green League. On average, the citizens of such cities tend to be younger than those outside the main urban concentrations. Among the younger voters of major cities, attachment to political parties is weaker than among older generations, whose politicisation was more institutionalised to specific parties. As various recent elections in Finland have demonstrated, many of the younger urban citizens are willing to opt for any of the three progressive parties, depending on the political-strategic calculations of the moment. In contrast, in mid-sized or small cities and former and contemporary industrial centres, the SDP, in turn, competes particularly with the far-right Finns Party for support from the working class. It is noteworthy that the Helsinki metropolitan area's share of the national population continues to increase. As such, the SDP is hard pressed to find ways to better compete in the capital area and its surroundings and university cities in general, while also ensuring and fostering support in smaller cities and municipalities.

3.3 The Brahmin left hypothesis and Finnish social democracy

In *Capital and Ideology*,[83] Thomas Piketty described a major transformation of political cleavages and the party political systems in the USA and in Europe. Piketty argued that left-wing, centre-left and labour parties, like the Democratic Party in the USA or the Labour Party in the UK, have transformed into parties of the well-educated. Piketty refers to this group using the Indian term Brahmin – the educated social

class. In contrast, the right-wing parties can rely on support from the richest citizens (what Piketty calls the merchant right) and the less-educated citizenry that feel culturally alienated from progressive politics. While political scientists had addressed similar topics before, Piketty's book gave food for thought and new evidence regarding these political realignments.

What about the case of Finland? Does Piketty's description of political change apply to Finnish social democracy? The answer is quite clearly in the negative. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, for instance, support for the SDP came clearly more from the less educated: while the party's total support was 20% of all votes, only 14% of those with tertiary education voted for the party. In contrast, 25% of those with primary education and 19% of those with secondary education supported the SDP. Only support for the Finns Party has come more from the less educated. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, the Finns Party also gained 20% of the total vote, but 29% of the vote came from those with primary education and only 11% from those with tertiary education.[84] The strong working class backing of the SDP may be partially explained by the age structure of its support. Younger generations tend to be more highly educated than the baby boomer generation.

As in many other European countries,[85] in Finland, the Brahmin left thesis also applies better to green and other "liberal-left" parties than the traditional social democratic party with roots in the labour movement and that is still well-positioned within the trade unions. While in 2003 support for the Left Alliance came mainly from those with primary or secondary degrees, in the 2010s and 2020s, the party gained equal votes from citizens of all levels of education. The Green Party, in turn, has long been first and foremost the party of the highly educated.[86]

Going beyond the education demarcation, but not unrelatedly, the SDP is also relatively well-supported among those in lower positions

in workplace hierarchies, those conducting more physically strenuous and less autonomous labour, and the unemployed. Only the Finns Party has stronger support among such citizens, although the party's supporters tend to have somewhat higher incomes than those of the social democrats.[87] Thus, while it may be the case that the radical right can build on the cultural conservatism of certain strata of the working classes and scepticism against the "undeserving poor", social democrats still have considerable working class support. Ultimately, however, the occupational group on whose support the SDP continues to most depend is the pensioners: almost a third of pensioners voted for the SDP in 2023 and a quarter in 2019.[88]

3.4 Social democracy and the widening gender divide in Finnish politics

In addition to the generational, geographical, educational and occupational cleavages, in recent years, the gender divide in politics has become an important point of discussion around the world. The rising popularity of far-right and nationalist parties among men and the ascent of Instagram feminism have been the key political developments spurring this debate. For great periods in the 20th century, women tended to vote more conservatively than men. However, for a long time now, political scientists have observed that in Europe women are more likely to vote for left-wing parties. This phenomenon has been called the modern gender gap.[89] Yet recent research and election results suggest this trend has recently become more pronounced among young women and men. Some argue that a new global gender divide is visible among younger generations.[90]

A new kind of gender divide has likewise manifested itself in Finnish politics. Before the 1990s, gender played only a modest role in accounting for political support for the Finnish parties. However, a divide started to emerge in the 1990s and 2000s and widened in the 2010s. For example, the clear majority of the social liberal Green League supporters are women, whereas the majority of Finns Party supporters are men.[91] In the parliamentary elections of 2019, 17% of women but only 5% of men voted for the Greens. In comparison, the vote share of the Finns Party among men was 25% and 11% among women.[92]

In the case of the SDP, until recently, the support among men and women was relatively equally distributed. However, in the 2023 parliamentary elections, the gender divide became much more visible than before, also in the support for social democrats. In the 2019 elections, 17% of men and 19% of women voted for the SDP, whereas, in 2023, these same figures were 16% and 24%, respectively. Some of this shift was most likely connected to previous female supporters of the Greens and Left Alliance voting for the SDP in the hope of preventing the victory of the far right and out of support for Sanna Marin.[93] Whether or not these numbers are signs of a further widening gender divide amongst the SDP's social base remains to be seen. If so, such a trend is hardly in the interest of social democrats.

3.5 The challenge of building a coalition of wage earners and young progressives

As observed, contemporary Finnish social democracy is currently upholding a coalition whose social base lies particularly in retirees and older employees politicised when the labour movement was much stronger than today. On average, social democrats' supporters have

comparatively low levels of education and income and tend to live in mid-sized and smallish cities and suburban and exurban areas. The party also has substantial, but less than satisfactory, political support amongst the younger progressive citizens in the country's major cities.

Indeed, blue- and pink-collar employees of urban and semi-urban areas and ideologically progressive citizens – often professionals and highly educated – of major cities constitute the main groups amongst which Finnish social democrats have the potential to increase their support in the medium term within the hitherto fragmented Finnish political system. For representation of the former, the SDP is in contest with the Finns Party in particular and to a lesser extent with other right-wing parties, while for representation of the latter, it is the Left Alliance and the Greens that the social democrats must compete with. What citizens belonging to these groups often share with each other is either an interest in or an ideological commitment to good public services, such as education and healthcare, and benefitting from labour rights and having greater autonomy over their working conditions and substance.[94] Especially amongst younger citizens, there is also often a common experience of downward social mobility and uncertain future outlooks across many geographical, educational and occupational divisions.

However, given the highly skewed age profile of the SDP's support, it is the age question that likely continues to constitute Finnish social democracy's greatest predicament. One opening for social democracy to bolster its support among the younger generations may come from the processes of an ageing society, an intensified assault on the country's welfare state institutions and labour rights, and greater commercialisation of healthcare. In a society that is aging, cutbacks to public services and commodification of healthcare inevitably translate into worse care for the majority of the elderly – who, on average,

are more sick – while increasing the caring responsibilities of the same majority's relatives. At the same time, it aggravates the already excessive mental and physical burden of healthcare workers – who at over 430,000 workers constitute the largest (if internally differentiated) section of the Finnish labour force.[95]

This lamentable outlook contains within it the possibility for facilitating and strengthening inter-generational solidarities; the possibility for demonstrating that the freedom, wellbeing and dignity of one necessitates the same for all. It is not only that we all age and most have elderly relatives who they wish to see receiving good care without an extreme increase in their own daily hardship – either in wage labour or outside of it. It is also that this care is dependent on the health, wellbeing and capacity of the young. Articulating these evident shared interests may be one way social democrats in Finland can make progress in bridging the generational gap in their support.

This said, it is particularly in the question of recruiting support amongst younger citizens that political actors can be confronted with the limits of representation, articulation of short-term interests and managerialism, and in which transformative leadership gains greater significance. It is likely not a coincidence that social democracy continues to speak particularly to those currently older generations that were politicised during the labour movement era of power when Finnish social democrats were more ideologically forward-looking. Nor is it an accident that the politicisation of novel or previously trivial social questions by the Finns Party (and many of its international sister parties) has correlated with considerable support amongst the younger generations. It may be that the political mobilisation of the youth and young adults in particular mandates a more future-oriented and generative political disposition than the Finnish social democrats have been willing or able to consider in recent decades.

4

Social democracy and the contemporary political conjuncture

Questions pertaining to political groups' future visions and orientation, or the socio-demographics of their support, operate with a relatively long-term temporality. Political parties must, of course, also operate in the short-term time frame of day-to-day politics and policymaking. Arguably, three questions of politics and policy are particularly pressing for Finnish social democracy – and the progressive bloc in general – in the mid-2020s conjuncture: persistently stagnant economic activity; the right-wing dismantling of Finland's 20th century "Nordic" social and economic institutions; and Finland's geopolitical position as a NATO member neighbouring a bellicose Russia in a time when the USA's commitment to European defence is questionable, to say the least.

Firstly, ever since the early 2010s, economic activity and development in Finnish society has been comparatively feeble, and substantial investments – also vital to the "green transition" and limiting the harms of climate change – have been insufficient in scale. Secondly, there is the initiation of a direct assault by the right wing and bourgeoisie on the so-called "Nordic model". In fact, in line with the traditional right-wing, supply-centred interpretation of the economy, although other political-ideological motives were also at play, the previously mentioned economic troubles constituted one pronounced rationale

for the conservatives' critique of the Nordic model. Employee rights, public services and bureaucracy were allegedly at fault for stagnation. In general, stagnation has played out in the context where right-wing economic prescriptions and a deep-seated fixation on public debt tend to permeate and predominate the Finnish public sphere. Thirdly, Russia's belligerence and the unreliability and authoritarian penchant of the USA have made the geopolitical landscape considerably more troublesome for Finland.

4.1 A strategy for overcoming economic stagnation and promoting green structural change?

During the post-WWII decades, Finland was successful in catching up with industrialised countries in terms of GDP and R&D intensity, and the country's investment rate was amongst the highest in the world.[96] In the late 1990s and 2000s, in turn, the success of Nokia and the information and communications technology cluster led to robust and creative economic activity. Now, Finland was transformed into an export-led economy with large current account surpluses. Yet, after the global financial crisis, the country has experienced a long period of relatively weak economic development. Simultaneously, relative to the decades at the turn of the century, the country's economy has become increasingly reliant on domestic demand and less on exports.[97] In 2023, the country's GDP per capita was roughly at the same level as during the pre-financial crisis peak of 2008.[98] Hence, in terms of GDP growth, the Finnish standard of living has stagnated. In addition to fiscal austerity, the failure of Nokia in its mobile phone business, structural changes to the traditional forestry and metal industries, the failure of Finnish technology start-ups to

scale up, and demographic change are among the main explanations for lacklustre development.

Low economic growth has contributed to the increasing public debt ratio since the global financial crisis. In the second quarter of 2024, Finland's general government debt stood at 80% of GDP.[99] While Finland is not a high-debt country in the EU, the growth of public debt constitutes a challenge in the current institutional context of EU fiscal rules. As things stand, the rules mandate Finland to undertake one of the strictest "fiscal consolidations" of all EU member states.[100] Yet, it remains to be seen to what extent the EU will put the rules into force.

The right-wing government that took power in 2023 has addressed this situation through a combination of fiscal austerity on the expenditure side and the weakening of labour and social rights (more on this in Section 4.2). Given the EU's new fiscal rules, the Finnish Ministry of Finance is also set to recommend further fiscal consolidation for the next government to address what the Ministry conceives as the "sustainability gap" in the republic's public finances.

As for Finnish social democrats, they have not challenged the need for substantial fiscal adjustment. Instead, the SDP has made the case for progressive tax increases in addition to expenditure cuts. Increasing taxes on the wealthiest to address public deficits has a strong rationale, especially given that the Ministry of Finance in Finland forecasts that the tax-to-GDP ratio will decline under the current government.[101] Moreover, while taxation of earned income in Finland is progressive, its relative share of total tax revenue has decreased over time. In addition, because of a dual income tax system, where capital taxation is less progressive than earned income taxes (hence the incentives to report capital rather than earned income), and the preferential tax treatment of dividends from unlisted companies, the tax system is not progressive when it comes to the richest segments of Finnish society.[102]

Given Finland's contemporary socio-demographic dynamics, immigration is also a central question for the country's political economy. Historically, net immigration to Finland has been modest: in 2005 around 9,000 and in 2016 around 17,000. Recently, however, there has been a surge in immigration. In 2022, net immigration stood at approximately 50,000; at around 58,000 in 2023[103] and around 49,000 in 2024.[104] Although those fleeing the war in Ukraine partially explain the growth, immigration from Asian countries, such as India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, has also increased substantially. If Finland can maintain this level of net immigration, it would improve the prospects for public finances and labour supply in an aging society. Thus, immigration seems like a low-hanging fruit for politicians and policymakers. Nevertheless, due to the insistence of especially the Finns Party, the right-wing government has sought to put the brakes on both labour and humanitarian immigration. During the current government term, the SDP has made the case for an increase in labour immigration. This is indeed an issue where the SDP, the NCP and business interests can find common ground.

Two things are much less clear, however: whether fiscal consolidation through expenditure cuts can reduce Finland's debt concerns in the first place; and whether the country's broader economic challenges are addressable without an explicit economic strategy going beyond fiscal policy and immigration. With regards to the first question, recent experience in Finland alone puts the effectiveness of expenditure cuts in reducing public debt in doubt. Despite the right-wing government's spending cuts, Finland's debt-to-GDP ratio has increased. In fact, during the right-wing government's first year in office, the growth in this ratio was the highest amongst EU member states,[105] and it is often projected to continue to increase.[106] In conjunction with the European Central Bank's severe interest rate hikes, which had a particularly

harsh impact on Finnish household consumption and the construction industry, the government's social and economic policy have ensured that economic activity and outlook in Finland have remained poor. For instance, between June 2023 and December 2024, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Finland increased from 7.2% to 8.9%.[107] Moreover, in 2024, Finland witnessed the most bankruptcies during the whole 21st century.[108] Outside of this particular experience, research by the International Monetary Fund suggests that fiscal consolidations tend to decrease public debt ratios only under very specific circumstances.[109]

In addition to questions of fiscal and monetary policy, the social democrats, and Finnish politicians and policymakers more broadly, would do well to go beyond the extant horizontal industrial policy of broadly supporting public education, R&D investment and the venture capital market. Addressing the country's economic, environmental and security policy challenges instead requires programmatic work in developing an economic and industrial strategy. Based on the economic complexity rankings by the Atlas of Economic Complexity, which evaluates the relative standing of countries in the global economy, the complexity ranking of Finland has deteriorated since the heyday of Nokia's mobile business in the 2000s. Complexity rankings reflects the amount of productive knowledge needed to produce a country`s export products. The decline of complexity of Finnish exports is a worrisome trend because, according to complexity theory, affluent countries are more complex than poor and middle-income economies.[110] Hence, increasing the complexity of the Finnish economy will be critical for overcoming economic stagnation.

Yet, Finland can build on some existing strengths. Finland's research and innovation system still fares relatively well in international comparisons, and its R&D intensity (3.09% in 2023) is relatively high.

Secondly, the country is well placed within the EU with regards to the green transition,[111] and particularly in the energy sector, previous Finnish policies, such as green R&D and subsidies, have proved to be relatively successful. One widely shared outlook in Finland is that future industrial activities can be built around the supply of affordable renewable energy and nuclear power. For example, besides (hitherto) societal stability and cool climate, the supply of energy has been and will be the key advantage for Finland in attracting data centres. As in numerous other EU countries, in Finland, there are high expectations, especially with regards to green hydrogen and green steel. Finding ways to further support green industries is undoubtedly a central policy and political question for social democrats.

But any political group inevitably has to pose further important questions if and when there is an ambition to strategically choose economic sectors and technologies to promote. For one, there is the initial question about the principles and methodologies employed in making these choices. The follow-up question concerns the tools and instruments to be used in promoting those sectors and technologies identified as propitious. Answering these questions successfully and developing a productive industrial strategy, however, requires extensive resources for policy preparation and knowledge production. Yet, it is not certain that the necessary capabilities are there, especially given the cuts to state capacity in these domains in recent decades.[112] These are also questions that transcend mere considerations of economic expedience or effectiveness. Instead, they are also intimately tied to more straightforwardly political questions of who precisely benefits from advancing particular sectors through specific tools, who might be set to lose and who bears the risk.

Despite Finland's lacklustre economic performance after the 2008 financial crisis, recent economics debate suggests that a new generation

of technology companies might turn the country's economic fortunes in the coming years.[113] Barring a shift in macroeconomic policy and the development and implementation of a more coherent economic and industrial strategy, a wholesale change of course seems unlikely. With regards to the latter, *the specific ways in which* such a strategy is developed and implemented are also paramount issues for any political movement – including Finnish social democracy.

4.2 In the ruins of the Nordic model

English-language debates still tend to idealise the Nordic model and countries. It is true that comparatively speaking many of the Nordics still have relatively high tax rates and strong trade unions, and they tend to fare well in international comparisons on wellbeing. However, for example, in Finland and in Sweden, the traditional social democratic Nordic model was already contested during and in the aftermath of the economic depression in the 1990s. In Finland, since the turn of the century, right-wing parties and employers have become far more assertive at challenging collective labour rights and the Nordic welfare state. In the late 1990s and 2000s, long-term unemployment became a major problem in the country, and in terms of the Gini coefficient, inequality increased significantly, to much higher levels than it was in the 1980s.[114] With regards to public services, in a survey published in 2021, 44% of Finns considered their quality had become worse in recent times, while 24% thought they had improved.[115]

Furthermore, Finland's corporatist and tripartite (state, employer and employee organisations) model of industrial relations has gone through significant changes since the turn of the millennium. The changes have been dubbed as gradual reorganisation,[116] or the slow erosion of corporatist institutions.[117] Others have perceived an incipient

disintegration of the historical class compromise between capital and labour.[118] The coverage of collective bargaining is still high in Finland (89% at the end of 2010s), but wage bargaining has shifted from centralised to industry or local levels.[119] Employers, such as the Finnish Forest Industries, have opted for local-level bargaining. Also, solidaristic wage policies have lost ground. While labour market organisations still have preferential access to public policy preparations, for example, in pension policy, major labour market and social policy reforms can nowadays be pursued without the involvement of trade unions.

The current government's weakening of labour rights and the Finnish welfare state intensifies all of these trends. The passed or proposed reforms include the limit of political strikes and solidarity actions, the establishment of an export-led wage model enshrined in law, extending the local bargaining possibilities of non-organised employers and non-union employees, easing restrictions to lay off employees with temporary contracts, cuts in social programs (including earnings-related unemployment benefits and housing allowance), and ceasing adult education allowance.[120] Interestingly, the government has justified its policies through insisting that the reforms have been implemented previously in other Nordic countries. This argument, however, is factually incorrect. A recent report that provided a comparative analysis of Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway concluded that out of nine reforms proposed by the government, only two to four had been implemented in other Nordic countries (depending on the interpretation).[121]

Finnish business organisations and the NCP have long argued for the above changes to weaken the political and bargaining position of employees. However, it was only through the government alliance between the NCP and Finns Party that employers and the NCP were able to proceed with this agenda. While fiscal austerity was sought by

both parties, the undermining of labour rights required that the NCP accommodated the Finns Party's demands on substantially tighter immigration policy. Given the profile of the NCP's and Finns Party's supporters, however, maintaining a coalition with a combination of vast expenditure cuts, austere immigration policy, and overpowering trade unions and employees is not easy. The last factor mentioned sits badly with many of the Finns Party's working class supporters, as do the effects of fiscal austerity when it turns from an abstract notion to concrete reality. And despite the benefits that many fractions of Finnish business gain from weakened labour rights, the adverse implications of the government's immigration and economic policy to labour supply and domestic demand are hardly in the general interest of Finnish private sector, nor in the specific interest of many of its fractions. Indeed, the government's approval numbers have been steadily decreasing, with one poll suggesting that around 41% of Finns supported the government parties in December 2024.[122] Thus far, this decline in support has not created insurmountable fault lines in the governmental coalition. How long this is the case remains to be seen.

As for Finnish social democrats, a key question going forward is whether it can undo the right-wing governments' policies and formulate a new agenda for strengthening labour rights and public services. In addition to their desirability from a social democratic point of view, the institutions of the so-called Nordic model, such as strong labour rights, universal public services and extensive collective bargaining, are also politically vital for all Nordic social democrats. Through creating solidarity and non-market social relations amongst the majority of citizens, they have also fostered demand for social democratic policies amongst the socioeconomically secure. Thus, the decentralisation of employment relations or insufficient funding of public healthcare, for example, mean not only the deterioration of employees' bargaining position or

the deterioration of the health of many citizens, lamentable as these consequences are. Moreover, as a growing number of citizens resort to individual or private arrangements, such developments endanger increasing conflicts and competition amongst citizens, and thus, risk reducing the solidarity social democracy both advances and thrives upon.[123]

4.3 Surviving in the new security landscape

Finally, Finnish social democracy cannot escape the intensified tensions and strengthening of might-makes-right ideology in international politics. For Finland, a country with 1340 km of border with Russia, its eastern neighbour's war of aggression on Ukraine was a momentous shock – a focusing event – that led to the end of Finland's military non-alignment and to a new era in foreign and security policy. Historically, due to their Atlanticism, especially politicians in the right-wing NCP and the party's core supporters have been vocal advocates of Finland's NATO membership. Other major political parties and the majority of Finnish citizens, on the contrary, were long committed to the country's position outside of military alliances, even if after the Cold War the country became an active non-member partner with NATO. Since 2013, Finland also insisted that it maintained an "option" to join the military alliance, and in 2017 the country joined the UK-led and NATO-initiated North European Joint Expeditionary Force. However, faced with Russia's blatant bellicosity and readiness to use force against its neighbours, in spring 2022, across the political spectrum, a widespread sense of urgency to strengthen Finland's military security developed.

Indeed, only three months after Russia's invasion, with the SDP leading the "popular front" government, Finland applied for NATO membership in May 2022. A year later, in April 2023, the country joined the organisation. Moreover, in recent years, Finland has also strengthened bilateral cooperation with the USA, most notably by signing a defence cooperation agreement that, amongst other things, provides US military troops access to Finnish territories. In line with Finnish political elites' long-standing mentality, political parties have tried to maintain a public consensus on foreign and security policy, and the post-2022 decisions have been carried out with very little to no politicisation – notwithstanding sporadic attempts from civil society to question the new foreign policy orthodoxy.

But while criticism towards Finland's new NATO- and US-centred security policy has been meagre, external events, namely, the re-election of Donald Trump, threw the policy into question even before there was time to coherently develop it. Trump famously urged Vladimir Putin to "do whatever the hell they want" with NATO member states if they failed to meet the defence spending objective, and more recently, he refused to rule out using military force in seizing Greenland. In February 2025, Trump's defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, stated that the USA will not be the "primary guarantor of security in Europe". These statements cast serious doubts over the commitment of the USA to European and Finnish defence.

For now (March 2025), Trump's return to office seems not to have put an abrupt end to the Atlanticism of the Finnish right, who currently hold all key foreign policy posts. By and large, there is still a willingness, or some would say a geopolitical need, to turn a blind eye to the domestic authoritarianism and external bellicosity of the Trump administration in the hopes of maintaining reasonable bilateral relationships with the USA. For critics, in the contemporary US-Finland relationship, there

are signs of what some have called "neo-Finlandisation", in reference to Finland's Cold War *realpolitik* with respect to the Soviet Union.

But even if we dismiss moral considerations and analyse the situation in terms of pure *realpolitik*, it is anything but straightforward that latching onto the USA is prudent foreign and security policy for Finland in the mid-2020s conjuncture and near future. Already the unpredictability, impudent opportunism and authoritarianism of Trump and his Republican Party and the fundamental uncertainty in the outlook of US domestic politics speaks against counting on the geographically distant power – however amicable bilateral relations Finland tries to maintain. Moreover, despite the capriciousness of contemporary US politics, the long-standing and bipartisan reorientation in US foreign policy from the Atlantic and Mediterranean to the Pacific will most likely persist, given that China and other South and East Asian countries continue to increase their power and influence in world politics.

The second Trump administration has also motivated the Finnish government, as well as other Nordic and Baltic governments, to give greater weight to strengthening common EU defence. This adjustment has been particularly evident in breaking the long-held opposition towards common EU debt, insofar as it is employed for military purposes.[124] As for Finnish social democrats, the party has also been supportive of stronger collective EU defence. If EU member states wish to truly increase the region's paltry defence capabilities, then, in addition to common debt, it must also coordinate defence procurement to boost European industries, given that much of European military spending in the past has gone to the USA's military-industrial complex.

As the USA will continue to be a highly unreliable partner, the development of the EU's collective defence would undoubtedly be beneficial for Finland and the European continent in general. Against this background, the EU Commission's ReArm Europe plan, embraced

by the Council of the EU, is a step in the right direction from the Finnish perspective. EU's current policy response consists of temporary exceptions to EU's fiscal rules to allow for defence spending at the national level, a new instrument providing €150 billion of loans to member states for joint defence investments, using the EU budget to fund the military build-up and retasking the European Investment Bank to support defence companies and projects. Germany's "whatever it takes" moment in defence will also prove critical for developing European military capabilities.

Although EU member states, including Finland, would stand to benefit from the Union building strategic autonomy in the realm of defence, a clear-headed political analysis must acknowledge the historical difficulties in developing collective military capacity in the EU. One must also pay good heed to the contemporary domestic political tendencies within the Union, in particular the further ascent of far-right and authoritarian parties with ties both to the Kremlin and the Trump administration. Such forces gaining state power more widely in Europe could threaten EU's political unity and destabilise advances in building European defence capabilities and strategic autonomy.

Amid the current turmoil, Finland has a culture of national defence upon which it can build. Unlike many other European countries, such as Germany or Sweden, Finland has retained its system of compulsory military conscription for men until today (service is voluntary for women). Thus, the army reserve is large, 900,000 – approximately 16% of the Finnish population. Recently, the country also increased its national defence spending substantially: in 2024, the defence budget of €6.2 billion constituted 2.41% of Finnish GDP and recent defence purchases include around €10 billion for 64 F-35 fighter jets by the American Lockheed Martin. Among the political parties, the expediency of high military expenditure has become more or less uncontroversial. For

the right, the fact that sizable military expenditure implies – barring an increase in taxation or debt – reductions somewhere else is, of course, not an issue but a boon. But if the left hopes to strengthen Finland's national defence, turn around the decline of welfare state institutions and advance a green transition, it must take on the matter of financing head on.

Yet, further enlarging the already relatively strong military will not remedy the fact that Finland remains a small state in whose interests, in the contemporary geopolitical environment, it is to have inter-state security cooperation. If, even in the face of Trump, strengthening the EU's collective defence continues to remain uncertain and Finnish conservatives remain wedded to their Atlanticism, the Finnish progressive bloc in general and social democrats in particular will have to assess their commitment to and rationale of consensus politics in foreign and security policy. Preparing for such an event would at least mean thinking carefully about how to further advance cooperation with those that, through their geographical location in the Baltic Sea and the EU's eastern rim, share similar geopolitical interests with Finland.

5
Conclusions

Although consensus politics remains alive and well in Finnish foreign policy, the country's political field has, in general, left behind its turn of the century form, in which parties across the spectrum competed over the centre ground. As elsewhere, the rise of the far right on the back of intensified inequality, diminished prospects and cultural politicisation demolished the business-as-usual politics the country's political elites had complacently grown accustomed to. Despite its auspicious attempts to shed its skin accordingly, for its part, Finnish social democracy has not been able to completely leave behind the old managerial ways through which it comes to present itself primarily as the defender of the prevailing social order. Instead, a prominent political tendency within the SDP continues to be the same the cultural and political theorist Stuart Hall[125] presciently identified as the UK Labour Party's predominant political predisposition in the 1980s: a bureaucratic approach to politics under which a party easily becomes the state's "representative in the society rather than the society's bridgehead in the state".[126]

Conceiving the people as the recipients of the fruits of "responsible" and "good governance" undertaken by politicians and policymakers, instead of as the rulers of their own fate, the bureaucratic disposition lacks many of the empowering and mobilising qualities Finnish social

democrats also possessed for great periods during the 20th century. The mode of action in such a disposition is often purely reactive, while its temporal orientation either extrapolates the future from the present or demands restoration of "normalcy" and the extant order in response to crises. Given such modes of action and temporal orientations, a bureaucratic approach to politics is not favourable for the emergence of visions and projects of the future that aspire to the expansion of "popular capacities",[127] and hence, may be able to galvanise seemingly disparate sections of society that ultimately share many common interests. It is an approach to politics that also stands in stark contrast to the extravagant politicisation of a plethora of hitherto subsurface issues, however regressive, undertaken by the far-right Finns Party and its analogues elsewhere – and not necessarily always to the benefit of social democrats.[128]

Of course, even with the existence of the bureaucratic tendency within Finnish social democracy, the SDP as a party may continue to maintain its reasonably strong position within the country's political field for the near future. If so, the path dependencies of Finland's 20th century institutions and politics will not be insignificant in such a development. Social democrats also still have credibility as "responsible managers" of the state, and the SDP's reorientation from the mid-2010s onwards has proved fruitful. Long-term trends in and socio-demographic characteristics of the social democrats' support, however, indicate that, despite the SDP's recent electoral recuperation, complacency is hardly in order.

In any case, it seems unlikely that lacking the determination to experiment with new kinds of political projects centred on the empowerment of citizens and expansion of their self-rule and -realisation, social democracy in Finland could return to the power it enjoyed in the previous century. Instead, especially if the bureaucratic

political disposition strengthens, as some recent signs of attempting to return to general consensus politics suggest, in due time, predictions of Finnish social democracy's decay may once again proliferate. In the contemporary environment of high social antagonisms and increased hardship, a return to the consensus politics of the turn of the century would be deeply anachronistic. Trying to conceal and obscure social conflicts through "responsible governance", instead of leaning into these conflicts, provides a new opening for the far right to capitalise on, even if the Finns Party's support has suffered during its recent tenure in government.

None of this is to say that particular policy positions and short-term actions have no bearing on social democracy's fortunes in Finland. Developing and implementing solutions to the urgent predicaments people face, from unemployment to lack of adequate care and from increasing inequalities and insecurity to deteriorating occupational rights and possibilities, is undoubtedly of paramount importance for both social and political reasons. This, however, is also a task that necessitates open-mindedness, grit and willingness to develop answers based not primarily on the needs of the state (so often conflated for society in Finland[129]) but on the interests of those social democracy aspires to represent and lead.[130] Relatedly, a key challenge is also to connect and relate such immediate questions of governance to the more long-term progress social democracy in Finland wishes to advance and see come into fruition. A first necessary step, however, would be to elaborate what such progress would concretely look like. Luckily, such work need not start from scratch.

Biographical information for specified social democratic figures

Antti Lindtman (b. 1982), Chair of SDP 2023-; Member of Parliament 2011-

Antti Rinne (b. 1962), Chair of SDP 2014-2020; Prime Minister of Finland 2019; Member of Parliament 2015-2023

Kalevi Sorsa (1930-2004), Chair of SDP 1975-1987; Prime Minister of Finland 1972-1975, 1977-1979, 1982-1987; Member of Parliament 1970-1991

Matias Mäkynen (b. 1990), Vice-Chair of SDP 2020-; Member of Parliament 2019-

Mauno Koivisto (1923-2017), President of Finland 1982-1994; Prime Minister of Finland 1968-1970, 1979-1982

Nasima Razmyar (b. 1984), Vice-Chair of SDP 2023-; Deputy Mayor of Helsinki 2017-2023; Member of Parliament 2015-2017, 2023-

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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN FINLAND: A GREAT MOVING FORWARD SHOW

A. Alaja and J. Wahlsten

The volume at hand was written by two outstanding scholars – Antti Alaja and Johan Wahlsten – and is an enthralling story of one of the oldest social democratic parties in Europe – the Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP). The brief genesis, the post-war period, the challenges of the Third Way and the impact of the financial crisis, as well as the recent journey to government and back, are all depicted with exceptional diligence and attention to key details. Consequently, this fascinating read depicts the SDP as both an integral part of the grand historical political family and a party that exists within an explicit context. So much so that a reader will find themself equipped to detect further the characteristics that derive from the Nordic dimension, alongside those that constitute the more specific Finnish component in the SDP's unique political and organisational DNA. To that end, those who dive into this publication may end up both sager and more concerned at the same time after they finish reading. Alaja and Wahlsten are point to the conclusion that these are extraordinary times and the ordinary, adaptive and somewhat deterministic in nature answers will not suffice. The authors argue that what is needed, as they argue, is a progressive project; a strong leadership; and innovative ways of thinking about political agency, institutions and state.

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