

Social democracy in Europe. Towards a decent society.

*Redemanuskript Job Cohen
Jubiläumsfeier der Berliner Republik
Meistersaal am Potsdamer Platz, 21. April 2010*

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren,
liebe Genossinnen und Genossen,

zunächst gratuliere ich der *Berliner Republik* zu ihrem zehnjährigen Jubiläum. Zehn Jahre *Berliner Republik* – in dieser Zeit hat sich Ihre Zeitschrift als Diskussionspodium für progressive Politik und neue politische Ideen etabliert, mit einem offenen Auge für Debatten und intellektuelle (oder: gedankliche) Entwicklungen im Ausland. Das ist es, was mir an ihrer Zeitschrift besonders gefällt: die internationale Offenheit und Neugier. Und das ist genau das, was die Europäische Sozialdemokratie braucht und was ihr nützt. Gerade in Zeiten wie diesen, die voller gesellschaftlicher Turbulenzen sind.

Ich bin sehr froh, hier auf Ihrer Geburtstagsparty sprechen zu dürfen. Ich mache das zuerst auf Deutsch. Ja, das stimmt, wie fast alle Holländer: mit Louis-van-Gaal-Akzent. Dieser holländische Trainer von FC Bayern München hat die deutsche Sprache schon bereichert, so habe ich das verstanden – und zwar mit seiner Aufforderung „Chancen zu kreieren“, was ja nicht nur in sportlichen Wettbewerben interessant ist, und mit seiner Parole „Gladiolen oder Tod“, wobei Arjen Robben dann für die Gladiolen gesorgt hat. Ich habe daran gedacht, hier, an diesem Abend, meiner Rede den Titel: „Europäische Sozialdemokratie: Tod oder Gladiolen“ zu geben. Ich habe das doch nicht getan. Ich möchte diesen wichtigen Vortrag nun auf Englisch fortsetzen, weshalb meine Rede auch einen englischen Titel bekommen soll, selbst wenn der dann etwas ernsthafter ist. Er lautet: „Social democracy in Europe. Towards a decent society.“ Soziale Demokratie in Europa: für eine anständige Gesellschaft.

So, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your gala is taking place at an important moment in time. It is election time in the UK, where the Labour Party, after an incredible long office in government, is struggling for upholding its New Labour Project against the Tories and the Liberals. A Future Fair for All, their election manifesto, is a bold attempt to fight the aftershocks of the financial crisis, partly caused by the City itself, and to fight the crisis of trust in politics which is a severe problem in the UK after the expenses scandal. The good news is that Labour, after a disastrous gap in the polls, is coming back. The electoral outlook is much less gloomy than it seemed to be before. In doing so, Gordon Brown and his party is repudiating the pessimist determinism that existed in circles of European social democracy just after the disastrous results of the European elections and after the disappointing outcome of your own Federal elections.

If there is one message I will bring you tonight, it is this one: there is no need for pessimist determinism about the future of social-democracy. Of course, I know all the analyses. I am not a naïve optimist, but we see in the UK that economic competence counts a lot, as does the ideal of a future fair for all.

In the Netherlands we witness that our story of social cohesion and solidarity is getting a new momentum in times of severe economic shocks and in times of populist attacks against the rule of law in democracy and migrant communities. The social democratic fight against undecency is recognized while we are entering the election campaign in the Netherlands.

This weekend we have our party congress, where I will be elected (if the rumours are right) as front runner of the Dutch social democracy. In the very complex and fragmented multi-party-system of the Netherlands, I will tell the social democratic story of social cohesion, solidarity and international cooperation. That is the story my country needs more than ever.

The Netherlands: a political laboratory.

In recent years, you must have been puzzled by what is going on in your neighbour country Holland. Cabinet crises, political murder, huge electoral shifts, while only some years earlier it was “Modell Holland” in terms of low unemployment and “flexicurity”. So the Netherlands seems to be a laboratory of political moods, models and fashions: both in a positive and a negative sense. In the nineties, the Netherlands was famous for its so-called Poldermodel: the harmony model of cooperation and consensus in Dutch labour relations and politics. Symbol of this model was the so-called Wassenaar Akkoord between unions, employers and the government to fight the unemployment crisis in the Netherlands. The Poldermodel was our best export product; it inspired

Gerhard Schröder's Bündnis für Arbeit and it brought the Dutch Trade Unions and Employers Organizations the highly respected Bertelsmann Preis.

But since 2002 the Netherlands became a laboratory of multicultural tension and polarisation. Pim Fortuyn, who gave voice to the discontent among the Dutch population about immigration, Islam and welfare state reform, was murdered just before the elections in 2002 – the country was in shock. Two years later, we witnessed a second political murder. The film director Theo van Gogh was killed by a radical Muslim in the streets of Amsterdam.

As a result the political debate, the public discourse and social attitudes about migration and immigration have hardened and have become unrestrained. Holland seems to be a lot less tolerant than it used to be. In our party landscape we are today confronted with a strong populist movement. There has been an atmosphere of anger and alienation in the Netherlands about immigration and integration. It accounts for the explosive cocktail with which the debate on minorities has been conducted. You must have trouble to follow and understand these changes in our country. What's the matter with Holland? I can understand your confusion about the rapid changing mood in the Netherlands. Let me try to explain what has been going on and what kind of answers we have tried to give in response to this turbulence by referring to my experiences as Mayor of Amsterdam, a city which considers itself to be *geistesverwandt* with the creative dynamic city of Berlin.

Amsterdam & Berlin

Amsterdam and Berlin, these cities are both known for their tradition of freedom and tolerance, tolerance for artistic expression, for differences in lifestyle and culture, etc. Our *Großstädte*, our big cities, are a pressure cooker of creative dynamism, but also of tension and polarisation. Amsterdam is a city with a long tradition of migrants. Today – in a globalised world – Amsterdam consists of more than 170 different nationalities and cultures. Managing this diversity, as it is called, is a rich and beautiful thing to do for social democratic politicians. But there are serious shadow sides as well. It can sometimes be hard work to keep the city integrated and to bridge the social, economic and cultural differences.

Major changes – globalisation, individualisation, democratisation, privatisation and secularisation – have, together with migration, led to a society in which people face one another as strangers. Feelings of fear and alienation are being compounded by the nuisance caused by the criminality of groups of young people from ethnic backgrounds with which people are confronted in their own neighbourhood or district. This year we commemorate the sixth anniversary of the murder of Theo van Gogh. And like so many other people, I remember

that day of the murder vividly. It brought anger first and distrust immediately after, which meant that the local government had to act.

Actions to defend social cohesion, actions against polarisation

So we set up an action programme, called “Wij Amsterdammers” – we, the people of Amsterdam, expressing that we did want to bind all the people of good will in terms of social capital. The aims were

1. to encourage better bonding within and bridging between ethnic groups
2. to promote the empowerment of minorities
3. to increase social trust and
4. to actively counteract the development of negative images and prejudices.

I will just give you an example of how this action program works in practice. In 2003, some Moroccan-Dutch lads disrupted the Second World War Remembrance Day ceremonies. In the aftermath of that, the media reported on problems in schools with Muslim youths during lessons on the Second World War and the persecution of the Jews. Holocaust denial was also involved. Jewish men are increasingly reluctant to wear a *yarmulke* in public.

There was a lot of fear in the Jewish community and they wanted badly to talk about these issues with representatives of the Moroccan community. Just as unacceptable as those incidents are the numerous examples of discrimination against Muslims in everyday life. We all know about all different sorts of discrimination in their daily life.

Therefore I decided to chair a number of discussions between representatives of the Jewish and Moroccan communities in 2004 and 2005. With a few exceptions, the people involved in these discussions had seldom, if ever, met before. The discussions were intense and frank. No attempt was made to avoid sensitive subjects like the conflict in the Middle East, in which all of us are deeply involved. But even though our points of view and opinions may differ, especially on this complex issue, there was something stronger that bound us together and kept us at the table: the conviction that we are first and foremost citizens of Amsterdam, that we are all living there and therefore will tolerate no form of discrimination whatsoever.

Keeping it all together

My ideas about the mission of social democracy for the years to come have been deeply influenced by these experiences in Amsterdam. That's the reason why I have accepted to be the candidate for the Dutch PvdA to run for the next national elections. The central mission of social democracy is in my opinion to offer people a perspective of a decent society, a society with trust, social cohesion and mutual respect.

The social democratic story is in the end about binding, bonding and bridging. "De boel bij elkaar houden", as it is called in my party. These are the famous words of Joop den Uyl, our Willy Brandt of the PvdA of the seventies. "De boel bij elkaar houden" is quite difficult to translate. It is something like "Keeping it all together", meaning "Keeping people in society together", or to maintain a socially integrated society. Fight risky individualization, fragmentation and polarization. Do not tolerate large inequalities, but keep all in society connected to each other. It is a basic philosophy of European social democracy. And a necessary correction of the political direction we have taken in the last decades.

A call also for being moderate – as an answer to fanaticism and hysteria, both from extreme populist voices and from disconnected elites that enrich themselves and preach an overall adaptation to the globalised world, but in the meantime pay little or no attention to the political, cultural and social costs of this adaptation. It is one of the root causes for the existence of populism of discontent, fear and anger.

The message today of the PvdA, my message, is all about this new binding narrative of social democracy. I am looking for an inclusive society, not for an exclusive one. It is urgently needed to address these polarizing tendencies in our societies, and to give an answer to the new social and cultural questions we face.

And we are not only challenged by the cultural fragmentation, in lifestyle, in extreme individuality, in multicultural separation, but – due to the neoliberal market dogmatism and its outcome: the crisis of financial casino-capitalism – we are also confronted with increasing social-economic inequalities and imbalances: between the ever richer top and the precarious bottom, with a fragmenting middle class in-between. On top of that, we witness polarizing trends in our democracy, with an increasing number of citizens losing trust in politics and public institutions becoming disconnected from the democratic process.

Social democratic parties have to care about the anxieties of their voters. And they have to respond to these polarizing trends with a program of diminishing social-economic inequalities, promoting active citizenship and bridging cultural differences. This is what I call the "keeping all together"-mission. What

troubles me is that social democracy itself threatens to fragment. One of the tasks is to keep the social democratic constituency together, the biotope of the “Volkspartei”, as a model, as pars pro toto for European welfare societies at large. What bothers me is that higher educated people tend to drift to the Green party, to the social-liberal parties, more parties for academic professionals than parties with a broad base.

My appeal as leader of the PvdA is also directed to these young generations of academic professionals. Not to be indifferent towards

- what is happening in our big cities;
- what is happening with the low-skilled in our knowledge-based economy;
- not to be uncritical against the dogmatic market-society.

In one word: not to be just consumers waiting for the new Ipads to come over from the US, but to be involved citizens.

The mission of social democracy today: a common perspective

The financial and economic crisis has hit our societies hard. But it has also opened up new opportunities to redesign our social and economic order and to find a new political perspective. My point of departure is that promoting cohesion, bonding and bridging, will be crucial in the years to come. We share a common destiny in a common future of our society, our democracy and our economy. Nation by nation, and European wide.

Society

To regain cohesion in our societies, we need to restore trust in and respect for each other. We need a society where people “belong”. In order to succeed we need three basic ingredients:

- we need empathy, understanding the other’s position;
- we need clear limits, based on our constitution and our rule of law – and we need enforcement of our rules and laws as well;
- we need participation, in civil society, in politics and in the economy.

This routing takes time and will depend more on local than on national initiatives and interventions. Our city governments have to move forward and mobilize positive forces. The American expert in this field, Ervin Staub, advised the City of Amsterdam how to develop positive relations between the local ethnic groups and Muslim minorities in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands – and the rest of Europe as well – in a six steps plan.

- A first step towards preventing polarization is to organize a real debate.
- Secondly, meetings are a crucial condition in order to establish a real dialogue, and for this purpose meeting places are necessary, at school, at work, in the public domain and on television.
- The third step is to ensure that in the dialogue we treat each other with respect.
- The fourth step is to learn about each other's culture, religion, and norms and values, as well as about each other's fears and pain. The media could and – in my view should – play an important role in this.
- The fifth step is to ensure that the basic criteria of the debate are clear to all parties involved.
- The sixth step is to make the switch in due course from dialogue to the development of a shared and non-exclusive but inclusive vision of society and identity.

Democracy

Strengthening our democracy evolves around three crucial concepts: a self-confident state, public interests and citizenship. Citizenship is not only essential to create a more cohesive society, but also to enhance our democratic values and practices. Keeping all those different people coming from so many different cultures together requires, in the words of the Dutch author Geert Mak, “a new kind of common glue” which will again create a kind of basic trust. This basic trust is to be found in a new interpretation of “citizenship”. Essentially, citizenship implies trust in one another as citizens of the same community, be that a village, a city or a country. Again to quote Mak: “... trust, not only in each other's good intentions, but also in the quality of administration and justice, in the competence and integrity of politicians, in the civic-mindedness of managers and businessmen”. To restore trust requires restoring responsibility. Responsibility both for yourself and for the whole, whether that be the society you live in, the company you work for, the school your children go to, or the street you live in.

Effective citizenship should count on a self-confident state. After decades of liberalization and deregulation of markets, it is time for a reassessment of the state. This is not about a small state or a big state, an overpowering state or a shy state – but about an effective, focused and self-confident state. The state – on a national and European level – has to re-establish clear points of reference of public interests vis-à-vis markets. It has to create a framework of public values, in order to embed, regulate and supervise markets – certainly the financial markets. After a period where we seem to have trusted markets more than states, we have to restore trust in the state, in the public domain and in public services. Clearly defined responsibilities and politicians who are held accountable are in this respect a preliminary requirement.

Economy

Economic progress starts with social cohesion and an equal and inclusive society. These are not only moral standards, but also economic assets. A society, where everybody is stimulated and supported to participate, to belong and to use their talents – regardless of age, place of birth or zip code – simply performs better economically. In the years to come, with more older and less young people, we simply need everybody to participate in our economy. Not at all costs, but providing the possibilities to combine work and care, firm and family. We should ask responsibility not only from those who have to find their way back to the labour market, but also of the business elites who have profited so much from the economic boost. Why not put it this way: We also need a Hartz IV for the business community.

If there is one lesson we have learned from the financial crisis it is to constrain the financial element, the financial interest, the financial risks in our economy. We have to move forward towards an economy of real entrepreneurship, not an economy of hunters and preys. An economy of innovative enterprises, to keep our society strong, dynamic and sustainable, in order to create new growth and welfare.

An economy, too, that puts an end to precarious work – as we know it from Günter Walraff's latest book – and opens up the opportunities for social mobility. In our post-war model, we created opportunities to climb the social ladder: through school and further education, by job promotion, by moving to a better neighborhood, by increasing wages – and by creating new opportunities for our kids. That still happens, but we have to pay special attention for this part of the society. It is not a coincidence that becoming part of the middle class – with all the possibilities for personal development involved – is one of the top priorities of Barack Obama's program for change.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

So let me conclude. I think our societies and our parties in Europe are at a crossroad. We have to make up our minds: In what kind of society do we want to live? Do we make a choice for a society where inequality grows, immigrants are considered as permanent intruders, markets dominate public interests, financial interests are considered as more important than entrepreneurship, and people feel strangers to each other? Or do we choose the European model that we constructed with care and effort after the war, an inclusive society with moderate differences of income and wealth, a public sector that acts as countervailing power to the market, with responsible citizenship at the top and the bottom, an educational system that cherishes engineers as well as me-

BERLINER REPUBLIK

chanics, with a green and innovative economy, with a clear rule of law and a relaxed diversity?

My answer is clear. Our common goal for the years to come should be what the philosopher Avishai Margalit calls: the decent society. A society where people treat each other with respect and are treated with respect – in the street, at the workplace and by state institutions. An egalitarian and inclusive society, where the law rules, diversity inspires and work provides dignity. In this mission, I believe, social democracy can find its new “Deutungshoheit”, as Sigmar Gabriel has put it.

Thank you for your attention. And have a great party tonight.