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Time for a European recovery programme

Anita Pollack argues Labour must get off the fence about Europe

David Cameron's wielding of the so-called veto in Brussels last December pandered to his backbench hard-line Eurosceptic wing. It will cause endless difficulties for Britain's relations with our European partners in the months and years to come. It did not stop anything, so it can hardly be termed a veto. Whilst those who care about our relations with the EU were aghast, it appears to have been popular with a large chunk of the British public, tutored in Euroscepticism as they have been for years by our right-wing press. Cameron wins kudos for appearing strong, even if his approach was crazy.

The fiscal treaty signed up to by 25 member states (not simply the Eurozone countries) during the January meeting of the European Council proceeds regardless, though it does not have the support of the left. It is in full cry for even more austerity and unlikely to solve the financial crisis. It even suggests that each country must write the commitment to a balanced budget into its constitution or equivalent laws.

Labour has for years sadly, appeared nervous of taking a firmly pro-EU line, afraid of those very opinion polls. Far from developing and promoting a principled approach, Labour has perpetuated a nationalistic argument. True its spokespeople support being in the EU, but our position tends always to be peppered with 'red lines', 'getting the best deal' and a marked lack of enthusiasm that casts doubts about our conviction.

There is scant attempt to educate the public about the benefits of the EU. This has meant that when the time comes (as it often does) to put forward a pro-EU argument and trash the nonsense that comes from the Tories, Labour stumbles, mumbling pragmatically about trade and unable to resist critical commentary, finding it hard to differentiate itself from its political opponents. Siren calls, even from the left, for a new referendum on EU membership are not met with reasoned argument.

Let's stop blaming the Germans for being too strong, the Greeks for being too weak, the EU for too much bureaucracy and the French for anything that comes to mind. What makes Europe strong is good for Britain and we should make no mistake about that. In the face of the current crisis our stand should be based on principles. Glenis Willmott, Leader of Labour MEPs, points out in relation to our lack of influence, that 'no-one is calling for Britain to join the Euro, or to implement any legislation where we have an opt-out...'

Labour needs to make a concerted effort both to convince its own members and the public of our need to be an active and positive partner in the EU, even when times are hard as they most certainly are right now. This is, let us not forget, the world's largest trading bloc. It is still united in a peace that eluded the European continent for hundreds of years. The European model of solidarity is good for workers as well as good for business. So far as equality and workplace rights are concerned, our European membership has been the engine of change and continues to protect us against serious erosion of standards. There are benefits to the UK from foreign direct investment such as the Nissan factory in Sunderland. Our universities and businesses benefit from collaborative cross-border research projects. The European Arrest Warrant assists in bringing criminals to justice. 51% of our exports of goods and services are to the EU and plenty of jobs depend upon it. Most of our environmental law emanates from the EU. There are a host of reasons to support it, and yes, things to criticize, as in any family.

Renewal of the democratic left in Europe needs a wide and vigorous debate including all party members and supporters. Labour should be loudly supporting a Europe-wide economic recovery for jobs and sustainable growth. We should stand up firmly against any whittling-away of environmental and workplace standards, unemployment rights and equality. We may feel more comfortable outside the Euro, particularly given the difficulties of the moment. That is no reason to cease working together with countries in the Eurozone to promote economic stability without which the jobs will not grow. Highlighting Tory divisions is not enough. Labour needs to develop a coherent European policy, spelling out fundamental aims and translating them into practical policies for the next European Parliament elections in 2014.

Attacks on the welfare state, jobs migrating to the far East and the debt crisis offer a bleak future unless the left can come up with dynamic and practical proposals that will gain the support of the people whose future is at risk. Rather than retreating into nationalism and anti-globalisation rhetoric, we need more collective action in Europe - a concerted social democratic response to the crisis. We must work with our political allies in other countries for a common programme. Such an approach does not mean economic profligacy and wasteful public spending. But it should include a Europe-wide economic platform for jobs and growth

as a counterpoint to the right's austerity obsession. We need regional investment banks and productive public investment where there is a guarantee of job creation, particularly for young people. It should aim to prevent trading partners outside the EU securing an unfair competitive advantage through undercutting our high environmental and social standards. European democracy cannot thrive without more efforts to tackle corruption, and for greater government and institutional transparency, not least in the EU institutions.

A real determination to tackle tax evasion and tax avoidance should be part of the equation. The super-rich must be made to contribute more equally to the public good and yes, that does mean a financial transactions tax enthusiastically supported by Labour. Why are we still so enthralled by the City that we are not supporting this at the European level? Saying we only support such a tax at a global level may be well-meant, but is a recipe for inaction. There can also be no economic recovery without greater environmental protection and investment in energy sustainability. The scandals of 2011 in the UK plainly indicate that socialists should support tough national and European rules to secure real media pluralism and cultural diversity of expression which includes continuing support and strengthening of public service broadcasting.

Labour's support for its membership of the European socialist and social democratic family should be promoted much more vigorously, not least to our own party membership which hears little about our continental partners. This family is going through a rough time. In the 1990s, the centre-left was in government in 11 of 15 European countries. Now it is two out of 27. Support for the left is at an all-time low which is astonishing given that the right's strategies for dealing with economic crisis are to dish out more austerity pain to working people and more gain for the rich. Yet the balance could be on the verge of change for the better, particularly in France. Pro-active, unafraid support for a collective plan for growth and for democratic progress in Europe is an essential plank in supporting our own economy. Labour's members and supporters deserve nothing less.