

Lessons for ALP in demise of European left populism

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM July 12, 2019

As Labor struggles to find its bearings, it would do well to consider what is happening in Europe.

Syriza, which was trounced by the conservatives in last Sunday's elections, was not merely a Greek phenomenon when it swept to office four years ago; rather, it was hailed as the flag-bearer for a much broader radicalisation of the global left.

Everywhere one looked, Tony Blair's "third way", which had dominated the left in the years leading up to the global financial crisis, seemed dead and buried.

And buried with it was the legacy of the social democratic treasurers and finance ministers who had presided over the market-oriented reforms that lifted Europe out of its crippling crisis in the late 1980s.

Instead, radical new movements, cast from the same mould as Syriza, were making the running.

In Spain, the militantly anti-capitalist Podemos, founded barely a year earlier, was on its way to becoming the third largest political party, shattering the duopoly of the conservatives and the social democrats; and it had promising counterparts in Germany's Die Linke (The Left) as well as in the grouping that became La France Insoumise (Unbowed France).

Moreover, just as those movements were gathering steam, Jeremy Corbyn won a landslide victory in the contest for the leadership of Britain's Labour Party. With Corbyn's ascent sealing the broader trend,

Europe's social democratic parties, fearful of falling behind, abandoned the centre ground and, one after the other, veered to the left.

Now the results are in and triumph has become a rout. Syriza has lost office and is consumed by internal divisions. Die Linke is, at best, going nowhere and shows no signs of regaining momentum. Podemos and La France Insoumise are on the road to collapse.

Nor are the social democratic parties that followed them in the swerve to the left doing any better.

The French Socialists — who, in the 2017 presidential election, jettisoned Manuel Valls, a staunchly centrist former prime minister, for a little known environmentalist from the party's far left — are an extreme case in point. Forced to sell their headquarters so as to pay the bills, they no longer exist as a significant force, ending a history which began in 1879.

The German Social Democrats — who for many years were Europe's largest political movement — are not quite at that point; but they too are in the midst of an electoral collapse and risk losing, for the first time since Germany became a parliamentary democracy over a century ago, their status as one of the country's two major parties.

And even the mighty Scandinavians have buckled. Yes, the Swedish Social Democrats managed to return to office, but they did so with their lowest vote share in more than a century and by accepting a coalition agreement that dismantles key aspects of the Swedish welfare state.

The same goes for Denmark, where the Social Democrats saved themselves only by adopting a policy on migration and asylum-seekers that makes Pauline Hanson look like an advocate for refugees.

As for Corbyn, he has managed the seemingly impossible feat of performing even more poorly in the opinion polls than did the left's

Michael Foot when he led Labour to disaster in the 1983 general election. And unlike Foot, who was naive but honest, Corbyn has dragged Labour into disrepute, whitewashing anti-Semitism and cosying up to terrorists.

These outcomes are not just the stinging rebuke of a political strategy; they are the disavowal of the theory of "left populism" on which the turn to the left was based.

Shaped by political philosophers such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (who advised virtually all of Europe's radical movements), that theory rejected the view of politics as the art of compromise. Instead, reaching back to German legal theorist and sometime Nazi Carl Schmitt, it argued that politics is an existential battle in which "the distinction between friend and enemy" attains "the utmost degree of intensity", pitting the wealthy few against the working many, the destroyers of the environment against its protectors, the repressors of gender rights against their defenders.

That this Manichean world view bears no relation to the social democratic tradition hardly needs to be said. That tradition's finest thinkers were not academics but practitioners; as the great British social democrat Anthony Crosland put it many years ago in his vastly influential tract, *The Future of Socialism*, the school of hard shocks had taught them to regard politics not as a fixed set of prescriptions but as the pursuit of a set of values whose realisation was constantly tempered by economic, political and social constraints.

Depending what remained of that tradition, left populism proved to be the intellectual equivalent of crack cocaine, spreading through the global left with all the virulence of an epidemic.

That its consequences were devastating is unsurprising. Thoughtful leftists such as Norman Geras had warned that so hopelessly simplistic a political philosophy would lead the left to lose its moral compass, turning

a blind eye to the crimes of its alleged “friends” — be it Hamas, Hugo Chavez or the local Islamists — while refusing to recognise the merits of those it cast as “enemies”.

And even putting aside its contemptible ethics, it was, they argued, a sure-fire recipe for electoral suicide.

After all, unlike total war, democratic politics is not a struggle between implacable adversaries, as Schmitt imagined.

In the Australian context, the Liberals may be Labor’s opponents; but far from seeking to exterminate Liberal voters, Labor’s challenge is to woo them.

That is what Labor so singularly failed to do in the May election.

Like its European counterparts, it made divisiveness into a virtue, elevating the puerile “class against class” rhetoric of Wayne Swan and Sally McManus to centre stage while translating it into punitive taxes on every group Labor despises.

And also like its European counterparts, its rash commitments on climate change merely worsened its prospects, doing nothing to dislodge voters from the Greens while repelling those who feared for their jobs and their incomes.

Now Labor’s policies, from phasing out coalmining to clamping down on franking credits and negative gearing, are little more than verbs in search of tenses.

It is scarcely willing to admit that they ever were; whether they still are, or will in future be, no one knows, least of all its leadership.

It is, of course, in good company: from Greece to Sweden, the left, bereft of any sense of direction, is floundering.

But just as Australia needs a principled and effective centre-right, so it needs a thoughtful and mature party of the centre-left. As things stand, it has no chance of having one.