



The Lonely Life of a Progressive

Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Former Prime Minister of Denmark

One of my predecessors in Danish politics, former Prime Minister Viggo Kampmann, often famously said, “It’s wonderful being a social democrat.” This was back in 1962. At that time, the Nordic social democratic parties would easily win 40 percent of the vote at elections—making them by far the largest and most influential political parties in their respective countries. Social democrats were the undisputed center of political thought and action during those years. The sky was the limit. And being a social democrat was the very definition of what it meant to be progressive. A bright future lay ahead.

I agree with Viggo Kampmann, it is indeed wonderful to be a social democrat. I also believe there is no alternative. But, I’d like to add, it sure isn’t easy.

What distinguishes progressives from both the conservatives on the right and the far left is that at the core of our political DNA, we share a determination to seek influence and act responsibly. We also know that governing responsibly comes

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with a price—especially at times when tough choices need to be made, severe economic challenges faced, and new global risks tackled.

Today, social democrats are criticized from the left and the right. From the left, we are attacked for not spending more on welfare or for daring to reform our outdated welfare state and public services. The members of the far left now loudly proclaim themselves to be the true social democrats and progressives, asserting that we are mere echoes of neoliberal dogma. From the right, on the other hand, the conservatives argue that we are still spending too much on welfare and that we don't care enough about the fundamentals of the economy.

Leading a progressive government can be a lonely place, especially when you are being attacked from both the left and the right. Still, it's the only place to be—governing with responsibility, guided by our values, and driven by the ambition to see them realized anew in the modern era.

Social democrats will always stand up for a fair society. The foundations of personal freedom are institutions that ensure fairness.

Yet our definition of what constitutes a fair society cannot simply be based on how much wealth we redistribute. We cannot be preoccupied by a simplified and technical discussion on Gini coefficients. Even in highly developed welfare societies such as those in the Nordic countries,

there is a significant opportunity gap. Being born in to the “right” family is still the most important factor affecting educational attainment, lifetime income, and personal health. That is why progressives must now be judged on how effective we are at helping to create wealth, as well as by the inventiveness and success of our policies in delivering equality of opportunities for all our citizens. That is why the Danish Social Democrats are committed to crafting a strong balance between markets and social justice. That is why we take more pride in the size of our educational budgets than in the scale of social transfers. Our boldest ambition is to invest in people in order for them to be self-reliant in a modern society shaped by information technology and global competition.

Social democrats, then, build a fair society by harnessing the dynamism of a strong and vibrant social market economy. We know from history that the market economy is the most powerful engine to secure growth and create wealth. But we also understand that markets have failings. This is why we believe in regulation that ensures markets function for the benefit of all. That is why we are so concerned with reform of the financial sector, to ensure it is more stable and efficient.

The social market economy also needs to be sustainable in all its dimensions. As social democrats, we must be concerned about the deficit. Structural deficits not only hamper our prospects for economic growth in the short term, they also burden future generations with unfair debt.

The social democratic vision of a just society is one in which rights and opportunities come with obligations and duties. Yes, we want to invest in people, but people have a matching obligation to provide for themselves and their family if they can. Social democrats are also, by tradition and by inclination, strong and committed internationalists. We know that we cannot solve climate change acting in isolation, we need to act together. We know that we cannot regulate the financial sector on our own, we need to act together. We know that we cannot halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons alone, we can only do this together. We know that we cannot cope with global terrorism and extremism one nation at a time, we must build a global coalition and work in close collaboration with one



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another. We know that we cannot tackle the refugee crisis by acting alone, we have to agree on cross-national solutions. At the heart of this internationalism, we need a strong trans-Atlantic cooperation that can be the backbone of an ever-expanding alliance of democracies.

In these turbulent times, social democrats stand up for political leadership, even though it is a lonely life.

Over the years, the opportunity to meet with fellow progressive leaders from around the globe—through the progressive governance and global progress dialogues—has helped build a strong political community that transcends national boundaries. These gatherings, such as the one I hosted in Copenhagen in 2013, provide us with an opportunity to share new policy ideas, compare political strategies, and revitalize our spirits for the battles ahead. As reformers and modernizers, progressives are bound to face endless allegations and dreadful attacks from both left and the right. Yet as we each work to reform our societies to respond to the structural changes that will shape our future, staying true to our values is what defines our leadership.

This leadership is what being progressive is all about. That is why, despite all the difficulties we face, it is still wonderful to be a social democrat.