

EU's social model survives despite all ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Reading Paul Gillespie's recent article "Has Europe's social model disappeared?" reminded me of Dr Seuss's classic story of the citizens of Whoville chanting through a tiny trumpet to the elephant holding them tenuously on a speck at the end of his trunk: "We are here! We are here! We are here!"

Certainly the social model - much maligned and at times moribund - is still here. Bruised and battered, and in need of reform, it still largely defines the European Union. As globalisation thrives, it is the fundamental differentiating factor between us and other global economies.

Broadly outlined as "a common vision many European states have for a society that combines economic growth with high living standards and good working conditions", in reality, there is not one single social model. Member states across the EU share several characteristics, including a commitment to full employment, social protection for all citizens and social inclusion.

Country approaches have evolved during the crisis - with varying success, particularly as tensions simmer between Keynes and the supply side advocates. But a commitment to combining flexible and competitive economies with policies and services that ensure cohesion and minimise poverty and exclusion has largely remained.

Its most recent manifestation in the "Europe 2020" strategy calling for more and better jobs and setting headline targets has been broadly - and rightly - criticised as these goals fall sorely behind schedule. But the objective remains one of solidarity and cohesion: that economic growth must serve to boost overall social wellbeing, and not take place at the expense of any section of society - it must not be a "tragic trade-off between economic efficiency and social justice".

Traditional approach

European structural and cohesion funds have underpinned this approach over decades, helping to bridge the gap between countries, boosting peripheries such as Ireland and supporting the new member states of central and eastern Europe.

Already back in 1973, the then European Community highlighted its commitment to the social dimension with the first social action programme, (under Ireland's first European commissioner, Dr Patrick Hillery). Shortly afterwards, it established the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, the tripartite European agency based in Dublin to provide data and analysis to help shape policy.

Most recently it was Eurofound's calculation of the estimated cost to Europe's economy of the exclusion of the 14 million young people not in employment, education or training (about €153 billion per annum) that galvanised EU ministers to sign up to the youth guarantee now being implemented across Europe.

Similar analysis is taking place on the costs of public disengagement rife across the EU, and of female non-participation, as well as the social and economic costs for an EU facing swathes of "discouraged" workers and long-term unemployed. Think working time provisions, anti-discrimination laws, equality in the workplace, access to healthcare - all at the heart of the social model and a half-century of Europe's undisputed economic and social progress.

Sustainable society

In times of crisis, however, as European countries rein in their finances, there have been serious repercussions for welfare and services in many states, and the focus is increasingly on how to fund a sustainable social model. Some serious suggestions include blocking the flow of an estimated €1 trillion in losses every year from tax evasion and avoidance across the EU, for example, or exploring potential gains from stemming inequalities as per Richard Wilkinson or Thomas Piketty.

Whatever the source of funding, the question cannot be if we can afford to maintain the social model. Rather, can we afford not to? A point underlined by International Labour Organisation director general Guy Ryder recently when he said "smart social policies - such as programmes that help the unemployed find jobs or systems that provide social security to vulnerable members of our society - cannot just be considered a cost. They are an investment in our future."

Paul Gillespie suggests it is "the Eurocritics" that argue "deeper political union must be accompanied by a redistributive social union

between richer and poorer states and classes if it is to be accepted".

Europhiles believe this equally, if not more so. Political and economic integration will not progress without the deepening of a strong and solid social Europe. There is clearly an economic case for this.

More importantly, perhaps, there is a moral case. Echoing Dr Seuss once more, as Horton surveys the speck: "I can't put it down. And I won't. After all. A person's a person. No matter how small."

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: inequality ^[4]

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