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The Language of European Social Democracy

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The following paper examines the changing language of European social democracy. Focusing on the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, it looks at the changing meaning of keywords - categorised as 'policy concepts' and 'policy areas'. While previous research has treated political language as a static phenomenon, to be quantified numerically through 'content analysis' (Budge et al., 1987 and 2001), this paper examines the discursive context of keywords and concepts (Bourdieu, 1991; Diez, 1999). It, thus, seeks to 'understand' rather than 'describe' political parties and their vocabulary, which is vital in an analysis of party programmes over time. Furthermore, Tthe evolution of the meaning of the keywords in the two parties between 1989 and 2005 furthermore shed light on a (limited) convergence in European social democracy.

Language holds a central importance for politics – from the simple election slogan to the more concrete party programme – which is increasingly recognised by politicians and analysts alike. The prominence of the concept of political spin is evidence of this change. The key role of language in ideological argument was recognised by Wittgenstein (1961), who argued that, by understanding the deeper meaning behind the use of words, we wcould uncover the thoughts expressed by those words.

The following discourse paper begins by setting out the framework for a qualitative discourse analysis, illustrating the added value of this approach for an interpretative account of party programmes. It then looks at the changing meaning of four keywords in the British Labour Party and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) between 1989 and 2005: two policy concepts ('social justice' and 'equality'); and, two policy fields ('public services' and the 'welfare state'). The research argues that limited convergence has taken place in the language of European social democracy, and that this reflects a 'Europeanisation' of the parties studied. The EU has provided both a policy framework and an arena in which social democratic parties can learn from each other (Sloam, 2005). It nevertheless remains the case that the EU context continues to allow for a significant range of policy alternatives, broadly governed by institutional (party) and national opportunity structures.

Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis has been used to investigate a wide variety of subjects (Basham et al., 1999) – from trial transcripts to poetry – to help answer distinct linguistic, sociological or political questions. All research nevertheless starts with the aim of analysing 'aspects of the structure and function of language in use' (Johnstone, 2002: 4). The qualitative discourse analysis used in this study examines the language used in programmatic documents within parties, over time and between parties in different countries, to shed light on 'why certain meanings prevail' (Hoffman and Knowles, 1999: 33-4). An analysis of changes in the usage and meaning of these words and concepts provides us with a number of reference points through which to reveal the nature of party programmes in cross-reference with other methods (referred to below). This approach contrasts markedly with that of Budge et al. (1987 and 2001), which treats words, phrases or concepts as static over time. The paper argues that, given the normative use and changing meaning of the keywords described below, a closer analysis of the terms themselves is necessary. Individual words and concepts used in party programmes are, in fact, indivisible from their social and strategic (political) context (Bourdieu, 1991). Investigating changes in the usage and meaning of key social democratic concepts provides us with reference points through which to interpret the party programmes of Labour and the SPD. This qualitative approach seeks to 'understand' rather than merely 'describe' political parties and their vocabulary.

The parties' discourse must be contextualised in a qualitative sense, because 'the meaning of words is dependent upon their discursive context' (Diez, 1999: 610). Firth (1935: 40) wrote of the utility of research into the 'contextual distribution' of what he called 'focal or pivotal words'. Williams (1983) later explained the ability of 'keywords' to build up a 'vocabulary of culture and society'. This paper similarly attributes great explanatory power to the use of words by political parties. Fairclough (2001: 3, 5) has argued that such an analysis has become increasingly relevant for political parties in general and New Labour in particular: 'language has become significantly more important over the past few decades… An important part of these changes is a new relationship between politics, government and the mass media… New Labour is involved in a "'reinvention of government" ' which in itself entails a greater salience for language'.

To contextualise the parties' discourse, three main analytical tools were used: a contextual analysis examining the institutional and national settings for party policy; a programmatic review (looking at election manifestos, party programmes and statutes, lead motions carried at party conferences, position papers on specific policy areas, and policy statements made by the party leadership); and, elite level interviews with actors involved in the policy-making process. These three methods defined the policy environment, enabling an understanding of the language of social democracy across time and space. The keywords were chosen on the evidence of the contextual analysis and programmatic review. The discourse analysis itself looked at how these words were used in the parties' national election manifestos and statutes or constitutions, but in reference to the broader set of programmatic documents tackled in the programmatic review. The original research, based on an analysis of fifteen keywords (and included the French Socialist Party – PS), was narrowed down for the purposes of this paper to 'equality' and 'social justice' (policy concepts), and the 'welfare state' and 'public services' (policy areas). While the keywords selected for the paper by no means cover the whole range of party policy, they reflect the central pillars of social democratic programmes.

Policy Concepts

Social Justice

'Social justice' is a term not commonly used in the UK in recent decades, so that its meaning is extremely vague and ill defined. It has rarely been used in Labour Party programmes, despite its occasional appearance in traditional party arenas like the annual conference. In the UK, the main parties have seldom referred to something as 'social policy', preferring to talk more specifically about 'employment policy' or 'labour market policy' or 'workers' rights'. The term social justice has nevertheless entered the vocabulary of New Labour in recent years as a means to advocate the idea of 'opportunity for all' and 'community'. Social justice is a common concept in continental social democracy, and its increasing prominence in Labour programmes points to the influence of these sources. 'Soziale Gerechtigkeit' is seen in Germany as the belief in a 'fair' or 'just' society. This term is a key pillar – perhaps the key pillar – of SPD conceptual thinking, relating to the fact that the state must moderate the effects of the market. As a concept of justice it was not, however, linked to specific policies beyond a general commitment to eradicate poverty. Changes in the party's conception of social justice reflect the movement of the SPD (and German society in general) away from the idea of 'equality of outcome' and further towards 'equality of opportunity'. The increased frequency of the term social justice in Labour (and, beyond, in the French Socialist Party) illustrates the cross-fertilisation of policy concepts within European social democracy.

The term social justice was not present in Labour's 1992 manifesto. In fact, the word social is only used in reference to 'social services', 'social division', the 'social partners' and the European 'Social Chapter' (Labour Party, 1992). Social justice has nevertheless become a more recurrent theme, partly as a result of European integration, bringing it to the attention of the party elite. The word 'social' formed a central part of Tony Blair's approach – which might be described as 'social liberal' – stressing the role of 'community'. In the 1997 programme, 'social justice' was used just once, but was equated with the more easily understandable British concept of 'fairness': on taxation for families, 'It is about social justice and a fair deal' (Labour Party, 1997). In 2001, the term was only utilised twice, and again linked to fairness – that people should not to be forced to live in poverty (Labour Party, 2001). In fact, fairness is used on numerous occasions to describe what might well be seen as social justice in Germany. Social justice nonetheless became a key feature of Labour's 'social contract' in 2005, when the party promised to 'forge an even stronger bond between the goals of economic and social justice' and to 'make the idea of social justice and a fair deal for all the governing ideal of our country' (Labour, 2005: 8-9). This was bound quite clearly to the idea that the state would provide opportunity for all – e.g. through education and training – to fulfil citizens' potential.

As might be expected of a concept so central to party identity, soziale Gerechtigkeit appeared a number of times in the SPD 'Basic Programme'. A main section entitled 'Through Social Justice to a Society of Solidarity', proposed that the goals of social justice be achieved principally through the 'Sozialstaat' (the welfare state – see below), which should be 'maintained and extended' (SPD, 1989: 34-6). This was the interpretation of soziale Gerechtigkeit in 1989. The concept has, in fact, been consistently used in a normative manner to support new party positions (in SPD election manifestos) both to express the idea of fairness and to support current policies. In 1990, for example, the term referred to alleviating the 'material burdens on, above all, young families', which led to the promise of at least 'DM 200 per month [support] for every child' (SPD, 1990: 16). In the 1994 'programme for government', soziale Gerechtigkeit was more frequently used for a wider range of policy issues: 'social rights and real co-decision' in the workplace, for 'moving towards… a socially just society' throughout Germany, and even with regard to poverty in the Third World (SPD, 1994: 6, 50, 72). By 1998, the profile of social justice was raised further to describe the neglect (social injustice) of the Kohl era and the way the party would seek to combat key issues like unemployment if elected. The manifesto, 'Work, Innovation and Justice', stressed that social justice should not 'fall under the wheels' in a time of social change, arguing that innovation rather than 'social cuts' was the answer to economic success (SPD, 1998: 6). A main section on 'Social Security and Social Justice', however, set out a noticeably different interpretation of social justice than that offered by the Basic Programme: the state should both provide 'a secure floor' and 'encourage individual responsibility [author's italics] and initiative' (SPD, 1998: 21). The 2002 manifesto confirmed this change in the orientation of policy: 'Justice means for us the possibility for all to have access to the same chances in our society', linking 'social justice to economic reason' and also 'to the principle of fair competition' (SPD, 2002: 10, 22-3). This was confirmed in 2005, when the party's explanation of social justice bore a striking resemblance to the Labour manifesto only a few months earlier (see above): 'economic prosperity and social justice are not contradictions' (SPD, 2005: 8). Changes in the meaning of the concept of soziale Gerechtigkeit have, thus, reflected key policy changes within the party as well as 'lesson-drawing' (Rose, 1993) from other Third Way-type policy programmes.

Equality

'Equality' is viewed mostly in terms of 'equality of opportunity' and equal chances in the UK today (relating mainly to education and training), but also to the alleviation of poverty (a more minimalist version of 'equality of outcome'). Equality for the Labour Party in the 1990s and into the early 21st century steered clear of the concept of equality of outcome, as it sought to move away from the image of a party of redistribution that wished to tax those that had been successful in the capitalist system. In this sense, equality is referred to most often with reference to 'opportunity', and in terms of 'equal treatment' for different groups in society (e.g. for example women and, ethnic minorities). Any emphasis on 'equality of outcome' (e.g. for example the minimum wage) is expressed in terms of fairness for those low-paid workers, families and pensioners who have fallen into the poverty trap. In Germany, 'Gleichheit' is seen in terms of opportunity ('Chancen') and outcomes ('Ergebnisse'), where wages for top-earners have traditionally been more restrained than in the Anglo-Saxon model. The SPD, much like the Labour Party, plays less emphasis on equality of outcome than was the case in its past. Yet, unlike the Labour Party, the German social democrats have long believed in equality of opportunity ('Chancengleichheit') as a fundamental goal (at least since the watershed Bad Godesberg conference in 1959), which has been interpreted – for example – as social investment in education and training. Even in France, where 'égalité' remains a intrinsically bound to PS thinking, the idea of 'equal chances' is something that has become more prominent in party programmes. The greater emphasis on equality of opportunity was a central feature of the programmatic renewal in the late 1990s around New Labour in the UK, the 'Neue Mitte' (New Centre) in Germany and 'réalisme de gauche' (Leftist realism) in France.

Labour's 1992 manifesto committed itself to strengthening 'equality before the law and equality of opportunity' (Labour Party, 1992). Labour was conscious not to portray itself as an anti-market party bent on redistribution, so – while condemning poverty – it strictly avoided any claims to be an equalising force. This was nevertheless accompanied by a real change in policy to stress opportunity through social investment (e.g.for example in education), while attaching less significance to inequalities of wealth. The battle over 'Clause IV' of the Labour Party constitution epitomised this change. While the old Clause IV articulated the aspiration 'to secure workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof' (Labour Party, 1990), the new passage pushed through by the Blair leadership in 1994 emphasised the creation 'for each of us the means to realise our true potential' (Labour Party, 2002: 1-2). Underlying this conception of equality was the idea that opportunity was the route to tackling 'division and inequality in our society' and respecting 'the equal worth of all' (Labour Party, 1997). The only inequalities that were to be solved by pure redistribution of wealth related to the poverty of children and the elderly (those who could not work). 'Top rates of tax' were, furthermore, to remain unchanged (Ibid.). Education was seen as the key area through which to achieve equality of opportunity – 'to raise the standards of every school', and through this to create 'educational and employment opportunities for all' (Ibid.). A second idea was to 'make work pay', so low-paid workers received relief through the minimum wage and tax credits, even if this was presented in terms of providing incentives to work. In 2001, havinge demonstrated its prudent approach to public spending, the party felt about to express the wish for citizens not only to have 'an equal chance to benefit from the opportunities of our country', but also 'to share in its wealth' (Labour Party, 2001: 3). The commitment to social investment, to create opportunity was stepped up through the large financial increases in spending on core public services described below. By 2005, 'equality' had been substituted by the term 'opportunity'. The only references to equality stated the need for 'promoting equality of opportunity for all groups' in society, and guaranteeing 'equality of life chances' for every child (Labour, 2005: 27-8, 75).

The SPD, in its Basic Programme, first of all stressed the need for 'societal equality', especially in the case of the equality between men and women, in a whole sub-section devoted to an attack on discrimination in pursuit of 'equal freedom for all' (SPD, 1989: 8, 20-4). At this time, the party also stated the desire to dismantle 'social and economic inequalities', not only in the case of the divisions between Eastern and Western Germany, but also a more general 'just division of income, wealth and [working] time' (SPD, 1989: 8, 37). In 1990, the party avoided the explicit mention of Gleichheit, but nevertheless supported a number of equalising measures in sections on 're-orientating equal opportunities' and 'safeguarding the social net', such as raising child benefit and guaranteeing minimum pensions and unemployment benefit (SPD, 1990: 16-8). In 1994, a 'new politics for equality of opportunity' was heralded, but this was

– as yet – only well defined on the issue of Germany unity, where emphasis was placed upon ‘equal opportunity’ between people in Western and Eastern Germany, and the economic regeneration of Eastern Germany provided ‘a target for more redistributive policies’ (SPD, 1994: 5, 6, 12). The 1998 manifesto talked openly about the state as a provider of Chancengleichheit: a central plank of this idea was ‘a comprehensive reform of education’ with the goal of ‘more achievement and more equality of opportunity’ (SPD, 1998: 9, 30-2). The intention was to promote the state as an enabling force, so that even a proposed increase in child support was conceptualised in the framework of opportunity (SPD, 1998: 26). Though the 1998 and the 2002 programmes for government continued to guarantee a decent minimum income through tax reductions for the low-paid, the 2002 document openly placed ‘equality of opportunity’ at the heart of its ‘Politics of the Centre’ (SPD, 2002: 10). In 2005, equality of opportunity had become so central that – as with the Labour Party – ‘equality’ was mostly substituted for ‘opportunity’ (‘Chancen’). For example, the party drew attention to the ‘better opportunities for young people in the labour market’, stressed the importance of ‘educational opportunities for all’ (e.g. through the increase in nursery places) (SPD, 2005: 4-5, 27-8). The one area of redistribution highlighted was financial support for families – a proposed ‘gain in income of almost 3,000 Euros per year’ (SPD, 2005: 5).

Policy Fields

Public Services

The notion of ‘public services’ in the UK is well defined, referring mostly to state-owned services in the areas of education, health and transport (high-profile services which the public use). Public services have formed the backbone of Labour Party policy and are a major pillar of its identity. Support for greater funding of schools, the National Health Service and, to a more limited extent, rail and bus services became more important in recent decades in the face of what was perceived to be the decline of these services under consecutive Conservative governments, between (1979- and 1997). The notion of public services has become more blurred in recent years with the privatisation of whole industries (e.g. for example British rail) and the tendering out of services at the local level (e.g.for example rubbish collection). Labour has nevertheless placed the improvement of public services at the heart of its policy agenda since the turn of the century. The literal translation of public services, ‘öffentliche Dienstleistungen’, has less resonance in Germany than in the UK. Although just services are better funded (through taxation) in Germany, many of these are run by semi-autonomous ‘parapublic’ institutions. The notion of öffentliche Dienstleistungen in the SPD is not highly observable as a concept. When social investment is discussed, it is with reference to the Sozialstaat (‘welfare state’ – see below) or specific policy areas like education rather than to public services as whole. This is due to the diverse nature of the policy areas, but also to the fact that many public services are governed from the regional level (e.g. for example education) so have less relevance for national policy programmes. Given the high quality of public services in Germany, the SPD has been placed in a more defensive role, seeking to maintain these standards. In this area, we have seen convergence from different starting points, given the higher levels of spending and debt in France and Germany than in the UK. While the SPD in government was forced to make modest cuts to public services, Labour has explicitly sought to bring the UK up to European levels of funding. Labour, furthermore, began to embrace the ‘social’ role of public services and the welfare state – through its focus on ‘social exclusion’ – that was inherent in the SPD approach. Even in the area of privatisation, the SPD has increasingly accepted that the involvement of the private sector (something in that is inherent in the New Labour approach) as a result of domestic budgetary constraints and pressure for de-regulation from the EU level.

Labour’s programmatic commitment to public services has been high: insisting, in particular, upon ‘a high quality National Health Service’ (Labour Party, 1992). The party’s position on public services has, however, seen some substantive changes. Increased funding was a strong message in 1992. While ‘additional resources’ were to be made available in both education and health over the first two years of a Labour government (Ibid.), they were not that great as Labour sought to free itself from a tax and spend image. In 1997, the focus for the manifesto was modernisation and reform rather than public services themselves. Little was made of increases in public spending – extra funds were to be found mostly through ‘modernisation efficiencies’ – though some modest commitments were made, for example, to raise ‘spending on the NHS in real terms every year’ (Labour Party, 1997). The big change came in 2001, when the party staked its reputation on the attainment of ‘world class public services’ through record levels of public spending that would result in the recruitment of ‘an extra 10,000 teachers… 20,000 more nurses, and at least 10,000 more GPs and consultants’ (Labour Party, 2001: 17). A second key development has been the role of the private sector in public services. In 1992, Labour was opposed to a 'commercialised contract system' in the NHS, rejected 'Conservative plans to privatise British Rail' and wished to 'end the de-regulation of the buses' (Labour Party, 1992). The early 1990s nevertheless saw the privatisation of British Rail and the de-regulation of local transport as part of the Conservative governments' broader privatisation strategy. In this new atmosphere, the party's 1997 platform began to advocate the use of the private sector in partnership with the public sector to increase efficiency in several areas, for example: 'to improve the condition of school buildings', and 'to improve the [London] Underground' (Labour Party, 1997). By 2001, the use of public-private partnerships had become a central theme in the delivery of 'world class public services': 'Where private-sector providers can support public endeavour, we should use them. A spirit of enterprise should apply as much to public service as to business' (Labour Party, 2001: 17). The 2001 manifesto, for example, called for the introduction of Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) for major capital investment programmes such as the building of hospitals and schools (Labour Party, 2001: 18-22). Labour therefore combined a quantitative increase in spending – in particular, on healthcare and education – with a qualitative reform of the public sector. Though the party argued that 'Investment in public services is up – an extra £1,000 per pupil per year… spending on the NHS has more than doubled to £69billion', it was equally clear in its commitment to 'extending patient power and choice' through greater involvement of the private sector (Labour, 2005: 6, 32, 60).

The SPD Basic Programme made only one reference to the term öffentliche Dienstleistungen, wherein it expressed the desire to 'improve public services and provision, in particular for disadvantaged groups' (SPD, 1989: 27). In 1990, it was only mentioned with regard to the creation of jobs primarily in the public sector (SPD, 1990: 24), while in the 1994 manifesto the term was not used at all. In 1998, it was only used to bundle together the financing of 'education and other services' (SPD, 1998: 15), and again in 2002 not at all. The significance of this omission, however, lies rather more in the nature of the German system of state funding and governance (see above) and the vocabulary used to describe services (i.e. Sozialstaat refers to the social role the state as a 'provider') than in any lack of commitment to these services. Furthermore, Germany has mostly high-quality, well-funded public services, whose status is not seriously threatened by the SPD's main political opposition (the Christian Democrats). A phrase that has come into common (political) usage in Germany and the SPD is 'Daseinvorsorge' (used to refer to 'state-funded public provision'). This term gained currency in the late 1990s in response to a perceived threat of enforced deregulation through the completion of the EU Single Market and the European Commission's interpretation of Competition Policy. The only reference to public services in 2005 therefore underlined the party's commitment (similar to the Socialist Party in France – PS, 2002) to an EU directive on services that is 'socially balanced' rather than based on the 'principle of production' (SPD, 2005: 22). What this meant in practice was, however, far from clear-cut.

The Welfare State

The concept of the 'welfare state' in the UK has not been frequently used in party programmes, and is regularly conflated with the term 'welfare', often referring to 'social security' paid by the state to assist the unemployed, the worse-off and the elderly through state benefits. The welfare state was attacked by the Conservative governments for its alleged excesses, and unemployment benefit was – in particular – targeted for reduction, to get people on their bikes and into work. While substantially increasing the funding of public services to provide opportunity, the Labour governments challenged the idea of a 'passive welfare state' (Giddens, 1998) with even more vehemence than their Conservative predecessors. Despite New Labour's emphasis on citizens' responsibilities, it combined this with a commitment to reducing poverty in the UK (which was relatively high by European standards) and investing public services (opportunities – see above). Although 'Wohlfahrtsstaat' is the literal translation of 'welfare state', the term Sozialstaat (which, as its name suggests, orientates towards the 'social') is more commonly used in Germany. The SPD has a clear affiliation to the welfare state, to perform the function of a social state and provide for essential public provision (as opposed to public services). From support for the extension of the welfare state in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the SPD's perception of the role of the state has changed markedly. The Schröder governments at first only tentatively supported measures to achieve a more active welfare state that acted functioned more as a 'trampoline' than a 'safety net' (Hombach, 2000), in a manner reminiscent of Labour's Third Way (see Blair and Schröder, 1999). In 2003, the SPD-led government nevertheless embarked upon a programme of radical reforms – 'Agenda 2010' – designed to make the social state more sustainable in the long-run (see below). Labour and the SPD have, thus, converged towards a corridor of values. This entails a common belief in social capital and citizens' rights to equality of opportunity through social investment in key areas like education and training. It also incorporates the general principle that it is the responsibility of the unemployed to accept job offers. In the wider context of European social democracy, the revisionist position of Labour and the SPD in this sense have become divided from the more traditional views of parties like the PS in France, which continues to view the benefits system in terms of citizens' rights and the state's responsibilities to provide a 'statutory social guarantee' (PS, 2002: 2-3).

As with public services, Labour's identity was built on the creation, expansion or defence of the welfare state. However, after the successful characterisation of Labour as a tax and spend party in the 1970s and 1980s, the welfare state was not an area the party wished to emphasise in their 1992 programme. Welfare state or just welfare did not appear in the entire manifesto. The party instead made modest commitments to tackling poverty in a few key areas – 'increased child benefit', 'higher pensions', and 'introducing a statutory minimum wage' (Labour Party, 1992). In 1997, the welfare state was tackled head-on, as the party sought to present new concepts for 'building a modern welfare state' and to win back this issue of perceived Conservative competence (Labour Party, 1997). This new conception of welfare was built on the idea that 'rights and responsibilities go together', 'to fulfil our objectives of promoting work incentives, reducing poverty and welfare dependency' – the unemployed 'have a responsibility to take up the opportunity of training places or work' (Ibid.). In the section 'We will get the unemployed from welfare to work', these ideas were laid down in concrete terms: Labour wanted to stop 'the growth of an 'underclass' in Britain', get '250,000 young unemployed off benefit and into work', make 'tax cuts for employers who create jobs for the long-term unemployed', and give 'effective help for lone parents' (Ibid.). In 2001, the party felt confident enough in its economic record to commit itself to direct measures against poverty and social exclusion: for instance, 'our ten-year goal is to halve child poverty... within two years, no pensioner need live on less than £100 per week' (Labour Party, 2001: 24). Yet welfare to work remained integral in this strategy, offering opportunity with responsibility as well as a minimum guaranteed 'take-home pay' for those willing to accept low-paid work (Labour Party, 2001: 26-7). Opportunity would be further enhanced by 'improving mainstream services, preventing people falling between the cracks, and reintegrating them into society when things go wrong' (Labour Party, 2001: 29). The centrepiece of the party's strategy was a job creation scheme – the 'New Deal' – funded by a windfall tax on recently privatised utilities. The 2005 manifesto could therefore both praise the achievements of an active welfare state (e.g. 'long-term youth unemployment has been virtually eradicated') and their success in offering a better deal for those unable to work (e.g. pensioners are '£1,500 a year better off') (Labour, 2005: 12).

The SPD Basic Programme praised the creation of prosperity 'through the extension of the welfare state and the policies of the unions' in the industrial world (SPD, 1989: 13). The party committed itself to the further 'maintenance' and 'extension' of the welfare state, opposing 'the privatisation of elementary risks' (SPD, 1989: 34). The 'pillars of the welfare state' were seen as 'state-guaranteed social security and participation, and the enforceable inalienable right to social benefits… the right to work as a human right' (SPD, 1989: 27, 34). In the 1990 programme, the Sozialstaat was not, however, mentioned by name, despite the reforms advocated for social security: 'securing and enlarging the social net… making pensions secure… carrying through health reforms' (SPD, 1990: 6). The short treatment of social policy in 1990 was largely down to the postmaterialist turn in the SPD (a response to the electoral threat of the Green parties), which led to a focus on environmental policy. 1994 saw the SPD return to its more traditional values, and the Sozialstaat was, once again, a big issue, with the party calling for a large reduction in areas of employment without 'social insurance' (SPD, 1994: 16). The third main section of this manifesto was entitled 'A Stable, Efficient, Welfare State', introducing 'work' as the basic foundation of the Sozialstaat, which would support families through child benefit, 'avoiding poverty of the elderly through basic social security', and making sure that 'health risks are not privatised' (SPD, 1994: 38-48). The issue of work as the basis of the welfare state was more strongly emphasised in 1998, as the welfare state increasingly revolved around the issue of employment: 'Our motto is 'work instead of social aid' (SPD, 1998: 21). The party added that a 'modern welfare state… offers a secure floor… [but also] the encouragement of individual responsibility and initiative, not nannying' (Ibid.). The similarities to New Labour's conception of welfare to work was illustrated by the SPD's attempt to introduce the notion of 'responsibility' (contrary to the Basic Programme) for 'recipients of social benefits to accept jobs that are offered to them' (Ibid.). The 2002 programme was more explicit in its intentions to provide 'both incentives and penalties for the unemployed', in combination with job creation schemes such as the 'Jump' programme to combat youth unemployment (SPD, 2002: 24-5). Agenda 2010 proved to be a sea-change in SPD policy on the welfare state. In response to Germany's burgeoning public debt, the SPD-led government provided a radical response: for example, freezing pension increases for several years and introducing penalties (and incentives) for the unemployed to return to work. The introduction of penalties for those not accepting jobs, through the SPD's notorious Hartz reforms, was nevertheless largely responsible for the haemorrhaging of support amongst the party's traditional constituency. It also led indirectly to the emergence of a new and (threatening) electoral coalition on the hard left of the spectrum ('Die Linke'). In 2005, the party was, thus, keen to reassure its supporters that it would 'preserve the welfare state' (whose 'main role remains that of social levelling'), whilst also arguing that an 'active state… that helps people to lead an independent life' (SPD, 2005: 9).

The Language of European Social Democracy

The paper began by stating the importance of understanding what politicians say through an analysis of the language they use, because 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 43). This is especially the case given the increasing sophistication of political parties in mastering the implications of electoral competition, manifesting itself in 'spin'. Here, the language of politicians and political parties can better reflect their electoral strategy than their policy programme. A qualitative discourse analysis contextualises language, thereby offering us the opportunity to bridge the gap between what politicians say and what they are (their programmatic identity).

We have seen how the meaning of keywords in party programmes changes across time and space. This is particularly insightful for European social democracy, because – with the help of a contextual analysis – it allows us to move beyond the rhetoric, to identify a convergence of social democratic visions from different starting points. This, Moravcsik (2005: 23) describes as a 'continental liberalisation and British social democratisation'. On a conceptual level, Labour and the SPD have stated the need to balance economic progress with social justice, but have also moved towards an emphasis on equality of opportunity. The Labour Party has tried to improve public services (from a relatively low level in the UK), while the SPD and PS have sought to preserve their social models (from a higher starting point) (Paterson and Sloam, 2006). Labour and the SPD have, on the other hand, sought to adapt welfare states to provide incentives for people to work, whilst at the same time seeking to focus public spending on research, education and training (as well as expansionary job creation programmes).

It is not within the scope of this paper to fully discuss the reasons for the convergence of European social democracy, but – suffice it to say – it has been the result of a need for common solutions to common challenges. The most clearly identifiable cause of the common challenges has been the European integration process. The EU has provided the framework for social democratic policy, and thereby 'downloaded' policy to Labour and the SPD (Ladrech, 2003; Poguntke et al., 2006). This, then, is the first dimension of Europeanisation. The most obvious examples of this are the obligations demanded by the completion of the Single Market and the fiscal rules governing Economic and Monetary Union. Second, as social democratic parties have recognised the importance of European integration for their policy programmes, they have tried to 'upload' their policies to the EU level (Ibid.). With this in mind, many social democratic parties have sought to establish a consensus on minimum standards for European social policy. Although Labour – in the context of the relatively Eurosceptic UK – has generally tried to oppose these moves, Tony Blair did nevertheless reverse the opt-out from the 'social protocol' (attached to the Maastricht Treaty) when he came to power in 1997. Since an EU social policy remains very limited in its scope, the third dimension of Europeanisation is particularly significant. As shown in the case of the SPD and Labour party 'policy learning' within European social democracy ('crossloading') has been encouraged by the common framework of European integration and the increasing activity of 'transfer networks' (Paterson and Sloam, 2005).

The different national and institutional contexts within which the parties operate have nevertheless limited any convergence. While we cannot look at the nature of the contexts here, they are crucial in determining the continuing (if reduced) diversity of social democratic programmes. Substantive differences remain, for example, over the role of the state (versus the private sector) in the provision of services, the role of workers' representatives in industry, and in the nature of the benefits system. These differences explain the divisions between the parties over the completion of the Single Market (e.g. for example the EU services directive) and the necessity of 'binding' social regulations (e.g. for example the European Charter of Fundamental Rights).

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