

Social Europe

The Treaty of Rome (1957) commits Member States to, 'ensure social progress of their countries by common action to eliminate the barriers which divide Europe.' Since the EU's foundation this has been interpreted in different ways by different politicians, some wanting freedom for the market and others greater protection for workers and domestic industries. Since the mid-1980s, attempts by the European Union to create a unified approach to social policy for all members have come into conflict with the desire of some, especially Britain, to keep control of this policy area. While some see the EU as a primarily economic organisation, others argue that this cannot be separated from the effects it has on society as a whole.

History

After World War II, most countries in western Europe adopted policies of welfare and full employment that provided generous support for the poor, sick, elderly and unemployed. Although each country had a slightly different interpretation of these policies, this broad approach was considered by some to be a distinct 'European Social Model', different from the *free market* approach of the USA. These ideas influenced the wording of the Treaty of Rome, the setting-up of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Social Fund (ESF).

When some politicians started challenging this *consensus* during the 1970s and 1980s by overturning trade union rights and cutting benefits in order to encourage stronger economic growth, those on the left attempted to use the European Community to maintain the 'European Social Model'. This clash of ideas was played out on the European stage in the late 1980s as a battle between the pro-market British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the EU Commission President Jacques Delors. Mr Delors presented a Charter of Fundamental Social Rights designed to protect workers, which Mrs Thatcher opposed because it would restrict free enterprise. When Delors' Charter was attached to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 as the Social Chapter, Britain used its *opt-out* to avoid it becoming part of British law.

The slow co-ordination of social policy

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) proposed EU level regulation of social policy in a range of areas covering health and safety, gender equality, collective bargaining, social security, social exclusion and the right of workers to play a role in managing companies they work for. Some of these proposals went much further than existing British law and were strongly opposed by the Conservative government then led by John Major. However, when the EU used its existing health and safety powers to bring in another law to limit working hours – known as the Working Time Directive – the UK government had no power to opt-out.

The slow integration of Britain into EU social policy accelerated under Prime Minister Tony Blair: in 1997 Britain signed up to the Social Chapter and the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights in 2000. The EU is currently finalising legislation to increase the rights of temporary workers. In July 2008, the Commission proposed a new Health Directive which would force member states to pay for citizens to seek treatment in any EU country. However, reforming Social Europe has not been straightforward. For example in April 2008, EU Trade Union representatives were angered when an EU court ruled that member states could set minimum a wage for foreign workers.

The Charter of Fundamental Human Rights

As part of the Nice Treaty (2001), member states agreed a Charter of Fundamental Human Rights that commits them to maintain a comprehensive set of rights for their citizens. It has been criticised by some because it gives power to the EU, through the European Court of Justice (ECJ), to rule on many aspects of social and employment law.

Globalisation

In recent years concern has grown in some European countries that the EU is not doing enough to protect jobs in the face of competition from countries like China and India. It has become increasingly common to see protests on the streets of many European cities (most recently France and Germany) protesting against the effects of globalisation. So far, the EU's attempts to respond to this through its Lisbon strategy have had limited effects.

Quotes

'The purpose of our social model should be to enhance our ability to compete, to help our people cope with globalisation, to let them embrace its opportunities and avoid its dangers. Of course we need a social Europe. But it must be a social Europe that works.' Tony Blair, British Prime Minister

'We want out of the Social Chapter, which is a threat to British jobs. The European Union is spewing out too many regulations. It's holding our economy back.' Michael Howard, Conservative Party Leader, 2003-2005

'Yes, we need more flexible labour markets, but not a return to the Dickensian sweatshops of the 19th century' Jacques Santer, EU Commission President 1995-1999

Technical Terms

Free market: business governed by the laws of supply and demand, not restrained by government interference.

Opt-out: the ability of a Member State to permanently exempt itself from part of an EU treaty.

Links

- http://europa.eu.int/pol/socio/index_en.htm
- http://www.esc.eu.int/how/index_en.asp