

Presented at the Launching of the Exhibition

*For Freedom and Social Justice – Social democratic political platforms
and practical politics since the middle of the 19th century*

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Reflections on the realities and potentials for membership- and program-based political parties in Germany

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When you will have a look at the exhibition, you will be aware of two concepts of political philosophy between Germany, especially the Social Democratic Party, and the Philippines: Here in a post feudal society the main aim for politicians seem to be, as some sociologists write, to come to power and to profit from it. There is hardly a difference to notice in the political, social or economic concepts between the majority and the opposition. Also for this reason the change of a politician from one side to the other does not create a problem for his or her credibility, as we have seen on some occasions. But to talk about Philippine politics is not my task today. This will be Professor Randy David's responsibility.

This exhibition shows a different approach, that of a program based and membership-based political party. with such a program approach, the Social Democratic Party, or short SPD, in Germany, has survived more than 140 years of a very stormy historical period, from the German Confederation to the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, the National Socialist dictatorship to this day of a free democratic republic. The party was suppressed and forbidden during times in the 19 century and under the dictatorship of the Nazi regime. in the communist part of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, it was forcibly merged with the communist party. Today, the party is reunited, alive and striving. In fact, it is the oldest German political party. And it seems that this long life has to do with its concept of programmatic policy and of devoted membership.

The leading values right from the beginning of the social movement in the mid 19th century, which led to the establishment of a political party were the principles of **freedom, justice and solidarity**. **Those values have been** applied and modified according to the changing needs and possibilities of the German society and remain the cornerstones of the mission of the party until today.

The Leftist movement in Germany was always program oriented. Programs have served as a compass and as an anchor for the social democratic movement and its party. This is important in times of suppression, but it is equally important once you are in power, when painful compromises have to be struck with other political forces with whom you might have to share power.

It is not the intention of the exhibition to present a model to be applied in a completely different society like the Philippines. Each country must find its own way of democratic cooperation. But I think, it contains elements and shows practical experiences of politics, successful and less successful ones, which are worthwhile discussing. It might be worthwhile examining, in how far some of these elements could also be useful to adapting them in strengthening your own civil society.

The industrial revolution, the demographic development with a fast rising proletariat living and working under abominable conditions in the 19th century in Germany and elsewhere in Europe required a political answer. This was given by the Communist Manifesto in 1848 written by Karl Marx and Friedrich

Engels. For a long time it was the leading philosophical basis for what developed out of several socialist movements into the Social Democratic Labour Party in 1869, preceded by the General German Workers Union of 1863.

One of the main features of this programmatic development of the SPD is the continuous adaptation and further development of the program, based on a constant monitoring whether the program still reflects the needs and necessities of the society under the guiding principles of justice, freedom and solidarity. This has always been done under the broad participation of the members of the party. Here the important element of a party membership in formulating the party program in a democratic way comes in. Major strategic decisions have to be agreed upon from bottom to top. As a matter of course, there are often contradicting opinions within the party membership. Finally you have to decide by majorities. And sometimes, minorities who cannot accept majority decisions leave the party and form their own groups or parties. This has happened with the radical socialists which finally formed the Communist Party in Germany in the first half of the 20th century.

If you look around in this exhibition, there have been a high number of party programs following each other, most of them based on the former one and developing it further. However, some contain a dramatic breach with the past one. (Just to numerate the programs: Eisenach Program 1869, Gotha Program 1875, Erfurt Program 1891, Görlitz Program 1921, Heidelberg Program 1925, the Prague Manifesto 1934 while in exile during the Nazi regime, the most important Godesberg Program of 1959, the Berlin Program after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Leipzig Program 1990, finally the Hamburg Program of 2007. All of these programs reflect the changing circumstances in the society, thus did and do contribute to maintain and preserve the identity of the SPD and give guidelines for a Socialdemocratic Government. Just to recall the most important and dramatic changes: The call for the right of women's vote in the 19th century as part of the request for equal rights for men and women, (finally achieved in 1919). At that time this was unheard of. The abandonment of the revolutionary Marxist concept at the beginning of the 20th century; instead the acceptance of following reform policy in a democratic society, however based on Marxist ideas. The radical change, from a pure workers' party to a peoples' party in the Heidelberg program 1925. This program already at that time requested the establishment of the United States of Europe as the first party in Europe, in the interest of a peaceful development of Europe. Finally in the Godesberg program of 1959, when Marxism was officially abandoned as the main foundation of social democratic policy. Democratic socialism was now defined as the perpetual pursuit of freedom and justice.

The step from a Workers' Party to a People's Party, as expressly stated in the 1925 program, and which reflected the changing composition of the population, had and still has far reaching consequences. There was no other way; otherwise the SPD would have remained an ever shrinking minority as the percentage of workers in the German society was shrinking, without a chance of ever winning the majority to form a government. But with the development to a peoples' party, of course, the party itself is changing, as its membership becomes less homogenous. There are now fewer workers beside middle class people, intellectuals, and some business men: this requires a readiness and openness for a much differentiated discussion and formulation of the program: It is necessary to embrace and integrate a much broader spectrum of opinions and positions. As a consequence you have to strive for compromises without losing the identity of the party.

At the same time the German society, and this goes for other European societies as well, I assume, has changed dramatically: It has become a very individualistic society. The ties to the party, which formerly were almost a matter of a person's own identity, and did hold for life time, are getting weaker. The 'glue' which ties the person and the electorate to the party, has lost its strength. This goes especially for the younger generation. At the same time, you observe many people's movements, very often concentrated on local issues, or regional ones. In Bonn, where I have lived for many years, in our

Barangay there was a people's movement to save the wonderful old trees in a park which the city administration wanted to cut to replace them by young ones, because they assumed the maintenance of the old trees was too cumbersome and expensive. People chained themselves to the trees at night in order to save them and were finally successful. The trees are still standing and blossoming wonderfully. Here the party – the parties - has and have to be careful not to disregard these growing people's movements which are part and a sign of a growing civil society.

As a consequence of these changes in our society, all major peoples' parties, the ones from the left as well as those from the right, view their electorate more or less in the middle of the society, some in the middle-left spectrum, the others in the middle-right one. The important task is not to lose its identity or to blur it so much that it becomes unclear for what the party stands. This has happened to the SPD with the formation of the new 'Linke', a merger of dissatisfied radical Socialdemocrats, Trade Unionists and the former communist party, for whom the SPD was too much concentrated on the middle strata of society. In some way it had also happened to the SPD some years before when the Green Party was established, composed originally to a great extent by disappointed Social Democrats: The SPD had too long ignored the burning issue of ecology, not sufficiently taken care of new developments, especially ecological peoples' movements which sprang up in the society. Now the Green Party is a powerful party of its own. All this makes party politics even more difficult than before.

Other phenomena threaten peoples' parties like the SPD: It is unrealistic in Germany, with functioning free and fair elections, to achieve absolute majority for one party. So you will always have coalition governments or even a grand coalition like at the moment. This means again to reach additional compromises on a daily basis, without losing too much of your identity. However, it is necessary, and everybody in this political game has to learn it. The alternative would be to remain powerless on the opposition benches and not being able to influence the society according to its political objectives.

I have already mentioned at some instances the importance of party membership for a democratically based development of the party program. It is a major element for the functioning of a democratic party in our society. Just two additional remarks: All the representatives, delegates of the party at the different levels are elected by the relevant local, regional, federal assemblies of party members from bottom to top. So it is the party membership who chooses the representatives or candidates for the elections on the different levels in an independent way. Sometimes, of course, regional or federal party bosses try to exert their influence to favor certain candidates. But this does not necessarily work; the members who elect their candidates are independent.

Membership fees are the main source of income for the SPD. These monthly fees are suggested by the party according to your own income. To pay them is a moral obligation, as far as the level of the amount is concerned. But without paying at all, you have no voting right and will have to leave the party in due time. This source of income of hundreds of thousands of party members gives a high degree of independence vis-à-vis pressure groups. These funds are the main source of funding for the – centrally organized – elections in every constituency (apart from contributions by the public budgets according to neutral and transparent criteria). And again, this secures the candidates from unwanted vested interests, who might exert their very specific influence by donations for the election campaign. Even more important: This system allows candidates to run with success for a mandate and a legislative seat irrespective whether you are rich or poor. There is no need to use your mandate, once you are elected, to gain money, legally or illegally, in order to be able to finance the next election campaign.

Much more can and should be said what means membership in a party, also for the society in which party members live. But I will stop here. My time has run out. Thanks for your attention.