



FROM ICE PICK TO ICE PACK?

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In the late 60s and early 70s, the universities of Europe were dominated by the Left. A Left that was arrogant, fractured, but still convinced that they were the future. Trotskyites contested with garden-variety Marxists and hard line Stalinists. I recall a passionate Trotskyist speech at my own university, calling for an open mind in choosing allies. It was magisterially put down by a member of the Revolutionary Anarchist Federation with the words: "the only time Trotsky had an open mind was when he had an ice pick in it".

Such was the atmosphere in which Conservative students were required to operate. A generation abandoned their tweed jackets and sherry drinking to defend fundamental democratic freedoms and personal liberty. These pioneers of the Centre Right learned how to counter extremist tactics and subsequently took control of many university student unions themselves.

Just as the student Left was international, so the student Centre Right learned to make alliances across the linguistic and political debris of their parents' politics. Conservatives, Moderates, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Gaullists and Giscardians made common cause. In 1974 the European Union of Conservative & Christian Democrat Students (ECCS) adopted the new name "European Democrat" to express the solidarity of the Centre Right. They did so hoping that the senior parties would follow their example.

From the campuses of 1968 the struggle evolved into a conflict with the Moscow financed student and youth organisations of Eastern Europe. Those tested in the strife of student politics went on to fight for a stronger European Union, with powerful federal institutions, that would attract the other Europe held in thrall behind the Iron Curtain.

EDS pressed for direct elections to the European Parliament and subsequently for the European Single Market. By virtue of their pan-European experience they became advisors to their national political parties as the process of the European integration deepened. When the Berlin Wall fell, they already had the experience, the contacts and the passion to be in the vanguard of those helping recreate free societies in the East.

After all this grand drama it was perhaps inevitable that EDS should see an over concentration on Classical Liberal economics. There was a loss of focus on those other conservative traditions suspicious of state power, such as Burkean Conservatism Proudhonian Federalism. Somewhere along the way, EDS failed to notice the great environmental issues of the day. Some flirted with euro -scepticism and its bastard step sister climate scepticism. They retreated into academic debate about flat taxes and missed the environmental clarion call to their generation of Europeans. What does the Centre Right have to say about a climate-constrained Europe in a post-American world?

Graduates of EDS under forty are ideally placed to be advocates for their generation inside the EPP family. If they recognise climate change as the greatest market failure in human history, they can speak out powerfully on behalf of inter-generational justice and the need for much technical and intellectual adaptation. After all they are the ones who will live to see the chaos of a 'four degree world' if nothing is done by this generation of politicians. While there is an urgent need for intelligent debate about mechanisms for countering the warming of our planet, there is no need for more recruits to the well-financed ranks of 'useful idiots' dancing to the tune of the fossil fuel lobbies. Environment driven migration, energy security, the loss of glaciers feeding the great rivers of Asia with their vast agricultural populations, geo-engineering and the role of the military in a warming world all require high quality thought of the kind EDS and its alumni have provided in the past. Each generation of EDS activist has responded to different challenges. I have no doubt that the same will be true for this generation. Now however they can call on the rich personal and intellectual heritage of their predecessors who will occupy some of the most influential positions in European politics. EDS has moved beyond the politics of the Trotskyite ice pick. It urgently needs to mature into the politics of the Arctic ice pack.

