A Balanced Society for a Growing Economy: Restoring a Confident and Prosperous Middle Class

The term "middle class" is not just an empty political slogan. For the EPP, the "middle class" is about more than income levels, social class or educational attainment. It is about all the people, and the families, who want to contribute to society and improve their local communities for the betterment of future generations.

Much of the debate regarding the position of the "middle class" has focussed on the issue of income inequality. The ability of populist political movements to gain voters among the "middle classes" symbolises a deeper dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction and anxiety that has a considerably wider basis than the confines of economic data. We must show and reassure the people that we have always kept their interest at the centre of our politics and we shall do that also in the future.

The EPP is determined to address the concerns of the middle class and restore belief in the ability to achieve a higher standard of living and offer better opportunities for their children. Our policies emphasise job security, equality of opportunity and social mobility. We believe that by working hard you must get further in life.

New technologies, business practices and global linkages are changing our labour markets and societies faster than would have been deemed possible even a decade ago. They are crucial drivers of long-term economic growth and job creation. However, the EPP recognises that the rapid pace of these changes has increased the uncertainties and anxieties facing working families. The EPP is committed to making sure that as many people as possible have the skills necessary to compete in, and draw the benefits of, new innovations and technologies.

To counter these real worries, the EPP acknowledges that we require a broad range of socioeconomic policies which accurately reflect the day to day challenges facing millions of "middle class" Europeans.

1. "Economic Policy is Social Policy": Building Real Life Social Networks for the Digital Age

Defending the Social Market Economy means ensuring that our society and our local communities are equipped to deal with the realities facing families today. This requires all parts of society to contribute to building inclusive economies that work for everybody, regardless of age, sex, ethnic or religious background, occupation or income. The EPP remains committed to ensuring that the European Pillar of Social Rights provides a framework for realising the benefits of the social market economy. We continue to support an approach to social rights which is predicated on the belief that "Economic policy is social policy and social policy is economic policy. You cannot disentangle the two – and we need action on both at the same time".[1] In this context, the EPP:

[1] Commissioner Thyssen, Speech on the European Pillar of Social Rights, Plenary Debate of the Economic and Social Committee, Brussels, 25 January 2017.

- Acknowledges that more must be done to make sure that everyone can benefit and prosper in the digitally driven flexible economy of the future;
- Acknowledges that social policy is a shared competence and reaffirms that in all decisions, the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality should be respected;
- Acknowledges that social policy needs to be decided and implemented as close to the citizens as possible to make policies efficient in the local context;
- Calls on member states to pay special attention to developing strong and vibrant local communities to act as real life social networks. In turn providing a healthy and sustainable societal basis for further economic growth.

2. Families' Best at the Core of a Sustainable Work Life Balance Model

Today's working environment is becoming more fragmented, more flexible and more mobile as technology and globalisation transform economies. However, these trends can result in significant levels of stress as modern families – be they dual earner, single earner or single parent – try to combine family life with the challenges of the modern working world. This stress can often be exacerbated by gender inequalities in the labour market notwithstanding the fact that young women tend to obtain more education and outperform young men academically. Many women leave the labour force, particularly following the birth of a child. This is also reflected in salary levels, pension provision and representation in senior management. In the context of Europe's ongoing economic and demographic challenges, this is a considerable challenge. The EPP:

- Recognises that greater participation of both genders and people of all ages in the labour market is vitally important in restoring an aspirational "middle class" as a cornerstone of a vibrant European society;
- Recognises that by facilitating greater choice in how parents and care-givers choose to organise work and caring responsibilities we support working families and better economic outcomes;
- Calls on member states to support the transformation from a "maternity leave" to a "parental leave" society. Family policies must be such that they treat both parents equally and do not discriminate or offer incentives for one or the other to drop out of the labour market;
- Calls on member states to ensure that no discrimination is allowed against single parent families in terms of family policies and facilitating labour market access;
- Calls on member states to actively facilitate and promote flexible working arrangements with parents with young children and those with other care responsibilities;
- Calls on member states to ensure that both boys and girls educational needs are met to reduce gender inequalities in higher education;
- Supports the implementation of a comprehensive policy that ensures the conditions and incentives for supporting families.

3. Childcare as a Driver of Social Mobility and Economic Growth

Increasing women's labour force participation is crucial for Europe's economy and competitiveness. It is undoubtedly a fact that more equal countries have obtained a higher level of economic development both globally and in Europe. Access to affordable, flexible and high-quality childcare is a key concern for parents throughout the EU. It is a major source of parental stress, a key element of the work-life balance debate and, in many countries, a major source of financial expenditure. This is underpinned by the rightful expectation of women in particular that they will have the choice to continue to develop their careers regardless of whether or not they decide to start a family. Allowing parents the option to avail of flexible childcare options is a prerequisite for families to facilitate social mobility and economic development. The EPP:

- Recognises that increasing the provision of high quality childcare can have a major impact on increasing social mobility, particularly for families with low incomes. This in turn results in a range of positive economic outcomes in terms of employment and income in later life;
- Supports continued work into the development of more comprehensive childcare systems at national level, while acknowledging member states prerogatives relating to the design, structure and financing of such systems;
- Reaffirms that it remains committed to highlighting best practice in childcare models;
- Calls on member states to ensure access to affordable and high-quality childcare for families in order to allow parents the ability to combine work and family life;
- Calls on member states to facilitate flexibility in childcare systems so as to give parents the widest possible choice about if, when and how they avail of such services.