PREFACE

This book started from a puzzle. Given the failings of neo-liberalism revealed by the economic crisis starting in 2008, why was social democracy not triumphant? After all, its political success over much of the post-war period was bolstered by a particular representation of the inter-war years and a belief that governments had put the old economics behind them, while some social democrats had given early warnings about the follies being committed from the 1990s. Despite the caricature about social democratic governments being free spenders, they have tended in office to be rather fiscally responsible. Nor was there reason to believe that electors had rejected social democratic ideas about public services, although they may in some cases have become less tolerant of welfare dependants.

There is no simple answer to this puzzle but the contributors to this collection agree that social democracy's problems do not stem from a fundamental flaw in the core idea, nor that social and economic change have rendered it redundant. Social democracy is in good health in some places, while elsewhere it is struggling to find its voice. One problem lies in the realm of ideas, where neo-liberalism has gained the ideological hegemony, to the extent that social democratic parties internalise it and seek to modify it only at the margins. Another is the inability to adapt to a more complex but still socially stratified and unequal society. A third lies in the decline of mass party politics and of the social institutions such as trade unions, which provided the means for social democrats to mobilise.

Our contributors do not present a single vision of social democracy but have been encouraged to interpret it in their own ways. The result is a complex picture, highlighting problems but showing that social democratic thought and practice are by no means dead.

We hesitated over the title of the book, fearing that the word 'crisis' was

too dramatic or fatalistic. Yet, used in its original sense, a crisis is a moment of change, which provides opportunities as well as threats but makes the status quo untenable. The economic woes of the decade provide such a moment and a challenge.

We dedicate the book to our friend Stephen Maxwell, intellectual and activist, whose dream of an independent social democratic Scotland was profoundly shaped by his internationalist convictions. Stephen died before we went to press but his contribution to our seminar in Edinburgh, commenting on the draft chapters, as well as our discussions over the years, have left a strong and inspiring influence.

Note

1. Even the much-criticised dash for growth of the first Mitterrand government in 1981–3 registered smaller fiscal and trade deficits than the contemporaneous Reagan administration, while the Thatcher government in Britain was rescued only by the influx of oil revenues (which were to leave no lasting legacy).