Preface

2008 will, without a doubt, go down in the annals of world economic history. What neither ideology, nor the political balance of power, nor even ‘people power’ had been able to bring about has been triggered by the excesses of financial capitalism itself: a radical reappraisal of the ‘casino economy’ which has evolved over the past thirty years. Although 2009 is opening on a scene of devastation, as amply demonstrated by this edition of ‘Social Developments in the EU’, the year is at the same time opening on new debates, unthinkable until very recently.

This new scope for debate contains great potential for change in the European Union. The rediscovery of a public role in the economy should help to stabilise and revitalise the economy, but in other ways than before. For the credit crunch must not be allowed to mask today’s other major challenge: the much-needed transition to sustainable development and measures to combat climate disruption.

Politics – national, European and international – is therefore (back) at the centre of a game that is wide open, in which it has to redefine its own role. The challenges confronting us in this context, where there is everything to play for and certainties no longer exist, are immense and unprecedented – and hence fascinating. Two risks arise, however: firstly, that the ‘return of the State’ might be synonymous with national navel-gazing and, secondly, that this ‘each to their own’ attitude, pursued in haste, might focus on unsustainable activities. Thus, although the new scope for debate contains great potential for change, the changes made will not necessarily lend themselves to the type of sustainable development made essential by climate change.

The European Union has an important part to play in this context: not only because it is in essence an exercise in cooperation, and cooperation is what the Member States need now, but also because the EU is the appropriate level at which to determine the content, thrust and meaning of this new model of growth.
Above all, finally, it is undoubtedly at European level that the most valid contribution can be made to an often neglected aspect of the transition to a low-carbon economy: its social dimension. It has to be admitted, in fact, that this issue has not yet come into its own. The social parts of the European initiatives underpinning this transition – whether it be the energy/climate package or the Action Plan for sustainable consumption, production and industry – are anything but a priority at present. It is to be feared that, unless the social dimension gains greater prominence, Europe's population will not lend its support to the transition.

This tenth edition of ‘Social Developments in the EU’ aims to concentrate attention on this specific aspect of the fundamental issues confronting the European Union.

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