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Aan: Veerle Solia
Onderwerp: Willy Brandt – in celebration of the centenary of his birth

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December 18 2013, marks the centenary of the birth of Willy Brandt, former Chancellor of Germany and leader of the SPD, and former president of the Socialist International, a figure-head that strove for freedom and democracy throughout his life, influencing many and changing the face of our International.

Willy Brandt was born Herbert Ernst Karl Frahm, in Lübeck, northern Germany, on 18 December 1913. He was motivated by politics at a very early age, joining radical left youth movements from the age of 16. By the age of 18 in 1931 he helped to form the Socialist Workers Party (SAP), a Marxist left organisation. In 1933 Brandt sought exile from Nazi Germany, first in Norway, where he assumed his pseudonym Willy Brandt, and later in Sweden. His distrust of communism began while covering the civil war in Spain. Mary Saran, much later, wrote in a review of his 1971 publication Brandt in Exile 'It was his ability to learn from bitter experiences which strengthened his belief in the desirability and possibility of a democratic reconstruction of society'.

In 1946 Brandt returned to Germany, reclaiming his citizenship in 1948 but keeping his adopted name. In the same year he re-joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Brandt's determined push for rights and freedoms for all people offered great hope during the backdrop of the Cold War and the geopolitical discord that was taking place internationally. In 1957 he was presented the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Freedom Award bestowed on the 'ability of an individual to shape history and change for the better a world moving toward freedom for all'. In the same year he served as President of the Bundesrat in Bonn and as Mayor of West Berlin, a post he held until 1966, standing as a symbol against the division of the city.

In 1964 Brandt was elected Chairman of SPD, and in 1966 became Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor under an SPD coalition with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU). Three years later, the SPD formed a coalition with the Free Democratic Party of Germany (FDP) and Brandt was elected Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Throughout these years, Brandt was unwavering in his commitment to alleviating relations between West and East Germany and he became widely known for his Ostpolitik that generated at first some dispute but later triumphed. Time magazine named him Man of the Year in 1970 for 'seeking to end World War II by bringing about a fresh relationship between East and West' and in 1971 he received the Nobel Peace Prize for 'having shown the way for a meaningful

dialogue between East and West'. He never ceased working for peace throughout his life.

Brandt resigned as Chancellor in May 1974 but continued as head of the SPD until 1987 and was honorary chairman until his death.

Brandt's views were strongly reflected in the Socialist International. He believed in the true values of social democracy and knew that the implementation of these values would hasten the improvement of freedoms and rights for the people of Europe, and across the globe, who were then so entrenched in the Cold War confrontation. At the VII SI Congress in Rome, on 23-27 October 1961, Brandt gave a speech on the Berlin crisis and his role in the organisation continued to grow. He was elected Vice-President of the SI at its tenth Congress, on 5-8 May 1966, becoming a major actor and contributor in the work of the International and its council meetings.

Ten years later, in 1976, Willy Brandt was elected President of the Socialist International, and in his first speech at the Congress in Geneva on 26 November, he spoke openly and frankly on his vision of the world at that time and on his hopes for what the SI could achieve in the future: 'The rich nations will not remain rich if the poorhouses of mankind continue to grow' he said, 'In the long run there will be no islands of privilege, no oases of happiness at the expense of others. The offensive for peace must join forces with the struggle against worldwide misery; we must take it on our shoulders... We need the courage to see the world and its conditions as complicated as they are. In doing so we follow a good tradition: the socialist movement from its very inception has been an appeal to man's ability to think'.

With Brandt as president, the SI began to surpass European concerns, reaching out to all corners of the globe to extend solidarity and to demonstrate the depth of what could be accomplished by socialists even during times of serious East-West divisions. Brandt had a new vision for the Socialist International, one that was formed from his experience of international politics, of repression and neo-colonialism. He wanted to create a truly global International, one that would be comprised of member parties from all over the world, and one that would support and encourage these political parties in their struggles to establish democracy, freedoms and rights. Brandt's understanding was that poverty, war and inequality would continue or worsen without global solidarity, and that the International was perhaps the only organisation of its kind capable of achieving such solidarity. In 1977 Brandt was appointed chairman of the Independent Commission for International Development Issues, and the Brandt Report, which broke new ground with a set of far-reaching proposals, was published in 1980. In 1984 he was awarded the Third World Prize by the Third World Foundation 'in recognition of his contribution to world Peace and Third World development'.

Brandt's vision for the SI was successful. SI party membership grew, and the International's commitment to issues worldwide expanded. SI Councils, commission meetings and missions were frequently organised in new locations, emphasising the increasing global interest of the organisation, calling for social justice and greater support for countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In 1984, the SI Bureau meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, made headlines as it constituted the biggest political gathering of its type that had taken place in the Latin American and Caribbean region at that time, and was also larger than any previous SI Bureau meeting that had been held; 47 political parties from 39 countries attended.

Under Brandt's presidency the International was also forceful in calling for an end to apartheid in South Africa. The SI carried out a number of visits to the region, including a meeting in 1984 with leaders of the Frontline States, the ANC and SWAPO in Arusha, Tanzania, and a meeting of the Presidium in Botswana in 1986, hosted by then President of Botswana Quett Masire, to express SI solidarity in the closest location to South Africa it could meet. 'There could be no compromise with apartheid' it could not be reformed, it had to disappear, Brandt personally told PW Botha, then President of the Republic of South Africa, on a trip there in April 1986. During this visit Brandt had repeatedly requested a visit with Nelson Mandela, who was then incarcerated, but the South African government denied him this. Brandt did meet with Winnie Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, and spoke with trade unionists, civil rights campaigners, church representatives, and residents, reiterating the strong message of support from the International and from social democrats worldwide, in the struggle for rights and freedoms and an end to apartheid. After Mandela was released, Willy Brandt invited him to visit Bonn, expressing the support of the SI as a network of international solidarity.

Brandt presented the SI as a 'framework for cooperation' worldwide, but it became much more than just a framework under his leadership. Relationships with political actors from new SI member parties in developing and struggling countries widened the scope of issues the organisation dealt with. The SI published reports from member parties on the realities of their individual countries, and the truth on fundamental issues such as poverty, housing, health and education, drawing attention to the fact these were political issues that demanded and could be overcome with social democratic policies. Brandt emphasised that global collaboration and peace were interdependent, and this concept was incorporated in the policies of the SI family worldwide.

At the XVIII SI Congress in Stockholm in 1989, Brandt said 'the SI has triggered off developments which go way beyond the confines of Europe and have improved international cooperation... But we are far from the end of the road. In fact, we are just at the beginning of what we want to accomplish internationally'. These words continue to embody the spirit of the International.

Brandt was sadly unable to attend the XIX Congress in Berlin that marked his retirement from the International on 15-17 September 1992. In his memorable message to the Congress however, he wrote 'The fact that we have... become a truly worldwide and thus also a diverse community, affords me – and all of us – special satisfaction.' At this Congress in Berlin, Felipe González, then Prime Minister of Spain and SI Vice-President, said of Brandt in his opening speech 'Without his foresight, courage and integrity we would never have overcome Euro-centrism to achieve the worldwide affiliation that is so indispensable in the world in which we live'.

The death of Brandt, on 8 October 1992, was a tremendous loss for the Socialist International, as it was for the world. Willy Brandt served in the leadership of the Socialist International for twenty-six years, having first been elected as Vice-President in 1966, and was subsequently elected president six times. The Socialist International was privileged to have Willy Brandt at its helm for such a length of time and during such a significant period of political change. His legacy remains in the work of the International, which today has 155 member parties and organisations from all continents, and 55 member parties currently in government. On Brandt's seventieth birthday in December 1983, in an accolade to Willy, writer Guenter Grass said 'You held your course from the outset, you stayed 'left and free'. And for that I, your friend and comrade, thank you.' The Socialist International reiterates this deep feeling of gratitude, respect and admiration today, on the centenary of his birth.

Luis Ayala
Secretary General



SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL, MARITIME HOUSE, OLD TOWN, CLAPHAM, LONDON SW4 0JW, UNITED KINGDOM
T: (44 20) 7627 4449 | F: (44 20) 7720 4448 / 7498 1293 | E: secretariat@socialistinternational.org

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