One of the truisms of modern life is that some aspects of the past are beyond nostalgia. Keynesian economics have gone forever, so has the Soviet Union, even if people still hanker for certain things it provided.

So when a major country starts getting nostalgic for things which it should have binned long ago, the rest of the world should start taking notice. When that country is Germany, it should take even more notice, and not necessarily for negative reasons.

Whether it likes it or not, where Germany leads, other countries tend to follow. Following World War Two it should have been a rule taker rather than a rule maker. Yet its economic miracle was also accompanied by a political miracle – simply because it was Germany, or in those days West Germany, it became a leader of the very Europe which had despised it a few years before.

Germany is getting nostalgic for the sort of moderate socialism we most associate with the post-war period of any country – big state, big welfare, investment in housing and education, the attempt to create a classless society. The sort of thing real socialists despised as being unconnected with the real needs of the workers, just as non-socialists despised it as wasteful oppression and thievery.

All that tax and spend socialism managed to achieve was persuading people that those who sat above were stealing their earnings and spending them on loony schemes which only profited the egotistical, intolerant or feckless. But there are signs that in Germany, a country which experienced much of this, this political time capsule is in danger of being dug up.

If Germany does it, so will others, because the process has German approval. Where then? Is this really the answer?
When Mussolini took over in 1922, he was regarded as something of a joke in the rest of the world, and remained so outside Italy. Although other fascist and proto-fascist parties existed, with the same concerns, Italian fascism never took on more than local significance.

When Hitler came to power he had a very different effect. Fascist parties everywhere were given new importance and new life - and Hitler himself was seen as a danger, not a clown, even though those who could did little to stop him.

Only because Germany had done it were fascist parties in places such as the Netherlands and Portugal able to take root. Italy couldn’t be a model, Germany was.

In the days of tax and spend socialism, Germany likewise led the way with its SPD, or Social Democrats. The initial post-war West German governments were Christian Democrat and conservative in character, as the victorious powers wouldn’t have allowed anything else.

Eventually however the SPD, under Willy Brandt and then Helmut Schmidt, demonstrated to the world as well as Germans that they were not red clawed radicals but practical, business oriented types who gave priority to using public resources to improve education and social welfare. They were as harmless as their socialist counterparts elsewhere, who were just as innately conservative and well educated, people who had achieved greater importance and wealth than their forebears, but still felt they represented their roots.

Subsequent SPD leaders have been hindered by the generally positive legacy of Brandt and Schmidt. If they appear similar, they are anachronisms with no place in the neo-liberal, individualistic world of today, where their ideas have no credibility. If they are different, they are dangerous, not reminiscent enough of the comfort which socialists who are essentially the same as the right can provide.

Present SPD leader Olaf Scholz is very much a throwback to the old days of assuming the present and future were increasingly Social Democrat. A middle class lawyer, considered a party moderate, he has worked his way through the party collecting jobs and distinctions. He also appears to share the common failing of social democrats and socialists – happy to preach compromise, but suspicious of the personal integrity of anyone who doesn’t share his own views, which he considers more evolved and moral.

Yet Scholz is becoming increasingly likely to be the next Chancellor of Germany - not because he has stolen the clothes of the right to get elected, like many other successful socialists, but because he is a reminder of what decent social democrats were in days gone by. A dinosaur with considerable negative baggage has been reborn, and if it is reborn in Germany, who can stop it?

The Socialist who said sorry

One reason people turned against socialist and social democratic administrations is that they were apostles of public spending, but spent the money on things the public didn’t like. New swimming pools when no one wanted to swim, fancy public art which no one would have bought for themselves, education as long as it served political ends, that sort of thing.

Scholz is a banker, brought up in the intolerant modern economic schools. He is in favour of limited public spending, but prioritising the needy.

Back in the bad old days, few would have objected to grandiose spending projects if the same amount of money had been spent, or seen to have been spent, on addressing the actual needs of the working masses, instead of what middle class lefties thought was good for them. Scholz’s approach is being seen as a contemporary reinterpretation of what his natural supporters wanted his forebears to be fifty years ago.

Another problem was clannishness. No one cared if the parties of the right supported each other at the expense of everyone else, and favoured their friends and fellow travellers, because it was expected. But parties of the left, which owed their existence to those the right had left behind, were expected to be more open and inclusive, serving a broader section of society.

Instead, they seemed to be a private club for those considered intelligent, wealthy and ideologically correct enough. Left wing organisations supported each other and despised everyone else with a weary predictability. People who voted for them became afraid to approach them and ask for help unless they were seen as not worthy to be amongst
them, in direct contradiction of what left wing parties were supposed to be doing.

Scholz is a minister in the current Merkel Christian Democrat-dominated government, as part of one of several “Grand Coalitions” Germany has seen. His main opponent in the race for Chancellor is Armin Laschet, whose campaign has been marred by gaffes and sudden reversals of course.

These make Scholz appear a solid, pragmatic statesman, who will work with others for the good of his people, not an irresponsible ideologue who will only support his chosen ones regardless of who actually supports him. If he can pull that off, he will go a long way towards burying the innate inherited prejudice against old style socialists which lies behind the judgments of many who never lived under them.

Another common complaint was that richer socialists didn’t have much to lose from government tax policies, but the lives of the poor were not improved by them. Working class left leaning areas never seemed to improve, remaining poor and dominated by local administrations which ran these places like gang territories because there was no real alternative the locals could relate to.

Scholz does not seem to share the common fear of leftists that if they improve the lot of the people, those people will abandon their roots and start supporting other parties. On the contrary, he is able to build a community of interest between business and professional fields and the traditional working class supporter base, which is why his party suddenly surged in the polls.

The old politics of class warfare ceased being relevant long ago from a leftist perspective, and have now been appropriated by the right. If the old soft left is now inclusivity and moderation, it has a better long term perspective, even better than it had in its postwar consensus heyday.

If Scholz wins in Germany, the old rule will kick in and the rest of Europe will follow suit. Social democratic and moderate socialist parties still struggling with historic baggage, mostly of their own making, will develop a new self-respect and relevance in the post-Covid world.

In politics there are always winners and losers. Who will be the biggest losers of the rise of progressive moderation? Not the right, nor the far left … but those invidious fifth columnists of all parties and none – the politically correct.

It is no coincidence that “political correctness” became a thing just as postwar socialism was collapsing. Previously, inclusive and progressive language and policies, designed to promote greater respect for all, were associated with the socialist and liberal parts of the political spectrum. With those having neutered themselves, progressives became a law unto themselves, set by some shadowy figures, accountable to no one.

Nowadays no one can take certain attitudes in public, not because they are morally wrong or offensive but because they are politically incorrect. Someone has told people in authority to tell you that you can’t do it. When that “someone” is a progressive politician you can vote in or out, a real person, you can control the process. When it’s someone whose identity you will never know, supported by professional thought police, you can’t.

Germany’s 1960s Grand Coalition, which meant removing all opposition, fuelled the rise of terrorism because there was no other outlet for disagreement. The politically correct are the political terrorists of our day. If their ideas, moral and good as they generally are, have an outlet within the mainstream on one particular side, the way political correctness is implemented will be seen as the McCarthyism it is.

Reasonable people will no longer tolerate being told what a reasonable person is when they have someone they can vote for to give them a voice. Whether they are of the left or the right, this is ultimately what most people want most of the time.

If Scholz can embody that, the social divisions which have created misguided populism will be transformed into debate within an all-inclusive political spectrum, exactly what a democracy is supposed to provide.

Way out or way in?

After conflicts and pandemics countries discover what’s good about themselves. In some areas they cling to the old certainties, and don’t dare change them. In others they adopt radical change, voluntarily, because some aspects of the pre-crisis world they never want to see again.

In 1945 Winston Churchill was considered a Great War hero. He has retained that reputation to the present day. Yet when Churchill had to call the overdue parliamentary elections of 1945, with his personal reputation at its highest,
he was voted out by a landslide, losing to a Labour Party which had never even had a majority before. This ushered in radical social reforms, such as the welfare state and nationalisation, which no British voter had ever seen at that point.

In other respects, everyone wanted the old things back. Sports boomed, due to the urge to play in safety, but there were little or no changes in the composition of the major sports leagues. There was still a Royal Family, and the British view of history remained as it was, with its view that the UK needed no one, particularly the American allies derided as “overpaid, oversexed and over here”.

But the country wanted radical political change, and kicked out a national immortal to get it. The Conservative Party had to consign its pre-war manifestation to history to become electable again.

The SPD has held power several times since the post-war social democrat brand became so tainted. However it has always done so as a protest against Christian Democrat dominated governments, or as a partner in those governments. It has tried to be anything but what social democrats used to be, and there was little in the modern world which suggested its previous incarnation was anything other than out of date.

_Seth Ferris, investigative journalist and political scientist, expert on Middle Eastern affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._