Portugal Had Elections Too!

On Sunday 26th September, the same day as the German elections, Portugal held its local elections. Big deal! Half the Portuguese didn’t bother to vote, and in comparison with Germany the event aroused little international interest.

Portugal isn’t a first ranking country, and most non-Portuguese speakers have forgotten its historic importance, having been the last country to lose many of its colonies. The elections didn’t change the government, or have any real effect on it – despite calls for a cabinet reshuffle following the vote, everything will continue as before at national level, and probably at local levels too.

Yes, the centre-left Socialists (or PS), dominant partner in the governing coalition, lost a few municipalities to the leading opposition party, the centre-right Social Democrats (PSD). That is what usually happens in local elections, when the composition of the national government is not at stake.

The PSD did nowhere near enough to suggest it has enough support to return to power. The only real surprise was in the capital Lisbon, Socialist more often than not, which will now be under PSD control.

However there is a feature of these elections which makes them more newsworthy than the German ones, not less. The issue is not that the Socialists lost Lisbon, but why they lost it.
If Germany is getting nostalgic for old-style socialism, Portugal suggests another level of political dynamic. It is easier for that dynamic to develop in Portugal than in most places. But as in Germany, if it happens there, what is to stop it happening elsewhere, and what will be the consequences if it does?

Red As A Wall

Modern Portugal was effectively founded by the Socialists after the 1974 revolution. This was a military coup led by Marxist army officers who restored democracy, after decades of right-wing dictatorship, but hoped this would be a prelude to creating a Communist state in Western Europe, adhering to the deceitful Communist definition of “democracy” of the people.

The Socialists were the least of all evils. Like the Communists, they had been banned by the dictatorship, the party having been founded in Germany, at the height of the left-wing terrorist activity there. But they were also prepared to work within a liberal democracy – the common criticism of the PS is that its policies are “Socialismo na gaveta”, or “Socialism in the drawer”.

The Socialists played the leading role in preventing the Communists coming to power and ensuring the transition to democracy. In a country where a Marxist coup is thought to have restored human rights, and there is no recognised liberal party, it could be all things to all men, the foundation of the new democratic socialist state.

It is this, rather than their actual ideology, which has kept them in power since 2015. In the election of that year they came second, but the PSD-led coalition then appointed was soon toppled by the Socialists allying themselves with practically everyone else in an arrangement known as “the contraption”.

On paper, that contraption had the most parliamentary votes, and should thus have won any such vote. In practice, only the authority of the Socialists, as the established party most representative of the Portuguese state, could create the contraption and make it work.

To a large extent the contraption, and later more Socialist administrations, has worked. Recent events have derailed the government’s programme, but it has still repaid Portugal’s IMF loans in full and ahead of schedule, whilst maintaining a degree of growth. Whatever priorities it has, it has generally been effective in pursuing them, and achieving reasonable results for most of the population in a country traditionally poor by Western standards.

So why did the Socialists lose Lisbon? It may be that the Socialists have fallen victims of their own success. They have reversed the usual pattern of political assumptions in what might be called the “1970 Effect”, after a similar shock result in the UK’s parliamentary election that year.

Lisbon doesn’t think it needs the Socialists any more. It has outgrown what they represent. However they should never have represented that thing to begin with, and this is what will have consequences.

Inverted Logic Straightens Up

Most people in most countries share certain common political traits. One of these is that they don’t vote on the basis of party manifestos but on vague ideas of what parties stand for, which is set by the positions they are believed to take on whatever is bothering the electors at the time.

These vague ideas are reflections of other basic prejudices shared by all electors. There is no reason why the terms “right-wing” or “left-wing” should even exist, let alone have some emotionally resonant connotations to them. But we all tend to make assumptions about who thinks and does what, and these underpin our political choices.

Parties of the right are assumed to be more interested in keeping things as they are, unless they have been out of power for a very long time. They are thought to be better economic managers, because they reflect business interests, and be hot on law and order, national institutions, tradition and nationhood.

Parties of the left are more interested in social welfare, increased spending and decreasing personal liberty to pursue their welfare programmes. They are thought to be more internationalist and progressive, but at the same time rooted in parochial class warfare, and controlled by trade unions and other bodies which may be elected, but not by the general population.

So in times of crisis, people turn to the right to sort things out. Only when people have enough confidence that their jobs and streets are safe do they think it is time for sharing wealth and opportunity, as they no longer feel threatened by programmes which will take away some of what they have, and risk introducing new ideas and power
structures which might be destabilising.

Portugal itself has experience of this, its 1926-74 dictatorship having come to power in a coup against unstable leftist governments, and been widely supported for many years as a force of order, discipline and national independence. But few seem to have noticed that the 1974 revolution began a chain of events which has seen the boot transfer firmly to the other foot.

Portugal has done better economically under the PSD than under the PS. It enjoyed a period of unaccustomed prosperity under the government of Cavaco Silva and when a subsequent PSD government went running to the IMF for a bailout in 2011 this was considered unnecessary in some quarters, as the PSD had made Portugal strong enough to recover without it.

But when that bailout created problems, the country went running to the Socialists. Having obtained power through the contraption, they retained it by telling the IMF where it could stick its austerity and structural adjustment policies.

The PSD became seen as the crazy opportunists putting ideology before the public good, for having gone along with austerity policies which can never work in the Portuguese state structure. The left-leaning Socialists are now the party for sorting problems out, the right-leaning PSD the walking risk.

Lisbon has kicked out the Socialists because they are thought to have restored the basics. It is time to move beyond this, to take the risks of further capitalist development.

Portugal is doing things the other way round, and has put its Socialist party in the same position the “old guard” of the Soviet Communist Party were in the long years before that state’s collapse. They are the Establishment, so they will sort everything out. Can Portugal, or Europe, really live with such an establishment?

**Adding Up Not Taking Away**

One place the Socialists held onto in the local elections was Mirandela, a small town in the north of Portugal. This is traditionally PSD territory, and had never elected a Socialist administration prior to the last locals in 2017. Now it has retained that administration with an increased share of the vote.

Mirandela has the same features as many other small Portuguese towns. After 1974 its buildings and facilities went to rot due to land and property appropriations by leftist authorities and over-reliance on a state sector which couldn’t provide any more. A situation which residents of the former Soviet Union are very familiar with based upon the experiences their own countries.

When things improved later, nice new housing was built, but not where the grubby buildings were. The town has industry, and a hospital, and has developed its riverside with some impressive green spaces and public art. But this is largely to deflect attention from the still-existing decay, and in particular the fact that that the town’s central square is now dominated by derelict buildings, a hurtful and humiliating situation for any municipality.

The town is PSD territory because the north is traditionally conservative and has a dynamic of doing things differently to the south, but demanding the same voice. The improvements to Mirandela were associated with the PSD and its policies, showing the independence and self-reliance of the north.

However they haven’t resolved the big issues, and people are still leaving the town to find better lives elsewhere. The busy streets and largely busy with the elderly, who enjoy good pensions relative to their previous earnings, municipal employees and lawyers who profit from misfortune. All the derelict buildings in the middle, some even historically protected sites, are daily reminders of the general problem with the town.

In 2017 the town got tired of the PSD and brought in the Socialists to sort it out. The “mayor”, Julia Rodrigues, is a former parliamentary deputy and member of a prominent local family active in the sausage industry, one of the things the town regards as its own.

So as at national level, Mirandela decided that the Socialists, despite never before having run the local council, were the ones to sort out a problem, not lead them down the garden path of ideological schemes. The new normal in national perception was even newer in a place which has never voted that way before, but it has entrenched itself as such nevertheless.

If the Socialists actually fulfil their development programme the town may feel it doesn’t need them anymore, just
like Lisbon has. But when it has a problem, it will turn back to a party of welfare, a classless society and prioritising the poorest, as the fundamental rather than the aspiration.

You can’t have socialism without the money to pay for it. Can you therefore integrate enterprise within a system where socialist thinking is the natural assumption? Is it possible to create a socialist situation where enterprise and the wealthy are not the enemy, but another side of the same coin?

Portugal has sleepwalked into a position of having to try and find out. Where that leaves its relations to the rest of the world is an open question. Little Portugal, a backwater which few pay much attention to, may portend what is in store for the rest of Europe in the wake of German elections, especially in terms of what must be done, in terms of give and take, in forming a new government.

But where Germany has now begun to lead, Portugal has already taken the next logical step, even though it contradicts every existing assumption and all existing political and economic thinking. This may or may not be a good thing, but time will tell whether Portugal is trying to square a circle, or whether the circle wasn’t as round as we all thought it was.

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