During the Trump Administration we were introduced to the unsmiling figure of a certain Stephen Miller, senior adviser and speechwriter. According to a longstanding and far-fetched conspiracy theory, the world is run by a race of reptiles disguised as humans. The only reason Miller cannot be one of them is that, in his case, the disguise is nonexistent.

Whenever Miller found himself in trouble in an interview he would describe Trump as a “political genius”. This is not a designation to bandy about lightly, as it can be taken two ways. If it refers to genuine political accomplishment and effectiveness, it can’t be applied to living people because events may change their reputation overnight. If it refers to convincing people to vote against their own interest, this might represent a certain type of genius, but not a positive one.

Few people would regard Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa as a political genius. It wouldn’t be the Portuguese way to ascribe such epithets, and outside Portugal few people know or care about him. He turns up, does his job, says sensible things in keeping with his position and doesn’t upset the other countries. He has no distinctive ideology or significance: there will not be a faction of “Costaites”, preserving his ideals and legacy, when he has left the stage.
However Costa is doing some extraordinary things, which have wide relevance. He is redefining socialism, long after it has been discredited, by finding ways in which everything his instinct tells him to do can be called that. He is reading the public with greater subtlety than anyone ever expected of him, gambling from a position of strength in the manner of Robert Mugabe.

Most of all, he is getting results. He may run the poorest country in Western Europe, but after many setbacks it is definitely on an upward curve, despite Costa’s policies being supposedly impractical. He does what you can’t do and wins, with positive rather than destructive results, and lays foundations others of all persuasions can build on.

Still few may care, even in Portugal itself. But if better known figures did the same things in their countries, they would be spoken about much more often. Maybe his very ordinariness will ensure Costa is left alone, but sooner or later his achievements will have increasing relevance far beyond Portugal’s borders.

Blood Not Banners

In Portugal, the Socialists are the party of the establishment, not the underprivileged. The 1974 coup which created today’s Third Republic was conducted by Marxist army officers who tried to make Portugal the first Euro communist state. However introducing democracy was a first step towards that, and the people wanted a liberal democracy. The Socialists, exiled like the Communists during the previous corporatist dictatorship, steeped into this void by having their feet most firmly planted in both camps, and there they have remained.

As is common with leftist movements, the Portuguese socialists are continually criticised for not living up to their name. Those who actually believe in socialism as a system are lukewarm, or downright hostile, towards them, and both the Communists and the independent Left Bloc still command significant minority support.

Nevertheless, Portugal has a larger state sector you would expect in a modern Western country, and is still firmly regarded as a socialist country, even when others are in power. It is structured to provide state support to those who need it, funded by the taxpayer and controlled by various levels of government. It is the opposite of the US, which as Martin Luther King pointed out, operates on the basis of “socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor”.

Portugal runs rightward as an experiment but then runs back to the socialists when things go wrong. Therefore this socialist party isn’t either as radical or scary as those in other countries, which have got over postwar devastation and reconstruction, and see no point in rhetoric about a classless society. It still has the traditional socialist concerns about everyone having a job and a home and social protection as of right, but this is more a mood than a doctrine, and is in line with a broader public tolerance, not a minority aspiration.

Others have sought to redefine socialism in a modern social context, where the old division between haves and have nots has been eroded by social mobility. Tony Blair was perhaps the best example of this, with his brand of “New Labour” politics which seemed much closer to the Conservatives than anything Labour had said or done previously.

Though electorally successful for a time, this project ultimately failed for exactly this reason: there is still a faction of “Blairites,” and because their views are not mainstream. In the eyes of many on their own side, you can’t be really Labour if you are a Blairite, regardless of what the rest of the party is doing.

Antonio Costa has convinced himself, but also many others, that his brand of avuncular pragmatism really is socialist, despite being anathema to many who use that label. There are those in Portugal who say he isn’t a socialist, but few in the rest of Europe.

Politics everywhere realigns from time to time. If the Costa methods can generate a general rethinking of socialism, other parties will also have to rethink their least palatable features, and show that good works are consistent with ideology, and the latter should serve the former.

Everything is What I Say It Is

The Portuguese parliamentary election of 30th January saw Costa’s socialists gain an absolute majority in parliament. This was only the second they had achieved, despite almost always being the leading party, and was not expected after some losses in local elections in September and declining opinion poll returns.

The elections had been called because the Communists and Left Bloc members of the previous government had voted against Costa’s budget. He knew perfectly well that they would. Costa is in favour of balanced budgets and limiting public debt. He isn’t prepared to go down the traditional socialist route of tax and spend, and worry about the balance later.
This is one point where Costa and traditional socialism part ways. However his argument is that if the country has a debt, the state cannot provide, and therefore the burden of that debt falls disproportionately on those in need of state assistance, whether it be welfare recipients or the armed forces.

Balancing budgets helps the poor, and the majority, whilst debt only helps the rich persons, and overseas governments, who finance it. Therefore in contradiction to conventional thinking, balancing the budget is a fundamental of helping the less fortunate, if that is your political aim.

However Costa has also upset many, and would upset more if he was better known, by doing what we are told is impossible nowadays. Like a good nineteenth-century liberal, the ones who presided over unparalleled growth and prosperity, he rejects the distinction between financial responsibility and social welfare which modern economic schools force every student to adopt, at sword point, for fear of never getting a job afterwards.

Costa has raised the national minimum wage several times, whilst also balancing the budget. He has created jobs, often transient but nevertheless there. He has also improved actual support to the armed forces, as opposed to increasing the defence budget, and as a graduate of Lisbon’s military high school, he is not associated with the peace at any price brigade.

These measures have upset the left as much as they have the right, because they take their clothes. The junior coalition partners refused the budget because they had painted themselves into an ideological corner, needing to show they were different.

Costa therefore campaigned for the election he called himself under the slogan “Continue the Advance” – which was read in the same way as the notorious “Safety First”. That was the personally typical campaign slogan adopted by the most conservative of all British Prime Ministers, Stanley Baldwin, for the 1929 election, and is still held partly responsible for his defeat. It was also that of crumbling relics of Communism in their last days.

But here was Costa, using it as a socialist, implying safety was socialism and socialism was the norm, not a weapon to be used against the norm. This time the voters bought it. The Communists and Left Bloc lost seats, being regarded as irresponsible even by their own supporters. The centre-right PSD, main opposition party and main beneficiary at the local elections, lost ground when not expected to, as localities can move beyond the Socialists, but not the country as a whole.

As he has with the country itself, Costa has done all the things a socialist isn’t traditionally supposed to do, got results, and has redefined everything he has done as more socialist than the traditional conception of the term. After wars and pandemics, society changes, and parties of all stripes need to redefine their values and messages. Costa is showing right now that you can do a Tony Blair without ending up a Blairite, or a Margaret Thatcher without ending up a Thatcherite.

**Houses Not of Cards**

Socialists in general have it easier when it comes to definition. There is a Socialist International, and there is general consensus about who the socialist parties are in any given country.

There is also a Liberal International, but recognition of who are and who are not liberal parties, and what one should look like, is often more elusive. The same is true of conservatives, as like liberals they can be found anywhere in the spectrum, and the word has very different meanings in different countries – a conservative in South Africa is a very different beast to a conservative in the Czech Republic, given their histories.

However all parties everywhere will have to build a new world after Covid, and it will be a reaction to the perceived failings of the pre-Covid one. In order to get anything done, all parties will have to do as Antonio Costa’s Socialists have done, and find ways to make necessary positive steps, which go against previously received thinking, appear natural expressions of their accepted positions.

Take as an example infrastructure development. This is an ongoing issue in any country, but becomes more acute after conflicts, when damage needs to be repaired or a new country built to create more and better opportunities.

At present any debate about infrastructure is a matter of political posturing. Conservatives, liberals and socialists have different ideas on who should pay for it, who should control it and who should primarily benefit.

More energy is spent on each side calling the other names (squanderers of public money, asset strippers giving contracts to their friends, loonies who can’t reconcile public benefit with private gain) than in actually doing
anything - and any end product is often rejected by the public, as its design and utility were nothing to do with them. So services are placed at the service of ideology, not the other way round.

All countries will have to rebuild their economies and their roads and ports and hospitals after Covid. Ideology won’t come into it. But in order to get the votes to do it, and be allowed to continue doing it, they will have to find a way to present pragmatic actions as consistent with their presumed ideological position - the sort of thing “they” would do, and “the other lot” wouldn’t.

People of all opinions, and all socio-economic conditions, need hospitals and basic public goods. There is a socialist case for private hospitals (they free up the public ones for the poor) and a conservative case for public hospitals (public funding provides choice and accountability).

The important point from now on will be building the hospitals, even if you are told it isn’t feasible or practical, not checking to see whether the hospital plans fit the accepted ideology. Only politicians who grasp this will be able to prosper in the coming reality. Costa has provided a model, whatever their views on him, his party and his policies, which they could do a lot worse than follow.

Tribes of One

Portugal has liberals, but only a small and recently formed liberal party. This was one of the major gainers in the legislative election, but still has an economic liberal profile in the eyes of most, only half the stories as far as European liberal parties go. The other big gainer was the far right Chega, which is trying to become the true home of Portuguese conservatism. But Portugal has been down that road before; it is unlikely to go there again if push comes to shove.

Therefore Costa’s party remains better positioned than the rest to be all things to all men. If it can continue redefining everything which needs to be done as truly socialist, and truly not anything else, however dubious such a claim may be, it is likely to retain that position or generations to come, much like the LDP in Japan’s “one and a half party system”.

As we all know from personal experience, it takes a lot to convince those around us that what we happen to think is not only right, but the highest manifestation of a broad and well established train of thought, shared by many. Costa has done that, and brought small but significant benefits to his country.

Others will have to do the same before long, from their various perspectives. Let us see who has the genius, and the guts, to do it.

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