Olaf Scholz, the improbable role model

A state that protects the weakest and is a bulwark for democracy — that is the new social democratic paradigm that the chancellor embodies

Foreign Policy, the American magazine with a focus on international affairs, surprised me 10 days ago with the headline: 'Welcome to the West's Olaf Scholz Era'. The German chancellor, said the standfirst, 'represents the future of progressive politics'.

The (British) author of the piece, John Kampfner, recognised that in his personal style, Scholz has 'few characteristics of a potential saviour'. But in a quiet, unexcited way, his coalition is radically modernising the German economy for the first time, while his foreign-policy orientation has undergone a complete change – which usually happens at most once in a generation.

The successes are impressive. Yet, Scholz's style consists of not talking too much, explaining little and giving the impression that everything is taking its necessary course, trusting that the reasonableness of this policy will be obvious to everyone in the end. It is an 'incremental revolution', according to Kampfner.

Bickering partners

Scholz is also symptomatic of contemporary progressivism in a second respect. Governing in shaky alliances, which only allow the smallest compromises with a more and more fragmented electorate – making the leader more of a conductor – will be the reality everywhere in the future.

The Foreign Policy piece is smart but a bit pretentious. For a new 'era', one would hope something like a paradigm would be outlined. Yet, the analysis does go against the current: leading articles celebrating the Scholz government as a success story are thin on the ground.

The *Ampelkoalition* (traffic-light coalition) in Berlin is squabbling. Even the most basic projects lead to bickering within the government: the partners strangely believe it would be a clever tactic to distinguish themselves from each other while giving the impression of a dysfunctional administration.

Even well-meaning supporters are somewhat puzzled by the government's peculiar performance: they rather wish Scholz could act a bit more like a traditional boss, offering visible leadership while keeping things under control.

The German economy has been virtually stagnant for three quarters; in two, there was even a minimal contraction. Somewhat hysterically, commentators are already asking whether Germany will soon be 'the sick man' of Europe again.

The *Schuldenbremse* (debt brake) is now forcing some moderate fiscal consolidation and could even bring about a recession. With the centre-right Free Democrats in a rather centre-left government, any departure from ideological 'fiscal discipline' requires painstaking work.

In opinion polls, approval of the government is deep in the basement. Scholz's social-democratic SPD ranks at about 18 per cent, more or less. Even well-meaning supporters are somewhat puzzled by the government's peculiar performance: they rather wish Scholz could act a bit more like a traditional boss, offering visible leadership while keeping things under control.

A message of respect and belonging

Late August, Berlin. Scholz has invited guests to the eighth floor of the chancellery for a 'culture summer evening'. Among the casual-dress party are actors and actresses everyone knows from the *Tatort* (Crime Scene, a long-running police procedural), celebrated authors, multiple award-winning figures in literature and art, and members of the international *avant-gard*e.

Scholz radiates relaxation but also the self-confidence of someone firmly convinced his course will succeed in the end. At the outset, he recalls his 'respect' message from the 2021 federal election campaign: it cannot be accepted that ordinary people have the feeling they have no voice – that they are not even noticed, that they do not matter.

Scholz has just pushed through the cabinet a modern citizenship law, for him a centrepiece of Germany's modernisation. Whoever is born in the country, whoever migrates to it, should not have to wait forever until he or she is seen as someone who belongs.

Scholz sees a 'contempt for poor people' in the claim that one has to accommodate the resentments of the working classes. Because what kind of image of the working classes is actually behind that?

In the table discussions in which the chancellor is involved, the talk keeps coming back to the threats to democracy, to the rise of the radical right. The *Alternative für Deutschland* is polling at an alarming 22 per cent. Scholz likes to go a long way back and reminds us how the social democrats fought for democracy and fundamental rights even under the *Kaiser* – they were a *Kampfpartei* (party of struggle) for social and democratic progress.

One quickly gets the impression Scholz thinks very little of the occasionally circulating idea that social democracy must become culturally conservative and more conventional. He sees a 'contempt for poor people' in the claim that one has to accommodate the resentments of the working classes. Because what kind of image of the working classes is actually behind that? That they are anti-modernist, can't cope with the contemporary diversity of today's societies and are so stupid as to fall for a few reactionary slogans.

Some have a caricature of the (male) *Proletariat* in mind: beer at the table, mountains of meat on the plate, slippers on the feet and trousers hanging over the overweight backside. One cannot quite tell whether such ostensible worship of the working class is more idolatry or disdain.

The protective state

In fact, a new paradigm of contemporary progress is slowly emerging. In economic and socio-political terms, it has to be much more left-wing than the 'third way'.

Instead of romantic talk of 'employability' and 'equality of opportunity', what is needed is a state that intervenes in markets where they are not functioning well, that invests in the future and massively expands non-fossil energies. It is a state that provides security in a risky world, with minimum wages and support for trade unions – and simply an alert sense of the realities of life and the disrespect to which the weakest are exposed.

The new paradigm thus revolves around the protective state. It avoids the

trap of cultural conservatism and its 'culture war' agenda, with respect for everyone, a tolerant 'live and let live'. No one should be discriminated against; everyone is entitled to empathy. The time when women could be treated as fair game, sexual assault was dismissed as a 'trivial offence' and girls automatically had to take a back seat to boys in their career aspirations is long gone.

Contemporary social democracy is a protective power for the weakest, an advocate for ordinary people, a bulwark for democracy and the liberal way of life and a driving force for modernisation.

Above all, people who already have a hard time should not be trampled on. All this is widely accepted today, so there is no reason to capitulate to those who foment antagonism, fuel ethno-nationalism or create images of an enemy against which they can then incite hatred. The social-democratic electorate today is largely progressive.

Take Austria. In June, its social democrats elected Andreas Babler as their leader. A popular mayor, he exudes 'one of us', yet is explicitly progressive on the cultural issues so hyped today. In terms of character, he is the 'finally someone you can trust' type and likes to talk about 'politics from below'.

In short, contemporary social democracy is a protective power for the weakest, an advocate for ordinary people, a bulwark for democracy and the liberal way of life and a driving force for modernisation. Joe Biden won the United States presidency with such an agenda in 2020. Scholz did likewise in the *Bundestag* elections two years ago, and Spain's outgoing socialist premier, Pedro Sánchez, defied all predictions by emerging with a chance of retaining power after the general election in July.

Perhaps this is the answer to that surprising Foreign Policy claim about 'the future of progressive politics'. The torrents of insanity in these times, the apparent dominance of an embittered frenzy, should not obscure the fact that the majority of voters ultimately prefer reasonableness – and political leaders who are fit to master the tricky balancing acts of governing in a complex world.

This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal



Robert Misik
Vienna

Robert Misik is a writer and essayist. He publishes in many German-language newspapers and magazines, including *Die Zeit* and *Die Tageszeitung*.