

Presidential elections in Austria: Preparing to bring the neo-fascists into government

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25 April 1998

“The more things change, the more they stay the same” is a popular saying. It also works in reverse. Now and again important political changes take place almost unnoticed, in obscurity, behind a facade of apparent stability and continuity. That is the state of affairs at the moment in Austria. Last Sunday the Bundespräsident was reelected for a further six years.

With 63.5 percent of the ballots cast, Thomas Klestil received considerably more votes in the first round than he had six years ago. In that election he was only able to obtain the necessary majority in the second round of voting. In accounting for Klestil’s much improved vote-getting ability this time around, commentators have made reference to the advantages of office as well as Klestil’s own popularity. Neither of these, however, is sufficient to explain the sharp increase in the Bundespräsident’s vote.

Six years ago Klestil ran as the candidate of the Christian conservative Austrian Peoples Party (APP), stressing the holy sacrament of marriage and solid family relations. But only a few months after the 1992 election, Klestil’s wife moved out of the presidential villa, a development that received much media coverage. She departed after learning that her husband had had for years maintained a relationship with a colleague in the presidential office.

This was followed by an embarrassing affair over a pension that Klestil received in addition to his lavish income as Bundespräsident. Finally last year he suffered a sharp decline in his health.

As these events make clear, Klestil’s reelection can hardly be ascribed either to his political performance or his personal reputation. Rather, it is the result of arrangements made by leading Austrian politicians who have a particular task in mind for the reelected Bundespräsident. His job is to lay the basis for incorporating the right-wing radical Joerg Haider and his Austrian Liberal Party (ALP) into the government.

Thomas Klestil is well qualified for the job. He was Austria’s ambassador in Washington when his presidential predecessor, Kurt Waldheim, was put on the watch list and banned from visiting the US by the American president because of Waldheim’s role under the Nazi regime. At that time Klestil could not prevent the international ostracism of Austria, but he worked feverishly to restore diplomatic links abroad. Now he will seek to prevent any renewed isolation of Austria arising from the participation of Joerg Haider in a future government.

During the election campaign last week Klestil repeatedly emphasized that he regarded Haider and his Liberal party as quite fit to take part in government. Continued exclusion of Haider’s party would be undemocratic and would flout the will of the voters, he implied. Haider responded by calling for the voters to reelect the Bundespräsident.

To facilitate winning the support of the right-wing radicals, Klestil this time around did not run as the candidate of the APP, but rather as an independent, standing above the political parties.

Of the four other candidates, two based themselves on the widespread public opposition to Haider. From the outset, however, they had no serious chance of success. One of the two, the chairperson of the Liberal Forum, Heide Schmidt, was Haider’s former deputy and presidential candidate in the election six years ago, but left Haider’s party only recently. Her rejection of Haider was based primarily on opposition to his “authoritarian style of leadership.” She continues to espouse the standard conservative policies. Compared to her 1992 results, Schmidt lost more than 5 percent, winning only 11 percent of the vote.

Under pressure from the Greens and after considerable hesitation, the evangelical theologian Getraud Knoll announced her candidacy, calling for more “humanity and backbone in politics.” Under pressure from the media, she pulled back sharply from her original call for all foreigners to be guaranteed the “right to remain” in Austria. Expected to poll 20 percent, in the end she received only 13.5 percent of the vote.

The social democrats of the SPA have played a key role in the election of Klestil and Haider’s further rise to political prominence. In this presidential election, for the first time they put up no candidate of their own.

The SPA is the oldest political party in Austria and has the largest membership. For almost 30 years, since 1970, it has held the post of national chancellor. For the past 12 years it has governed Austria in a grand coalition with the Austrian Peoples Party.

The period when the social democrats of the SPA could be relied on to maintain class peace and carry out social reforms in the interest of the broad masses has long since passed. The domination of the international financial markets and capital flows has undermined the structure of the social welfare state in Austria. For many years the government has imposed one austerity program after the other. State-run companies have been privatized. As in neighboring Germany, unemployment has soared to the record

levels of the 1930s.

One and a half years ago a report on social conditions by the charity organization Caritas documented how mass poverty was growing in leaps and bounds. Families with children have been hit the hardest. According to the report, in this highly developed industrialized country of 9 million inhabitants, nearly a quarter of a million children are living below the poverty line.

This social disaster provides the background for the increasingly aggressive campaign of the right-wing demagogue Joerg Haider. The multimillionaire landowner is one of the richest men in Austria, but likes to portray himself as the advocate of the little man and those who are socially deprived.

Haider has never concealed his spiritual roots. In 1990 he proclaimed his admiration for Adolf Hitler and the “jobs program of the Nazis.” Three years later he organized a referendum under the slogan “Austrians First,” calling for the deportation of foreigners and asylum seekers and a broad struggle “against the foreign infiltration of Austria.” He worked to divert growing opposition to unemployment and social cuts along right-wing, racist channels and spread the poison of racism.

The social democrats reacted to Haider’s rapid growth in political influence by taking up his reactionary slogans, thereby making him, as they put it, “superfluous.” The government moved against foreign workers with increasingly draconian laws and decrees. Haider applauded.

When the social democratic interior minister, Loeschnak, imposed an extremely restrictive policy against aliens and demanded that foreigners be excluded from entire urban areas, Haider described him as “my best man in the government.” Soon thereafter the SPA labor minister called for “public service work “ for the long-term unemployed—a form of compulsory labor—and Haider immediately claimed credit for the proposal, insisting that he was its author.

The rightward shift of the SPA contributed to spectacular election gains for Haider’s right-wing radicals. In the 12 years in which Haider has led the ALP, its share of the vote has increased from just 5 percent to 27.6 percent (in the European Union elections of October 1996).

In three of the eight regions of Austria (Kaernten, Tiroland and Salzburg) and in five regional main cities, the ALP constitutes the strongest party. Meanwhile the SPA and APP have suffered a sharp decline in votes.

An important political transformation is taking place in Austria. The way is being cleared for the right-wing radicals to join or even head up a future government. The SPA and APP are presently competing to prove their affection for the formerly scorned ALP. Viktor Klima, the former finance minister of the SPA and architect of many cuts in social programs, recently emphasized that, despite many differences, he could well imagine collaboration with Haider’s Liberals. In fact, he and Haider have been close personal friends for some time.

The leaders of the trade unions have also declared their willingness to work with Haider. The central leadership of the Austrian trade union movement has offered Haider’s party posts at every level of the union structure. The chairman, Fritz Verzetnitsch (SPA), who also heads the European Trade Union,

declared to the press that the Liberal Party had copied its immigration policies from those of the unions.

The preparation for entry into government by the right-wing radicals signifies a qualitatively new stage of political development. The policy of social reformism is finished. All parties have only one answer to growing economic problems—drastic savings and cuts in every aspect of social spending.

The end of social cooperation also means the end of social peace. The government anticipates resistance and is preparing for major struggles. Participation in the government by the neo-fascist radicals means that in the future the government will seek to arouse the most impoverished and desperate layers of society and use them as a battering ram against the working class.

Under conditions of an ever-deepening social chasm, political power is being shifted from parliament toward the central state apparatus with its legal, police and military means of repression. This is the context in which the colorless bureaucrat Thomas Klestil is able to appear in the Donaumetropole like a living relic of the Habsburg dynasty and announce that the presidency will now assume far more political significance than in the past.

The events in Austria are symptomatic of the trend of development in many European countries. They are being closely followed in Germany. It is no coincidence that the former president of Germany, Richard von Weizsaecker, took part in the closing meeting of Klestil’s election campaign.

In Germany the political signposts point toward stormy times. There are many indications that with the end of the government led by Helmut Kohl, the CDU, which has often described itself as a people’s party, will break apart, allowing a powerful right-wing party to emerge that could unite the various neo-Nazi groups.

For decades workers and the overwhelming majority of the people have become accustomed to standing aside from direct political participation in events. That is now changing. Given the systematic preparation for government participation by the right-wing radicals, it is necessary to sound the alarm bells and recall the dire consequences when workers fail to build their own party so they can intervene in the situation as an independent political force.

Today in Germany it is repeatedly asserted that a social democratic government would be a progressive alternative to Chancellor Kohl. The events in Austria refute this.

The so-called “lesser evil” there has paved the way for a lurch to the right and the growing prominence of a racist demagogue, and this in a land which experienced the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship in the period of 1934-45. Nowhere in Western Europe have the neo-Nazis been able to gain as much political influence as in that country where, for almost 30 consecutive years, social democracy has held power.



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