

German SPD party congress: united without a perspective

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The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has held its first national party congress since taking power over a year ago. A total of 522 delegates met in the plush Estrel Hotel in Berlin to draw a balance sheet, discuss further policy and elect the party leadership.

The past year has been characterised by an unparalleled series of political differences, conflicts and crises. Last spring, following vigorous disputes over financial and social policies, party chairman Oskar Lafontaine resigned.

Prior to his resignation major tensions had emerged over changes to immigration law and the planned long-term closure of all atomic plants. German participation in the Kosovo War and the budget cuts introduced by Lafontaine's successor as finance minister, Hans Eichel, brought the party to the verge of a split. When, together with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder published a document on political perspectives and Lafontaine in response accused Schröder of betraying all of his election promises, the party seemed close to breaking up. In a number of state and local elections traditional SPD voters deserted the party in droves. In the East German state of Saxony the party vote fell to near the 10 percent level.

At the party congress, however, this was all in the past. The party seemed united in a marvellous manner. Chancellor Schröder was confirmed as party chairman with 86 percent of the delegates' votes—an increase of 10 percent over his result of last spring. Lafontaine was consigned to oblivion—along with his criticisms and scoldings of the chancellor. The Schröder-Blair paper was considered a closed matter and filed in the party archives under “H for Hombach” (*Die Zeit*). Bodo Hombach, the author of the paper, was a close confidante of Gerhard Schröder, who was forced to resign after Lafontaine's own resignation.

The SPD left joined in the chorus of applause. Lafontaine's closest friend, Reinhard Klimmt, demonstratively supported Chancellor Schröder. Before the congress started, he announced that Schröder had moved in the direction of the party as a whole and the congress would respect that. The spokesman for the “left-wing” Frankfurt Circle, Detlev von Larcher, described Schröder's speech to the party as “very successful” because it clearly emphasised the “fundamental social democratic principle of social justice”.

There was some rear-guard action, such as the dispute regarding a proposal for a tax on wealth. But the motion of the left wing on this subject was “so harmless that everybody could have voted for it”, as one of their spokesmen, Young Socialist Chairman

Benjamin Mikfeld, explained. In the end, this did not happen and the motion failed. In general, however, harmony and unity dominated at the congress.

Unity in a party can have various causes. It can express profound agreement and emerge from the enthusiasm which arises in the struggle for a common aim; or it can express the insecurity and lack of orientation of a membership that draws together in fear. The new-found unity of the SPD clearly belongs to the second category. Even the theme of the party congress—“The future requires courage”—sounded like whistling in the dark.

Schröder's opening “programmatic speech”—prepared and honed by experts over a period of weeks—was entirely along these lines. At the last party congress before the end of the century one would have anticipated at least a glimpse into the future. Schröder sensed this and began with the words: “This is the last SPD congress before the turn of the century.” One of “the bloodiest centuries” was coming to an end. The Social Democrats were not only trusted with leading the government, they were trusted with the “great task of leading our country into the next Millennium”.

Nothing, however, followed from this. Schröder failed to develop any vision of the future. His speech was entirely directed at “massaging the social democratic soul”, as he himself put it. He had something for everybody—for every paragraph of his speech there was another which stood in crass opposition.

The Berlin daily *Tagesspiegel* described the SPD congress as a “therapy session” and commented: “The speech by the SPD chairman had no real content, but many incompatible elements. Basically, it consisted of one word: Ommm. Oriental meditation in a Berlin hotel.”

Because Schröder's pact with Blair had been badly received, French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was invited as the guest speaker for the congress. In terms of content, everything remained the same. The policies pursued in recent months were merely presented in a new wrapping. In Schröder's 90-minute speech there was not a single fresh thought. There was no mention of any initiative or measure on the part of the government to tackle mass unemployment and the rapid growth of poverty among broad layers of society. Instead, well worn phrases were dished out about a “future civil society” and justice for all on a day that will never come.

The budget cuts of Hans Eichel have been implemented without changes. Budget policy constituted a central theme of Schröder's speech. In the manner of a grocer in a provincial shop he raised the

issue of how much money was in the till to the level of a political maxim. “In recent weeks and months” the social democrats “had faced their responsibility”. The government, under his leadership, had undertaken “important changes of course”. Against the egoism of various organised associations, the government has “seriously tackled the consolidation of the budget”. Eichel had carried out “exemplary work”.

Schröder also defended German participation in the Kosovo War with old, well-worn arguments, even though, since the end of the war, new facts have come to light on a daily basis to demonstrate how mendacious such arguments really are. Following the collapse of “all political attempts to end the genocide in Kosovo” there was no other possibility “than to intervene militarily”, Schröder stressed. He expressly thanked Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping for his “considered and exemplary commitment”.

Finally, Schröder proclaimed his lack of a political compass to be a virtue. “We are acting, but we are not turning our actions into an ideology”, he said in relation to the recent rescue operation for the Holzmann building company, which had run into financial difficulties. He did not intervene because he was “pursuing an ideological line”, he said. In overcoming such company crises, it was “the market which is primarily responsible”. Such a “pragmatic intervention” did not signify a “fundamental conception for dealing with such problems”.

The fact that the delegates eagerly swallowed this speech, applauded and then overwhelmingly honoured the chancellor's line with their votes says everything about the internal state of the SPD. What moves the delegates is not the concerns and plight of the people arising from growing unemployment and social insecurity, but rather their concern for their own offices, posts and privileges. The SPD has long since degenerated into a party of officeholders and functionaries whose incomes, as a rule, far exceed that of the average worker.

They are therefore quite prepared to believe that the declining influence of the party is, in the first place, a product of its “image”. The yearning for unity and calm was expressed in the large vote for the general secretary of the party—a post which was newly created by the congress. Franz Münterfering received 94 percent of the votes, a result which recalls the majorities achieved by the Stalinist parties of the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

The crisis of the SPD, however, has its roots not in questions of image, but rather in profound social changes. The globalisation of production has removed the floor from underneath traditional forms of social partnership and the harmonisation of social interests. The gulf between rich and poor is growing continuously. This is the more profound reason for the break-up of Germany's traditional “people's parties”, which have governed the political fortunes of the country for decades. In this respect the finance scandal which has hit the conservative opposition party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is also a portent for the SPD. The gulf between the SPD and the population is growing ever greater.

The party unity, much in evidence at the congress, will not last long. It was, in any case, the result of favourable external circumstances: the finance scandal of the CDU, which has

temporarily cast the SPD in a better light, and Schröder's dramatic rescue of Holzmann, the results of which are already questionable.

Under pressure from the transformation taking place in society a new political axis is being developed for the SPD—silently, virtually unnoticed and even in part unconsciously.

Recently there has been an increase in the ranks of those warning against the uncontrollable consequences of economic development which proceeds exclusively from the short-term interests of the money markets. Above all *Die Zeit*, a newspaper whose publishers include former SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, has taken to castigating “predator capitalism” of the American variety. In its latest edition the former chairman of Daimler-Benz, Edzard Reuter, made comments to this effect.

In his own speech Schröder called for an “international financial architecture”, adding that this demand is correct even if “someone prior to me made the same call.” Only a few of the delegates noticed that this “someone” referred to Oskar Lafontaine, who had vehemently argued for international regulation of the financial markets and had come under considerable fire for doing so.

Under the given international conditions, such measures do not move in the direction of ameliorating capitalism, but rather in the direction of protectionism, the building of economic blocks and sharp conflicts between Europe and America. This is the real meaning of the reconciliation of the SPD lefts with Schröder's cuts and war policies. It was, after all, Lafontaine who linked his slogan “We do not want American-type relations” with a co-ordinated European financial and economic policy.

The crises and shocks of recent months signify the final collapse of the SPD as a party of reforms. From the rubble a new party is emerging which, in the name of German and European interests, is developing an aggressive policy at home and abroad.



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