

Treading in Haider's footsteps

Germany's CDU veers to the right as state elections approach

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While it seems certain that Angela Merkel, at present the secretary-general of Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), will be elected party chairperson at the upcoming CDU party conference in Essen, a power struggle is taking place behind the scenes to define the party's future political orientation.

Jürgen Rüttgers, formerly the Minister of Future Technology in the Kohl government and now the CDU's front-running candidate in the upcoming North Rhine-Westphalia state elections, has set off a debate that has raised the hopes of the most right-wing forces within the CDU and its Bavarian counterpart CSU with his slogan "Kinder statt Inder" ("Children instead of Indians").

The slogan is Rüttgers' response to the announcement by Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD—Social Democratic Party) of plans to grant 20,000 computer specialists from non-European countries (including India) time-limited residence and work permits for Germany. The goal of the initiative, which is modelled on the use of the so-called Green Card in the US, is to import foreign experts to support German industry. The number of these computer specialists, and the length of time they are allowed to stay in Germany, are to be decided entirely on the basis of economic considerations.

Rüttgers, who in his former government position was responsible for this sector, is fully aware of the German computer industry's current need of qualified specialists. For him, the debate about the "German Green Card" is simply a welcome opportunity to stir up anti-foreigner sentiments. His slogan "Children instead of Indians" (meaning: "More Germans instead of foreigners") is a modernised version of the old Nazi slogan "Foreigners out!".

He justifies his rejection of Schröder's Green Card plans with the words, "We don't want to bring in additional foreigners to Germany", while posing as the "little man" fighting against big business interests—a demagogic ploy taken straight from right-wing Austrian politician Jörg

Haider's. Playing on this theme, Rüttgers accuses Schröder of once again demonstrating his close ties to big business and proving that he is the "bosses' comrade". Coming from a high-ranking member of the CDU, a party whose dependency on wealthy sponsors was once again amply documented in the recent fund-raising scandal, this is certainly a daring accusation!

Rüttgers is not on his own in the CDU. Schröder's announcement has since set off a spate of demands from leading CDU/CSU politicians calling for further restrictions on immigration and the total removal of the right to asylum from the German Constitution.

Michael Glos, the head of the parliamentary group of the CSU (Bavarian wing of the Christian Democrats), says an "immigration limitation act" is required that would rescind the right to individual asylum. The new CDU/CSU party whip in the Bundestag, Friedrich Merz, has made no public statements supporting Glos' and Rüttgers' position, but he has made it abundantly clear that he sympathises with it, boasting that, with him as party whip, the parliamentary faction can finally "discuss things openly again".

With that kind of support behind him, Rüttgers apparently sees no need for any inhibitions in the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections. Presenting himself as a "law and order" hard-liner, he is already calling for full video camera surveillance of streets and squares. His response to objections raised by data privacy officials and many others is that "people who aren't criminals have nothing to hide".

Following Roland Koch, the Minister-President of the state of Hesse, Jürgen Rüttgers, is the second CDU politician to place anti-foreigner slogans at the centre of his election campaign. The CDU's more right-wing Bavarian counterpart, the CSU, has been doing this for years.

This "Haiderisation" of conservative parties is by no means restricted to Germany. In the US, Christian fundamentalists have a disproportionate amount of influence within the Republican Party; in Britain, the Tories are in the

grip of right-wing chauvinists; and in France, a group led by former Minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua has split off from the Gaullists and is now competing against Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front on the far right.

As a rule, politicians—and particularly those in Germany—justify this shift to the right by claiming they are merely reacting to public sentiment and wish to prevent the emergence of new far-right parties. In its latest issue, the influential news magazine *Der Spiegel* writes that the anti-foreigner stance taken by the CDU/CSU accommodates the "latent German fear of all things alien". Using the topic of foreigners, the opposition CDU can "drive the government into a corner whenever it feels like it", concludes *Der Spiegel*.

In actual fact, the reverse is true. It is their increasing distance from the mass of the population that is driving the conservative parties to the right. They have no solutions for the issues dominating millions of people—a secure future, employment, social security, affordable housing. This is why they are employing xenophobic and nationalist demagoguery in the hope of directing mounting social grievances into reactionary channels. And in a situation where the former workers party, the SPD, and the former protest party, the Greens, are now totally subservient to the interests of big business, this method is achieving a certain amount of success.

Rüttgers' anti-foreigner election campaign is also a clear indication that the crisis of the CDU is far from over. The CDU's success in the 1950s under the leadership of Konrad Adenauer and, more recently, under Helmut Kohl was based on its being able to unite the most contrary social groups in its ranks: industrialists and workers, craftsmen and farmers, businessmen and small tradesmen, government employees and intellectuals, retirees and trainees. The economic upswing after World War II formed the material basis on which it was possible to reconcile and accommodate the diverse interests of these groupings.

But the increasing polarisation of society during the past two decades has caused the gradual collapse of this wide-ranging "clientele"-oriented policy. For a long time Helmut Kohl was able to suppress the internecine sniping as the various wings of the CDU rapidly drifted apart. Presiding over the CDU like a patriarch, he managed to hold together the centrifugal forces of the party—not least of all, as we now know, through the exactly dosed and targeted employment of funds.

Kohl's downfall and the resignation of his successor as party chairman, Wolfgang Schäuble, due to the latter's involvement in the fund-raising scandal, have unleashed a bitter struggle over the political orientation of the CDU/CSU. Rüttgers, Koch and CSU Chairman and

Bavarian Minister-President Edmund Stoiber represent the hard-line right wing. Other CDU leaders, such as Christian Wulff from the state of Lower Saxony and Peter Müller from the Saarland, want to uphold to the rhetoric of "social market economy", fearing otherwise that the CDU will become too isolated.

The election of Angela Merkel as party chairperson is only a temporary cease-fire in these conflicts, which also have a regional element. Nobody feels secure enough yet to attempt to wage the decisive battle—the chance of losing it is still too great. And nobody—including, presumably, Merkel herself—knows exactly what she stands for politically. She is a compromise candidate, intended, on the one hand, to "integrate the rank and file" and thus defuse indignation about the fund-raising scandal and, on the other, to cover up and play down the fight over political orientation raging within the party.

The "Essen Declaration", co-penned by Merkel for adoption at the upcoming CDU party conference, consists of vacuous phrases intended to invoke the CDU's "popular party" traditions: "Caring for people instead of Red-Green handouts", "Orientation instead of Red-Green arbitrariness" and "Freedom instead of Red-Green tutelage".

But, with influential CDU forces moving so vehemently to the right, it will not be possible to retain the CDU in its present form for long. At the latest, the conflicts will break out again when it comes to nominating the CDU's candidate as Federal Chancellor in the next national elections. For the moment, nobody is risking open opposition to Merkel—or to Rüttgers, for that matter. But in view of the differences within the CDU, further disintegration of the party is inevitable. The only thing that remains uncertain is the time frame for this process.



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