

No discussion of five-month-old finance scandal

German Christian Democrats elect new leader

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The congress of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) held on April 10 and 11 can more aptly be described in the language of group psychology than in the language of politics.

It takes an extraordinary level of fear and despair for over a thousand delegates—all of them adults and hardened politicians—to fall into a collective euphoria, reminiscent of teenage fans confronting their pop idol. The enthusiasm for Angela Merkel, unopposed and the recipient of 96 percent of the votes—a candidate's dream—as the new party chairperson, indeed assumed grotesque forms. One malicious press commentator said she could have “read out the telephone directory and would still have been cheered by her ravenous party”.

Superficially, there is little that qualifies the 45-year-old to lead the party. Even though she has enjoyed a rapidly rising career, since joining the CDU in East Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall, this owed less to her own performance than to the protective hand of Helmut Kohl, who for image reasons wanted to have an East German woman in his cabinet and so made her Families Minister and later Environment Secretary. In both offices she stood completely in the shadow of her mentor and did not distinguish herself in any way.

When Merkel became CDU general secretary after the party lost the Bundestag (federal parliament) elections in 1998, she led a shadowy existence—more secretary than general. It was others who were in the limelight—the new party chairman Wolfgang Schaeuble, long-serving party big-wigs such as Volker Ruehe, and local matadors such as Roland Koch, Peter Mueller and Christian Wulff.

Only when the CDU was drawn ever more deeply into the vortex of a financial scandal did Merkel become the carrier of the party's hopes. The more the deeply disconcerted membership longed for peace, the more popular she became. Her obvious weaknesses were suddenly regarded as virtues—the absence of her own power base and her distance from the internal party

cliques and plots; her demonstrative naïveté and the ability to use well-chosen words to formulate empty phrases. The aura of a home-grown conservatism from the old East Germany inspired the older CDU members, who grew up in the socio-political fog of the Adenauer era.

The party matadors fighting for succession to Kohl and Schaeuble soon realised that they would not get anywhere against this mood. Anyone going on the offensive would inevitably have lost. Volker Ruehe, who incautiously held up the state elections in Schleswig-Holstein where he was the party's lead candidate as a plebiscite on the CDU chairmanship, was forced to find this out. He not only lost the state ballot, but also almost lost his seat on the party executive at the congress. He was only re-elected because there was no rival candidate. He received the result worst by far with 58 percent.

As the party congress approached, one candidate after the other for the chairmanship withdrew. In Bavaria, where Merkel had at first met violent hostility from the CDU's sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), the white flag was hoisted. Finally, Merkel remained in the running as the only candidate.

For her competitors, withdrawal was all the easier since Merkel is too weak to pose any serious obstacle to them. As a party chair without political office she is clearly at a disadvantage against the power-conscious CDU state premiers. The real decision concerning the succession to Kohl and Schaeuble will be taken in two years' time, when the party's candidate for chancellor is decided before the next Bundestag elections. Until then—according to the agreement between Merkel, CSU chief Stoiber and the other rivals—this question remains taboo.

At the latest, this is when the violent struggles concerning direction and who wields power inside the CDU will again break out. As far as her competitors are concerned, Merkel is only a transitional figure. She should calm down the excited membership and keep open the chances for the next round of the dispute.

Moreover, her political line is hardly discernible. At the party congress she accomplished the feat of endorsing the so-called “Green Card” initiative of Chancellor Schroeder (granting foreign computer specialists temporary residency), on the one hand, while at the same time supporting the election campaign of Juergen Ruetters in North Rhine-Westphalia, which is directed explicitly against this initiative with the slogan *Kinder statt Inder* (“[German] children instead of Indians”).

Merkel clearly does not represent the “left” or “liberal” wing of the Union (CDU/CSU), as she is accused of by the CSU. As a Protestant divorcee who grew up in East Germany, and who lived with her partner for many years without a marriage certificate, she probably does not regard some questions of family morals in the same way as the Catholic clientele of the CSU. This apart, however, her socio-political outlook is best described as conservative to reactionary.

One of her first independent initiatives was to require the re-establishment of marks for diligence and behaviour in schools. She has also never dissociated herself from the anti-foreigner campaigns of her colleagues Koch and Ruetters. And it is worth noting that one of the few concrete resolutions passed at the congress vehemently condemned the sanctions against Austria because of the participation of Joerg Haider's right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the government.

The party congress was largely directed towards calming the troubled membership. Accordingly, in an act bordering on collective mental repression, hardly a word was spoken about a crisis that has shaken the CDU to its foundations for five months. Not a single delegate took the trouble to examine the social setting and causes of the party crisis.

Along with talk of the party crisis, social reality was also kept a long way from the conference. No trace could be found of the worries facing broad social layers, the increasing social tensions, rising discontent and hatred, particularly of those living in eastern Germany—despite the new East German party chairperson.

Instead, a mood of artificial euphoria prevailed, such as is produced at cheap fire sales. “Down to business!” read the large banner hanging over the podium, and the speeches bristled with challenges to the Social Democratic-Green Party government and slogans such as “We're back again!,” with which the delegates engendered mutual courage.

In the process the CDU/CSU is moving further to the right.

This was revealed, on the one hand, by the support for Roland Koch and Juergen Ruetters, who for the first time in the history of the CDU openly played the race card in the elections in Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia. Ruetters was elected deputy party chairman with 75 percent—the second best result—and Koch, who is also deeply implicated in the financial scandal, still received 66 percent in the election to the party presidium.

On the other hand, the election of the banker Ulrich Cartellieri as the new party treasurer clearly revealed the relationship of the CDU to big business. Cartellieri, who for many years was a director of the Deutsche Bank and therefore enjoys excellent relations with prominent business circles, was elected to the presidium with the record result of 99.3 percent.

The banker, who only joined the party on the eve of the CDU congress, left no doubts as to what he regards as his function. He wants to bring the conceptions of big business into the CDU presidium with “the necessary vigour,” as he explained at a press conference. For its part, the CDU expects Cartellieri to procure the funds from big business it needs to overcome the desolate financial crisis—and there was no secret made of this either.

If, behind the scenes, Kohl used to allow himself to be kept by big business, the same thing is now happening under Merkel on the open stage. So much for working through the moral lessons of the party finance affair.



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