

Chancellor Schroeder calls vote of confidence on German participation in the war

An ultimatum to parliament and the people

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On Friday, the *Bundestag* (parliament) will debate a motion linking Germany's participation in the Afghanistan war with a vote of confidence in the government. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder decided upon this procedure, which is unique in the history of post-war Germany, to intimidate and silence those critical voices being raised against the largest ever military intervention by the *Bundeswehr* (Armed Forces).

Linking the decision to deploy the *Bundeswehr* with a vote of confidence is primarily directed against those Social Democratic (SPD) and Green Party deputies who have announced their intention to vote against German military involvement. They are being posed with an ultimatum: Those who vote against participation in the war must oppose the vote of confidence in the chancellor, placing the future of the "red-green" coalition in question; those who vote to continue the coalition and express their confidence in the chancellor must support participation in the war.

Last weekend, Schroeder had still let it be known that he would content himself with a simple majority, and was not insisting on gaining a majority in his own camp for the despatch of the *Bundeswehr*. Since the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democrats (FDP) had already signalled their support for a German military mission, broad parliamentary agreement seemed safe. But on Tuesday, after consulting ex-SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and former SPD chairman Hans-Jochen Vogel, Schroeder decided to tie participation in the war with a vote of confidence in the government. As was expected, the CDU/CSU and FDP then announced they would shift their vote to one against Schroeder. Since the ex-Stalinists of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) generally oppose German military involvement, Schroeder's majority will now depend exclusively on the behaviour of the Social Democratic and Green Party deputies.

If Schroeder wins the vote, this would strengthen his authority and silence the critics in his own ranks, at least for a time. If he loses it, he can ask the federal president to dissolve the *Bundestag* within 21 days. A general election would then take place at the beginning of next year. However, the *Bundestag* could also decide to elect a new chancellor, either Schroeder or someone else. Conceivably, this could be an SPD-FDP coalition, which would enjoy a narrow majority, or a grand coalition of the SPD and the Christian Democrats or sections of them.

The SPD parliamentary faction immediately capitulated to Schroeder's ultimatum. After four deputies had originally expressed opposition to a *Bundeswehr* mission, the faction has now closed ranks behind the chancellor, giving him a standing ovation at their meeting.

As far as the Greens are concerned, the matter is far from settled. Previously at least eight deputies had said they would vote against sending German troops to war. If they don't change, this would remove Schroeder's majority, since the red-green coalition cannot sustain more than seven negative votes from within its own ranks. It is expected that some of the rebellious Greens will succumb to the substantial pressure that is now being brought to bear.

Unlike Britain, for example, the German political system only permits the premature dissolution of parliament in exceptional cases. The most important means to this end is by tabling a vote of confidence. This has only occurred three times in post-war Germany. In September 1972, SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt forced the premature dissolution of the *Bundestag* in order to secure a stable majority for himself in the ensuing election, as did CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl in December 1982.

SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt called a vote of confidence in February 1982, in order to stabilise the fragile coalition with the FDP and to discipline his own party. By forcing the deputies to express their confidence in him, Schmidt tried to control the growing opposition within the SPD ranks to his political course. This opposition was directed both against his employment and economic policies, as well as against the stationing of medium-range nuclear missiles on German soil, which had unleashed a protest movement of hundreds of thousands. Schmidt won the vote and emerged victorious. Nevertheless, seven months later his coalition with the FDP came to an end when the Liberals changed their allegiance in the *Bundestag* to the CDU. Schmidt's rightwing course had smoothed the way for Helmut Kohl, who remained chancellor for the next sixteen years.

Gerhard Schroeder is marching in the footsteps of Helmut Schmidt when he uses the confidence vote as a means to silence critics within his own ranks. But he is going even further than Schmidt, who did not link the confidence motion with a vote on another material question. By tying the confidence vote with the deployment of German troops abroad, Schroeder is entering new constitutional ground. A confidence motion, which traditionally

serves to establish whether a chancellor still possesses the confidence of the *Bundestag*, is being used as a means of forcing the will of the chancellor upon parliament.

The timid opposition of a few Green Party and SPD deputies is certainly only a weak echo of a more widespread sentiment. FDP chairman Guido Westerwelle openly said as much in the *Bundestag* last week, when he warned the deputies not to make themselves the “echo of sentiments” in the general population.

The local SPD and Green Party branches are seething. Just before Schroeder’s decision, 170 cultural and media personalities who are close to the SPD published an appeal saying, even supporters of the red-green coalition could no longer recognise what differentiates their politics in the fields of economics, taxation, education and health from those of the CDU/CSU or FDP. This applied even more to questions of security and the military. The appeal calls for a policy “that opposes the dominant neo-liberalism and creeping militarisation in theory and practice”.

Many Greens have already concluded that the party will not win enough votes to re-enter the *Bundestag* next year if it holds to its present course on the war. This is one of the imponderables surrounding today’s vote. At least some Greens have reached the conclusion that the deeply discredited party can only save a shred of credibility by going into opposition.

In view of this widely held rejection of the government’s course, even if formally it does not violate any legal norms, Schroeder’s actions have the whiff of a coup d’etat about them, serving to push through a deeply unpopular policy. Three years after the Kohl government was voted out of office, Schroeder has embarked upon a course that has the full backing of the Liberals and the Conservatives, and is opening the road back to power for them, without the electorate having the slightest influence on this.

In the meantime, Schroeder is meeting almost daily with FDP leader Guido Westerwelle. On Tuesday, he made a point of attending the FDP’s parliamentary faction meeting, in order to explain his present course—a clear signal for a future coalition with the Liberals.

If in the past, parliamentary votes on such fundamental questions as war and peace were left to the conscience of each deputy, Schroeder has now declared that “foreign policy necessities” are not a matter of conscience.

The deployment of *Bundeswehr* units to the Middle East and Central Asia goes far beyond the question of whether German soldiers take part in a given military action or not. The government believes that military participation in the present war is indispensable, if Germany is again to play a role as a great power. What started in the name of “unlimited solidarity” with the USA, is, in the long-term, directed at challenging the last remaining superpower in the struggle over raw materials, markets and spheres of influence.

On this question, Schroeder agrees with the Conservatives. Only last week, former CDU leader Wolfgang Schaeuble, who is again being regarded as a possible CDU/CSU candidate for the chancellorship, announced that the world did not want to accept “the leadership of only one power”. At the same time the *Bundestag* vote is taking place in Berlin today, a secret meeting of the Defence Secretaries of Germany, France, Britain and Italy is

being held in Bonn, as *Der Spiegel* reported in its latest edition. This gathering is supposed to improve the coordination of the European Union in the Afghanistan conflict and so strengthen Europe’s position against the US.

In the meantime, after the fall of Kabul, some Greens are consoling themselves with the fact that the hot phase of the Afghanistan war is now over and all that remains for the German units to do—as in the Balkans—is to support clearing-up and security operations. They overlook the fact that the “war against terrorism” in Afghanistan announced by the US government has only just begun, and that the resolution also permits the deployment of the *Bundeswehr* in quite different areas: “the Arabian peninsula, Central Asia and northeast Africa, as well as the adjacent sea-areas”.

A military escalation is inevitable, and inevitably strengthens the rightwing, militarist elements in society and politics, with the SPD and Greens preparing the way. If in times of peace they preached participation and democracy, then the new virtues are to resist the pressure of the general population and be immune to the horrors of war.

Schroeder’s behaviour also contains an element of panic. He justified his actions to the SPD *Bundestag* faction saying, in view of the economic situation, he wanted to guarantee a stable government. He is obviously anticipating that rising unemployment, drastic wage cuts and sinking social security benefits will unleash a wave of social protest.

Whereas the government and opposition are largely united regarding war policy, rejection can be found not only in broad layers of the population but also in sections of the press, involving the most varied motives. While in the population, memories of the terrors of the Second World War and fears of a military escalation prevail, the press fears that the government is acting without preparation or thought for the consequences, and is committing itself too closely to the US government.

Further political crises and intense struggles are thereby pre-ordained.

The working class needs its own political voice. The SPD and Greens are completely discredited and the PDS, which poses as a peace party, waits longingly for next crisis when the SPD looks to it for assistance. Their vows to oppose the war will then prove just as dishonest as the ones made earlier by the Greens. The ferocity with which Schroeder is pushing through his government’s war policy highlights the necessity to construct a new, independent party of the working class on the basis of an international socialist programme.



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