

Red-green great power politics

German parliament votes for participation in Afghanistan war

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On November 16, Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green Party deputies voted overwhelmingly in favour of sending German troops to participate in the Afghanistan war. Their 336 votes secured a majority for the ruling “red-green” coalition. Three votes less and the government would have been finished. Prior to the vote, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) turned the issue into a vote of confidence for the government, thereby exerting massive pressure on SPD and Green parliamentary deputies.

Under these conditions those inside the coalition parties opposed to German participation collapsed like a house of cards. With the exception of one SPD deputy, all the social democratic parliamentarians voted for the chancellor. Only Christa Lörcher voted against the resolution and quit the SPD faction.

Eight Green Party deputies who had publicly rejected the proposal to send German troops agreed to a compromise worthy of a Solomon. They agreed “to split” their votes. In order to demonstrate that they were against sending German troops but in favour of maintaining the SPD-Green coalition, four of them voted No and four voted Yes, thus ensuring a majority for the chancellor and the military intervention. A lash of the parliamentary whip, in the shape of a vote of confidence, was enough to intimidate the opponents of the war and bring them to order.

The real extent of the capitulation to the chancellor’s diktat became clear three days later at the SPD party conference, which began November 20 in Nuremberg. Schröder was confirmed as party chairman with a record 89 percent vote. At the same time, 90 percent of the delegates voted to support the foreign and domestic policy proposed by the party executive, thereby supporting the military course adopted by the government. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the most active advocate of the war among European social democrats, received frenetic applause following his address to the conference. Critical voices were hardly to be heard.

On Saturday, the Green Party is holding its own conference in the north German town of Rostock. While one may anticipate somewhat more conflict and perhaps the shedding of a few tears, a decision in favour of German intervention in the war and for the continuation of the SPD-Green coalition is virtually assured.

Based on its past experiences of pushing through controversial resolutions for military interventions, the Green Party leadership has been working for some time on a form of words that would allow party delegates to vote in support of this latest coalition decision. The pertinent motion for the conference worked out by Ralf Fücks, head of the Green Party think-tank, the Heinrich-Böll Institute, reads as follows: the “broad collapse” of the Taliban government has been greeted “evidently as a liberation” by the people. This shows that the USA and the international alliance “are not conducting a war against Afghanistan”, but rather against

“a terrorist regime which abuses human rights.”

The party leadership has also been given cover from the United Nations. The latter’s decision to hold a conference in Bonn next week to discuss the future of Afghanistan is being used to exert pressure on critical elements among the party’s grass roots. Green Party chair Claudia Roth warned that it would be “tragic” for political and humanitarian perspectives in Afghanistan, should a Green foreign minister no longer be in office.

Amidst the tumult of the political battle, where power politics, majorities and tactical advantages are being fought out, the historical dimension of the parliament’s decision has been largely forced into the background. In fact, the November 16 decision of the *Bundestag* (parliament) is one of the most far-reaching and momentous in its history. Chancellor Schröder himself made this clear when he described it as a “turning point”. “For the first time,” he said, “the international situation is forcing us to deploy German troops for a military intervention outside the NATO area.”

Irrespective of whether German soldiers are actually used in action over the next weeks in Afghanistan, a precedent has been established and there will be no turning back. The decision follows a well-known pattern that has been repeated since German marine troops were sent to the Persian Gulf in 1991 to clear mines. Through a series of sharp political controversies, the extent of the tasks to be undertaken by German troops has been expanded from unarmed medical orderlies and logistic support to armed “peace missions” and overt military action. Their sphere of activity has been widened from the area covered by NATO to the shores beyond Europe and the entire globe. As soon as internal resistance has been overcome, the next intervention takes place; after initially prising open the door, the next step is to charge through without any resistance.

Until now, the high point of this escalation had been German participation in the NATO war against Serbia. Agreeing to the intervention by German troops was the price the Greens paid three years ago to join the German government for the first time. This latest decision, however, goes much further. In Serbia it was a question of a few German air force Tornado fighters participating in active military operations; otherwise the German army was limited to logistical support. Now, for the first time, larger units are being made ready for direct participation in the arena of war—including 1,800 marine special forces, 800 soldiers trained in atomic, biological and chemical warfare and 100 additional special forces. At the same time, the geographical limits have been enormously expanded; the area of intervention stipulated in the *Bundestag* resolution reaches from the Hindu Kush across the Middle East and into north-east Africa.

Germany is increasingly closing ranks militarily with Britain and France, the European victors in the Second World War. Chancellor

Schröder summed up the position in the *Bundestag* with the words: "With this contribution a united and sovereign Germany is measuring up to its increased responsibility in the world."

The November 16 decision will initiate a spiral of defence spending. In the past, political obstacles have always prevented the German army undertaking military interventions. Now that the *Bundestag* has removed them, the relatively limited military budget and lack of defence spending are all that stand in the way. Previously, the government has only reluctantly increased military expenditure, mainly by funneling additional funds into other, military-related, budgets. It has been conscious of the fact that lifting the military budget at a time of strict regimenting of social welfare costs would prove to be extremely unpopular. Now it has chosen a different path. As soon as German soldiers step on the battlefield, the economic sacrifices necessary to ensure they have weapons will be regarded as a patriotic duty.

The immediate consequences of the *Bundestag* decision are much more far-reaching than officially conceded in government propaganda. On the one hand, nothing has been finally decided in terms of the war in Afghanistan. The surprisingly sudden retreat by the Taliban, who have left the large cities virtually without putting up a fight, has given rise to conjectures that they are preparing for a drawn-out guerilla war, which could prove to be a deadly trap for foreign soldiers. At the same time, there are increasing indications that the struggles between the various warlords that comprise the victorious Northern Alliance, could re-ignite drawing foreign troops into a long and bloody civil war.

On the other hand, the US government has made absolutely clear that it will not limit its "war against terrorism" to the territory of Afghanistan. The latest decision by the German parliament gives the government a free hand to participate in military activities in other countries. This aspect of the resolution is only limited by a clause which says that the country involved has to give its agreement to such an intervention. Literally the passage reads: "German forces will only take part in any possible interventions in other countries apart from Afghanistan with the agreement of the government in question." When one considers, however, that the two countries under consideration as future military targets either lack any functioning central administration (Somalia) or possess a government regarded internationally as a pariah (Iraq), then this proviso loses any real significance.

At its party conference, the SPD leadership did everything in its power to ensure the withdrawal of a motion which called for the intervention by German troops to be limited to Afghanistan. Despite the fact that 120 of the 520 assembled delegates signed this motion, the leadership was able to consign it to the files. The motion also condemned particular forms of military actions (e.g., carpet bombing), rejected special military courts for trying terrorists, criticised Israeli occupation policy and called for an independent state for the Palestinians.

The withdrawal of this motion makes clear that Schröder does not want to tie his hands regarding the possible expansion of military action. In his *Bundestag* speech he referred to "further possible decisions by parliament" which could arise from the original November 16 decision.

It requires a great deal of naivety or cynicism to accept as good coin the official government propaganda that the November 16 resolution was merely a reaction to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, serving the fight against terrorism.

It has been widely documented that American war preparations against Afghanistan go back long before September 11. It is also a fact that the terrorists, against whom the present war is supposedly directed, are products of earlier American foreign policy activities. Bin Laden's Al Qaeda would be just as inconceivable without substantial CIA assistance as the Afghan Mujaheddin, which were all financed and armed in the war against the Soviet puppet regime in Kabul.

The strategic significance that US foreign policy attaches to Central

Asia was extensively documented by, among others, Zbigniew Brzezinski in his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard*. Former National Security Council advisor to US President Jimmy Carter, Brzezinski bluntly put the view that the key to the defence of American global supremacy in the 21st century was control of Central Asia.

There is extensive, publicly available literature concerning the political significance of the different pipeline routes for the development of the oil and gas reserves from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. There are also personal connections between the American oil industry and the administrations of Bush the elder and Bush the younger, and a close business relationship between the Bush family and the bin Laden family.

All this is well known to SPD and Green Party deputies, just as it is to most party congress delegates, since both parties have their own foundations, institutes and think-tanks that examine these questions closely. However, they did not feature in any of the debates held in the *Bundestag* or at the party congresses because they would put Germany's participation in the war in a completely different light.

Just as the American government is using the September 11 events to put into practice its long-held plans to be the "only world power" (Brzezinski), so the German government has seized the initiative to finally put an end to Germany's subordinate role in world politics, a role forced upon it by defeat in the Second World War more than a half century ago. "The post-war period is over!" Chancellor Schröder told the *Bundestag*, to the applause of the deputies.

Germany's economic and political elite does not want to stand idly by and watch a new re-division of the world into zones of influence and power. The contradictions that have beset Germany historically are driving the government towards a new version of the great power politics that have twice already plunged Europe and the world into disaster. The country has great industrial efficiency but a narrow domestic market, high energy consumption and an almost complete absence of its own energy sources.

Regardless of the chancellor's claims that he is only following the requests of his allies, the government has been pushing for weeks to participate in the Afghanistan war. One should not be deceived by Schröder's language when he talks about "obligations" and "responsibilities". Great power politics have always employed such clichés. The British also spoke about "the white man's burden" and their civilising mission when they subjugated half the world in the 19th century. The terrible consequences of their colonial rule on the Indian sub-continent and in Africa have still not been overcome.

Schröder's rhetoric is only exceeded by that of his Green Party foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, who in Orwellian manner reinterprets every war as a humanitarian mission. In his speech to the *Bundestag*, Fischer mutates the war against Afghanistan into a matter of "world domestic policy," and the bombardment of an impoverished country becomes the means to provide "humanitarian aid". According to Fischer, "We now have a great opportunity. Everywhere, where the Northern Alliance is, the United Nations and its relief organisations and the NGOs can go in again". His announcement was immediately contradicted by the actions of the Northern Alliance.

But that will not prevent Fischer from pulling another argument out of the hat tomorrow. In a similar way, he praised the Albanian KLA, only later to justify the deployment of German soldiers by citing the provocations of the KLA in Kosovo and Macedonia.

The *Bundestag* confidence vote has saved the red-green coalition, for the time being. But in the long term, it has sealed its fate all the more surely. The fact that the chancellor had to use the drastic measure of tabling a vote of confidence shows that the government no longer has support in the general population.

The confidence vote primarily served to whip into line those deputies who were deviating. But the timid opposition of some deputies conceals

the opposition of broader social layers who reject any military involvement in Afghanistan. Although official propaganda monopolises the mass media, opinion polls show that approximately one third of the population are against participation in the war, including many SPD and Green Party voters. If the true reasons for Germany's participation became known, this number would rise substantially.

Under these circumstances, the confidence vote served to push through a deeply unpopular resolution by means of an ultimatum. This was so obvious that Schröder had to defend himself before the *Bundestag* against the charge that he was acting undemocratically. "Our constitution is an exemplary democratic constitution," he said. "If the procedure we have chosen to take today is expressly foreseen in this constitution, this proves that there is no contradiction between a vote under article 68 of the constitution and the likewise guaranteed and just as important freedom of conscience."

In many respects, Schröder's position recalls that of his social democratic predecessor Helmut Schmidt in 1982. At that time, Schmidt encountered broad opposition to his agreement to permit the stationing of medium-range nuclear missiles on German soil and his antisocial economic policy. He also secured the continuation of his government through a vote of confidence. But not for long. A few months later he had to give way to Helmut Kohl, who won a clear victory in the subsequent general election.

If one draws a balance sheet of the past three years of the red-green government, then the coalition has achieved one major thing. It has implemented decisions that would have met substantial public opposition under a conservative government and possibly have failed as a result. This applies not only to foreign policy and Germany's military missions, but also to domestic and social policy. The two security packages of Interior Minister Schily, agreed by the *Bundestag*, contain the most extensive attacks on democratic rights since the adoption of Germany's post-war constitution. Under the SPD-Green coalition, the dismantling of the welfare state has progressed far faster than under the preceding conservative-liberal coalition.

The SPD is returning to its traditional role. Ever since the party betrayed its own programme in 1914 and voted for war credits in the name of defending the fatherland, it has always, in periods of crisis, placed itself on the side of the existing order—standing against its own voters.

With their agreement to participate in the war, the Greens have also taken on a historical responsibility. The party that started and won influence with the slogan "never again war!" will enter history as the party that again opened the way for German militarism.

The reason lies not simply in the Green politicians' craving for power, which some press comments refer to, but in the party's social orientation and political programme. The Greens initially claimed to offer an alternative to the existing society without needing to change its fundamental basis. They rejected the class struggle in the name of allegedly higher questions affecting humanity as a whole, such as the environment and peace. Under conditions where all the internal and external contradictions in society have reached crisis point, such a view can no longer be maintained. A position between or above the classes becomes untenable. The Greens express the petty bourgeois longing for order and respect for the state. Their pacifism gives way to "international responsibility", which, as Fischer's recent ultimatum expressed, the party rank-and-file must now finally recognise.

The trust of those who three years ago helped the Greens enter the federal government has been completely eroded. The party is showing all the signs of an advanced state of decomposition. The resignation letters are mounting at its headquarters. The party has suffered clear losses in all the regional elections over the past three years and next year's *Bundestag* election should seal its fate.

The danger exists that peripheral right wing figures could fill the

political vacuum that the Greens and SPD leave behind, as Roland Koch did in Hesse or Barnabas Schill in Hamburg. The Green Party leadership is using the frightening prospect of a rightwing government takeover to discipline rebellious party delegates. But the continuation of the red-green coalition is not a lesser evil, as the recent *Bundestag* resolutions concerning an armed forces' mission and domestic security demonstrate. The longer the red-green coalition remains in government, the more thoroughly they clear the way for the rightwing.

The only possible answer to militarism, attacks on democratic rights and welfare cuts is the building of an independent party that gives voice to the interests and needs of working people. Such a party must be based on an international socialist programme.



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