

German opposition parties launch xenophobic campaign for national elections

Ulrich Rippert
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Following its passage through the lower house of the German parliament at the beginning of March, Germany's new immigration law was discussed in the second chamber (Bundesrat) on March 22. The debate ended in uproar and sensation, unprecedented for Germany's second chamber of parliament.

Representatives from the federal states governed by the opposition Union parties—the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)—voted unanimously against the immigration bill, already passed by the Bundestag (lower house). As Klaus Wowereit (German Social Democratic Party—SPD)—the incumbent president of the upper house, according to the principle of rotation—called for the vote of the federal state of Brandenburg to be announced, Manfred Stolpe (SPD prime minister of Brandenburg) voted for the legislation and his deputy, Interior Minister Schönbohm (CDU), voted against it. However, because the federal constitution requires a unanimous decision on issues from each of the federal states, Wowereit checked once again, ruled the prime minister's vote as confirmation of his state's consent to the legislation and declared the bill passed.

Immediately, opposition Union politicians sprang to their feet, cried "Breach of the constitution!", demanded a break in the session and the resignation of the president of the upper house. Finally they left the chamber, voicing loud protest. The loudest was the notorious CDU right-winger and prime minister of Hessen, Roland Koch, who won the state election in Wiesbaden three years ago on the basis of a xenophobic campaign against the so-called double-citizenship scheme.

This kind of parliamentary tumult has not occurred since the beginning of the 1970s, when Franz-Josef Strauß (CSU)—the political godfather of the opposition Union's candidate for chancellor, Edmund Stoiber (CSU)—described his political opponents as "rats and flies".

One day after the latest tumult in the Bundesrat it became clear that the apparently spontaneous eruption of rage and indignation had been carefully prepared the previous evening. From then on, both the voting behaviour of the state of Brandenburg and the reaction of the upper house president were entirely predictable.

At a gathering in Saarbrücken two days later, Saarland's Prime Minister Peter Müller (CDU) admitted this quite frankly, saying: "Of course it was all a show—but a legitimate show!" This seemingly incidental detail is not without significance and reveals the disdain with which the right wing of the CDU is prepared to treat parliamentary bodies. While they forcefully accuse their political opponents of breaching the constitution, they don't hesitate to use the upper house as a platform for shameful political manoeuvres.

Although the SPD had incorporated almost all the CDU/CSU's

critical points in the revised text of the immigration law and Federal Interior Minister Otto Schily signalled willingness for even more concessions, chancellor candidate Stoiber whipped the Union parties into a united front in opposition to the proposed bill. Under all circumstances, he wanted to prevent State Interior Minister Schönbohm—who had expressed a positive attitude towards the main points of the law at an earlier stage of consultation—from changing his opinion at the last moment and giving consent. In the course of the upper house session, media reporters counted no fewer than 18 attempts by Stoiber, Koch and other CDU/CSU functionaries to pressure Schönbohm in private talks to stick to his declared intention to reject the legislation.

Kurt Kister of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* aptly described the behaviour of the Union, which entered the parliamentary session with the equivalent of a finished script: "Their behaviour descended to its lowest point with the statement from the Bundestrat. On the other hand, the scene played by Roland Koch made it clear once again why cynics predict such a great future in politics for this man. In ancient Rome, people in the forum were hired for a few sesterces to strut in front of the senate and shout 'traitor', 'liar', 'criminal' at a senator designated by their sponsor. This is exactly how Koch behaved after the widely anticipated performance of Wowereit. With the indignation of a Roman hired minion, Koch cursed into the cameras. It was all an act, like so much of this aggravating session."

Since then there has been considerable argument over whether Wowereit's ruling of Brandenburg's split vote was constitutional or not. Expert opinion on the matter is extremely divided and the Union has already announced its intention of appealing to the constitutional court if Federal President Johannes Rau signs the bill.

But a more fundamental question concerns the political evaluation of the debacle in the upper house.

Stoiber, the Union's chancellorship candidate, maintains that he is concerned with "improving" the law in the parliamentary mediation committee. But this is merely a delaying tactic. In reality this committee has sat de facto for two years since work on the law began. No other legislation has ever been drawn up in such close cooperation with the opposition Union parties.

The government commission worked for months on end under the direction of Rita Süßmuth, a leading CDU politician. Before a year had passed, she presented a number of proposals that were far more liberal than the currently existing draft law. A commission of the Union parties under the leadership of Peter Müller, the CDU executive member, also tabled a draft proposal whose central points were adopted by the Red-Green government.

After this, Stoiber and his Bavarian interior minister, Beckstein,

demanding that the text of the law should expressly declare an intention to “limit immigration”. SPD-Green Party politicians consequently changed Paragraph 1 of the draft law appropriately.

The call for a mediation committee was only superficially a call for “changes to the text of the law”. Stoiber was far more interested in exerting his influence over the SPD and Greens, knowing full well that the Greens—in spite of their readiness to compromise—would not always give their blessing to the SPD’s rightward drift once the election campaign was under way. Any crisis in the SPD-Green coalition could only improve the Union’s election chances.

Stoiber, Beckstein, Koch and others in the CDU/CSU are currently orchestrating a movement to the right by the Union parties. Their express aim is to make hostility to foreigners an election campaign issue and stir up feelings of xenophobia. Although opinion on the matter varies within the Union, so far no one from the more moderate sections of the coalition has dared to question at any serious level the course being taken. The right wing of Stoiber’s forces seems to have been given free play.

The decision to organise a xenophobic election campaign has far-reaching consequences. It is aimed at stirring up the most backward social layers and moving the whole political spectrum further to the right. As social misery continues to mount, the Union seeks to channel increasing despair in an openly racist direction. The Union’s campaign against the immigration law was already heading in this direction, encouraging neo-Nazi and skinhead thugs to attack immigrants with the battle cry “Foreigners Out!” and set fire to asylum-seeker hostels.

Stoiber’s offensive is not only irresponsible, it is politically criminal. His brand of right-wing populism brings together two tendencies. Already in his seventies and as prime minister of Bavaria, he has long embodied the national-conservative wing of the Union. Historically centred around the figure of Franz-Josef Strauß, this tendency emerged directly out of the Nazi regime. It combines German jingoism with elements of social reform policy, scarcely differing from the SPD on some points.

In view of the mounting economic crisis, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold society together on the basis of social harmony. Therefore, Stoiber is now trying to mobilise society’s most oppressed layers with the aid of crass right-wing slogans, even though this meets with scepticism and disapproval from broad sections of the ruling elite. Following developments in Italy and the recent mass demonstrations against Berlusconi, many fear that politics will move into the streets and a general radicalisation of society will take place.

The second element in Stoiber’s right-wing populist offensive is represented by his 25 years younger colleague, Roland Koch. This political heir of CDU extreme right-winger Manfred Kanther is deeply involved in the CDU party donation scandals, has lied to parliament, and owes his successful election as prime minister to a xenophobic election campaign. He represents a layer of society that became influential as a result of the recent boom in share prices and now seek to defend their privileges in every possible way, including criminal means. His aggressive arrogance stems from the fact that his political conceptions have never met with any serious resistance from the working class.

The reason why the right-wingers in the CDU/CSU are able to flaunt themselves in this way stems, above all, from the political cowardice of the SPD. Among the leading figures of this party there is literally nobody with the courage to stand up to Stoiber’s right-wingers and to restrain and cut down to size bloated demagogues like Koch. Rarely

before has a party prostituted itself in this way, allowed itself to be seduced and held hostage by its political opponent.

Why the well rehearsed drama in the upper house and the manoeuvring in relation to Brandenburg? Why not let the bill be defeated in the state council and then make the Union right-wingers responsible for its demise and bring a fight against their xenophobic challenge into the open? Why this pitiful kowtowing to the CDU/CSU, always in the hope of avoiding a confrontation by offering further concessions, only to win a slap in the face?

The motivating force behind the servile politics of the SPD is not hard to uncover. The social democratic functionaries are part of the same political caste to which Stoiber, Koch & Co. belong. In face of the increasingly obvious effects of the economic crisis and the intensification of social conflicts, they feel threatened by the growing exasperation of broad sections of the population and are striving for a closer alliance with the Union.

The obsequious politics of the SPD in relation to the CDU/CSU are being accompanied by cuts in social services and attacks on basic democratic rights. It is unwilling under any circumstances to openly oppose the CDU/CSU and their politics of hostility towards foreigners, because it is afraid this will mobilise precisely the social forces which are the brunt of its policies and which it seeks to keep under control.

Federal Interior Minister Otto Schily is the living personification of this political stance. At the same time as giving in to the Union’s every demand, altering the immigration bill to satisfy the right-wingers on every occasion, referring to Bavarian Interior Minister Beckstein (CSU) as his friend, and rejecting every demand from the refugee support organisations, he is simultaneously enforcing a drastic curtailment of civil rights and toughening of state powers.

Where will this lead? In a country where, as every child knows, the social crisis of the thirties and unemployment of six million had disastrous consequences, the declaration by the Union that it intends to make xenophobia a theme in the elections must set alarm bells ringing. It is time to oppose the racist demagogues and unite the defence of foreign workers and refugees with the campaign against unemployment, welfare cuts and attacks on basic rights.



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