

Candidates debate on German TV: Schröder and Stoiber advance similar right-wing policies

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For the first time in a German election campaign, the two top candidates of the main parties met for a televised debate. For 75 minutes last Sunday, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD—Social Democratic Party) and his challenger Edmund Stoiber (CSU—Christian Social Union) appeared on two of Germany's main private television channels and answered questions posed by two political journalists.

The event was preceded by an intensive media campaign, with sensational headlines promising a “duel” and “boxing match.” The debate had barely concluded when a host of pollsters, journalists, public relations experts and former politicians appeared to air their opinions as to who emerged as the victor. The main German channel titled its programme “The Referee,” as if the whole affair were a pugilistic exhibition rather than an exchange of political standpoints.

The model was the televised debates that take place regularly in the US between presidential candidates. These were aped to the last detail. Up to now such debates have not been the norm in Germany because, in contrast to the American system, the German chancellor is not elected directly by the people.

In the national elections due for September 22, the German electorate will cast their votes for parliamentary deputies, who will then vote for the chancellor. Usually, the new chancellor is dependent on votes from two or more parties. Nevertheless, only two parties were allowed to take part in last Sunday's televised debate. Germany's FDP (Free Democratic Party) protested its exclusion and filed a court action demanding that it be allowed to participate.

The debate failed to live up to the media hype. For the three-and-a-half minutes allowed for each answer, the candidates merely regurgitated their cribbed campaign slogans. As a result, the event was devoid of serious conflict, and provided little insight or information. Although the programme attracted a large audience of 15 million, there is little indication that the debate will have any significant influence on the election result.

The debate failed to overcome the widespread lack of public interest that has characterised the election campaign up to now, although that was a major aim of the spectacle. Rather, the programme confirmed the experience of many voters, who see little difference between the two major candidates.

In terms of content, the differences between Schröder and Stoiber are minimal. The SPD has moved so far to the right that the chairman of the right-wing CSU was able to criticise his opponent from the left on some issues. Stoiber criticised the Schröder government's measures to eliminate capital gains taxes and its corporate tax

“reform” that has already provided a windfall in the billions for Germany's largest firms. Even when the two expressed differences with any vigour, the substance of their disagreements fell within a narrow, mutually agreed framework.

When asked about the two parties combining after the elections in a so-called Grand Coalition of the SPD and the Union parties (the CSU and the CDU—Christian Democratic Union), both rejected such a possibility. But their opposition was not based on unbridgeable programmatic differences. Schröder even emphasised that, with the exception of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—formerly the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany), all of the parties in the German parliament had “to be ready to make coalitions with one another.” His own preference after the elections, however, was a continuation of his party's coalition with the Green Party.

Stoiber rejected a Grand Coalition on the grounds that it could lead to “a growth of radical forces in our country.... I do not want a situation which suddenly leads in Germany to the emergence of a German Pim Fortuyn or a radical politician arising from frustration because there is no reasonable opposition in the German parliament.”

Sharp differences emerged over the issue of military intervention against Iraq, but even on this question the differences between Schröder and Stoiber are less substantial than might at first appear.

Schröder repeated his standpoint that he regarded an intervention against Iraq as wrong. For this reason, he emphasised, such an intervention “cannot be made with the assistance of Germany under my leadership.” At the same time he left open a back door, stating, “It is said we must get rid of Saddam Hussein; it is not said that we want to exert pressure to allow international observers to come into the country, and that is a policy which I believe under the given circumstances is false.”

In other words, should the war be carried out under another pretext—exerting pressure to allow international observers into the country—Schröder would entertain the prospect of German participation. Precisely such points are being discussed at the moment in the US, where a section of the ruling elite fear that naked American aggression to overthrow the Iraqi government could isolate the Bush government at home and abroad, and are therefore demanding a better pretext for war.

Stoiber condemned Schröder's statements as “irresponsible” and went on to justify his standpoint: “Whoever unnecessarily excludes any theoretical options yields to pressure from Saddam Hussein, to give way to the UN.” But Stoiber also emphasised “that no German chancellor, whether he comes from the SPD, the CDU or the CSU,

would take part in a military adventure. On this we have no differences of opinion.” He added, “We both seek to avoid the intervention of military means.”

Stoiber is aware that the international policy of Schröder and his Green foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, flows seamlessly from that carried out by Schröder’s predecessor, Helmut Kohl (CDU), together with foreign ministers Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Klaus Kinkel (both FDP). The phrase used by Fischer upon accepting his office—“there is no Green foreign policy, only German foreign policy”—is programmatic in this respect.

Since reunification, German foreign policy has sought to gradually wean itself away from dependence on the US and develop its own imperialist interests with renewed vigour. An indispensable precondition for this is the country’s ability to intervene internationally. In this respect, four years of the SPD-Green Party in power have achieved far more than 16 years of the Kohl government.

The current government has increased German expenditure for international military interventions tenfold—from 178 million euros in 1998 to 1.7 billion in 2002. These figures were made public in the middle of August as Chancellor Schröder boasted of his performance to Stoiber in the course of a discussion in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* newspaper. Germany now has more soldiers posted abroad than any other country, apart from America.

It is against this background that one must understand Schröder’s criticism of the war plans of the US government. It is not based on any pacifist considerations, but rather the drive of German ruling circles to pursue their own imperialist interests in the future in a far more independent and self-conscious manner. Hence Schröder’s slogan: the “German way”.

Should Stoiber win the upcoming election, it is evident he would pursue essentially the same course. Increased arms expenditure is a central point in the election programme of the Union.

The position of the two candidates on the issue of unemployment was typical of the similarity between their standpoints. In the course of the debate, Stoiber repeatedly attacked Schröder for failing to reduce unemployment to the level of 3.5 million, as he had promised. Stoiber’s own answer to the problem of unemployment is, however, virtually identical to that of Schröder: further relief for employers via tax cuts and reductions in their social welfare contributions, together with the spread of low-wage jobs.

In response, Schröder referred to the proposals of the government’s Hartz commission, which has drawn up plans aimed principally at creating a mass army of low-wage workers. The unemployed are to be hired out to firms directly by the unemployment exchanges, and will lose any sort of support should they refuse to cooperate. Others will be loaned out to employers, for example, to help fill shelves in supermarkets. Such measures have far less to do with resolving the problem of unemployment than with replacing regular work with cheap labour. Social gains fought for by workers over previous decades are to be consigned to the trash can.

Schröder was cynical enough to explain that it required the recent scandal over falsified figures issued by the employment exchanges to impose measures as drastic as those embodied in the Hartz report. When Stoiber asked the chancellor why he introduced these proposals only shortly before the elections, Schröder replied that sometimes it required great shocks before public opinion was prepared to accept such measures.

In the debate, Stoiber emphasised his call for tax cuts for small businesses, obviously appealing for the support of this layer of voters.

This, according to Stoiber, is the most important measure against unemployment. But Stoiber also favours the forcible introduction of low-wage jobs—a central demand raised by the Union in its “immediate programme” released to the public August 23.

Neither of the two gave the least consideration to measures to create new jobs where they are urgently needed: in the areas of education and health, nursing, in the field of the environment. The problems in these areas can be resolved only by a large-scale programme of public works financed by increased taxation of top-level incomes and investment. Both the SPD and the Union categorically reject any such measures.

When the debate came round to the theme of immigration, it degenerated into a competition between the two candidates to stake out the more right-wing position. Each went out of his way to emphasise that he would reduce immigration to a minimum.

Stoiber spoke in favour of maintaining a general moratorium on applications for foreign workers outside of Europe, and attacked the new law on immigration because it “envisages more immigration.” This is something that, according to Stoiber, “We cannot take.”

For his part, Schröder gave assurances that the new law created the possibility of “sensibly controlling immigration, and that means, of course, also being able to limit it.” He made a distinction between immigrants “we need” and those “whom we do not necessarily need.” He continued: “That is why this new law enables us to differentiate, to limit, but also to make immigration possible.”

On this issue, and indeed throughout the entire debate, concepts such as humanity, basic rights, democracy, justice or social equality played no role. They have disappeared from the vocabulary of both candidates. The word “social” only cropped up in relation to a question on the charitable activities of the wives of the candidates. Stoiber defined social as “that which today and tomorrow creates jobs”, a definition that could embrace not only low-wage labour, but even forced labour.

The television debate only served to confirm that on September 22 voters have only a choice between two right-wing political programmes. None of the parties that are taking part in the election have any answer to the problems confronting millions of people.



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