

The death of Jürgen Möllemann and the decay of German politics

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On June 5, Jürgen W. Möllemann, until recently a leading member of the German Free Democratic Party (FDP), plunged to his death in the course of a parachute jump. Möllemann, 57, was an experienced parachutist.

News of his death shook the German capital of Berlin, and the shock increased as indications grew that Möllemann had committed suicide. Only hours after the story broke, a columnist for the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper wrote: “No one else was responsible, only he himself.”

Is this true? Can the death of a leading politician be so easily explained? Is it sufficient merely to note the “excessive political ambition, exaggerated self-esteem, and monomaniacal obsession” of Möllemann?

There is no doubt that Möllemann was a politician with reactionary views who sought to utilise growing popular dissatisfaction with the existing parties and the political establishment to encourage right-wing populist sentiments. The methods he employed—a mixture of flashiness, media events and promotional stunts—were repulsive, but they were not merely the product of one man alone, an egomaniac with an exaggerated opinion of himself.

Möllemann’s death—eyewitness accounts, the post-mortem and the police investigation all point to suicide—must be considered in relation to the protracted degeneration of political relations, a phenomenon not limited to Germany.

At the heart of this development, which one could describe as the political decay of democracy, are two main issues: first, the exclusion of the broad majority of the population from any real impact on political decision-making; and second, inseparably linked to the first, the suppression of any serious political discussion. All important political decisions are made by a small circle of party functionaries, business representatives, experts and journalists.

The interests of the broad masses do not play the slightest role in this process. Or, to be more precise, they are considered from one standpoint only—the most effective means of preventing the masses of people from expressing their point of view. Millions take to the streets to protest against war, and war takes place anyway. Tens of thousands protest against attacks on the welfare state, and they are studiously ignored.

The exclusion of the popular will has consequences for the

structure of the political parties. There is no longer any form of control from below. Decisions on the political line are no longer arrived at by genuine political debate and ballots, but rather by intrigue and the mobbing of political opponents.

Möllemann was both an exponent and a victim of this development.

When the 25-year-old teacher from Münster joined the FDP in 1970, it marked the beginning of a meteoric political career. By 1972, he was already a deputy in the German parliament (Bundestag). In 1982, Möllemann supported the former FDP chairman and foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, in his decision to end the FDP’s coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and enter into coalition with the conservative parties, resulting in a change in government. His reward was a post as undersecretary in the Foreign Ministry.

Later, Möllemann went on to become education and then economics minister in the cabinet led by Christian Democratic (CDU) leader Helmut Kohl. Möllemann even served as vice chancellor for a period of time, but was forced to resign in 1993 following a corruption scandal.

Since the 1980s, the FDP has represented the free-market “liberal” wing of German politics, and for a period described itself as the “party of the well-off.” After the fall of the Kohl government, the party rapidly declined and failed to win the 5 percent vote required to obtain legislative seats in several state elections. At this point, Möllemann initiated his “18 percent campaign.” Experienced commentators thought his plan to triple the vote for the FDP insane, but it soon became clear that Möllemann had a strategy.

He sought to orient the party to right-wing voters. In a similar manner, Jörg Haider in Austria had transformed the former sister party of the FDP into an openly racist and right-wing party. Over the same period, other parties, such as the Venstre in Denmark and List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, successfully pursued a similar strategy.

Möllemann was even prepared to employ anti-Semitic overtures to achieve his ends. For weeks, he conducted a polemic against Michel Friedman, the vice chairman of the Central Jewish Council in Germany. Möllemann accused Friedman of encouraging anti-Semitism in Germany with his “intolerant, spiteful manner” and “unbearable, aggressive and

arrogant behaviour.”

Möllemann combined justified criticism of the Israeli government with statements that had unmistakable anti-Semitic undertones, and refused to distance himself from ultra-right groups that expressed enthusiasm for his campaign. Although his line led to reservations within the FDP, his “18 percent campaign” was accepted as official party policy at the FDP annual conference in 2001, and Möllemann was appointed deputy to party chairman Guido Westerwelle.

However, it became clear in the course of the 2002 election campaign that influential sections of the political elite were opposed to the transformation of the FDP into a right-wing populist party. There were a number of reasons for this. The experience of Austria, Holland and Denmark had shown that similar right-wing formations were extremely hard to keep under control, and their participation in government led only to increased instability. It was also feared that anti-Semitic statements from a party that had filled the post of foreign minister for decades in post-war Germany would harm the image of the country and damage German export prospects.

More significant was the fear that any form of populism could serve to mobilise the most oppressed layers of society—an eventuality the political elite has sought to avoid at all costs. Since the end of World War II, the German bourgeoisie, with the assistance of the reformist labour bureaucracies, has worked to control and suppress any independent popular movement. There is a widespread fear that this control could no longer be maintained if politics went beyond the environs of party offices and editorial boards and took to the streets.

An intense political campaign was launched against Möllemann after the FDP failed badly to meet its target in last autumn’s national elections. During the election campaign, Möllemann distributed a leaflet to millions of households in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW) containing renewed attacks on the Israeli government and Michel Friedman. The day the poll results were made public, questions were raised about the financing of the controversial leaflet. Under pressure from the party leadership, Möllemann resigned as deputy chairman shortly after the election.

In October of last year, FDP Treasurer Günther Rexrodt accused Möllemann of a “substantial violation” of party rules with regard to the financing of his leaflet, and called for Möllemann’s resignation as FDP state and parliamentary faction leader in NRW.

When the party leadership demanded in November that Möllemann quit the party, he responded by announcing his intention to found a new party. This was the trigger for furious activity on the part of the party leadership, in collaboration with the state attorney’s office, to ruin and discredit the former FDP leader.

The state attorney’s office in Düsseldorf commenced four separate investigations, involving suspicion of tax evasion, fraud, embezzlement and violations of party rules. These

accusations hardly exceed the charges in many other corruption probes. Should the investigations reveal that Möllemann was involved in weapons deals in the Middle East, organised through his connections with Arab organisations, his actions would by no means be entirely foreign to the behaviour of others in the political establishment. They would be on a par with the criminal and semi-criminal activities of a number of other politicians.

The honorary chairman of the FDP, Otto Graf Lambsdorf, was convicted of tax evasion a number of years ago and still participates in the political life of the country. Former chancellor Helmut Kohl refused to name anonymous donors to his so-called “black chest” of illegal party funds. He was also heavily implicated in the takeover of the East German Leuna oil company, in the course of which substantial sums of slush money passed hands. Nevertheless, the prosecution was abandoned.

The prime minister of the state of Hessian, Roland Koch (CDU), demonstrably lied to parliament about his own illicit donation practices. The prosecution was abandoned in his case as well.

The situation was very different for Möllemann. Last February he was expelled from the FDP parliamentary faction, and in mid-March he resigned from the party in advance of proceedings aimed at his expulsion. Two weeks later, he confirmed his intention of forming a new party.

On June 5, the state attorney’s office demanded that the parliamentary leadership move up the hour at which Möllemann’s parliamentary immunity was to be lifted. More than 100 officials were on standby to begin the immediate search of 25 properties in four different countries: parliamentary offices, business offices, private accommodations, a holiday home, etc. It was the biggest search and investigation undertaken against a German politician since the end of World War II.

One hour after the unanimous parliamentary vote to lift his immunity, Möllemann, leapt to his death.

When Thomas Kröter writes “No one else was responsible, only he himself,” he reveals himself to be a journalist whose grasp of political complexities has not improved since he moved from the radical *Tageszeitung* to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. More serious observers of social developments cannot fail to make the link between Möllemann’s death and the parlous state of German bourgeois politics as a whole.



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