

Germany: Schröder resigns as party chairman

Peter Schwarz
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Germany's chancellor Gerhard Schröder has resigned as Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman in favour of Franz Muentefering, who heads the SPD faction in the *Bundestag* (parliament). The surprise announcement was made at a hastily convened press conference last Friday. The next day, the party's executive committee confirmed Muentefering as the new chairman. He is to be officially elected on March 21 at a special party congress.

Schroeder's resignation as SPD party chairman, a post he has occupied for five years since taking over from Oskar Lafontaine, is in reaction to the massive slump in party membership and votes. Over the course of the last year, the SPD has lost nearly 10 percent of its members—63,000 in total. In 1990, the year the Berlin Wall fell, the party had 950,000 members; today it has just 650,000. In voter polls, the SPD has sunk to an historical low of 24 percent. In the last *Bundestag* elections one-and-a-half years ago it retained 38.5 percent of the vote.

Last week, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* published around two-dozen letters of resignation, all from the month of January, which provide some insight into the reasons for the slump in party membership: anger and indignation over Schroeder's policy of welfare cuts—the so-called “Agenda 2010.”

“I have resigned after 33 years' party membership in the SPD, the party that once represented the weak in society,” states one letter. Another reads: “Chancellor Schröder has become even worse than Kohl [his conservative predecessor]; the rest of them are interchangeable careerists, who have abandoned the ideas of Brandt, Wehner or other decent Social Democrats. The SPD no longer represents the ideals that motivated me to join the party on January 21, 1977.”

Another ex-member writes: “I joined the SPD as a student and am now resigning as a pensioner. The political decisions the party has made have reached a level that I can no longer accept.” And another writes: “I hereby declare my resignation from the Social Democratic Party, since I can no longer comprehend the goals of this party. Their reforms are

a scandal and a slap in the face for every worker and taxpayer, the work of this Chancellor and the party are a disaster.”

They continue in this vein over a whole page.

However, Schröder's resignation means neither a change in course nor the initiation of a discussion concerning the deeply unpopular “reforms.” Quite the opposite—the substitution of Muentefering as party leader is meant to suffocate any political debate.

Schroeder has no intention of deviating from his course. He has even justified his resignation by saying that, as head of government, he is first of all committed to the reforms. Since there will be difficulties in carrying through the reforms, he has agreed to a “division of labour” with Muentefering. As far as “the content and necessity of the reforms” are concerned, he and Muentefering are “of one mind.”

Muentefering affirmed, “We are decided and determined that there can and must be no way backwards.” He wanted to “contribute to winning support for the reforms,” he said, and demanded an end to the debates inside the party: “There must be an end to the talking at and against each other.”

His appointment as chairman serves to calm the party functionaries, who are increasingly nervous as a result of the dramatic loss in members and votes. This year, there will be five state elections and eight local elections, as well as the elections to the European Parliament. If the results of recent polls are confirmed, a disaster threatens the SPD, with the loss of innumerable elected posts and their accompanying privileges. In recent weeks, the complaints from the party's regional bodies have grown concerning the course being followed by Schröder.

Schröder indicated he had already begun discussing a change in leadership in private talks with Muentefering in January. The announcement was to be made in mid-February, at a meeting of the party executive. But the drop in the polls, the negative headlines and the increasingly loud criticism from within the party forced Schröder to act earlier. Last Friday, a few hours before the hastily convened press

conference, he informed the most important members of the executive and vice-chancellor Joschka Fischer of the Green Party about the forthcoming change.

Schröder's approach is characteristic of the undemocratic character of the entire enterprise. Neither the elected executive nor the membership were consulted as part of his plans to switch the occupancy of the most important party office. They are merely permitted to rubberstamp his decision after the event. Any discussion would inevitably have involved a debate over the entire political course, which Schröder wants to prevent at any price.

The 64-year-old Franz Muentefering is a creature of the party machine. He enjoys substantially more confidence among the party functionaries than Schröder, who has always been regarded as an outsider. At the last party congress in November 2003, the delegates (in most cases senior party figures) feted the leader of the *Bundestag* faction, while several cabinet members were punished by bad election results.

Muentefering embodies that current in the SPD which scoffing tongues like to dub "barracks socialism." His political ascent was made in the party's regional bodies in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW). He was the regional party leader when he became SPD federal business manager in 1995. The NRW region is closely linked with the trade union bureaucracy of the mining and steel industries.

The system of "employee representation" (*Mitbestimmung*) at factory and company levels, established in these industries as part of Germany's post-war reconstruction, meant trade union chairmen and factory council big-wigs could obtain relatively favourable conditions for the workforce, while they conducted themselves in the factories like feudal potentates. The unions enjoyed nearly 100 percent membership in the pits and steel plants of the Ruhr, which, combined with the relatively homogeneous character of the working class in this region, guaranteed safe majorities for the SPD—up to 90 percent in some constituencies—without needing to worry about any democratic considerations.

The type of Social Democratic functionary that arose, although deeply anti-communist, was in many respects the equivalent of the East German Stalinist bureaucrat: combining arrogance towards ordinary workers and disdain for democratic processes with enthusiasm for order and discipline.

Muentefering is from head to toe a Social Democratic Party soldier of this school. He has repeatedly taken over critical party posts in order to protect the backs of the respective party chairmen in crisis situations—federal executive manager, general secretary, leader of the parliamentary faction and for a brief time transport minister.

"Disciplined" and "loyal" are the two adjectives most frequently employed to describe him.

In recent years, his main task has consisted of using extortion and threats—not always successfully—to bring into line renegade parliamentary deputies who have opposed international missions by the German armed forces or the programme of social cuts. As party chairman, he will now carry out this role in relation not just to the *Bundestag* faction but to the entire party. His task is not to bring about a change in political course—as some fear or hope depending upon their political viewpoint—or to stop the decline in membership; it is to weld together the party machinery in order to accelerate the advance of the so-called reforms.

It is difficult to imagine a less visionary character than Muentefering, whose own motto is "Politics is organisation and organisation is politics." For the SPD, which has existed as a party for 140 years, his appointment as chairman means a further political decline.

In the first 40 years after the Second World War, the party had only three chairmen: Kurt Schumacher (1946-1952), Erich Ollenhauer (1952-1963) and Willy Brandt (1964-1987). In these years, it succeeded in combining the defence of the bourgeois order with genuine social reforms.

When Brandt resigned as chancellor in 1974 and his successor Helmut Schmidt introduced a sharp rightward turn in social policy, Brandt retained the party chairmanship. Although relations between the two were always strained, Brandt used his authority to keep the party together and protect Schmidt's back. This worked for eight years, until the deep splits inside the SPD over the stationing of medium-range nuclear missiles on German soil led to Schmidt's fall.

Following Brandt's resignation, the party has had five chairmen in 17 years—Hans-Jochen Vogel, Bjoern Engholm, Rudolf Scharping, Oskar Lafontaine and Gerhard Schröder. None of them could stop or reverse the increasing alienation between the SPD and the general population. Lafontaine strove to foment new illusions in 1970s-style reformist politics—only then to abandon office soon after the start of the current SPD-Green Party government, leaving the field to Schröder without a fight.



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