

Germany: Hamburg state elections—SPD in free fall

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The hammering suffered by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the prematurely held Hamburg state elections on February 29 could not have been clearer. With 30.5 percent of the votes (a decline of 6 percentage points), the SPD recorded its worst postwar result in Germany's second biggest city, which has traditionally been a stronghold for the party. Up until the 1980s, the SPD constantly received 50-60 percent of the votes and was able to govern on its own for decades.

Droves of workers, unemployed and pensioners punished the SPD for its non-stop attacks on the social welfare system, which has reached its latest highpoint with the government's so-called "Agenda 2010." Everywhere the colourless leading candidate of the SPD, Thomas Mirow, and his election team appeared, they had to justify the social cuts and health care reforms carried out by the Schröder government.

While in the city-state's last election in 2001, the SPD gained just 36.5 percent, it still emerged as the biggest single party. At the time, the Christian Democrats (CDU) won 26.2 percent and formed a governing coalition with the newly formed right-wing populist Constitutional Offensive Party (PRO) headed by Ronald Schill, which received 19.4 percent.

This time around, the CDU and current mayor of the city, Ole von Beust, raked in 47.2 percent of the vote. The unusually large increase of 21 percentage points gave the Hamburg CDU its best-ever result. The PRO, which split after it was recently kicked out of the senate and now goes under the name Pro DM/Schill, received just 3.1 percent and together with the Free Democrats (FDP) (2.8 percent) failed to reach the 5 percent hurdle needed to enter the senate. The Greens received 12.3 percent, an increase of 3.7 percentage points.

The continued decline of the social democrats is neither surprising nor a cause for regret. Aside from the 2002 German federal election narrowly won by the SPD, the Hamburg result is the fourth heavy defeat in a row for the SPD. In the state and regional elections in Lower Saxony, Bavaria and Brandenburg, the proportion of votes for the SPD fell by nearly 10 percent. Moreover, the mass resignation of SPD members, which continues unabated, shows that the party is also losing its last traditional base of support. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the SPD has lost a total of 300,000 members.

In the days of the Cold War, under conditions of an economic upturn, the SPD was able to implement certain social concessions. For many workers, the SPD was a synonym for social equilibrium.

The SPD glorified the market economy as a social model that could offer the working population a worry-free future—prosperity, democracy and a peaceful Europe was, according to this thesis, in immediate reach.

What remains of such a perspective? Ordinary people are today experiencing another reality. For five years, they have observed how an SPD-Green coalition government has become increasingly hostile to their interests. Former SPD voters look with dismay at the way this government is axing the welfare state and attacking democratic rights.

The huge shifts in the Hamburg election and the apparent overwhelming victory of the CDU are, in the first instance, a result of the bankrupt politics of the SPD.

Those who in 2001 voted for the Schill party in protest against the SPD voted this time predominantly for the CDU. They did this, however, not because they placed any trust in its politics. The absolutely barren, one-man show of Ole von Beust could only make an impact because there was no political alternative to be seen. According to the Emnid opinion poll taken just before the election, 40 percent of respondents did not know whom they would vote for, or if they should vote at all. Sixty-four percent were dissatisfied with the CDU, FDP and PRO coalition senate government, which was disbanded in December 2003, while 71 percent declined to support the opposition SPD.

For some time now in Germany, any political debate over current social problems has been replaced by utterly hollow election campaigns managed by professional advertising agencies. In this respect, the banal offerings served up during the Hamburg campaign represented a new low point.

The Springer publishing house took advantage of its monopoly of the Hamburg newspaper market and led the campaign for Ole von Beust in a manner that can only be described as undemocratic. It imparted to Beust a certain image to make him appear as modern, cosmopolitan and, above all, Hanseatic (Hamburg is a so-called Hansa city—a traditional trading centre in Germany). For weeks on end, he was the front-page hero with headlines such as "Ole-Superstar," "Celebrities campaign for Ole von Beust" and "Hamburgers come out for Ole von Beust" (a reference to his homosexuality). The aim was to carefully divert attention from the catastrophic effects of his policies, including education decline, the privatisation of hospitals and increasing unemployment.

During the last election, the Springer press promoted the extreme right winger Ronald Schill, who at the time promised to "clean

up” Hamburg—by which he meant mainly clearing the city of asylum-seekers, social welfare recipients, drug addicts and homosexuals.

At that time, Beust brought Schill—nicknamed “Judge Merciless” (he served as a court judge)—into the senate and made him his interior minister, because he himself could only become premier with Schill’s support. Together with the FDP, which with 5.1 percent just made it into the senate, Beust led a coalition that achieved virtually nothing. Schill and his “Constitutional Offensive Party” only made a name for itself in relation to a succession of corruption scandals carried out by its senators.

In the summer of 2002, the first bust-up with Schill came about. As a representative of the state of Hamburg, he spoke in the Bundestag (German parliament) and used the debate about the 2002 flood catastrophe to spew out a series of filthy racist remarks against asylum-seekers. On several occasions, he overran his allotted speaking time and could only be stopped with some effort by the Bundestag vice president, who in the end turned off the microphone. However, this did not really worry Beust. In addition, the constant announcement of new shady dealings and financial irregularities, involving leading PRO politicians, could not shake Beust’s coalition loyalty to Schill.

Only last December, when Schill, at the highpoint of a crisis within the coalition, threatened to make Beust’s homosexuality public, did Beust throw his interior minister out of the government. Schill had accused his “first-name basis” colleague Ole of having a purported homosexual relationship with Justice Minister Roger Kusch (CDU), and of inappropriately combining his private and official lives.

Beust felt compelled to fire Schill and suddenly claimed—in a remark that reflected badly on his own judgment—that Schill’s “character was not suited” for the post of interior minister. Nevertheless, Beust continued to maintain his coalition with Schill’s party.

The reason for this is simple: in essence, there were no fundamental political differences between Beust, Kusch and Schill. Beust and Kusch stood, in exactly the same spirit as Schill, for a strengthening of police and state power. Kusch made a name for himself as a fervent advocate for harsher forms of imprisonment. In the autumn of 2002, the representatives of the CDU and FDP adopted one of the laws demanded by the Schill party, dramatically expanding the right of the secret services to carry out bugging operations. The Hamburg law went far beyond the security measures implemented by German’s interior minister Otto Schily and allowed the secret services to operate completely unhindered.

When tens of thousands of school students demonstrated against the Iraq war early last year, Beust and Schill let the police loose on the peaceful demonstration with water cannon and batons.

During the election campaign, these events were carefully suppressed. The placards of the CDU even descended below the level of the lowbrow *Bild* tabloid newspaper. Apart from the laughable blond tuft of Carl-Friedrich Arp Freiherr von Beust (his full name, which he shortened when he was 18 years old), the CDU proclaimed the three most important messages: “Michel, Alster, Ole” (Michel—after the Hamburg St. Michel church;

Alster—after the river running through the centre of Hamburg). Only the Free Democrats were in a position to top this. Their placards exclaimed—in all seriousness—“Olé! Olé! Only with the FDP!”

What politics does Ole von Beust actually embody? His own party friends cannot even answer this question coherently. It would be perhaps appropriate to call him the man without qualities. Similar to his CDU boss Angela Merkel, he appears to resemble a blank screen that offers the ideal surface for reflecting different and diffuse political aims. This type of politician, who appears liberal, procrastinating and noncommittal, refrains from developing his own political considerations and conceptions. Political principles are alien to him. Someone like Ole von Beust can today govern with the right-wing populist Ronald Schill; tomorrow make a few tolerant and liberal remarks and as he did repeatedly during the election campaign, gaze fondly at the Greens; and then, a day later—as had already been decided—privatise all public hospitals.

Ole von Beust probably became a politician because his father Achim-Helge Freiherr von Beust was the first president of the Young Union (youth movement of the CDU) in Hamburg, and then from 1954 to 1980 mayor of the suburb of Wandsbek. In 1977, the young Beust effectively inherited the Young Union presidency from his father, and in 1994 eventually took over the party presidency in Wandsbek, the CDU branch with the most members in Hamburg. In September 1997, he was elected the party’s leading candidate for the state elections. Since then, there has not been the least trace of any sort of political successes or highlights for which he could claim credit.

After the Hamburg election, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder said that despite popular opposition his party would maintain its active dismantling of the social welfare system. The Hamburg election, he conceded, indicated that the reform process had negative consequences, but then he added: “We will continue the reforms, because there exists no other sensible alternative.”



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