

Germany: right-wing trajectory of conservative parties in wake of Bush re-election

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29 November 2004

Right-wing conservative politicians and Christian fundamentalists have sensed the possibilities for a radicalisation of their politics since the re-election of American president George W. Bush three weeks ago. The murder of Dutch film producer Theo van Gogh has already been used to kindle hysteria against Islamists—actual and supposed—and to conduct a crusade for so-called “Western values.” The party congress of Germany’s conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) last weekend in Munich represented the peak of this demagogic and chauvinist campaign.

CSU boss Edmund Stoiber demanded the defence of the “Christian character of our country.” There must be a return to “Christian values and more patriotism” in all areas of society. Stoiber told delegates: “An enlightened, self-confident patriotism is indispensable for the future of our country.”

Foreigners would have to do more to integrate. The “debt they bring with them (*Bringschuld*)” consists not only in learning the German language, Stoiber added, but “everyone who wants to live here” must acknowledge unconditionally the “basic values of the German society.” The German people must not lose its identity, it is a “community based on fate,” Stoiber stated, knowing very well that this term originated with the Nazis.

At the same time, the party congress was instructive in exposing the political background of the latest round of anti-foreigner and German nationalist agitation. Previously, German society had been held together on the basis of a policy of social reconciliation. The constant welfare cuts of the past years, however, have led to deep social divisions, which are taking ever-sharper forms. Now, an attempt is being made to steer increasing social anger and desperation into racist and nationalist channels.

Before the congress, the CSU leadership had agreed with its opposition partner, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), on a dismantling of Germany’s state health insurance scheme. What has been described as a “compromise in health reform” represents in fact a fundamental change of course in the social politics of the Union opposition.

Formerly, the so-called “solidarity principle” in the German

social security system was respected not only by the Social Democrats, but also by the two conservative parties, the CDU and CSU. Behind the “solidarity principle” was the concept that major social problems—illness, unemployment and retirement—could be solved on the basis of solidarity. The level of contributions for the health insurance system depended therefore on individual income, while at the same time all insured were entitled to the same benefits, irrespective of the level of their contributions.

Poorer families benefited from the system whereby non-working marriage partners and children could be insured without additional expense under the benefits of the main wage earner or even the recipient of unemployment payments. According to the “parity principle,” employers and employees both contributed on a 50-50 basis into the fund for health as well as pension, sickness and unemployment benefit schemes.

Although this system has been undermined over some time by new burdens on the poor and concessions for the better-off, the SPD and Union remained committed to this basic model. The basic form of public social security had been introduced in Germany in the 1880s by its first national chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, with the intention of stabilizing social conditions.

The “compromise” over the health reform, decided on at the CSU party congress, envisages a substantial adjustment to the so-called “lump-sum model” developed by the CDU. Accordingly, in future, every adult will pay a lump sum of 109 euros, or a maximum of 7 percent of their income. This amounts to drastic relief for the wealthy, whose insurance premiums sink proportionally as income rises. At the same time, non-working partners will no longer be insured.

The employer contribution is frozen at the level of 6.5 percent. As stated in the compromise paper, it is thereby separated “from the future expenditure dynamic of demography and medical-technical progress.” Altogether, the combination of employee lump-sum payment and employer premiums amounts to the sum of 169 euros—a figure totally insufficient to pay current expenditures. Further cuts in welfare assistance are thus pre-programmed.

The premium-free collateral insurance of children is to be

financed through taxes. This is thereby not secure and subject to the arbitrariness of budgetary policy.

The extent of the change in social policy is shown by the reaction of the CSU's own social affairs expert, Horst Seehofer. He rejected the resolutions on health reform and called them "antisocial, bureaucratic and financially unsound." After failing to win support for his position within the CSU executive committee, he resigned as deputy chairman of the union's parliamentary fraction.

The CSU congress also decided to undertake further attacks on employee rights. Legal protection against dismissal is to be drastically limited and be waived completely for persons employed in enterprises with fewer than 20 workers. So-called "factory labour alliances" are to be set up, aimed at breaking up tariff agreements and imposing low-wage jobs.

Under conditions in which the "social cement" that has so far held society together is breaking up, increasing efforts are being made to substitute an "ideological cement." Stoiber stressed to the congress, and on a number of occasions in interviews, that George W. Bush had won the recent US election by declaring his belief in conservative values such as patriotism, religion and the family. It was necessary to draw the appropriate lessons, Stoiber said.

The "Christian roots of Germany" would have to be represented with more self-confidence and energy, "for instance, with discussions on the role of the crucifix in public buildings, or on school prayer," he added. Youth must be instructed in performance principles, discipline, obligation to their responsibilities and politeness. "Our country has been shaped for 1,500 years by Christianity, not by Islam," the CSU boss retorted.

What stood out in Stoiber's congress speech was the lack of restraint with which it combined national state considerations with religion. While he ranted against Islamic fundamentalism, he called at the same time for the defence of the "Christian character of our country," propagating nothing less than Christian fundamentalism. It never occurred to him that the "defence of Western values" is, in fact, bound up with the separation of church and state.

Freedom of religion is one of the oldest civil rights and owes its modern form to the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and to the French Revolution. In its positive form, it is included in the UN general declaration of human rights and guarantees everyone the right to "thoughts, freedom of religion and conscience."

The "negative freedom of religion" (i.e., state neutrality in relation to all religions) was first embodied in Germany with the Paulskirche constitution of 1848. The immediate background was a Bavarian decree "*Kniebeugeerlass*" (genuflection decree) of 1838, whereby all soldiers were obliged to attend the Catholic Church and kneel down before god.

Though the separation of church and state was never fully

completed in Germany, in 1975 the Federal Constitutional Court decided in a resolution on Christian community schools that the "positive as well as negative forms of expression" of freedom of religion for all citizens were only ensured if the state neither prefers nor disadvantages any particular faith. The state can only be the "home for all citizens" if it protects "religious neutrality with regard to world-viewpoint" and therefore refrains from "privileging certain creeds."

Now, even this limited separation of church and state is to be annulled. Encouraged by the election victory of the Republicans in the US, the CDU/CSU is undertaking a similarly reactionary and demagogic campaign.

The Social Democrats and the Greens do not have any alternative to offer—quite the opposite. Green leader Bütikofer was the first to stress that "the left is well advised to study how the hegemony of the conservatives in the US has been strengthened with populist cultural agitation" and to propose a turn to nationalistic symbols.

Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) has called upon Muslims in Germany to integrate and has thereby joined all those who claim that Muslims and other immigrants have deliberately retreated back into ghettos, opposed German culture and plundered the welfare state. This is turning reality on its head. In fact, financial cuts, restrictive asylum laws and bureaucratic harassment have created conditions making social integration virtually impossible. The coming into force in January of a new immigration law will only accelerate this development.

Integration in the form of language courses, cultural facilities, integration programs and neighbourhood projects costs money, and it is precisely in these areas where drastic cuts have been imposed in recent years. Instead of accusing immigrants of setting up ghettos, it is necessary to provide suitable and affordable accommodation and reasonably paid jobs. Germany's SPD-Green Party federal government rejects precisely such policies and therefore plays into the hands of right-wing demagogues and Christian fundamentalists.



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