

After Bush re-election: German Greens shift further to the right

Peter Schwarz
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The German Greens have reacted to George W. Bush's re-election as US president with a clear shift to the right. Reinhard Bütikofer, co-chair of the Green Party, spelled this out in an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on the lessons of the US election.

"The left," Bütikofer stated, is "well advised to study how the hegemony of the conservatives in the US has been strengthened with populist cultural agitation." He firmly opposed reacting to "Bush's cultural populism with economic populism," as proposed by "part of the left in the US." When the *Rundschau* insisted: "You mean: to promise jobs in a populist fashion?" Bütikofer replied, "Yes, and to denounce the rich."

It remains unclear what Bütikofer means by "the left in the US"—his description is hardly applicable to the Democrats and the US Green Party. His message is nonetheless clear: the conclusion Democrats should draw from the election is to not focus politics on social issues—such as unemployment, the growth of poverty at one pole of society and the accumulation of obscene levels of wealth at the other.

This, said Bütikofer, "is where my criticism begins." Whoever argues in this way is offering "once again only collective answers." He warned of a "schematic juxtaposition" of the European and American social models. To put it more bluntly, Bütikofer's conclusion from the advances made by the right wing in the US is that it would be false to defend the social gains that have remained in Europe. Instead, he proposes a turn towards nationalism.

"The left," he explained, "must carry out a public discussion about certain symbols of republican identity." "More German national identity?" the *Rundschau* asks. Bütikofer answered in the affirmative: "The idea, anyway, to do away with a national holiday merely for a statistical benefit, testifies to a certain strategic blindness." (The week before, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had proposed

to move the October 3 public holiday, commemorating the 1990 reunification of Germany, to a Sunday to enhance economic performance. This provoked an uproar amongst nationalist-minded forces.)

Finally, Bütikofer stressed, one cannot "dream away" the fact that Bush's democratic legitimacy is greater now than it was four years ago. The *Rundschau* commented: "Bütikofer is seeking to win agreement in his party for the necessity of cooperation with the Bush administration."

Since the election results became clear on November 3, the German foreign minister and leader of the Greens, Joschka Fischer, has repeatedly stressed precisely this necessity. Bütikofer's comments make clear that what is at stake is more than just diplomatic niceties.

Bütikofer's reaction to the US elections conspicuously parallels that of the chairman of the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU), Edmund Stoiber.

According to Stoiber, the US elections have "clearly shown that not just economic issues are important." He urged a return to "traditional values." Families have to be strengthened, and the Germans need "nationalistic views". He also sharply attacked Schröder's proposal to switch the national holiday to a Sunday. While the chancellor occasionally attempts "through a vigorous appearance abroad to lend himself a patriotic air," he has "no sense for our national identity," said Stoiber. CSU General Secretary Markus Söder announced that the party would make patriotism a key issue in the next German national elections.

The turn to the right by the Greens is not just a German phenomenon.

The Democrats in the US have reacted to their election defeat in similar manner. Former president Bill Clinton set the tone. The election presents a great opportunity for President Bush and a great opportunity for Democrats, and the two are not necessarily in conflict, he declared, in what was a clear call for closer collaboration. Clinton said

the Democrats had failed to effectively rebut the Republican Party “values” campaign. “If we let people believe that our party doesn’t believe in faith and family, doesn’t believe in work and freedom, that’s our fault,” he said. Many other leading Democrats have likewise urged the party to adapt more to religious prejudices and glorify militarism.

In Italy the so-called left parties clearly have also shifted to the right. A WSWS correspondent writes from Rome:

“I feel it’s important to report a phenomenon that’s happening here in Italy (perhaps in Europe) more openly than I’ve ever seen before. Following Kerry’s pathetic declaration and promise to cooperate solidly and amicably with the Bush administration, abandoning any pretence of opposition, the Italian bourgeois left (DS, New Socialists, Greens, Margherita) has similarly pledged a more compact and complicit government in full cooperation with the centre-right and right wings of the current Berlusconi administration, abandoning even the slightest polemical stance.

“There have been claims from the left (in particular the New Socialists personified in the corrupt former foreign minister Gianni De Michelis) that there is a need for a closer alignment with the economic and foreign policies of the US and for an uncompromised acceptance of the current economic system as the only viable one.”

How can one account for this cuddling up to Bush and a Republican right wing that is so hated by the broad majority of the European population?

The answer is not to be found merely in tactical electoral motives. The Greens would not be sitting in government today if they had not publicly opposed the Iraq war in the run-up to the last German elections. At the same time, there can be no doubt that the Bush administration and its policies remain highly unpopular amongst the German population. The same criteria apply to Italy. In the US, the “values” campaign of the Republicans was only able to succeed because the Democrats refused to seriously raise major social issues and concerns over the Iraq war shared by millions of Americans.

One has to proceed from the political level to the social basis of society in order to understand this broad shift to the right by former liberal and “left” parties. The polarisation of society, which has taken advanced forms in the US and grips Europe as well, has swept away the basis for policies aimed at the reconciliation of competing interests and social compromise—the onetime speciality of

such parties. The fundamental needs of the vast majority of the population cannot be reconciled with the interests of big business. Every large-scale mobilisation—whether it is directed against the destruction of the welfare state, redundancies or war—indirectly challenges the foundations of capitalist society. Under these conditions, such parties unreservedly back the existing order. The process is especially evident with regard to the evolution of the German Greens.

The leading personnel of the Greens emerged largely from so-called K-groups (K as in *Kommunist*), which emerged from the radical student movement at the end of the 1960s. Between 1974 and 1980, Bütikofer was a member of a university Maoist group. During the same period, Joschka Fischer was active as an anarchist street fighter. These groups admired Mao and Stalin and tossed about barely digested Marxist phraseology until concluding, at the end of the ’70s, that the working class was not worth the effort.

The emergence of the Greens during that period was bound up with a decisive rejection of any form of class struggle. They took up different themes—the environment, peace, equality of the sexes, homosexual marriage, etc. It is not that these issues are unimportant, but their proper realisation is impossible in a society that subordinates every aspect of life to the profit motive. This is demonstrated by the evolution of the Greens themselves. Today they are still in favour of a clean environment—but only when it is compatible with business interests. From former opponents of German militarism, they have become the most virulent advocates of German military intervention abroad.

The Greens have turned into a party of those middle-class layers which, following their initial rebellion against their parents’ generation, have climbed the social ladder. They regard any social instability as a threat to their comfortable lives. This is what lies behind their enthusiasm for the dispatch of German troops to “trouble spots” such as Afghanistan, their growing attachment to law-and-order slogans and their adaptation to Bush.



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