

Germany: the career of Christian Democratic Union leader Angela Merkel

Part 2: From Kohl's "little girl" to the conservatives' chancellor candidate

Lena Sokoll
9 July 2005

The following concludes a two-part article on the political career of Angela Merkel, leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and chancellor candidate of the "Union"—the conservative bloc of the CDU and Christian Social Union—in the federal elections expected to take place this September. The first part was posted July 8.

Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Chancellor Helmut Kohl's promise of a "blossoming landscape" in the former East Germany helped the CDU win the first all-German elections in December 1990. In January 1991, scarcely one year after joining Democratic Awakening (DA) and just six months after transferring her political allegiance to the CDU, Merkel was sworn in as minister for women and youth in Kohl's cabinet.

During her time as a cabinet member, Merkel hardly missed any opportunity to pay homage to her powerful mentor Helmut Kohl as the "father of German unity." Although she did not join any particular party grouping, she generally supported the most right-wing elements within the conservatives. For example, she sided with the fanatical anti-abortionists in the CDU/CSU in the debate surrounding an amendment to Germany's abortion laws. Moreover, she called for the re-establishment of schools awarding pupils marks for general behaviour and diligence, and seriously proposed the introduction of "ethnology" as a subject to be taught in schools as a means of opposing racist violence.

Early in her political career, following German reunification, Merkel showed that she was able to utilise problems encountered by her former mentors to advance herself politically and strengthen her position in the CDU. Lothar de Maizière, the last prime minister of East Germany, who became Kohl's deputy in the CDU following reunification, resigned following an exposé in the newsweekly *Der Spiegel* that showed he had worked as an informant for the Stasi (East German secret police). Kohl, who liked to surround himself with loyal followers, promoted his protégé Merkel to the post of deputy party chair, little knowing that the 37-year-old from East Germany, dubbed his "little girl," would later pose a danger to his own position.

Another of Merkel's important mentors was Guenther Krause, now in the cabinet as transport minister and responsible for the privatisation of the Deutsche Bundesbahn (German Federal Railways). Following a number of cases in which he was seen to have benefited personally from his political office, his position became increasingly untenable and he was dismissed by Kohl in 1993. Although Krause had hoped to keep his presidency of the CDU party organisation in the state of Mecklenburg Pomerania, with Kohl's support Merkel was able to take over this position.

In the 1994 Bundestag (federal parliament) elections, the Kohl government was able to return to power with a small increase in its

majority. Merkel remained in the cabinet and was promoted from the relatively minor position of minister for women to head the environment ministry. One of her first official acts was to remove her state secretary, Clemens Stroetmann, from the ministry. This unusual step caused a stir because Stroetmann had gained a name for himself as the most competent person in the environment ministry under Merkel's predecessor Klaus Toepfer. Merkel, however, was not prepared to tolerate a "furtive environment minister" beside her.

Merkel was dubbed a lackey of the nuclear industry when she forced through the transportation of atomic waste to the disputed temporary storage facilities at Gorleben in 1995, against substantial popular opposition and protests by the Lower Saxony state legislature. Some 7,600 police officers were drafted in to protect the train transporting the waste in April 1995. In a collection of interviews published in 2004 entitled *My Way*, she called it one of her "greatest services" to have secured the "state's monopoly of force" in this situation. On the same question, her biographer Wolfgang Stock noted Merkel's view that a "fundamental weakness in West German politics [lies in the fact that this conflict] was repeatedly undecided. 'This had not led to any depreciation of attacks on the state.'"

Merkel's good relations with the German nuclear industry have continued since her tenure as environment minister. One of the few concrete points in the programme that Merkel has advanced in her campaign to become chancellor is, as expected, extending the life of Germany's atomic power plants.

Leading the CDU/CSU

When the CDU/CSU suffered a severe defeat in the 1998 Bundestag elections, and the government of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens came to power under Gerhard Schröder, Merkel lost her ministerial office but continued to advance within the party. In November of that year, the new party chair Wolfgang Schäuble elevated her to the post of CDU general secretary.

Following defeat at the polls, the CDU was beset by violent internal tensions that had been developing for decades, and which existed throughout the party—from rank-and-file members to the leadership. Inside the CDU/CSU, Kohl was held responsible for the poor election results—an expression of the enormous discontent with the party chief, who during his 16-year reign had always masterfully understood how to surround

himself with loyal followers and to isolate his numerous inner-party critics. After losing government office, Kohl had felt compelled to hand over the party leadership to Wolfgang Schäuble. At the same time, he was elevated to the post of “honorary president” that had been especially created for him.

That Schäuble made Merkel general secretary with Kohl’s express approval had little to do with her suitability for the office. Merkel had been a cabinet member in the Kohl government for some eight years, almost the same length of time she had been a CDU member, which hardly qualified her for one of the highest leadership offices in the party. Rather, Schäuble’s choice represented an attempt to ameliorate internal party dissent and hold the various internal groups in check by imposing on them an amorphous general secretary who did not come from any of the powerful West German party “stables,” and who did not belong to any particular grouping.

Sections of the party pushed for the CDU to reposition itself politically and break with Kohl, who had been able to secure four terms in office because he accepted high levels of public expenditure in order to preserve a degree of social equilibrium in the country. However, even though his time as chancellor was over, Kohl still pulled many of the strings inside the CDU. So the new chairman, Schäuble, set about making a slow and careful change in the party’s programme. However, the so-called “party donations affair” soon provided an opportunity for a radical break with Kohl and the policies he had pursued.

Towards the end of 1999, the public learned that the CDU had for years hidden away “donations” worth millions—clearly inducements from big business—in secret accounts. For weeks, the press and the public prosecutor’s office brought new accusations and disclosures to light. And it quickly became apparent that it was not just a matter of the corrupt behaviour of a few individuals, but of systematic criminality. Large sums had not been declared in the party’s annual report, their origin and purpose was hushed up and hidden bribes were used to provide certain people with finances or were deployed in the “fight against the left.”

The continuing exposures placed Helmut Kohl under considerable pressure, and in December 1999, during a talk show, he admitted that he had also personally received donations worth millions. However, he consistently refused to name the generous benefactors. Public indignation with Kohl and the machinations of the CDU leadership grew, as did dissension within the CDU membership. In the end, the previously unassailable honorary president was seen as fair game.

Merkel recognized and seized the opportunity presented by the “donations affair,” not only to get rid of Kohl, but also to dump his hesitant successor Schäuble and place herself at the head of the party. Without consulting Schäuble, she placed an article in the conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in which she distanced herself from Kohl, publicly presenting herself as the party leader who most wanted to clear out the “Kohl system.”

In the beginning of 2000, Schäuble had to relinquish his office as party chairman after it was revealed that he also had accepted a suitcase full of money from the arms lobbyist Karl Heinz Winter; Kohl also felt obliged to resign the honorary presidency.

In preparation for her candidacy for the now available party chair position, Merkel ensured she was fêted by the rank and file at various CDU regional conferences and so pushed aside her competitors Volker Rühe, Jürgen Rüttgers and Kurt Biedenkopf. Finally, she was cheered frenetically at the party congress, where she was elected by a membership that did not want to hear about any more dirty business.

Merkel’s ability to put an end to the “Kohl era” within the Union was more clearly apparent in the programmatic reorientation of the party than in any readiness to clear up the extensive corruption affairs. And her election as party chair drew a line under the scandals that had threatened to tear apart the CDU. The identity of the anonymous “donors” and how

much of the money was actually used still remain a mystery. Many of the party leaders who were probably embroiled in the intrigues now claim to know nothing about them, like Hesse State Premier Roland Koch. In autumn 2000, on the tenth anniversary of German reunification, Merkel began the rehabilitation of Helmut Kohl.

However, the CDU now delineated itself programmatically from Kohl, the man who had promised the East Germans “blossoming landscapes” during his time as chancellor, and who, fearing opposition in the population, had refrained from implementing any extensive cuts in social spending. In retrospect, in view of the radical austerity policies of the present Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition, Kohl is often called the “last social democrat.”

Following his departure, the CDU has seen the rise of those forces calling for the cuts to be carried out even more ruthlessly and for the elite to be able to enrich itself even more openly. In Merkel, they have found a representative who has personally enjoyed a rapid material and political ascent, and who feels herself in no way bound by Germany’s old welfare state traditions.

Merkel failed in her attempt to secure the Union’s chancellor candidacy in the 2002 federal elections, when she was beaten by Edmund Stoiber, head of the CSU and Bavarian state premier. This can be attributed to the fact that at this time, the Union still wanted to stand a candidate who, in part, appeared to be more moderate, and as a state premier was practised in counterbalancing diverse social interests. Now, since the 2005 election seems as good as won by the CDU, Merkel could push for the chancellor candidacy unhindered. Moreover, she is standing on a programme that will mean “Germans shy of change will not know if they are coming or going,” as the weekly *Die Zeit* commented.

Political positions

It is difficult to discern any political constants or firm convictions in Merkel’s biography. Throughout her career, Merkel the politician has displayed flexibility in her standpoints and alliances, using every opportunity in order to re-orientate herself. In Stock’s authorized biography, based on a series of interviews with Merkel, there is much that is banal, with only a few clearly elucidated political views. What is worth noting, however, is how in the course of recounting her biography, Merkel repeatedly and aggressively distances herself from everything she regards as “rank-and-file democracy” or being “more egalitarian”—whether this relates to church groups, party organizations or opponents of nuclear power—and lays the emphasis on the state with its “monopoly of force.”

Here can also be found the reason why Merkel as CDU general secretary was initially opposed to a petition campaign proposed by the CDU in Hesse in the 1999 state elections. She was not opposed to the extreme right-wing, racist character of the campaign against granting immigrants dual nationality, but hesitated to support CDU state premier Koch’s initiative since it seemed to her too much like an exercise in “rank-and-file democracy.” Such a campaign could allow the general population to articulate their views in a way that went far beyond just regular elections. However, she was finally persuaded by the most right-wing elements in the party and agreed to support the xenophobic campaign.

Merkel’s political positions have been much clearer since she began to prepare her chancellor candidacy, even if she continues to avoid answering concrete questions. More recently, several controversial debates on German domestic and foreign policy have inevitably meant she has had to elaborate some of her views, which are generally on the extreme right and show what can be expected from a Merkel government.

In the fields of social and economic policy, Merkel’s conceptions can be

summed up as “unleashing market forces.” She wants to continue and intensify the policies introduced by the Schröder government of social cuts and the redistribution of wealth in favour of the rich. She proposes development of the low-wage sector, a “more elitist approach,” comprehensive privatisations, a “flexibility of labour law” as well as “competition,” and the exercise of “individual responsibility” in relation to welfare benefits.

The debate surrounding the re-organization of the health insurance system has highlighted Merkel’s political conceptions. She has distinguished herself as one of the most vehement proponents of the fixed-sum health insurance premium to pay for health costs, which would replace the current tariff system based on income level. The main effect of this would be to limit employers’ ancillary labor costs and open the door to private health insurance schemes.

In *My way*, Merkel calls for the abolition of the law limiting the working day in Germany to 10 hours, since “factories need more freedom to be able to react to the changed conditions of competition.” Without an amendment of this law, “some people, who have already clocked off at the end of the workday, return to work illegally.” One should not have to work a “15-hour day” throughout one’s working life, but in Merkel’s view, such a possibility should be legal and acceptable.

Merkel’s vision of the freedoms on offer for working people looks like this: “I will only establish this understanding for change ... if I open up more decision-making options for the individual. Therefore, in our view, it is so important that the individual employee can decide whether to work one hour longer or to earn less money so that the factory will not be transferred to Poland.” At the same time, she defends the decision of the Deutsche Bank chief Josef Ackermann to implement sackings in order to increase equity returns from 20 to 30 percent, since this is the only way to “prevent a takeover by foreign competitors.”

Such a programme is tantamount to a declaration of war on working people and will inevitably meet strong opposition. It requires the strengthening of the state domestically in order to break any resistance. For some time, Merkel has appealed for a constitutional change allowing domestic interventions by the German army.

with military toughness and political intelligence, in which terrorism does not have a chance.” In this spirit, she seeks to “develop” international law in order to legitimize preventive war. “I do not doubt the fact that we can be confronted by situations where we must act preventively to hinder the use of weapons of mass destruction,” she said. Her remark came at a time when the lies used to justify the Iraq war had long since collapsed, but when grounds for war against Iran, North Korea or other countries are still required.

Certainly, Merkel is ready to emulate the Bush administration and conduct war at home and abroad. However, such a course means she will not be able to lead a stable government. Even if the Christian Democrats should become the strongest party in the coming election, such a policy will lack any support from a majority of the population, and will inevitably meet with resistance—even from within her own party. Merkel’s rapid ascent to prominence could then end abruptly.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Orientation to the Bush administration

In foreign policy, the field of operations of the German military can only become larger. Merkel’s orientation to American policy became clear for the first time in the run-up to the Iraq war, when she sided demonstratively with Bush and readily parroted Washington’s every lie. On February 22, 2003—with opinion polls recording over 80 percent of the German population rejecting the impending war and when the world had just witnessed the largest ever antiwar demonstrations—she sprang to the side of the Bush administration. She wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post*, headlined “Schröder does not speak for all Germans.” This was Merkel’s grovelling visiting card delivered to the White House, with her promise that she would be a better chancellor.

She has not changed her attitude since then. Today, Merkel still makes the absurd admonition that Schröder bears responsibility for the Iraq war because he did not seek agreement with the US and Britain, enabling Saddam Hussein to play “cat and mouse” with the international community, which “unfortunately ... made the intervention of the Americans unavoidable.” Accordingly, she is not in favour of a Paris-Berlin-Moscow “axis,” instead supporting stronger ties with the pro-American Eastern European EU members, to be able to better coordinate military and security policy questions with the United States.

Merkel stands firmly at Bush’s side in order “to work on a world policy,