

Chancellor Schröder justifies no-confidence vote:

New German elections aimed at breaking resistance to Agenda 2010

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As expected, the German parliament (Bundestag) voted in favor of the no-confidence motion presented by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) last Friday.

The no-confidence vote, initiated by Schröder, the head of the ruling SPD-Green Party coalition, against his own government was a parliamentary maneuver, carried out in order to make possible a national election in September, one year before the legally mandated end of his government's current term.

Schröder himself, his ministers and many deputies of the government coalition withheld their votes. As a result, only about half of the Social Democratic and Green deputies voted in favor of the no-confidence motion.

German President Horst Köhler must now decide within 21 days whether to agree to dissolve the Bundestag and set a date for new elections. This decision, from a constitutional standpoint, lies at his discretion. If he refuses, Schröder will probably resign, a move that would also lead to new elections.

If Köhler dissolves the Bundestag, the Federal Constitutional Court will have the final say. Two deputies have already announced they will make legal appeals to challenge the chancellor's decision to hold the no-confidence vote.

Since the result of Friday's vote was a foregone conclusion, attention was focused on Schröder's arguments in favor of his motion.

The German constitution grants neither the president, nor the chancellor, nor the Bundestag the right to dissolve parliament simply at their discretion, and thereby force an early election. Such a move is constitutionally sanctioned only if the chancellor no longer has the confidence of his parliamentary majority.

Since the SPD and the Greens have a narrow but safe majority in the Bundestag, and their deputies have so far backed the chancellor, there was no basis for seriously claiming that Schröder had lost the confidence of his own majority. In the run-up to the vote, reproaches were raised a number of times about manipulation and abuse of the constitution. In last Friday's Bundestag debate, particularly strong objections were raised by the Green Party deputy from eastern Germany, Werner Schulz, who has declared his intention of appealing to the constitutional court against the decision.

Schröder had treated his official rationale for the no-confidence vote as though it were a state secret. He informed his cabinet only two days before the debate, and the SPD and Green parliamentary delegations were told just one hour before the vote. However, his subsequent 30-minute speech in the Bundestag made his reasoning absolutely clear.

He justified the dissolution of parliament on the grounds that it was the only means to break widespread popular resistance to his program of social and welfare cuts—the so-called "Agenda 2010." Early elections were aimed, he explained, at legitimizing his social policy. The basic thrust of this policy would be implemented either via a fresh mandate for the current government coalition, or through the coming to power of a new government consisting of parties from the conservative opposition.

The content of Agenda 2010 is, in fact, the dismantling of the framework of the German welfare state.

At the beginning of his speech, Schröder dealt with the "chain" of "painful defeats at the polls" for the SPD, the last link of which was the "bitter result of the state parliamentary election in North Rhine-Westphalia." He frankly conceded that these defeats were the result of a widespread opposition to his policies.

Schröder remarked that "The Agenda 2010 and its consequences seemed to be the cause for the electorate to cast its vote against my party," and concluded, "If we are to continue to further develop this agenda, then a legitimization through [new] elections is essential."

Schröder boasted that his government had implemented "necessary reforms against massive resistance by interest groups," declaring that his government had demonstrated greater resolve in imposing such "reforms" than the previous government under Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Helmut Kohl. Given that Schröder's Agenda 2010 has always enjoyed the full support of business organizations, it was clear that the "interests groups" referred to were workers, unemployed persons and pensioners.

He said: "The government and the coalition factions [in parliament] of the SPD and the Greens have introduced a deep-going process of change in our country. With regard to its extent and consequences, this reform process is unique in the history of the Federal Republic. We tackled that which our predecessor government had omitted to undertake. We began a process which the CDU, CSU (Christian Social Union) and FDP (Free Democratic Party) had had 16 years to carry out, but lacked the courage. With the reforms involved in the Agenda 2010 we fundamentally renewed important aspects of the structures of our society—health care, pension policies and the job market."

Schröder then furiously attacked all those who had rejected this course and protested against it. "Some have used this situation in an irresponsible way to instrumentalize the sense of uncertainty among citizens," he declared. "By means of populist campaigns, fears were awakened and encouraged, because the reforms are initially bound up

with burdens, while their positive effects will be realized only in ensuing years. We recall only too well the public agitation during the introduction of practice fees (compulsory payments for doctor visits) and the wave of protests following the decision to introduce the so-called “Hartz IV” laws last year.

This is the language one traditionally associates with authoritarian rulers who regard social protests to be merely the work of irresponsible agitators. In fact, hundreds of thousands took part in the protests against the Hartz IV measures—not because they had been “instrumentalized” by other forces, but because, after decades of hard work, those who marched and rallied objected to being reduced to living on pocket money, or working for one euro per hour, while the ruling elite lived in luxury. These protests expressed a deep-rooted opposition to the entire course of social development pursued by the SPD-Green coalition. But Schröder sees only the work of populist demagogues.

Schröder then addressed the real reason why parliamentary confidence in his policies could no longer be guaranteed. The protests against the Agenda 2010 did not pass unnoticed within the government parties.

Speaking next to the opposition parties, he declared, almost in tears, that his government had paid “a high price for the implementation of the reforms.” He continued: “Since the implementation of the ‘Agenda 2010,’ the SPD has lost votes in all state and European elections—in many cases even losing power in state governments.”

This led, he explained, “to violent debates about the future course” in both government parties. Some SPD members had even threatened “to join a backward-looking, left-populist party which does not shrink from embracing xenophobia” and has at its head “a former SPD chairman.” Here the chancellor was referring to the newly proposed “Party of the Left” comprising the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Election Alternative (WASG), with former SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine as its leading candidate.

Such clear signals from his own party had to be taken seriously, Schröder continued. After the defeat at the polls in North-Rhine Westphalia, the issue was posed starkly: “Whether there still existed for myself and my policy the capacity to act during this electoral period.” The basic condition for government policy was “the capacity to plan and stability.” For this “the government is dependent on unity within the parliamentary factions of the coalition.”

If one examines the role of the SPD Bundestag faction since the SPD came to power in 1998, this argument seems absurd. There have been a few barely audible mouthings, but there has not been a single case where deputies within the coalition seriously opposed Schröder’s course. The so-called “lefts” in the SPD went so far as to vote for the chancellor in Friday’s no-confidence vote—precisely to dispel any suspicion they opposed the government’s policies.

Nevertheless, Schröder is using the no-confidence vote and new elections as instruments to discipline his own party. Any deviating note, no matter how timid, is in future to be branded an attack on the “stability” of the SPD. According to Schröder, this is the only way a party intent on continuing the process of implementing thoroughly unpopular “reforms” can survive.

Towards the end of his speech Schröder addressed a few critical words towards the opposition “union” parties—the CDU and CSU—which he accused of adopting a policy of blockading his initiatives in the upper house of parliament.

New elections, he maintained, would place “the decision on the future of policy and the future of our country in the sovereign hands of

our citizens.” Elections would make possible “democratic sovereignty” in the determination of “the basic direction of future policy.”

In reality, voters will be left without a choice. Schröder has issued an ultimatum—accept the Agenda 2010 without any amendments, or suffer the imposition of the same policies by a government of the union parties. His “popular sovereignty” amounts to giving the about-to-be-slaughtered calf the choice between a butcher with a red and green uniform and one dressed in a black and yellow (the colors of the opposition parties).

This was underlined in the debate which followed, during which the chairmen of all parties spoke. The contributions gave a taste of what is to come in the election campaign. The heated tone of the debate had little to do with any profound political differences.

Every party chairperson welcomed the new elections as a prelude to intensified “reforms.” Franz Müntefering (SPD), declared: “We want a clear mandate for our policy of reforms,” while Angela Merkel (CDU) proclaimed her allegiance to the “social free-market economy and democracy.” In fact, the dispute is over who can best impose a reactionary and anti-working class economic course. While the “union” parties accuse the SPD of a “zigzag course,” the SPD accuses the CDU and CSU of a policy of “blockade.”

All of the established parties attacked the alliance of the PDS and WASG, which, according to opinion polls, has the support of 10 percent of the electorate—a higher figure than that for either the Greens or the opposition “free market” Free Democrats.

The reason for these attacks on the “Party of the Left” has nothing to do with the political perspective of Lafontaine or PDS leader Gregor Gysi, neither of whom question the existing capitalist order. The Party of Democratic Socialism has long since emerged in the eastern states and municipalities as a thoroughly reliable coalition partner of the SPD and even the CDU, while the WASG consists of long-time social democrats and trade union officials who strictly reject a socialist perspective. The real source of the angry response from the establishment parties is the popular striving for a real social alternative, which, as confirmed by the opinion polls, finds a confused and distorted expression in support for the new “Party of the Left.”

The Social Equality Party is standing its own candidates in the coming election precisely to provide such a genuine political alternative based on an international socialist program.



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