

# Further shift to the right by the German Green Party

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Last weekend, Bündnis 90/The Greens officially adopted their program for the planned prematurely called elections this autumn. The program was drafted over the last six weeks by the Greens immediately after the announcement of new elections.

When Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chairman Franz Müntefering and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder proclaimed new elections on the night of the party's dramatic defeat in the state elections in North Rhine Westphalia, the Greens—the SPD government's coalition partner—were completely taken by surprise and unprepared. Neither the parliamentary fraction nor the Green Party leadership had been informed. Even the German vice-chancellor and foreign minister, Green Party head Joschka Fischer, was only informed of the decision after it was publicly announced.

The Greens' first reaction was one of outrage that Schröder had gone it alone and disregarded the SPD's junior coalition partner. This reaction was then followed by horror at the very real prospect of losing power. One Green Party member, Werner Schulz, characterised the politics of the chancellor as suicidal: "What we're doing here with the elections is harakiri." Schulz has since announced his intention to appeal the decision to call elections to the German Constitutional Court.

However—how it so often is with the Greens—they quickly adapted themselves to the new situation. The financial speaker for the party, Christine Scheel, told the media she had also initially reacted with "disgust," but had quickly changed her opinion. "After sleeping on it for a night, I realised it was actually a good decision," she told *Die Zeit* at the beginning of June. The newspaper wrote: "The way the Greens, under the leadership of Fischer, abruptly switched from dismayed horror to cheerful agreement in the days after the announcement—is something that one rarely witnesses on the political stage." The paper noted that "Fischer, Roth and Bütikofer [all Green Party leaders] appeared before the press and declared their agreement with Schröder's coup, although he had not only unilaterally dismissed the coalition, but also placed a question mark over the existence of the Greens—an act of self-abasement."

Immediately afterwards, Müntefering, Schröder and other leading social democrats distanced themselves from the Greens. Schröder explained that each party would have to try, in September, "to win the largest possible number of votes, against every other competitor." By "competitor," Schröder said this included the Greens. SPD fraction vice-chairman Ludwig Stiegler was even clearer: "There are no coalitions in an election campaign."

Just one day later, the SPD leadership sought to make the Greens responsible for the elections as well, by implying that they no longer supported the government's policies. A government spokesperson, Béla Anda, said that it is "regrettable" that the majority of Green parliamentarians did not want to support the reforms to the company taxation system. It was not just a question of the opposition Union parties blocking the bill, he said, but also the Greens.

The Green leadership reacted like a whipped dog, and after a few

grumbles of resentment declared that they stood "100 percent" behind the SPD-Green coalition government. They did not want to have to take the blame and be made responsible for the failure of the government, said Scheel.

During the so-called job summit in March this year, which brought together Christian Democratic Union (CDU) chairwoman Angela Merkel, Christian Social Union (CSU) chairman Edmund Stoiber and Chancellor Schröder, it was decided to lower the corporate tax rate from 25 to 19 percent, a decision that was later formulated into a bill by cabinet. The parliamentary leader of the Greens, Krista Sager, said: "We stand behind the proposals of the job summit."

Apart from these attacks by the SPD, a second development has been exercising pressure on the Greens. The resignation from the SPD of its former chairman Oskar Lafontaine and his announcement together with the leading figure of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the successor organisation to the SED, the ruling party in the former East Germany), Gregor Gysi, to form a new left-wing party, has struck a significant chord within the population. Within a few weeks, this new formation has recorded more than 10 percent in opinion polls and thereby overtaken the Greens and the free-market FDP (Free Democrats).

This has provoked the predictable use of confusing tactics within the ranks of the Greens over political positions.

Some functionaries, who think of themselves as representing the party's left wing, warned of becoming vassals to the SPD, demanding a change of political direction, and proposed to "go on the offensive to represent" their own line. Which, of course, begs the question: What is their own line apart from their role as junior partners to the SPD?

One of the Greens' parliamentarians, Hans-Christian Ströbele, said that voters expect above all a turn away from policies that benefit only the well paid and the corporations. Therefore, he said, a "new way" had to be fought for. Over the course of the last several years in government, Ströbele has continuously played the role of the "left-wing joker" who voted against the sending of German troops overseas and warned against attacks on democratic rights, but has always remained inside the party and continuously provided a left cover for its right-wing policies.

Critical voices were also to be heard from North Rhine Westphalia, where the Greens were voted out after a decade in office in coalition with the SPD. "We don't want to die a political hero's death with the song of Agenda 2010 on our lips, while the SPD meanwhile prepares a grand coalition [with the Union parties]," wrote Rüdiger Sagel, a Green state parliamentarian in NRW, and Wilhelm Achelpöhl, the chairman of the Greens' Münster branch. They also demanded a change in course.

The former Green NRW environment minister Bärbel Höhn later added to this demand in the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper: "We have to place the question of social justice once more in the forefront, alongside our ecological competence."

There was then a reaction against these positions. For example, federal environment minister Jürgen Trittin openly warned his party against

“returning to the left.” He told the daily *Die Welt*: “I am explicitly warning against distancing ourselves now, as Greens, from the reform policies of the last seven years. To do so would make us look incompetent in the coming years.”

The Greens’ election campaign manifesto reflects these discussions. The “Employment” chapter has for the first time been placed at the very start, before the environment. Demands such as the symbolic increase in the personal tax rate for the wealthy have been included, as the SPD have also done in its manifesto, but of course, very vaguely formulated: “We’re not providing any details,” explained Greens’ chairman Reinhard Bütikofer during the introduction of the manifesto at the end of June. “It’s about fundamentals.”

The manifesto makes clear that the government policy of the last seven years is to be continued. It explicitly praises the “reform policies” of the SPD-Green government. Every policy that adversely affects the population has come either from the CDU/CSU or the SPD, according to the manifesto. “It was a mistake to hand over so much economic and social policy to the SPD,” which “often appeared as a structurally conservative party of big business,” it explains in the preamble.

The Greens obviously think the population has a weak memory. Up to now, the Greens have promoted themselves as the “reform motor” who have initiated and forced through the necessary reconstruction of the welfare state. They were the ones who had to press the “structurally conservative” social democrats to implement social cuts.

The *Tageszeitung* newspaper pointed out that it wasn’t so long ago that Bütikofer cursed east German CDU politicians as “cowards” and “softies” because they had drawn attention to the consequences of the Hartz IV reforms. Critics of Hartz IV from their own ranks and from the SPD were handled in a similar fashion. In an interview with the weekly newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, Trittin declared: “We are the modernisers. We have not turned away from tackling the most difficult questions, whether it be on social issues, the rights of citizens, or energy policies.”

The prominent place given to the “Creating Employment” chapter in their manifesto, as well as the inclusion of higher taxes for the rich and faint-hearted adjustments to the Hartz IV regulations, are plainly cosmetic in nature. Party chief Bütikofer confirmed this when he told the press, “No one wants to get rid of Hartz IV.”

In addition, the Greens’ manifesto is qualified by a short-term expiry date. One is reminded of the “Berlin Theses for a new Destination of Green Politics” in October 1999. At that time, the reintroduction of the tax on assets—a component of their election program in 1998—was relegated to the filing cabinet. Due to the “moral intimidation of the better paid and associated compulsory taxes,” the tax could no longer be argued as a means towards social justice, they said simply, one year after entering government. With the same reasoning, the current proposal for minimal higher tax rates for the rich could also be retrospectively annulled.

The real content of the Green’s election manifesto is best revealed in the personal decisions and comments of its leading members.

While the other main political parties are either still discussing or have already agreed to an increase to the Value-Added Tax on basic commodities, the Greens’ program does not make such a proposal. Nevertheless, a number of Greens are demanding an increase. The Greens from the state of Schleswig Holstein went into the national Greens conference last weekend proposing its inclusion in the election program. Other leading members have also joined in, such as the leader of the Greens’ parliamentary fraction in parliament, Krista Sager, and the leader of the Hamburg Greens and their parliamentary finance spokeswoman, Anja Hajduk.

The increase in tax receipts would be used, according to the Greens, to lower the ancillary costs in the low-wage sector and thereby help to facilitate the expansion of cheap labour. Christine Scheel said: “Social security contributions are too high. Naturally it is just being honest when

we say that a reduction has to be financed through taxes.” She went on to say that a significant reduction in contributions would only come by increasing the Value-Added Tax by 4 percentage points to 20 percent. Similarly, Anja Hajduk argued in an article in the *Berliner Zeitung*, “We have to reduce unemployment in the low-wage sector,” and in this regard one had to increase the Value-Added Tax. Such is the reasoning of the Greens to increase a retrogressive tax that primarily affects working people.

In other areas as well, the Greens are banging the drums for more “competition” and “efficiency.” Their speaker for health, Birgit Bender, regretted the lack of courage shown by her social democratic partners in adopting unpopular measures. Referring to the inclusion of a citizens’ insurance scheme in the Greens’ and SPD’s programs she said, “The expansion of solidarity also places additional burdens on those who are not millionaires.” On the topic of financing the pension scheme, she told the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper: “If we don’t want to weigh down employment, the only way to achieve this is either through higher tax contributions or through a stronger, more comprehensive private insurance. We Greens are of the opinion that it won’t work without the latter.”

To the newspaper’s follow-up question, whether that meant that “an unequal increase in employee pension contributions [employers and employees currently pay half each] was no longer a taboo subject for the Greens,” Bender answered: “It can’t be taboo. The employer contributions cannot be increased.”

In the meantime, many state party candidate lists have been drawn up. There were no surprises here. In general, they pushed leading members to the front of the lists and thwarted the attempts of more critical elements. In this respect, the Berlin state list was of particular note. It displayed the name of Marek Dutschke (25), son of former student leader Rudi Dutschke. Marek Dutschke justified his standing in the election in the name of “renewing” the party, but in fact he stands wholly and completely behind the Greens’ political line (saying that “although the merging of unemployment and social benefits is correct, there must be some adjustments made to Hartz IV”). Nevertheless, he is considered to be part of the party’s left wing.

Federal consumer affairs minister Renate Künast was able to secure the leading Greens candidate spot, which is traditionally given to a woman. The third candidate position was won by Sybill Klotz, the chairwoman of the Greens’ fraction in the Berlin state parliament. Three members contested the second candidate position—Marek Dutschke, Werner Schulz and the former Berlin state justice minister, Wolfgang Wieland. Wieland emerged the winner. The other two failed to take fourth position, which was won by Özcan Mutlu, a current member of the Berlin state parliament.

By nominating Wieland, the Berlin Greens have picked a candidate who just three days after the announcement of new elections floated the idea of a state coalition government with the conservative CDU. After the decision to bring forward the federal elections by one year, Wieland told the *Berliner Kurier* that the Berlin Greens “no longer had to give consideration to federal politics” regarding the Berlin state elections in autumn 2006. At the same time, he praised the former federal environment minister Klaus Töpfer, who is being considered for the leading CDU candidate spot in Berlin.

Other leading Greens have made similar comments. The Greens speaker for legal affairs, Jerzy Montag, also sees the possibility for a coalition with the CDU/CSU. He told the *Financial Times Deutschland*, “We should not chain ourselves to the social democrats,” and added, with an “enlightened, democratic Union” there would exist parallels between the two camps. Parliamentary vice-chairman Reinhard Loske sees a consensus with the Union in the area of biological ethics and policies for small business.

This is how the Greens have reacted to the announcement of new elections. Apart from a few high-sounding and hollow phrases in the election manifesto, they have moved even further to the right. They are now even preparing the ground for a possible coalition with the CDU/CSU, if not this year, then in the future.

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