

Abandoning party posts after election

German Green leader clears way for collaboration with the right

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24 September 2005

On Tuesday, September 20, German foreign minister Joschka Fischer announced his withdrawal from the leadership of the German Green Party. Following the defeat of the Greens along with the Social Democrats (SPD) in the German elections September 17, he is seeking a new political home for himself and his party.

After last Sunday's closely contested election, Germany's main political parties are struggling to come up with a viable coalition. Fischer is, in effect, offering his services for a coalition with Germany's conservative union parties (Christian Democratic Union—CDU, Christian Social Union—CSU) and the “free market” Free Democratic Party—FDP.

This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the intensive discussions that have filled the pages of the German press and have been energetically undertaken by both the Green and conservative party leaderships. The Greens are acting like the blushing bride—affected, flattered ... and determined not to say no.

Whether such a coalition will come into being is difficult to say. Should it fail, it will not be due to a lack of willingness on the part of the Greens, who have demonstrated in the past they are capable of anything. It is more likely to flounder because the Union parties prefer to form a “grand coalition” with the SPD.

Every passing day has demonstrated the readiness of the Greens to cooperate in establishing a stable conservative Union-led government. The “new chapter in the history of the Greens” announced by Fischer on Tuesday will inevitably find the party deeply embedded in the camp of the right.

Politically, there is nothing to prevent the party from taking this step. Why should Fischer, who supported the Afghanistan war instigated by US president Bush, now have scruples about collaborating with the leadership of the Union parties and the FDP? Having supported the SPD's measures for undermining the German welfare state, what is to prevent the Greens from supporting even more drastic measures—this time in a coalition with the conservatives?

Fischer personifies the transformation of the German Green Party. He led the party—which emerged at the end of the 1970s in reaction to the right-wing turn of the SPD under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt—back into an alliance with the SPD. In 1985, Fischer, famously sporting sneakers, took his oath of office when he was appointed the first ever Green Party minister in the state of Hessian. Thirteen years later, in the meantime garbed in a tailored suit, he took over as vice-chancellor in an SPD-led government.

Under Fischer, the Greens, who had emerged from the extra-parliamentary, environmental and peace movement and whose leadership personnel originates from the 1968 protest generation, metamorphosed into a reliable, constitutional party. There is no election promise and no principle that the party has not made and then broken.

The Greens began political life with the principle of rank-and-file democracy, a scheme for the rotation of party posts and a quota for women in the leadership. Today, the party is characterized by a personal cult surrounding the macho and poseur Joschka Fischer.

The Greens stood uncompromisingly for pacifism—and were brought into government after agreeing to the Yugoslavia war and the dispatching of German troops across the globe. They promised to end the country's dependence on nuclear power—and provided energy companies with an extended period to continue their obsolete power stations. They promised a socially fair republic—and supported the SPD-led government's vicious offensive against the German welfare state: the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV measures. They praised democracy and the necessity to defend immigrants—and went on to support anti-terror laws and the abolition of Germany's postwar right of asylum.

The German media appreciates Fischer's services. They elevated him to the status of a superstar and, following his latest announcement, showered him with praise that is frankly embarrassing in its excess.

“Only he could display this persuasive power,” enthuses *Der Spiegel*. “Precisely because his life was so full of caesuras he was followed by the party ranks just as the Israelites followed Moses. He marched ahead, occasionally parted the seas and destroyed golden calves. Fischer was the great de-ideologiser of the Greens; he could do it because he replaced political clichés by political charisma.”

This “de-ideologisation” took place at a breathtaking pace during the seven years of the SPD-Green Party governing coalition. The Green pacifists not only became the most fervent advocates of German military intervention, they were also firm proponents of the Hartz IV laws and strict domestic budget controls. In a similar manner to the FDP in its coalition with the SPD in the 1970s, the Greens continuously worked to ensure that the SPD did not back down from its programmatic offensive even when confronted with widespread public opposition.

The result of this right-wing policy was electoral defeat for the SPD and Greens. On May 22, the last SPD-Green government on a state level fell in North Rhine-Westphalia, and on September 18 the coalition was toppled at federal level.

Now the Greens are seeking a new home in the camp of the Union parties and FDP. Fischer has opened the way for such a path with his withdrawal from party posts.

On Tuesday, Fischer informed the Green Bundestag fraction that he would no longer be available for offices in the party and parliamentary group in the coming legislative period. He would, however, retain his Bundestag mandate and also be prepared to take over a ministerial post, should the Greens participate in a new government. He did not say in what kind of coalition.

Through this tactical maneuver, Fischer, who as the leading candidate of

the Greens in the recent election campaign still argued for a continuation of the SPD-Green coalition, is bringing other figures into the party's leadership in order to open the way for collaboration with the Union parties. At the same time he has created the necessary conditions for a new political reorientation. In doing so he has delivered a stab in the back to the SPD, which was seeking to establish another joint government with the Greens—whether in the form of a coalition with the FDP or as a minority government. Through his withdrawal from party posts, Fischer has made clear he has no interest in such an option.

Accordingly, the Thuringia prime minister, Dieter Althaus, rated Fischer's withdrawal as a positive signal for a so-called "Jamaica (black-yellow-green) coalition," an alliance of the Union parties, the FDP and the Greens. The withdrawal from party posts by Fischer has resulted in "much movement," there is now "a greater openness to negotiation," the CDU politician told the dpa news agency, and then demanded the greatest possible openness from his own party. With Fischer's renouncement of leadership positions in the party and parliamentary group, there are more possible points of agreement with the Greens. Thus "things which played a role in the election campaign are now just history," Althaus continued. "When one allows the election campaign dust to settle, then there are surely a whole number of points of agreement."

That the Greens are more than ready to jump into bed with the Union parties and the FDP is indisputable. First of all, there is intensive courting of the Green bride by prominent CDU and FDP leaders, and this has been matched by a positive resonance from within the Greens.

Alongside Althaus, numerous other CDU politicians including the former chairman of the party, Wolfgang Schäuble, have openly argued for a "Jamaica coalition." It is to be preferred to a grand coalition of the CDU and SPD, Schäuble told the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, because the latter would lead to a strengthening of political extremism on the right and left of the political spectrum.

The CDU chairwoman, Angela Merkel, explained she did not want to prematurely dismiss the option of a black-yellow-green government, and positive signals were even heard from the CSU headquarters in Munich.

The FDP deputy chairman Andreas Pinkwart, the Bavarian chairman Sabine Leutheusser Schnarrenberger and the Schleswig Holstein party boss Wolfgang Kubicki all spoke out in favor of a coalition with the Greens.

The FDP vice-chairman, Rainer Brüderle, told the *Bild* newspaper, "On close analysis of the party programs, the reconciliation of economic and ecology policies is possible—if the Union, the Greens and FDP are prepared to make the leap we can carry it out." And the FDP finance expert Otto Solms saw points of common ground in tax and finance policy. The Greens also support a simplified tax law, he told the *Rheinischen Post*.

Some representatives of the right wing of the Greens have welcomed the prospect of a Jamaica coalition—e.g., budget expert Oswald Metger, the party's leading candidate in Baden-Württemberg, Uschi Eid, and the Bavarian member of the Bundestag, Jerzy Monday.

Other Greens have said it was too early for such a move, but that it was a possibility in the future. Bremen Green Party regional chairman Dieter Mützelburg stated, "I would not in principle say no to a Jamaica coalition. I do not believe, however, that this is the correct time."

The two chairpersons of the party, Claudia Roth and Reinhard Bütikofer, have repeatedly stressed their readiness to participate in exploratory discussions with the CDU to which Angela Merkel invited them Friday.

The ease with which this discussion of a coalition with the right wing has come about, and the fact that the most right-wing Union politicians do not rule out cooperation with the Greens, shows how far this party—once considered by many as an alternative to the SPD - has shifted into the camp of the bourgeois right.

The Greens have become a party of the better-off urban middle class, which reacts to increasing poverty and unemployment in exactly the same manner as other bourgeois parties: by moving further to the right.

The questions of lifestyle, which once separated the Greens from the established bourgeois parties, have largely ironed themselves out. This is evident from the fact that the FDP is led today by an openly gay politician and the CDU by a divorced, childless Protestant woman—developments regarded as inconceivable 20 years ago.

Environmental protection, the hobbyhorse of the Greens, has developed into a flourishing, profitable branch of industry, in which many FDP and CDU supporters also make their money. In times of rising oil prices, the need for alternative energy sources is recognized by big business itself.

The extent to which the Greens have narrowed the gap separating them from the Union and the FDP in terms of program was made clear in an interview recently given to *taz* newspaper by the head of the Green Party's Heinrich Böll Institute, Ralf Fücks.

On the SPD-Green coalition, Fücks remarked: "There will never be another historic alliance, a generational project of this kind.... Red-Green was important for us in order to become capable of governing and pushing ahead with ecological modernization. In terms of program it was not especially good for the Greens.... We stand for another version of social justice than the SPD. Green is the link to self-determination, direct responsibility and solidarity. Social participation is decided by access to public goods such as education and culture. Social Democrats concentrate more on social transfer payments."

"Self-determination," "direct responsibility" and the rejection of "social transfer payments"—these are key phrases that abound in the programs of the FDP and other neo-liberal parties.

In a similar manner, Fücks continues: "The issue is a new combination of basic social security and individual responsibility. If the trade unions had decided 20 years ago to invest a percentage of wage increases in investment funds, then employees would be the biggest shareholders in the country today." He called for "a new balance between public investment and social transfers. We spend too much on income tax and too little on the future." Such sentiments are the stock in trade of the FDP and individuals like Peter Hartz, who gave his name to the package of measures aimed at undermining the German welfare system.

"The Greens," Fücks concluded, "represent today the innovative milieu of society."

The political developments in Germany should serve to disabuse anyone of the illusion that the Greens still have anything to do with left-wing policies.



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