

Germany: TV debate reveals electors have no real choice

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The 90-minute TV duel September 4 between Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and his challenger Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) was tensely anticipated and billed as a “highlight” of the current German election campaign. It was transmitted simultaneously on Germany’s two main public and private television channels. For days in the run-up to the debate public, opinion analysts and media commentators had speculated to what extent it would influence the election result.

In the event, the resulting duel bore no relation to expectations. Both Schröder and Merkel reeled off well-rehearsed election campaign slogans, and viewers learned nothing new. In particular, however, it was clear that there were no real differences between Schröder and Merkel over political content, but only over which of them is best capable of imposing such policies.

Reactions to the debate also refrained from addressing political content. Political experts, journalists, retired and active politicians appeared en masse in the TV studios to expound on who had “won the duel”—as if the whole thing had nothing to do with the political future of the country but was merely a sporting event or beauty competition. Nothing could be heard with regard to the issues confronting millions—unemployment, social decline, growing insecurity.

Chancellor Schröder once again carried out the balancing act that has characterised the entire election campaign of the SPD and his Green Party coalition partner. On the one hand, he posed as the consistent “reformer,” who has undertaken deep cuts in the social system and was subsequently the source of widespread public criticism. But at the same time, he maintains, his was the only course that could guarantee the maintenance of a system of social security. He once again made clear that the SPD would not shift in the slightest from its policy of social cuts (Agenda 2010), which has led to

millions of voters turning their backs on his party and resulted in its lowest level of support for decades.

Merkel reproached Schröder for record unemployment figures of 5 million and Germany’s low economic growth, only in the next breath to assert that the conservative opposition had supported the most important aspects of the Agenda 2010, the government’s Hartz laws and its health system reform, and was determined in government not only to retain but accelerate the implementation of these measures.

For the remainder of the debate, both participants took great efforts to adhere to the rules that had been taught by their communication coaches: smile into the camera, do not lose your cool, avoid any “ahs” and too complicated sentences, exude superiority. In this respect, Schröder is still clearly superior to Merkel, although the latter has improved somewhat.

If one regards the debate from the point of view of a voter looking for a solution to the social crisis, then he or she has no choice. One can select the same economic policy in either a red-green (SPD-Green) or black-yellow (Union and free-market Free Democratic Party, FDP) packaging.

When asked about mass unemployment, Schröder referred to the effectiveness of his Hartz IV measures. Since April, the number of insured jobs has risen by 1,500 daily, but against the total unemployed this figure is very small and the increase is mainly due to seasonal factors—as Merkel emphasised with some relish.

Merkel intoned, as she has done continuously throughout the election campaign: “Social is that which creates jobs”—i.e., according to her interpretation only economic growth can create jobs. And this requires an intensified dismantling of employee rights and the reduction of bureaucracy (i.e., dismissals in the public sector)—as well as further tax cuts for big business and the rich.

Neither Schröder nor Merkel appealed for any sort of state measures, such as investment programmes and measures to create jobs—the only means to overcome Germany’s horrendous unemployment problem. While they argued about details like “two government officials”...“bickering in the Bundestag cafeteria about the right tax system” (*Spiegel-online*), they were quite united over political fundamentals. Unemployment is to be used as a lever to further erode the social and labour rights that the workers’ movement fought for over decades.

It was noteworthy that Merkel was even more reluctant than Schröder to commit herself to any concrete prognosis and merely tossed out hackneyed clichés: “I am convinced Germany can do better,” and so forth. The only measure she defended was the plan to increase value added tax by 2 percent—a point that Schröder then sought vigorously to exploit.

This uncertainty has several reasons. On the one hand, there are violent diversities of opinion within the union (CDU and Christian Social Union, CSU) itself—between the party headquarters and heads of individuals states, between the CDU and CSU, between neo-liberal and more socially oriented layers—and the union wants to keep these differences out of the election campaign. Above all, however, Merkel wants to keep all her options open and leave voters as far as possible in the dark over her future plans—out of the fear she could lose valuable votes.

The real extent of her plans is shown by the appointment in her election campaign team of Paul Kirchhof as expert for finance policy. Kirchhof proposes a tax concept that above all favours the rich. He wants to completely abolish Germany’s progressive tax system and introduce a flat rate of 25 percent. That would be less than half of the existing top rate of tax that was in force at the end of the conservative government of Helmut Kohl in 1998.

The dispute over Kirchhof’s tax proposals played a prominent role in the television debate. Schröder called it unfair and warned against making citizens a “guinea pig” for the plans of the union’s tax expert. Nurses, shift-workers and commuters would lose out on tax concessions and be forced to fund tax cuts for millionaires. At the same time, Schröder boasted that his government had reduced the top tax rate from 53 to 42 percent—acknowledging, in other words, that he had prepared the way for the even more radical proposals of Kirchhof.

Merkel sought to play down the issue by calling Kirchhof’s proposals “visionary” and referred to the

more moderate tax concept contained in the union election programme. At the same time, she affirmed, however, that Kirchhof would take up the post of finance minister in her cabinet if the necessary majority existed after the election. The “visionary” would then be well positioned to translate his tax proposals into reality.

Amongst the remaining few points that were a source of dispute in the debate was the issue of Turkish membership in the future European Union.

Merkel affirmed the stance of the union, which rejects such a membership and instead endorses a “privileged partnership.” She strove, however, to avoid the anti-Islamic undertones employed by many of her party colleagues. She justified her opposition to Turkish membership in the European Union by arguing that it would result in excessive economic demands on the EU and possibly fail due to referendums in France and other countries.

For his part, Schröder argued exclusively from the standpoint of the “geo-strategic significance of Turkey” and the “foreign and security interests of Germany.” These absolutely required that Turkey, situated in a critical region, be merged into the European Union. Schröder made no attempt to counter any of the racist arguments employed by the union.

With these words, Schröder made clear that there are only tactical differences between the SPD and the union in the sphere of foreign policy. Both seek to substantially strengthen the role of German imperialism on the world stage—the SPD rather more aggressively than the union. For months, Schröder has been advocating that Germany position itself as a “self-confident middle-sized power” that should help “to peacefully solve conflicts in the world”—a formulation he also used on several occasions in the debate with Merkel.



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