

Germany's new parliament: democratic fig leaf of an authoritarian government

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On Tuesday, the new German parliament (Bundestag) met in constituent session. In its first official business, the 614 deputies elected Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Norbert Lammert as parliamentary president.

According to protocol, after Federal President Horst Köhler, also a CDU member, the president of the Bundestag is the second highest representative of the German state. With the expected election of Angela Merkel as chancellor, the CDU will occupy three of the country's most important public offices.

In his inaugural speech, Lammert stressed the political significance of parliament as the "heart of democracy." However, he continued, the Bundestag would have to be especially conscious of its responsibilities in light of the large majority commanded by the incoming grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). Lammert told the assembled deputies that the Bundestag was not there to "rubber-stamp government decisions," but was, rather, the government's "task master."

This all sounded like whistling in the dark. In the coming legislative term, the deputies, the parties and their parliamentary groupings will command far less political power and organizational room for manoeuvre than before. A grand coalition comprising the SPD and CDU/CSU will hold 448 seats in parliament, a majority of nearly three-quarters.

In contrast to the outgoing coalition of the SPD and Green Party, which could be swayed by the opposition of a handful of deputies from its own side, the coming government will be able to survive the opposition of over a hundred members of its own parliamentary groupings. This signifies a "clear shift of weight from the legislative to the executive," as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented.

As in everyday life, one shameful act in politics often leads to another. On July 1, when the Bundestag duly

supported SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's wish to pass a motion of no-confidence in his administration, despite knowing full well that the SPD-Green coalition possessed a small but secure parliamentary majority, the deputies supported a political manoeuvre aimed at precipitating early elections in order to establish a strong, authoritarian government.

Only two delegates opposed the no-confidence motion, warning against such arbitrary abuse of democratic norms. The great majority of parliamentarians subordinated themselves to the chancellor's diktat, and thereby gave way in an important question of parliamentary and democratic rights. The words of warning from the new parliamentary president that the Bundestag should not become a rubber-stamp for the government amount to moralising balm on an already committed sin.

Parliament's self-enacted diminution of power already occurred in the summer. The fact that afterwards the federal president and the German constitutional court both approved the parliamentary manoeuvre does not make it any better, but shows how deeply the ruling elite has broken with its own legal norms.

In view of mounting popular opposition to increasingly drastic social cuts, leading employers' associations had demanded that the Gordian knot be cut, and Chancellor Schröder obeyed in the form of early elections. These completely undemocratic and illegitimate actions are now shaping the formation of the new government and its relationship with parliament.

While Bundestag President Lammert calls parliament the "heart" of democracy, the newly elected deputies have no influence on the formation of the government, let alone the formulation of its programme. All the important decisions were negotiated behind closed doors by the party chairmen. The media has been better informed than the Bundestag deputies.

Going forward, the deputies and the parliamentary groupings will have little say. Contentious questions that cannot be resolved inside the cabinet will be dealt with in the coalition committee. The role of parliament will be limited to agreeing to the finished results. This does not mean that parliamentary debates will be curtailed. It is often the case that the scale and volume of the parliamentary battle of words stands in inverse proportion to the actual power and influence of the deputies.

In terms of numbers, with a total of 166 seats, the parliamentary opposition is extremely small. Politically, it is impotent. None of the three parliamentary groupings that stand outside the government parties—the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens and the Left Party—are in principle opposed to the grand coalition.

FDP leader Guido Westerwelle announced there would be a “hard opposition,” albeit from the right. The “free market” liberals see their task as magnifying the pressure of the employers’ associations on the government, and thereby accelerating the redistribution of social wealth from the bottom to the top by means of aggressive social cuts and the “liberalisation” of labour laws, on the one hand, and tax breaks for the wealthy, on the other.

Immediately after the election, the Greens played a key role in supporting CDU leader Merkel’s bid to become chancellor. If they had refused to hold exploratory discussions with the CDU/CSU, the CDU chairman would have come under strong pressure from inside her party. Instead, the Greens not only signalled their willingness to hold talks, but announced that in future they would cooperate more closely with the CDU/CSU.

The resignation of Joschka Fischer as Green Party leader sent a clear signal in this direction. Last year, the Green Party and its government members had stressed that they regarded their main task to be supporting the SPD and the “Agenda 2010” programme of social cuts, thereby enabling the government to withstand the pressure of protests being mounted by working people.

The Left Party, which often talks about opposition, is thoroughly conformist in its practice. In the state legislatures of Mecklenburg Pomerania and Berlin, this party not only implemented social cuts, but also praised the SPD after the elections for supposedly blocking “the worst” in its discussions with the CDU/CSU.

If anything, the opposite is the case. Peer Steinbrück, designated by the SPD as finance minister in the grand coalition, is among the most energetic political figures in calling for austerity measures and has gone so far as to suggest the privatisation of Germany’s autobahns

(motorways). Meanwhile, top representatives of business and industry are posing new and more far-reaching demands, to put pressure on the incoming government.

A few days ago, the chairman of the Federal Union of German Employers’ Associations, Dieter Hundt, presented a list of demands under the heading: “The Expectations of German Business in the Coalition Negotiations.” As well as the “fundamental reorganization of social security” and the fastest possible “lowering of ancillary wage costs to under 40 percent,” the document called for a further cut in the corporation tax and the abolition of death duties, the lifting of protections against unfair dismissal in businesses with fewer than 20 employees, measures to make labour law and collective agreements more “flexible,” and a hike in the retirement age to 67.

The tensions and open conflicts that have occurred in recent days between Merkel, Edmund Stoiber (CSU) and others over the selection of ministers in the new government and the suitability of various candidates for the position of chancellor do not revolve around the issue of implementing welfare and social cuts, as the Left Party claims. There is substantial agreement between the parties on this score.

Fierce internal disputes are a characteristic of every authoritarian regime which functions in a manner completely removed from the general population and which rests on a narrow social base drawn from the economic elite and the state apparatus. The more the parliamentary and democratic structures are gutted and serious social disputes are suppressed, the more the conflicts within the government grow and assume an explosive form.



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