

The new German parliament shows its true face

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The first sitting of Germany's newly elected parliament (Bundestag) on Tuesday was characteristic. In the morning Norbert Lammert (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), who was elected parliamentary speaker (president) with a large majority, praised in the highest tones this “noble house” as the stronghold and heart of democracy. In the early evening the deputies then went on to make a thoroughly undemocratic decision.

On three occasions the chairman of the Left Party, Lothar Bisky, put himself forward for the post of one of the deputies of the parliamentary speaker and on every occasion he was voted down by the deputies. Even in the third ballot, when only a simple majority of votes was necessary, Bisky received the votes of just 248 deputies; 258 voted against him.

A few hours previously the parliamentarians had unanimously voted in favor of the agenda for the Bundestag, which expressly states that every parliamentary group has the right to a deputy parliamentary speaker's post.

The CDU speaker for domestic affairs, Wolfgang Bosbach, explained to the press on the same evening that there could be no doubt regarding the right of Left Party to a deputy post. The “no” vote was directed, he said, against “the person Lothar Bisky,” whose role in the former Stalinist East Germany (GDR) remained murky, with rumors circulating that he had worked for the GDR state security service (Stasi). Another candidate of the Left Party would possibly have better chances, Bosbach maintained.

In fact, what was at issue on Tuesday was not Lothar Bisky. Bisky has officiated for a number of years as a deputy parliamentary president for the Potsdam state assembly with the support of the Brandenburg governing parties—the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and CDU. He has continually worked closely in

parliamentary committees and in a spirit of mutual trust with CDU, SPD and Free Democratic Party (FDP) politicians—as he has frequently and gladly testified.

The rebuke for Bisky was aimed at setting an example and expressly gives the message: no opposition will be tolerated here! Whoever seeks to express, for populist or any other reasons, popular public sentiment in this “noble house” will be rigorously excluded, isolated and punished.

It was no coincidence that former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) had requested the dissolution of parliament last summer, arguing that under the pressure of mass protests against his policies (the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV measures aimed at undermining the German welfare state) an increasing number of deputies were expressing their doubts over the government's policy—albeit in a very hesitant and reluctant manner—and were calling for a change of course.

On its first day of business the new German parliament has made clear that for the majority of the deputies democracy has nothing in common with the interests of the electorate. The German constitution proclaims “All power proceeds from the people!” But according to the majority of Bundestag deputies, this power is limited to occasionally casting a vote. What comes after the election result is solely up to politicians to decide.

On September 18, the electorate clearly voted against the right-wing policies advocated by Angela Merkel (CDU) and Guido Westerwelle (FDP), giving a clear majority to the SPD, Green Party and Left Party, which had spoken out against Merkel's course during the election campaign. Nevertheless, the result has been the formation of a grand coalition led by the CDU which has the express aim of implementing precisely those policies which had been voted down.

“He is being treated as a scapegoat,” is a popular expression. The punishment and intimidation of the Left Party is directed at intimidating those who voted for the party—including many angry unemployed in both the east and west of the country—and making clear that any attempt to exert pressure on the parliament or government is futile. While deputies in this country like to describe themselves as “representatives of the people,” this does not change the fact that they see their main task as giving a seal of approval to unpopular government decisions, which they then defend and justify to a hostile public.

In the manner of the whipped dog who drops his tail and howls on the doorstep, a speaker for the Left Party declared the next day he was “very disappointed” with the behavior of his parliamentary colleagues. At the same time he announced that the Left Party parliamentary fraction will propose Bisky for a further ballot, but should he again be voted down then they would consider putting up another candidate. Left Party leader Gregor Gysi expressed his indignation and pointed out that just one day before the vote he had declared his own readiness for a close and trusting cooperation with all other parliamentary groups.

If it were just a question of the Left Party then the admonition would have not been necessary. The party is notorious for the manner in which it buckles down and kowtows on all important questions. In Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where it shares government power, the Left Party has demonstrated itself to be a thoroughly reliable, constitutional party. With regard to Bisky’s own political authority, he recalls the English politician Dennis Healy’s characterization of criticism from a political opponent, describing it as “like being savaged by a dead sheep.”

The Left Party does nothing to identify or oppose the political conspiracy which has led to the formation of the current grand coalition. Instead of denouncing the two parties which lost the election—the CDU and SPD—for forming a government in the interests of big business and the employer lobbies against the voters’ will, the Left Party declares that a grand coalition is “the second best option” and spreads the grotesque illusion that in government the SPD will prevent the worst.

A further rebuke took place during the first sitting of parliament. The outgoing Bundestag president,

Wolfgang Thierse (SPD), who was standing this time for a post as deputy speaker, was opposed by 136 votes with 56 abstentions—a thoroughly unexpected result. This was obviously the revenge exacted by the CDU for Thierse’s imposition of a fine of €20 million on the party during his term as parliamentary speaker. The fine was imposed following revelations of an illicit election slush fund set up by leading members of the CDU.

At the same time, two of those responsible for the donation scandal will sit as ministers in the incoming government. Wolfgang Schäuble, who stepped down from his post as CDU chairman in 2000 because of his involvement in the scandal, is to be the next interior minister, and Franz Joseph Jung has been proposed for the post of defense secretary. In the spring of 2000 Jung was forced to resign as a minister in the state of Hesse because of his heavy involvement in a finance scandal of the Hessian CDU. Jung had also functioned as the election campaign manager of Roland Koch, who won the Hesse election in 1999 after carrying out a thoroughly racist campaign.

The role to be played by such conservative and right-wing tendencies in the new parliament was also made clear in the declaration by its new president Norbert Lammert, who called for a renewal of the debate over a “defining German culture.” Three years previously the CDU had sought to inaugurate a nationalistic campaign based on this concept. Only in the face of broad opposition did they back down. Now they feel that the time is right to renew such an offensive.



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