

Germany's grand coalition leaders suppress internal party discussion

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Germany's grand coalition is incompatible with democracy. This becomes clearer every day as the haggling and maneuvering around the new government continues.

From the very start, the composition and character of the grand coalition was decided in great secrecy by just four persons: The chairmen of the three parties involved—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—and the outgoing chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD). Elected members of parliament (the Bundestag) were not consulted and party committees were relegated to rubber stamping the final result. Now, negotiations over the government's program are being accompanied by bizarre attempts to prevent any political discussion within the future governing parties.

The CDU chairman, Angela Merkel, wants to ban discussion within her party over its dire election result of September 18 until the coalition pact is completed and agreed. CDU general secretary Volker Kauder declared last weekend that the party's executive had agreed that an analysis of the election would take place only after the final formation of the government. At the moment, the public wanted to know what the government was planning to do and how it would tackle problems, he said. "We can talk about the election campaign at a later date."

The North Rhine-Westphalia prime minister, Jürgen Rüttgers, supported Merkel's decree muzzling speech and debate, arguing that a discussion on the election campaign on top of coalition negotiations would be "too much" for the party. The parliamentary secretary of the CDU-CSU faction, Norbert Röttgen, justified the ban on discussion with the words: "We have all made the experience in recent last weeks that unanimity is the precondition for success. If we want to implement our ideas, we must concentrate on this issue."

Meanwhile, in the SPD, Chairman Franz Müntefering is striving to subordinate cabinet members, the parliamentary delegation and the party as a whole to his personal dictates. As vice chancellor and minister of labor in the cabinet to be led by Merkel, his chief duty will be to keep an eye on ministers from his own party rather than on Merkel. He will remain SPD chairman, and is attempting to keep a tight rein on the party by nominating a trusted ally for the post of general secretary. The outgoing defense secretary, Peter Struck, who is considered to be absolutely loyal, is to take over as chairman of the SPD parliamentary group.

Müntefering's nomination of Kajo Wasserhövel for the post of

general secretary aroused unrest in the SPD. The largely unknown 43-year-old is considered to be an apolitical organizational manager who is entirely under the wing of Müntefering. Many SPD politicians would prefer Andrea Nahles as general secretary.

As former chairman of the SPD's Young Socialists, Nahles is regarded as a spokeswoman of the party's left wing. However, this does not mean much in the SPD. The so-called lefts in the party during the era of Schröder were characterized by their willingness, after a bit of occasional grumbling, to accept all of the unpopular measures agreed by the SPD-Green Party coalition government—from the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV measures to German military interventions in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Moreover, Nahles has support from elements within the SPD's right-wing lobby, the Seeheim Circle.

In distinction to Wasserhövel, it is thought that Nahles would maintain a certain degree of independence of the party center towards the government. While her appointment would do nothing to change fundamental support on the part of the SPD for the grand coalition, many SPD politicians think that the future electoral chances of the party would improve if it could distance itself somewhat from the government.

However, such a step is too risky for Müntefering. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented, he "obviously considers that successful government work by SPD ministers in key departments will contribute more to the recovery of the party than developing its own programmatic profile, which would inevitably conflict with the need to make compromises in the grand coalition." The newspaper doubts the wisdom of such an approach. There are "also arguments for the party retaining a certain independence, if only to repel attacks from the left," it writes.

In the long run, the attempts by Merkel and Müntefering to suppress any internal party discussion arise not just from tactical considerations, but from the character of the grand coalition itself. It has the task of implementing a policy which is profoundly unpopular with the majority of the people.

Although the coalition negotiations have only just begun and their success is by no means certain, the SPD and the Union parties are already in broad agreement that a total of 35 billion euros must be saved over the next two years, and that all other tasks must be subordinated to this goal. Such savings are possible only through a drastic intensification of the program of welfare cuts initiated by the Schröder government.

On September 18, voters decisively rejected the government

constellation which many bourgeois commentators expected to emerge from the election—a coalition of the CDU and the “free market” Free Democratic Party (FDP), dedicated to imposing further attacks on the German welfare state, using the methods of Britain’s notorious Conservative premier, Margaret Thatcher. Together, the Union parties and the FDP won just 45 percent of the vote.

Now the grand coalition is striving to develop and implement the same policy by other means. In close cooperation with the trade unions, the SPD has undertaken the job of imposing the social cuts and occupies all of the appropriate ministries—finance, labor and health.

The Union parties are to be responsible for domestic and foreign security. The designated interior minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, is one of the keenest proponents of enabling German troops to be mobilized for domestic purposes. Following the steps undertaken by his predecessor, Otto Schily (SPD), to dissolve postwar Germany’s traditional separation of the police and secret services, Schäuble could make similar moves to amalgamate the activities of the police and the armed forces.

The employment of the German Army against the “enemy at home”—i.e., against demonstrators and oppositional forces—which is theoretically possible under Germany’s emergency laws, could finally become reality. There is no question that the nominee for defense secretary, Franz Josef Jung, a close friend of the CDU right-winger Roland Koch, would have absolutely no objections to such a development.

At the same time, the Union parties and the SPD are preparing to divert popular anger over government policy by means of right-wing populist campaigns. The CDU wants to revive its debate over a “German defining culture,” while the Labor Ministry has initiated a mendacious campaign against the country’s unemployed. Without providing any proof, outgoing labor minister Wolfgang Clement (SPD) has declared that 20 percent of those receiving unemployment benefits are deceiving the state. A document produced by his ministry and published on the Internet goes so far as to compare these alleged abusers of the system to “parasites.”

Such a linking of social attacks with demagogic campaigns will serve only to intensify social and political tensions. Under such conditions, any political differences that become public could have unforeseen and possibly uncontrollable consequences. This is why the grand coalition must clamp down on opposition both inside and outside of parliament, as well as within its own ranks.

The coalition’s parliamentary majority stands in inverse proportion to its public support. While it commands a near three-quarters majority in the Bundestag, it represents the social interests of a small minority: Germany’s big business lobbies and the super-rich, who are intent on using high unemployment to smash up wages and social security benefits.

The social pressure exerted on the coalition manifests itself in intense internal tensions which can rapidly develop into a crisis. This is the key to understanding the efforts by Merkel and Müntefering to suppress any internal party discussion.

All decisions are to be made in small circles or by authoritative intervention. The most important decisions are taken by the party

leaders or the coalition committee. The job of members of parliament is to nod the decisions through, and party members will have the task of justifying them to the public. The grand coalition will adopt even more drastic methods to deal with any serious opposition which develops outside of parliament.

The most reactionary forces already feel strengthened by the grand coalition. The members of the Young Union, the Jeunesse Dorée of the CDU/CSU, were the first to defy Merkel’s ban on discussion at their annual conference last weekend.

Two years ago, when the CDU held its Leipzig party congress, the well-heeled, careerist new generation of politicians in the Young Union were amongst the keenest supporters of Merkel, when she cold-shouldered the CDU old guard of politicians “with a social conscience,” and proposed a lump-sum health scheme in place of Germany’s existing system of health insurance.

Now the rabble rousers in the Young Union accuse Merkel of lacking the “iron will” of Maggie Thatcher and making too many concessions to the SPD. Young Union head Missfelder declared: “We want the programmatic points which we fought for in Leipzig to be a component of the coalition agreement.”

Merkel’s arch rival in the CDU, Friedrich Merz, who advocates a radical tax reform along the lines of that recently proposed by finance expert Paul Kirchhof, was enthusiastically cheered by the Young Union audience. Merz gave his own estimation of the election result. The Union parties’ electoral debacle was not the result of the voters’ rejection of neo-liberal policies proposed by himself, Kirchhof and Merkel, he argued, but rather a lack of aggressiveness in the campaign on the part of the Union parties’ leadership.

“We should have provoked a row in this election campaign, and not among ourselves, but with the SPD-Green government,” declared Merz, who obviously sees his chances for a political comeback should the grand coalition fail.



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