

Following the elections

The German Green Party: open to all offers

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For the first time in twenty years, the German Green Party held a national conference under conditions in which it had no representation in either the federal government or any state government. Following last month's federal elections, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) decided to ditch its Green Party partner in favour of a grand coalition with the conservative Union parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavarian-based Christian Social Union (CSU). The Greens, who emerged from the protest movement of the late 1960s, have been so successful in making their way through the country's official political institutions that they have made themselves superfluous.

Now the Green Party finds itself sitting, as they say, between a rock and a hard place. In the new Bundestag (parliament), its seats are placed between those of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Union parties. There, the Greens form part of the loyal "opposition." The only reason the Greens are in opposition and not part of CDU leader Angela Merkel's government is that their votes are not needed to form a majority in parliament—although for arithmetical, and not political, reasons.

Therefore, in the manner of a grey-haired widow who has separated from her husband after twenty years of marriage, the Greens are looking for a new partner. The appropriate ad in the personals section of a newspaper would read: "Have modest demands, open to all offers."

This was the most important message to emerge from the Greens' recent party conference, held on October 15 in Oldenburg. The Greens want to return to power—not, however, with the SPD, but rather with the CDU and CSU.

Party chief Reinhard Bütikofer told the approximately 700 assembled delegates that it would not suffice "to base ourselves solely on red [SPD]-green, if we want to form an organisational majority." Bütikofer had already stated in an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper that it would be stupid to attempt to form coalition governments with just one side (by which he meant the SPD). "In the immediate future, we have to assess cases in the different states on their individual merits and determine whether an agreement on political content provides an avenue to step into office. We cannot afford to frivolously miss opportunities to form a majority coalition."

The same point was made by Renate Künast, the former minister for consumer affairs and the Greens' current parliamentary faction chairwoman. She told the conference that there are various doors open to them. "Whether we or others cross the threshold, we will have to decide that at another time."

The main motion put forward for voting by the Greens' national committee contained the following maxim: "Parliamentary coalitions are to be measured by the extent to which green policies can be advanced within them. After the end of the previous red-green model, we are faced with a new start for green possibilities. This means the possibility of various government constellations if they can potentially implement green policies."

The "another time" that Künast spoke of will be the various state

elections due in 2006. In March, Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony Anhalt will hold elections, and in September, Mecklenburg Vorpommern und Berlin. In the states of Baden-Württemberg and in Berlin, leading state Green politicians have been pressing for some time for a coalition with the CDU.

Immediately after the September federal elections, not a few Green Party members spoke out in favour of a coalition with the Union parties and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). The preliminary discussions between the Union parties and the Greens, five days after the election, held much promise.

"Pleasant, open and honest," said Green Chairwoman Claudia Roth, praising the talks that she and Co-Chairman Bütikofer held with the chairpersons of the CDU and CSU, Angela Merkel and Edmund Stoiber. The meeting had been an "important historical moment," declared Roth, who added that the talks involved an effort at "de-demonising."

After the "good discussion," the premier of Bavaria and designated federal economics minister, Stoiber, said he anticipated "a good atmosphere for the parliamentary work in the Bundestag." He did not rule out Union-Green cooperation "in one or another state."

Officially, the leaderships of both camps claim that the Greens and the Union parties are still too far apart. According to media reports there is, particularly within the CSU membership, considerable resistance towards an alliance with the Greens.

After the discussions between the two, however, Roth said that Union-Green cooperation remains "a perspective for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow."

The Green Party leadership repeated both before and during the party conference that the search for a "new government constellation" was based on "content before power." However, the entire discussion at the Oldenburg conference revolved around the question of how the Greens could maintain their "power options." There was absolutely no political discussion about "content."

"The concept of developing a programme without being in government to implement it was not liked by many," commented the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. "No one can remember a time when delegates put forward so few motions."

According to the *Tageszeitung* newspaper, which has close ties to the Greens: "For the Greens in Lower Saxony Oldenburg, there was no discussion on the content of its policies in government, something it could fight over and hammer out. Likewise, there was no discussion of the content of the oppositional policies that it wishes to advance on its way to political office. Instead, over 700 delegates had to discuss coalition possibilities—that is, power. In other words: what they don't have."

The Greens' "content" has over the course of its history become so modest that it can come to an agreement on it without any problem with all of the other capitalist parties: the SPD, the Union parties and the "free market" FDP. Since the Greens in 1985 first entered the Hesse state government, they have one by one abandoned fundamental programmatic

positions and moved consistently to the right.

In 1998, immediately before its entry for the first time into a federal government (in coalition with the SPD), the Green Party approved the sending of German troops to a war zone—in the Balkans. This marked the first time such military action had been taken by the German government since the end of the Second World War.

In the ensuing years, these former pacifists sanctioned such military operations on a world-wide basis. “In foreign policy, Germany took more international responsibility in the red-green period,” stated a motion of the Greens’ national committee concerning the Greens’ seven-year period in government.

A similar evolution was to be seen in the party’s social policy. “In the fields of employment and social policy we were prepared to take on the necessary reforms that had been left untouched in the previous 16 years [under CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl]. The pension system was made generationally fair. Previous recipients of social welfare were made subject to qualifications and mediation.” This is how the motion stated the Greens’ vehement support for the draconian Hartz laws and cuts in pensions.

The Greens have proven to be masters of euphemism and circumlocution. Hence, foreign military interventions are transmogrified into “taking more international responsibility” and social cuts into securing “generational fairness,” while military support for the war against Iraq becomes “support for disarmament,” a 30-year operational guarantee for nuclear power stations becomes the “abandonment of nuclear energy,” the raising of consumer taxes (the mineral and oil tax) becomes “ecological taxation reform” and the blockading of national borders against refugees and immigrants becomes “immigration regulation.”

The mood at the Oldenburg conference was dominated by shock and disappointment over the party’s fall from government power both federally and in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The latter occurred in May with the defeat of the last remaining SPD-Green state coalition government. And on 18 September, the red-green government lost its majority at the federal level.

Green parliamentary member Winfried Hermann confessed: “I only now realise that I had come to depend on holding office more than I had thought.” Christian Ströbele, the only Green candidate who was directly voted into the Bundestag, said: “Opposition while in office was more effective.” Britta Haßelmann, from North Rhine-Westphalia, entering the Bundestag for the first time, bluntly declared: “It will be brutally difficult.”

Although the Greens seldom received more than ten percent of the vote in elections, the party has participated in nine government coalitions with the SPD since 1985. The longest terms, lasting some ten years, were in North Rhine-Westphalia, Schleswig-Holstein and Hesse. In 1998, it formed a coalition with the SPD for the first time at the federal level.

With some 44,000 members—in 1998 it had 50,000—the Greens came to power and received numerous government posts in the second half of the 1980s and 1990s and became, in the most profound sense, a party of the state. It has scores of elected representatives at all levels of government. Financially too, the Greens have been dependent on the state for years.

The largest part of the party’s yearly income of 26 million euros in 2003 came directly or indirectly from state sources: 10 million from state support for political parties and 13 million from donations, which in the main came from various Green federal and state parliamentarians and local councillors. The financial report of the Greens for 2003 showed assets of 21 million euros.

The Green Party itself is a more or less exact reflection of the social layers it represents politically: a numerically decreasing section of the middle class that has risen in the private sector and, above all, in the public sector to become one of the better-paid social layers. In contrast,

the majority of the middle class count among the losers under conditions of growing social polarisation.

Disillusioned and frustrated, and forced either into self-employment or unemployment, these layers have increasingly turned their backs on the Greens. The social climbers, the careerists and the better-paid, which the Green Party represents, hardly differentiate themselves in their political orientation from the “free market” FDP (which has traditionally represented the better-off layers of the urban middle class), the Union parties and the SPD.

Politically too, the Greens have lost their function under the grand coalition. They are no longer required to obtain a majority in parliament. The grand coalition will be flanked on the right by the FDP and on the left by the Left Party. There is no requirement for an opposition in the centre.

Being the smallest opposition party in the Bundestag, the Greens will always be the last to be called to the speaker’s rostrum. In other words, when all the journalists have already gone home, prophesied the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper. “Hardly a prerequisite for successful oppositional work that is to be taken seriously,” the newspaper added.

This is the more profound reason for the hangover of the Greens in Oldenburg. With every passing moment, they are becoming increasingly conscious that have fulfilled their obligation to the bourgeoisie and should leave the stage.

Not a few of the 700 delegates were disappointed that outgoing Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, up to now the party’s leading celebrity, refrained from attending the conference, so as to assist them in their “process of grieving.”

“Everyone who mourns must say his goodbye,” one of the delegates told the *Die Zeit* newspaper.

In any case, Fischer, as the uncrowned king of the Greens, had cleared the way for the party to move closer to the Union parties by resigning his leadership post. The Greens are now attempting to gain a majority with the CDU, first on a state and then on a federal level, in order to maintain their very existence and access to state fleshpots and coffers. Should this be successful, Fischer might soon surprise his party colleagues with a “comeback.”



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