

In wake of state elections

German Greens, Conservatives draw closer together

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15 April 2006

Last week, the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and the free-market liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) started official talks aimed at forming a new coalition government in the state of Baden-Württemberg, after elections were held there at the end of March. Both parties aim to agree on a coalition pact by May 6. The state's premier, Günther Oettinger (CDU), made this announcement two days before the CDU's parliamentary faction was due to meet.

The CDU had previously held two meetings each with the FDP and the Green Party to assess the possibilities of forming a coalition government. The discussions with the Greens signified yet a further convergence between the two parties and will undoubtedly be viewed in the not-too-distant future as a preparation for the first CDU-Green state government.

In the Baden-Württemberg elections, the CDU was able to retain its position as the strongest party despite losing votes. With 44.2 percent of the vote, it only narrowly avoided gaining an absolute majority in the state parliament. The Greens obtained 11.7 percent of the vote, the third largest share, behind the Social Democratic Party (SPD) (25.2 percent), and in front of the FDP (10.7 percent).

Premier Oettinger repeatedly made clear that the discussions with the Greens were no mere tactical manoeuvre to pressure the CDU's previous coalition partner, the FDP. He said they were based on the consideration of Union-Green as a serious coalition option in every German state.

Oettinger, a former president of the CDU's national organisation and current president of the Baden-Württemberg branch, said that during the course of the discussions with the Greens' parliamentary leader Winfried Kretschmann, a former Maoist, the two parties

discovered a lot of common ground. He said the Greens had gained a lot in respectability and influence.

What Oettinger describes as "respectability" and "influence" is in reality the Greens' abandonment of any of their previous principles and election promises. Hence it was possible for the Greens, in Kretschmann's own words, to place the dispute over the closure of nuclear power plants "on ice." Oettinger had extended the operational period of the state's nuclear plants, going against the agreement made by the previous SPD-Green federal government.

According to press reports, the Greens did not even let the controversial "Stuttgart 21" transport project get in the way of a possible coalition pact with the CDU. The project plans to relocate the city's main train station underground.

In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, Oswald Metzger, a Green parliamentarian and a member of the party's economic-liberal wing, said the Greens were "conscious of the incredibly large responsibility required for state politics" during the discussions with the CDU. The state budget has to be "cleaned up, retrenchments in the public service organised and state employee pensions reduced." Considering that thousands of public service workers in Baden-Württemberg are currently engaged in a bitter strike—now in its ninth week—against attacks on working conditions by the state and local governments, the Greens are strengthening the resolve of the government.

The CDU continually praised the suggestions and offers made by the Greens and characterised the party as "realistic and very well prepared."

The CDU and Greens have long shared a close relationship in Baden-Württemberg. The Greens view themselves as the "true middle-class party" and euphemistically refer to this as "reality politics."

Oettinger has been an advocate of a CDU-Green coalition for the last 10 years. Politicians such as him and veteran Green politicians Fritz Kuhn and Rezzo Schlauch personify the growing confluence between the two parties.

Oettinger's predecessor as state premier, Erwin Teufel (CDU), had in 1992 already attempted to form a coalition government with the Greens. Although his efforts failed at the time, the basis for discussion between the two parties has since grown.

The metamorphosis of the Greens from a party that promoted itself as a progressive alternative to a liberal-conservative middle-class party is today embodied in its current state parliamentary leader, Winfried Kretschmann.

Born and raised in Baden-Württemberg, after his schooling Kretschmann studied at the University of Hohenheim. "Then came the radicalisation and the joining of the left-wing radical K-Groups," as the 58 year-old Kretschmann himself describes on his home page. Finally, "after this fundamental political mistake," he worked as a teacher and co-founded the Greens' organisation in Baden-Württemberg.

In 1980, Kretschmann was one of six Green members to enter a (non-city) state parliament for the first time. Six years later Joschka Fischer, the first Green state minister, brought Kretschmann to work in the environment ministry in the state of Hesse. When Fischer became German foreign minister and vice-chancellor in 1998, Kretschmann returned to Baden-Württemberg. He has been president of the Greens' parliamentary faction there since 2002.

"With this, the time for strangeness was over. Now I have to integrate and consolidate," he writes. "In December 2005 the party elected me as its leading candidate, with 88 percent of the vote. Kretschmann arrived at the heart of the party. And the party in the heart of society."

Kretschmann apparently has a very good relationship with premier Oettinger. That the CDU has continued to retain its coalition ties with the FDP is not due to the Greens, but the CDU itself. Although leading federal and state Union politicians viewed a Union-Green coalition favourably, the Baden-Württemberg CDU feared significant opposition to it from its membership and sought to avoid a serious internal party crisis.

In the same *Spiegel Online* interview, Oswald Metzger complained that others are now going to benefit from the coalition discussions. "Our warming-up exercises here in Baden-Württemberg have in the medium-term paved the

way for a Union-Green coalition. However, this coalition variant is now going to be first realised in another state. We have again been the ones to act as the pathfinders, but the coalition pact is going to be made with another."

Metzger believes the first Union-Green coalition government can be realised as a result of Berlin's September state elections. CDU general secretary Ronald Pofalla also hopes that Berlin's current SPD-Left Party government can be displaced by a CDU-FDP-Green one, a formation that had been advocated on a federal level by many Union politicians after last year's elections.

Some commentators have said that the Union-Green coalition talks in Baden-Württemberg have already had one effect—the disciplining of the FDP. This was demonstrated by the fact that the FDP put forward no demands whatsoever during the discussions with the CDU.

The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented: "The Free Democrats have had their wings clipped once more. This is not simply because of the coalition discussions, but because of its consequences: How and when should the party be able to protest, when the head of government can show it the door at any time because he knows another party is waiting outside? The FDP will be conscious of this humiliating dilemma. However, actions by it that may threaten the coalition cannot be ruled out. This Stuttgart coalition could be less stable than it may appear."

The Greens would not hesitate for a second to step into the shoes left by the FDP. It could still be Baden-Württemberg that witnesses the first ever Union-Green coalition government at state level.



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