

Germany: Social Democratic Party loses another chairman

Dietmar Henning, Peter Schwarz
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The Social Democratic Party (SPD) has lost its third chairman in two years. Matthias Platzeck, who was elected last November at the Karlsruhe party congress with 99.4 percent of the vote, announced his resignation last week and revealed the name of his successor, the state premier of Rhineland Palatinate, Kurt Beck.

Platzeck ascribed his resignation to poor health. Since the beginning of the year, he has twice experienced an acute loss of hearing, and suffered heart problems and a nervous breakdown in February. It took a week before “everything was ticking again.” Platzeck intends to continue in office as prime minister of Brandenburg.

Platzeck obviously does not possess the physical and psychological strength necessary to exercise two leading political offices simultaneously. However, the circumstances surrounding his breakdown, three months after he assumed office, point to the fact that his resignation has more deep-seated causes. Many of his predecessors combined the SPD presidency with a government office for many years; Platzeck had an extensive staff at his disposal in the SPD headquarters, as well as a general secretary of his choice. It was thus not the workload alone that led to the failure of his nerves, on the contrary, the nerve-racking content of his work must have played a role.

The rapid tempo with which the SPD has been changing its chairmen points to political causes for the renewed change in leadership. In the first four decades since 1949, the party had only three chairmen—Kurt Schumacher, Erich Ollenhauer and Willy Brandt. Since Brandt’s resignation in 1987, there have been nine: Hans-Jochen Vogel, Björn Engholm, Johannes Rau, Rudolf Scharping, Oskar Lafontaine, Gerhard Schröder, Franz Müntefering, Matthias Platzeck and now Kurt Beck.

In the final analysis, the enormous tensions within the SPD which tested Platzeck’s nerves are a result of the political decline of a party that has been moving continuously to the right, has lost nearly a third of its members since 1991, and has barely won any elections in recent years.

When the 74-year old Brandt resigned the SPD presidency in 1987, the SPD had been in opposition for five years. The last social democratic Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, had antagonised broad sections of the SPD’s constituency and membership through a programme of economic austerity measures and by approving the stationing of medium-range atomic missiles on German soil, paving the way for the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) under Helmut Kohl. In opposition, the SPD was able to give the impression it continued to support a socially progressive programme.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German reunification one year later plunged the party into a serious crisis. While the grey eminence of Willy Brandt stood at the side of Helmut Kohl celebrating German unity, sections of the party, with Oskar Lafontaine at their head, tried to put a brake on the unification process, well knowing that East German industry would be undermined by a rapid integration into the world market, which would also have serious repercussions for West Germany.

In the following years, the party stumbled from one crisis to the next

with chairmen coming and going as if through a revolving door. The 65-year old Hans-Jochen Vogel relinquished office in 1991 on the grounds of age. Björn Engholm resigned in 1993 because of an inconsequential scandal. After the interim leadership of Johannes Rau, Rudolf Scharping took up office only to be replaced by Oskar Lafontaine in a surprise coup in 1995.

Lafontaine had inspired the party congress delegates with a speech that recalled the reformist politics of the Brandt era. As party chairman in 1998, he organized the election campaign that returned the SPD to government after 16 years in opposition. The SPD’s election slogan “work, innovation and justice” encouraged the hope that global capitalism could be moulded in the interests of working people.

Hardly had the election passed than this proved to be a cruel deceit. Even before they formally assumed office, the SPD-Green Party coalition had agreed to Germany’s first post-World War II international military mission in the Balkans. In office, they initiated a policy of welfare cuts that made their Christian Democratic predecessor Helmut Kohl look like a former Social Democrat. Lafontaine, who came under fire from the international financial press, threw in the towel without a fight, leaving the field to Gerhard Schröder.

Whereupon Schröder took over the party presidency himself, in order to ensure the party was united behind the government. As resistance to SPD-Green Party government policies mounted—with hundreds of thousands demonstrating spontaneously against the “Hartz IV” labour “reforms” and the SPD losing 11 state elections in a row—Schröder surrendered the presidency in 2004 to his General Secretary Franz Müntefering, who had the job of whipping the SPD into line in the manner of a sergeant-major.

One year later, when the SPD suffered a defeat in its previous stronghold of North Rhine Westphalia, under pressure from the employers’ associations, Schröder and Müntefering decided to surrender power prematurely to the CDU. Contrary to the constitution, they instigated the premature dissolution of the Bundestag (federal parliament) and when, against their expectations, the election did not produce a majority for the conservative opposition consisting of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and Liberal Democrats (FDP), they signed up as junior partners in a grand coalition under CDU leader Angela Merkel.

While Schröder was able to fall back on lucrative business posts, Müntefering took on the role of establishing discipline in the grand coalition. As vice-chancellor and minister for labour, he is personally responsible for all the social barbarities of the new government, such as raising the pension age to 67 and implementing further benefit cuts. When the party finally dared to appoint a candidate as General Secretary who did not meet with his approval, he indignantly resigned as party president in November 2005.

These are the circumstances that led to Platzeck taking over at the head of the SPD; he was charged with squaring the circle—linking support for government policies that are directed against the vital interests of broad

social layers with the revival of a decaying SPD.

Platzek was presented as the SPD's "great hope," whose "friendly powers of reconciliation" were supposed to hold together the diverging party groupings, give the party a new orientation and lead it to new successes. He was even described as a future chancellor. Born in 1953, his (relatively) young age and his outsider credentials were emphasised.

Platzek grew up in the former East Germany, and has only been a member of the SPD for 11 years. In 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, he was active in the civil rights movement. He joined the SPD when "Alliance 90," which he represented as a deputy in the Brandenburg state parliament, fused with the West German Greens. Since 2002, he has been state premier in Brandenburg, where he governs in a grand coalition with the CDU.

From the outset, Platzek unreservedly supported and publicly defended Gerhard Schröder's "Agenda 2010" welfare and labour reforms and the cuts meted out to the long-term unemployed under "Hartz IV." Like Schröder, he called the cuts "the only way to reorganize the welfare state." At most, he criticised Schröder's style: One cannot implement a policy of cuts administratively, but only by winning the arguments. Accordingly, his role as the party's "great hope" was limited to finding new pat phrases in which to repackage the reactionary content of government policy.

On the day he resigned last week, newsweekly *Der Spiegel* published a sort of last will and testament for Platzek. The article, "Platzek returns!" was actually meant as a contribution by the party chairman to the new SPD policy statement, which the presidium was to discuss that very day. Now in its fourth draft, the SPD was trying to revamp its 1989 "Berlin programme." But the discussion never started because Platzek had resigned.

In *Der Spiegel*, Platzek rejected the "old-style welfare state." This was "too dependent on transfers of social costs and was curative" rather than preventative. To that extent, he agrees with government policy.

At the same time, he warned against "dividing society into winners and losers" and called for "a new social contract." He argues for a "preventative welfare state," which "invests in people and their potential far more strongly than previous welfare state models," encourages work, relies more on preventative health measures and averts poverty. This clearly calls for "more public investment in social services, in education and knowledge, in innovation and infrastructure... If we in Germany want to be economically successful in the 21st century, we must rely on outstanding products and services instead of on cheap wages, and on long-term growth instead of on short term profit."

These are noncommittal, nebulous phrases. Nevertheless, those who set the tone in the SPD leadership were not prepared to grant their party chairman even this verbal room for manoeuvre and repeatedly undermined his authority. In reality vice-chancellor Müntefering decided government policy in discussion with Chancellor Merkel, without informing the party leadership in the SPD headquarters—the Willy Brandt House. Thus Müntefering's plan to raise the pension age to 67 was allegedly made without him previously informing the party chairman.

The same day Platzek's piece appeared in *Der Spiegel*, Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) published an article in the daily *Tagespiegel*, which advocated a ruthless reversal in social and financial policies. Steinbrück wants to halve corporation tax from the present 25 percent to 12 or 15 percent, financing these tax breaks by further cuts in the welfare state. According to the slogan "encouragement [to work] rather than [benefit] support," only "that which actively works" will remain. Whatever "leads to passivity and exaggerated social demands" should be cut away. The relative weights "of 'personal responsibility and social solidarity'" should be redefined. The "basic principle of a modern welfare state," according to Steinbrück, should not be the "equality of outcomes" (i.e. the equalisation of people's circumstances), but the

"equality of opportunity," which is just another way of saying society should run according to the principle of dog-eat-dog.

The 57 year-old Kurt Beck is qualified to replace Platzek above all because he is the only remaining social democratic premier in a substantial West German state. The state premiers in East Germany, Klaus Wowereit in Berlin and Harald Ringsdorf in Mecklenburg Pomerania, both govern in alliance with the Left Party, and so do not fit into the spectrum of the grand coalition.

Beck has governed in Mainz, the state capital of Rhineland Palatinate, for 12 years in a coalition with the liberals. In state elections at the end of March, he was able to slightly improve his vote, and since the Greens failed to gain representation in the state, parliament was able to form an SPD majority government. This election success, the SPD's only one for many years, can be attributed to the fact that during his period in office in the largely rural state of Rhineland Palatinate Beck gave himself the aura of a "lord of the manor." Among the winegrowers of the Rhine and Mosel, Beck now counts as one of their own. "Local" and "affable" are the most frequent words used in connection with his name.

But so far, Beck has not been associated with political principles or vision. He could just as well belong to the CDU. His political horizon barely exceeds that of a village mayor, an office he held for a long time. According to Beck, what is important is what is "concrete," it's not just about fundamentals, *Die Zeit* quoted him saying, and commented: "Programmatic work has not been Beck's speciality so far, he is a man of political practice." According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Beck's principle is pragmatism—i.e. he has no principles.

This mixture of pragmatism, intellectual ignorance and rural backwardness qualifies Beck for the presidency of a party that regards its major task as abolishing all past social achievements. Beck, who has been an SPD member since 1972, rising through the political ranks, in contrast to Platzek, knows how to organize power struggles behind closed doors.

Beck will keep the same personnel as his predecessor, with the 33-year old Hubertus Heil remaining General Secretary. Heil is a leading member of a network of younger SPD politicians who stress a "pragmatic" and "undogmatic" approach to social and political issues, and who are primarily interested in promoting their own careers.

Beck has appointed the 44-year old Jens Bullerjahn as his new deputy, bringing him to Berlin from Saxony Anhalt, where he only recently entered a grand coalition with the CDU. This is a clear indication that for Beck, the Christian Democrats and FDP remain the preferential coalition partners.

How long Beck can cling to the SPD leadership remains to be seen. Possible successors are already in the starting blocks: Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück and Environment Secretary Sigmar Gabriel have made no secret about their ambitions. What is clear, however, is that Beck will be unable to stop the further decay of the SPD.



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