German Greens on the road to coalitions with the conservative CDU

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For the first time since the end of the Social Democratic Party-Green Party federal coalition a year and a half ago, the Greens are preparing to enter a state government in Bremen. The party is currently negotiating with the SPD to form a coalition in the city-state, which was governed for 12 years by a grand coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD.

As far as the Greens are concerned, the issue in Bremen is not bound up with an attempt to revive a coalition with the SPD at a federal level. Instead, they regard the alliance with the SPD as a transitional stage towards future coalitions with the conservative CDU at a state and federal level. To this end, the Greens are taking over a finance ministry in the debt-ridden city for the first time in the party's history. They are keen to prove that they can impose exactly the same sort of "responsible" social cuts and economic measures as other bourgeois parties.

In the Bremen state election a month ago, both the SPD and CDU suffered heavy losses, with the SPD losing 5.5 and the CDU 4.1 percent of their previous vote. In its former stronghold, the SPD received just 36.8 percent of the vote and the CDU 25.6 percent. Those who benefited from public discontent with the grand coalition were the Left Party, which won 8.4 percent and entered a west German state parliament for the first time, and the Greens, which notched up their best-ever state parliament election result with 16.4 percent.

Under these circumstances, the Bremen grand coalition could not simply continue as before. With a heavy heart, the SPD decided to inaugurate coalition negotiations with the Greens. For their part, the Greens were jubilant—sensing their chance to enter other coalitions at a state and federal level and thereby gain access to all the privileges and bonuses available to governing parties. According to one of the chairman of the Green parliamentary (Bundestag) faction, Fritz Kuhn, the most important result of the coalition talks in Bremen is that the Greens now "once again have their foot in the door."

At the same time, leading Greens have expressly denied claims that the Greens are primarily intent on forming coalitions with the SPD. The "SPD-Green project" is history. "This Bremen coalition is not equivalent to a new red-green project," stressed the vice-president of the Greens in the Bundestag, Katrin Katrin-Goering Eckardt. The party's leading candidate in Bremen, Karoline Linnert, backed her up: "This will be a government like any other."

According to Fritz Kuhn, Bremen shows that grand coalitions are only a "transitional phenomenon." If the Greens enter state parliaments following elections in Hamburg, Lower Saxony and Hesse next year, then the Greens will be part of governments in other states. State elections are due in Hesse and Lower Saxony at the end of January 2008, in Hamburg at the end of February, and in Bavaria in the autumn of 2008.

Kuhn did not say with which party the Greens would seek to form a coalition in these other states. But the magazine *Wirtschaftwoche* quotes another Green Party politician saying: "Hamburg would be an ideal place, in order to try out black-green [i.e., a coalition with the CDU]."

It is no secret that there is a strong lobby in the Greens striving for coalitions with the CDU. This is the position that has been stressed for years by Oswald Metzger, the budget speaker of the Green parliamentary group and currently an expert on finance policy in the Stuttgart state parliament. There are already CDU-Green alliances in numerous German municipalities and cities. In Tübingen, Green Boris Palmer was elected mayor of the city with votes from the CDU.

Now, such alliances are being prepared at a state and federal level. *Wirtschaftwoche* quotes an unnamed Green parliamentary deputy: "Formerly it was said we categorically exclude any cooperation with the CDU...but on the basis of the current coalition contract, and when the CDU supports a withdrawal from nuclear energy, then we are also open for the union."

This stance is confirmed by prominent Greens. Bundestag faction chairman Renate Künast has made clear she is open to all options: "After all the head is round, and that means thoughts can change direction."

In an interview with the *Rheinischen Merkur* (June 7), Künast was more specific: "It is always good to have options. I am not to be frightened by black-green. We would be crazy if we concentrated only on an SPD-Green model for the next elections under conditions where, according to simple maths, such a model currently lacks a majority. It is crucial that we can impose green values on a partner—ecology, education and family policy. This is what is important, and not the party constellations."

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The former federal environment secretary, Jürgen Trittin, even believes that the only conservative party with which the Greens could form a coalition is the Christian Social Union in Bavaria—a leading member of which is the law-and-order right-wing Interior Minister Günther Beckstein.

Should the shaky grand coalition in Berlin break apart, the Greens could also be used to form a new majority together with the free-market Free Democrats (FDP). Such a coalition would be possible without new elections. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is well aware of this option and has undertaken confidential discussions with leading Greens for some time.

The Greens are to take over two senator posts in Bremen—finance and environment.

Karoline Linnert's selection as finance senator is a first for the Greens at a state and federal level. A goal of the coalition negotiations is "a coalition of reason" in the insolvent small state that creates "an atmosphere where people are keen to work with us on achieving solutions," Linnert told the *taz* newspaper.

A spokeswoman for the Greens in Bremen, Susan Mittrenga, stressed that her party was eager to tackle the difficult budgetary situation. The new governing mayor Jens Böhrnsen (SPD) has expressly praised the Greens for their recognition of the need for an austerity course.

In fact, it is precisely this austerity course that was one of the main reasons for the loss of votes on the part of the SPD and CDU. Nevertheless, the manager of the Green Party parliamentary fraction, Volker Beck, accused the predecessor coalition of being inconsequent with regard to austerity measures. "Instead of reorganising the budget the grand coalition [in Bremen] has invested too much money in wasteful projects, which people in Bremen must pay for over decades," he declared.

When the Greens first joined the German government in 1998, they proved their reliability to the ruling elite by supporting the NATO war against Yugoslavia. Now, they are attempting a comeback by demonstrating their ability to impose tough and unpopular economic measures.

The Green Reinhard Loske is to take over the environment department. The former deputy chairman of the Green Bundestag faction stands on the extreme right wing of the party and is also an avid advocate of alliances with the Union parties.

In an interview with the news station *ntv* on March 13, Loske declared that in terms of personnel he has noted for years a closing of the gap between the Union and the Greens: "If I look at the people around Angela Merkel—for example, Norbert Röttgen, Peter Altmaier, Ronald Pofalla, Friedbert Pflüger—then these are people with whom we certainly do not agree on every point, but people who are amenable to black-green." Things would happen more rationally in a black-green coalition as opposed to an alliance with the SPD, Loske added.

He also sees good chances for a black-green state government in Bavaria: "For me, black-green in Bavaria would be a dream team," Loske said. "A party that makes clear it has conservative values, and an ecological party—this could perhaps be a goer."

Loske has long since seen himself as an advocate of "long-term coalitions," which combine "environmental and economic interests." Just two years ago, he received an award from the Herbert Gruhl Society. Gruhl embodied the right wing of the environmental movement.

The Herbert Gruhl Society has set itself the task of developing the "nature-conservative standpoint" of its founder together with the attending "end-of-time philosophical consequences." This latter phrase refers to Gruhl's reactionary population policy. He regularly used terms associated with the far right to describe the alleged overpopulation of the earth with terms such as a "flood of people" or "avalanche of people" and agitated against immigrants.

Gruhl was a member of the CDU from 1954 to 1978. In 1980, he was a founding member of the Green Party. Two years later, he created the ÖDP, a right-wing split-off from the Greens, that he led from 1982 to 1989. When the ÖDP opposed a resolution in favour of opening up the organisation to extreme right-wing parties, Gruhl resigned in order to form an openly extreme-right organisation with Baldur Springmann.

Springmann feared the "planned abolition of the German people" and called for resistance. He later founded an "Action committee for lovers of Germany" and advocated a simple rural life free from the "illusion of growth." Herbert Gruhl died in 1993.

In his speech at the award ceremony, Volker Kempf, the chairman of the Herbert Gruhl Society, put Reinhard Loske in the tradition of Gruhl: "The ecology movement of the 1970s/1980s rediscovered the value of doing without; reasonable measures were to take the place of a fetishism over growth."

Bremen Senator Loske has announced that his first job in his new post will be to get away from the "unproductive confrontation between economics and environmental protection."

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