

Following election of new leader, German CSU moves further to the right

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Following nine months of internal conflict, a congress of Bavaria's right-wing Christian Social Union (CSU), held at the end of September in Munich, elected the Bavarian Economy Minister Erwin Huber as new head of the party and Interior Minister Günther Beckstein as state prime minister. Both posts were formerly held by long-time CSU leader Edmund Stoiber. The congress also agreed to a new programme.

The CSU is a long-time ally of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and one of the partners in the "Grand Coalition" government, along with the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

While the nomination of Beckstein as prime minister and the party's leading candidate for the state election due next year was unchallenged, for the first time in the history of the CSU there was a ballot for the post of party chairmanship. Erwin Huber won the most votes (58 percent), with his main rival federal Agriculture Minister Horst Seehofer picking up 39 percent. Trailing in last place was the third candidate, the former state deputy Gabriele Pauli, with 2.5 percent.

After the vote, the party leadership made a show of unity, although Stoiber had been pressured to stand down against his will. At the conference, Stoiber praised his successors and was duly appointed honorary chairman of the party. Seehofer, who was the victim of a vicious public smear campaign, also pledged his solidarity to the new leadership and was elected deputy chairman by a large majority. Pauli, who had set in motion the campaign for Stoiber to step down, was ignored in silence.

In fact, the demonstrative shows of unity and hypocritical hymns of praise to the party's outgoing leader, together with the fuss surrounding Pauli's candidacy, only served to obscure the real political significance of the congress.

The end of Stoiber's rule makes clear that the role of the CSU as a classical "People's Party" has come to an end. In a similar manner to the Christian Democratic Union, which is organised at a federal level, the Bavarian-based CSU was able to represent the interests of a broad spectrum of social layers in the post-war period. The different interests and claims of various lobbies were counterbalanced by a complex system of policies involving concessions to various interest groups. This enabled the CSU to win the allegiance of some sections of workers, thereby securing the party's domination in Bavarian politics.

In 1993, when Stoiber took over the post of state prime minister and a few years later the chairmanship of the CSU, the political

and economic conditions had already changed to such an extent that the party's previous policies based on appeasing a diverse clientele were no longer viable. The increasing globalisation of production led to ongoing social polarisation in the state of Bavaria.

The number of well-paid jobs in Bavarian industries declined rapidly, and at the same time the state chancellery implemented a course of radical austerity measures, which threw growing numbers into poverty. The electorate responded by withdrawing support for the party. At the last federal election (Bundestag), the CSU vote declined by more than 10 percent compared to the previous election in 2003.

The party's victory under Stoiber in 2003 (61 percent of the vote and two thirds of all the seats in the state parliament) was largely a result of the decline of the main opposition party in Bavaria—the SPD. In 2003, the Bavarian SPD paid the price for the unpopularity of the party at a federal level. It lost 10 percent from its previous vote, and its share of the popular vote fell below 20 percent—the SPD's lowest share in the state since the Second World War.

This was background to the internal party strife, which took place at the start of this year and eventually led to Stoiber's resignation. While on the surface it appeared as though the CSU dominated Germany's southernmost state, the party was in fact rent by internal divisions. The crisis was intensified by the autocratic behaviour of Stoiber, who had surrounded himself with a clique of trusted friends, was increasingly impervious to any sort of criticism, and could not decide whether he should stay in Bavaria or take up a post in the national government.

Following a public attack on Stoiber by the largely unknown Gabriele Pauli, the entire CSU leadership, including Beckstein and Seehofer, commenced a campaign against Stoiber, who was unable to quell the dissidence in the party and eventually announced his resignation. There then followed an acrimonious and very public squabble over who should succeed Stoiber.

Beckstein's claim to the post of prime minister was largely secure, but a ferocious conflict erupted over the party chairmanship in which political issues were relegated to the sidelines. Instead, one scandal after another was paraded in the press. Opponents of Seehofer made a hue and cry over a love affair, while Pauli lost no opportunity to make a series of bizarre appearances in the German media.

The result of this mudslinging was a new leadership, which now

stresses its desire to continue the “successful course of Stoiber” and maintain “continuity.” In fact, the party is shifting further to the right.

Günter Beckstein, who was elected as the new prime minister with 97 percent of the delegate’s votes, is a notorious right-winger. He has headed the Bavarian interior ministry since 1993 and acquired the name “black sheriff” during this period. He is well known for his constant demands for intensified legal attacks against immigrants and asylum seekers. Beckstein has introduced legislation involving an extensive and discriminatory naturalisation process for foreigners, who are required to give extensive information about their personal lives and political attitudes. He is virulently opposed to Turkish membership in the European Union and advocates a ban on wearing the Islamic headscarf.

Beckstein has declared domestic security to be a “fundamental social right” and advocates the strengthening of the state apparatus. He favours the comprehensive installation of video cameras in public places and increased powers for the police and secret services. At the same time, Beckstein has pledged to take up the struggle against what he declares to be “violent Islamists.” Under this pretext, Muslim organisations in Bavaria are subject to secret surveillance and bans on their activities.

Erwin Huber, Beckstein’s favoured candidate for the party chairmanship, embodies the pro-business, neo-liberal wing of the party, which has increasingly determined the course of the CSU in recent years.

Huber was appointed general secretary of the CSU back in 1988 by its most prominent post-war leader, Franz Josef Strauss. In 1995, he was made finance minister and then head of the state chancellery. His unyielding loyalty to his superiors and his arrogant, inconsiderate manner towards subordinates has earned him the designation “multi-purpose weapon.” The former inspector of taxes is renowned for making decisions exclusively on the basis of financial criteria while remaining completely resistant to any other lobby or interests.

Huber is the main architect of the austerity course and the “reforms” carried out over past years, which include substantial wage cuts for public service employees and officials. He played a leading role in drawing up the election programme for the conservative union parties (CDU/CSU) in the last federal election and was involved in the coalition negotiations in Berlin. Although the state has a balanced budget and popular opposition to his austerity course is growing, Huber is intent on pushing forward with his economic measures.

Huber and Beckstein complement one another. While Huber continues his austerity course, Beckstein is intent on strengthening the state and encouraging xenophobia and nationalism as a means of diverting and suppressing opposition to the state government’s course.

The role of Horst Seehofer, who obtained 92 percent of the vote for the post of deputy chairman, is to act as a fig leaf for his compatriots in the leadership. Since he officiated in the 1990s as a federal minister of health, he has acquired the reputation of being a “socially responsible” (i.e., moderate) politician—although he has invariably backed the line of the CSU leadership.

The political significance of the change in leadership was also reflected in the programme adopted by the party—the first new programme to be agreed upon in the past 14 years.

The former arch-conservative programme of the CSU has been revised with the addition of further right-wing, nationalist components. The new programme refers to the values of a so-called German “guiding culture,” and the party explicitly professes adherence to “Western Christian culture.” These terms have become synonymous in German political discourse for restrictive policies aimed against immigrants and asylum seekers.

The reactionary family policies adopted by the grand coalition in Berlin (CDU-SPD-CSU) are also inscribed in the new draft programme for the CSU. The document demands funding for mothers who educate their young children at home—a measure that discourages women from resuming their jobs in favour of a strictly domestic existence.

At the same time, the new programme disparages aspects of the welfare state as a hindrance to personal enrichment. Under the slogan, “the false path of the supportive state,” the programme demands a radical dismantling of social gains. “The welfare state is beneficial for all persons when personal direct responsibility is the priority.” The programme thereby seeks to prepare the way for further privatisation in the sphere of health and pension provision.

Stoiber took up the same issue in his speech to the congress. He launched an attack on the SPD—which under Gerhard Schröder launched the notorious anti-welfare Agenda 2010 programme—accusing it of “selling its soul to Oscar Lafontaine’s Left Party.”

The strict budget discipline already practiced in Bavaria was particularly stressed. Debts could only be incurred “in special crisis periods.” No mention is made of the fact that the budget cuts involved are invariably carried out at the expense of the working population.

With regard to domestic and foreign policy, the new programme strictly rejects any admission of Turkey into the European Union. It expressly supports the maintenance of “German interests” abroad and the international missions currently being carried out by the German army. In his speech, Stoiber declared that German soldiers fighting abroad would have the complete “protective cover” of the party. The programme acknowledges the necessity to secure economic interests and ensure “energy security” through reliable supplies of oil and gas.



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