# Germany: The resignation of Franz Müntefering

## The beginning of the end for the grand coalition

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The announcement by Franz Müntefering (Social Democratic Party, SPD) that he will resign with immediate effect from his offices as vice-chancellor and employment minister in the grand coalition landed like a bombshell on Tuesday in Berlin. Just a few weeks ago, the minister had abruptly rejected speculation about his resignation.

According to media reports, Müntefering made the decision last weekend, when he also informed the SPD leadership. Müntefering said the reason was his wife Ankepetra's serious illness. He said he was resigning in order to be at the side of his wife, who has just recently undergone an emergency operation.

It is not unusual for fundamental political shifts to be bound up with changes in personal circumstances and be justified as being "personal decisions." However, it would be very shortsighted to ascribe Müntefering's decision to resign exclusively to his difficult personal situation.

That his wife had been suffering with cancer had been well known for a long time. When her illness became more serious in 2002, Müntefering stepped down as SPD secretary-general, but this did not prevent him from becoming party chair one-and-a-half years later at an SPD special party congress. The following year he led an intensive election campaign alongside Gerhard Schröder and emerged as the latter's most important supporter in Germany's previous SPD-Green Party coalition government. At the side of Chancellor Angela Merkel, he then became the strongest minister and representative of the incoming grand coalition of the SPD and Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU).

The first statements by SPD representatives said the resignation had been accepted "with regret" and was a "harsh loss" for the work of the coalition government. CDU politicians in particular have reacted very anxiously and spoken of someone who could only be replaced with difficulty.

Chancellor Angela Merkel praised Müntefering as a "stabilizing" force in the government's work, saying he was a voice of reason in the SPD. He was a political heavyweight with whom she said she worked well together.

"We have great respect for the decision of the vice-chancellor," said CDU Secretary-General Ronald Pofalla, adding that Müntefering was an important mainstay for the successful work of the grand coalition. The prime minister of Lower Saxony, Christian Wulff (CDU), spoke of his "understanding for this personal decision." Müntefering's great competence and his "attention to questions of detail" meant the resignation was a loss for federal politics, he said.

Even the arch-conservative Hesse state premier Roland Koch (CDU) paid tribute to Müntefering, offering his "respect and esteem." He always regarded the minister as "extraordinarily competent." His resignation meant the coalition had lost a "cornerstone," said Koch.

Bavaria's former state premier Edmund Stoiber (CSU) also evinced his high regard for Müntefering, saying he had respect for the considerable political and personal achievements of this "traditional social democrat." Despite much internal resistance, Müntefering had recognized the necessity of reforms and "led his party into the 21st century," said Stoiber, who has been appointed CSU honorary chairman.

Dieter Hundt, president of the Federation of German Employers Organisations (BDA), praised Müntefering's "sober, matter-of-fact style in everyday political business," which he would miss. For him, the SPD politician had always been a reliable partner. He added, "It is in the nature of things that we were not always of the same opinion. But one could rely on his word."

These hymns of praise to Müntefering by CDU and CSU politicians indicate their fear that his resignation could herald the withdrawal of the SPD from the grand coalition.

These fears were reinforced when SPD leader Kurt Beck, immediately after being informed of Müntefering's decision to resign, announced he himself would not be entering the

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government and taking over the posts of employment minister and vice-chancellor. Beck said he did not wish to be bound by “cabinet discipline.” In recent weeks, Beck had pushed through an increase in unemployment benefits, albeit very modest, against the express opposition of Müntefering. Now Beck seeks to use the resignation of the employment minister as a means of establishing a degree of distance between his party and its coalition partners.

The decision to appoint the party functionary Olaf Scholz to succeed Müntefering speaks for a gradual withdrawal of the SPD from the coalition. The 49-year-old Scholz is at present executive secretary of the SPD parliamentary faction. As a former chair of the SPD district of Hamburg Altona, he is an apprentice of the right-wing SPD leadership in this region, and became a close associate of former chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Scholz was jointly responsible for elaborating the welfare reforms contained in “Agenda 2010” and as SPD secretary-general (2002-2004) was involved in the suppression of all internal opposition to this political course. In his new role, he functions in the government as a transitional figure, who can manoeuvre according to the interests of the SPD party machinery.

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier takes over the post of vice-chancellor. At the SPD party congress at the end of October, he had criticized the actions of the Bush administration in Iraq and against Iran with remarkable openness and without the usual diplomatic restraint. He accused Merkel, when she was leader of the opposition, of opposing the stance of the then chancellor Schröder who had spoken out against the Iraq war. “That was a mistake,” Steinmeier told the party delegates. He also criticized the welcome given to the Dalai Lama when he visited Germany, and called Merkel’s foreign policy initiatives “shop window politics” that merely sought to gain a “quick headline at home.”

While Chancellor Merkel is clearly positioning herself at the side of the US administration, the SPD is trying to establish some distance with Washington, at least outwardly. Next year, there will be three important state elections taking place, and the SPD fears it confronts an even harder bruising at the hands of the electorate than was previously the case. For this reason the social democrats obviously intend not to remain too much longer in the grand coalition, but rather attempt to raise their profile against it.

It would be very wrong to regard this as any sort of shift to the left on the part of the SPD. This is already clear from the nomination of the right-winger Scholz as Müntefering’s replacement. The SPD remains tied to its anti-welfare Agenda 2010 policy, but it is attempting to counter its massive loss of membership and votes in recent years by distancing itself from government policy in a few specific issues—even risking a possible break-up of the coalition along the way. The party fears this is the only way to ensure that the organisation is in a position to be able to even fight the next election.

In 2005 former SPD Chancellor Schröder resigned, after losing 11 state elections and facing increasing demonstrations and protests against his anti-social policies, effectively handing over power to the CDU and Merkel. When the latter failed to win an outright majority—despite opinion poll predictions—they went on to form a grand coalition with the SPD under the leadership of Franz Müntefering, which continued and intensified the social attacks, for example, raising the pension age to 67.

The devastating extent of the social disaster that was introduced by the SPD-Green Party government and then continued by the grand coalition of the SPD and CDU/CSU has become ever clearer to see: dramatically sinking wages, skilled workers being forced into low-wage jobs, several millions being made to work in so-called “one euro” jobs, the mounting indebtedness of private households, a growth in child labour, etc. Now Müntefering has also resigned.

This first of all strengthens the chancellor and enables the SPD to play its well-known double game. While in all important questions it supports the social attacks, in the future it will seek to act more openly as a critic of government policy. Thus SPD leader Kurt Beck and the party executive committee want to strengthen the alliance with the DGB trade union federation and counter the dramatic fall in support for the SPD, which has lost approximately one third of its members—some 300,000—in the last decade. Entire local and district federations have been dissolved for lack of members.

The decline of the oldest and largest party in Germany, which for nearly 100 years has provided the most important pillar of bourgeois rule in all the times of great crisis, is not just a concern for the SPD’s executive committee. The employers’ associations also fear that the increasing anger of working people, seen in the massive support for the striking train drivers, could lead to a widespread radicalisation that could run out of control. In other words, large sections of the ruling elite are of the view that the SPD can still be of use.

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