

Former German president urges no let-up in right-wing agenda

Stefan Steinberg
6 May 2008

On April 30, former German President Roman Herzog appeared at a conference in the press centre of the German parliament alongside the former Social Democratic Party (SPD) “super-minister,” Wolfgang Clement, to publicise the latest book produced by the “Convent for Germany” (Konvent für Deutschland). The Convent for Germany is a right-wing think tank whose membership includes some of the most prominent members of the German political, business and banking establishment.

The comments made by Herzog (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and others at the press conference in Berlin clearly demonstrated that the Convent for Germany is intent on stepping up pressure on the German grand coalition government (SPD-CDU-Christian Social Union) to proceed more ruthlessly with the attacks on jobs, welfare and social conditions (Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV) initiated by the former SPD-Green Party coalition government of which Clement was a leading member.

Entitled *Mut zum Handeln* (Courage to Act), the Convent’s new book consists of 28 interviews with leading figures from big business, the banking world and politics. The general tenor of the interviews is that Germany confronts a logjam of reform and its current political elite lacks the “courage” to carry out the savage and unpopular economic attacks on the living standards of the vast majority of the population that the Convent for Germany regards as necessary.

At the same time, the Convent is critical of the country’s political establishment and, first and foremost, the current coalition government for being far too hesitant in pushing ahead with far-reaching changes to Germany’s political system.

The fact that Wolfgang Clement shared the platform at the press conference made perfectly clear the Convent for Germany is content with the economic reforms introduced by the SPD-Green coalition led by Gerhard Schröder. The Schröder reforms represent the most comprehensive attacks on the German social and welfare state to be carried out since the Second World War.

However, according to Clement at the press conference last Wednesday, Germany’s reform process has been struck “numb” (“Reformstarre”) and the Convent’s new book is a form of “wake-up call” to liberate Germany from excessive legal hindrances on business activity and a paralysing bureaucracy.

Jürgen Großmann, acting chairman of the energy giant RWE, was even more blunt at the press conference. According to Großmann: “What we need is nothing less than a revolution!”—i.e., a “revolution” aimed at establishing the sort of authoritarian government that is able to ruthlessly combat growing public opposition to the Agenda 2010 policy.

Herzog gave an insight into the thoroughly elitist thinking of the Convent in his response to a question from a journalist. When asked how he expected to win support from the German population for his proposals, Herzog blurted out in reply: “The people follow [*Das volk folgt*].... This is clear from the name.” Realising he had gone too far, Herzog quickly

sought to correct his comment and play down his revealing gaffe.

Founded nearly five years ago, the membership list of the Convent for Germany reads like a who’s who of German business and banking circles peppered with a number of leading right-wing politicians, including prominent members of the SPD.

The chairman of the Convent is Roman Herzog, federal president from 1994 to 1999. As a young man, Herzog studied law at the University of Munich and from 1958 to 1964 was an assistant to the legal expert Theodor Maunz. Maunz’s own legal career began in the early 1930s when he began advisory work for the National Socialists. For the entire period up until the end of the Second World War, Maunz was an enthusiastic supporter of the fascists and as a professor of law at Freiburg played a leading role in providing a legal framework for the work of the German police under the Nazis. Maunz was then allowed to continue his legal career after the war and went on to author—together with his assistant Roman Herzog—an authoritative commentary on Germany’s postwar constitution.

Herzog made headlines in April 1997, when in his function as president, he made his so-called “Ruck” (jolt) speech at the Hotel Adlon in Berlin. Herzog expressed his frustration at the pace of political development under CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Echoing pressure from big business circles, Herzog called for a “jolt” in Germany in order to overcome “encrusted structures.”

The drastic anti-welfare measures passed a few years later by the Schröder coalition government represented an initial response to Herzog’s appeal. Herzog’s call for radical change and a jolt has also been echoed more recently by the current German president, Horst Köhler.

One of the main themes taken up by the Convent for Germany is the demographic development of Germany. On this issue, Herzog and other Convent members have repeatedly intervened in the discussion on the future of Germany’s pension system. As chairman of a commission appointed by the CDU, Herzog already put forward proposals in 2003 for an increase in the pensionable age from 65 to 67 years, as well as demanding cuts to pensions.

Herzog returned to the same theme just a few weeks ago. In an interview with the *Bild* tabloid, Herzog deplored the influence of senior citizens in political life, declaring: “I fear we are seeing the beginnings of a pensioner democracy: The numbers of elderly are continually increasing and are receiving disproportional attention from all political parties. This could mean in the end that the elderly plunder the young.”

Herzog’s complaints about the exploitation of the youth by pensioners is rich stuff coming from a man who receives a monthly pension of €17,000 from the German Treasury for his five years as president. This sum is substantially more than an average German pensioner receives in a year! In fact, Herzog’s pension is just the tip of the iceberg and does not take into account his earnings from other past political posts, investments, lectures, books, etc.

Alongside Herzog on the Convent for Germany membership list are

captains of German industry such as Harry Roels, the chairman of the energy giant RWE; Klaus Zumwinkel, who resigned recently as chairman of the board at Deutsche Post following a major tax evasion; Hartmut Mehdorn, executive chairman of Deutsche Bahn/German Railways, which recently headed a major campaign against train drivers; and Wendelin Wiedeking, executive chairman of Porsche autos.

Representing the banking world is Germany's best-paid banker, Josef Ackermann. Other leading figures from the finance world are Andreas Dombret, vice chairman of the European operations of Bank of America, and Thomas R. Fisher, executive chairman of the WestLB bank (which has recently announced losses running into the billions in connection with the US-based subprime mortgage crisis).

Prominent political figures of the so-called Convent for Germany include the organisation's vice chairman Dr. Klaus von Dohnanyi (SPD, the former mayor of Hamburg), Wolfgang Clement (former minister of economics and labour from 2002 to 2005), Oswald Metzger (former member of the Green Party who recently resigned to join the conservative CDU), Otto Graf Lambsdorff, (former foreign minister, Free Democratic Party, FDP), Monika Wulf Mathies (SPD, former head of the ÖTV public service trade union, 1982-1994), and the former head of the Association of German Industry (BDI), Hans Olaf Henkel.

A glimpse into the thoroughly reactionary political ideas and priorities of the Convent is provided in another publication, *Das Ende des Weißen Mannes* (The End of the White Man), written by one of its founding members, Professor Dr. Manfred Pohl. Pohl is a leading theorist of the Convent for Germany who as a young man began his banking career under Hermann Josef Abs. Abs was a member of the executive of Deutsche Bank from 1937 to the end of the war and during this period played a leading role in the "Aryanisation" of the German economy—i.e., the forcible expropriation of the Jews. Like Maunz after the war, Abs was able to carry on with his activities and headed the Deutsche Bank well into the 1950s.

One of the main functions currently carried out by his pupil Pohl is leading the international "cultural activities" of the Deutsche Bank

Pohl's main thesis in his book is that Europe is being overrun by immigrants, a situation that will genetically threaten the dominance of the "white man." Under these conditions, Pohl argues it is necessary for nation states to defend their interests. "In Germany, Europe and the US the identity and feeling of belonging must remain German, European and American."

Pohl's own solution to the "demographic problem" in Germany is the demand in *Das Ende des Weißen Mannes* that senior citizens between the age of 60 and 80 undertake unpaid communal work. At the same time, steps must be taken to ensure that the rate of childbirth is driven up. Pohl's comments in this respect are equally reactionary as his proposals for senior citizens.

According to Pohl, a man who undertakes housework and cares for a baby will become "feminised" and unattractive to women: "This type of man will become feminised, because his testosterone will not be put to use and decay." With the result, a la Pohl, that even fewer children are born in Germany.

With regard to education, Pohl writes:

"It is necessary at an early stage to filter out the around 5 percent of people who are intellectually in a position to be able to perform at a high level, through inventions, for example, and give them specific support at the latest after leaving the nursery. The approximately 30 percent that apply, install or maintain inventions or can teach also require their own path of education as do the remaining 65 percent who operate the machines and carry out simple intellectual tasks. Around a third of this group is incapable of being educated, irrespective of how much money is invested in education."

The nauseating elitism propounded by Manfred Pohl could be dismissed

as the rantings of a politically frustrated person were it not for the fact that his book features a cover note endorsement by no less than Roman Herzog. The extent of the political influence of the Convent for Germany itself is further demonstrated by the fact that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was the main speaker at a Symposium of the Convent held in December last year.

To achieve their social and political objectives, Herzog, Pohl and the Convent are clear that major constitutional changes are needed to develop the authoritarian powers required to completely overturn the German social welfare system and enforce unpopular economic policies. Germany's ability to continue reforms, according to the Convent, is being hampered by too many elections and too much democracy.

Herzog proposes radical changes to the German political system, including an extension of the life of a parliament from four years to five, a reduction in the powers of Germany's states, and elections for states, communes, etc., that are currently held separately to be carried out at the same time.

In his recent book, Pohl makes clear that his role model for a modern state is a well-run company boardroom. In addition to the constitutional changes demanded by Herzog, Pohl also proposes reducing the current system of 13 German states to just 8, and the establishment of a Federal Convent with wide-ranging political powers.

For membership of such a Federal Convent, Pohl proposes "independent, wise members" drawn from the 8 states. By "independent wise, members" Pohl would evidently include himself as a member of this elite of technocrats, business experts and bankers with no firm political ties, but utterly loyal to the profit motives of their company or bank. Taken together with the constitutional proposals made by Herzog and others, Pohl's litany of demands represents a major attack on the German democratic system and a move towards an increasingly centralised and authoritarian state.

It is necessary to take the proposals made by Herzog and the Convent for Germany very seriously. Through their ties to big business and the German lobby system, they have already been able to exert influence on the process of changing Germany's federal system, and former SPD chairman Franz Münterfering was quick to take up Herzog's proposal for retirement at the age of 67.

Herzog's original "Ruck" speech was directed at the conservative government led by Helmut Kohl. Kohl's government was then replaced by the Schröder-led coalition in 1999, which began the process of implementing the type of "reforms" demanded by the Convent for Germany and broad sections of German big business.

Now Herzog and the Convent are worried that the "reform" process is running out of steam and are renewing pressure on the current government to go much further in dismantling the German social state. Against a background of growing financial crisis and increasing indications of popular discontent and resistance, the Convent is demanding antidemocratic reforms to achieve the sort of authoritarian state capable of enforcing its economic and political programme.

The reaction of the Convent and its president to the growing social and political crisis in Germany stands in a long and dishonourable tradition.

It was the grand coalition government (1928-1931) led by the social democratic Hermann Müller that carried out the biggest assault on the German welfare state in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1930, Müller then advised his party to support the conservative government led by Heinrich Brüning. Brüning in turn swept aside the German constitution in his haste to suppress popular opposition and ruled by presidential decree. In so doing, he created a precedent that was then exploited to its full in 1933 by the leader of the National Socialists, Adolf Hitler.

There are of course many differences between the current situation and 1933, but even a cursory examination of the perspectives and activities of the Convent for Germany makes clear that this layer of the German ruling

elite is quite prepared to tread the same dangerous path as Müller and Brüning in the 1930s.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact