

Tensions mount in the grand coalition

# German Social Democrats put forward their own presidential candidate

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The post of German federal president is largely of a ceremonial nature, and the successful candidate possesses little real power. This makes the election of the president all the more suitable for carrying out political manoeuvres and preparing new political constellations.

This was the case in 1969 when the election of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) member Gustav Heinemann to the post of president, with votes from the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), ushered in the end of the grand coalition (Christian Democratic Union/CDU—Christian Social Union/CSU and SPD) in favour of a coalition of the SPD and FDP. The switch by the FDP to support the candidate of the SPD was then followed by the election of Willy Brandt (SPD) as chancellor.

The current federal president, Horst Köhler (CDU), also owed his office to a similar set of circumstances. In 2004, the chairpersons of the CDU, Angela Merkel, and the FDP, Guido Westerwelled, appointed Köhler (at the time head of the International Monetary Fund) as their favoured candidate, as part of their plan to replace the SPD-Green coalition with a coalition of their own parties. Köhler was elected according to plan, but the CDU-FDP coalition then failed to receive sufficient popular support in the federal election in 2005.

The decision by the SPD to put forward Professor Gesine Schwan as its own candidate for the next presidential elections is also bound up with tactical party manoeuvres. Schwan can only become president with the support of the Green Party and the Left Party, and her election next year would be an important precedent for the creation of an alliance between the SPD and the Left Party at a federal level. The next federal elections are due to take place just four months after the presidential election, and sections of the German ruling elite have evidently concluded that the inclusion of the Left Party in a future government is advisable in order to satiate and contain growing public discontent.

The presidential election promises to be a close-run affair, and the result is difficult to predict. The head of state is due to be elected on May 23, 2009, by the so-called Presidential Election Council (BV), which consists of the 612 members of the German parliament (Bundestag) plus an equal number of members from Germany's 16 state parliaments. The CDU-CSU and FDP, which currently support a second term for Köhler, have a slim majority in the BV, but anticipated defeats for the conservatives in upcoming state elections (e.g., Bavaria in September) could change the relation of forces.

Gesine Schwan had already stood against Köhler—with the support of the SPD and Greens—in 2004 and only narrowly failed to win the presidency. Schwan received 589 votes (including 12 votes from the conservative opposition camp) to 604 votes for Köhler.

The SPD agreed to the candidacy of Gesine Schwan with considerable reluctance. Social-democratic leaders—party Chairman Kurt Beck, his Deputy Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück and Foreign Minister Frank-

Walter Steinmeier, as well as SPD fraction leader Peter Struck—indicated over a long period of time that they would not put forward their own candidate and were prepared to support a second term for Köhler.

Then, on May 26, the 45-member SPD executive unanimously nominated Schwan as its candidate. The unanimous vote was meant to avoid any impression of divisions over the issue and save face for party leader Kurt Beck, but those in the SPD who oppose the move quickly made clear that they reject any prospect of collaboration with the Left Party.

One day after the announcement of the executive's decision, Beck's predecessor as party chairman, Franz Müntefering, called upon the SPD to pass an official resolution ruling out any form of cooperation with the Left Party after the federal election in 2009.

Former SPD economics minister Wolfgang Clement also weighed in and told the *Welt am Sonntag*, "As things stand, this candidate [Schwan] has only a very small chance of being elected if, in addition to gaining around 90 votes from the Greens, the Left Party can be brought over into the camp of the SPD. There is no getting around the fact: whoever chooses this path is sending a political signal for a SPD-Green-Left Party alliance at a federal level."

Clement expressed his support for a second term of office for Köhler because the latter supports a continuation of reform policies in Germany: "As to their necessity, he is obviously better informed on the basis of his expert knowledge of world-economic affairs than some of those involved in government in Berlin." Köhler is regarded to be a vehement supporter of the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 programme introduced by the previous SPD-Green government led by Gerhard Schröder. As a minister in Schröder's government, Clement himself played a key role in enforcing Agenda 2010.

Clement also supports Köhler's foreign policy initiatives—especially the latter's attempts to deepen relations between Germany and Africa. Köhler "knows better than many others how much for us in 'old Europe' depends on this natural partner of Europe."

The CDU and CSU have also criticised the candidacy of Schwan. Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is usually careful to avoid criticism of the coalition she leads, sharply attacked the SPD leadership while CDU Secretary-General Ronald Pofalla and the CSU made no bones about their own hostility to the decision to put forward Schwan. Saar Prime Minister Peter Müller (CDU), who will fight out his next state election with Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine, went so far as to threaten a premature break-up of the grand coalition.

For her part, Merkel stressed that she did not reckon with any collapse of the government. A spokesman for the chancellor declared that the SPD's nomination of a candidate was "a burden for the grand coalition." Nevertheless, Merkel assumed that it would be possible to continue

governing on the basis of implementing concrete policies.

The SPD Chairman Kurt Beck had only reluctantly supported the candidacy of Schwan. As *Spiegel-Online* writes, for Beck, “Gesine Schwan was not exactly what he wished for. Forces inside his party and not least the professor herself carried out a backroom putsch and forced the party chairman to accept the candidate.”

Among these “forces” is deputy chair Andrea Nahles, who is regarded as a representative of the party’s so-called left wing. A more important role in the nomination of Schwan, however, was played by leading German newspapers such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Spiegel-Online*, which have all recently sung the praises of Schwan and encouraged her candidacy. Even the editor of the conservative *FAZ*, Frank Schirrmacher, went so far as to describe Schwan as a sort of “Mother Courage.”

The reasons for this concerted campaign lie first and foremost in the ongoing crisis of the grand coalition, but is also bound up with the biography of Schwan herself. As a self-avowed expert in Marxism and long-time virulent anticommunist, Schwan is regarded as the ideal candidate to trim the Left Party into shape for its possible integration into a future federal government.

The grand coalition has failed to live up to the expectations it awoke in 2005. After the election in that year, it was widely expected that the coalition, enjoying a large parliamentary majority, would sweep ahead with the “reform course” begun by the Schröder government—i.e., savage attacks on the German social and welfare state. In the meantime, internal conflicts have served to largely paralyse the government, and newspaper commentaries increasingly refer to a “deadlock,” “crisis of confidence,” “coalition of the disconcerted,” etc., following differences between the coalition partners over a series of policy measures.

At the same time, both coalition partners are rapidly losing support. The SPD is plunging in opinion polls, and support for Merkel and the CDU is also beginning to crumble. For the first time in decades, the CSU could lose its absolute majority in Bavaria.

The ascendancy of the Left Party is a direct result of this development. It currently has deputies in the Bundestag and in 10 of Germany’s 16 state parliaments, and is now the party with the third biggest level of support in the republic—placing it in front of the FDP and the Greens. For its part, the Left Party led by Oscar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi has not the slightest intention of challenging the capitalist system—this is adequately demonstrated by the policies carried out by a coalition of the SPD and Left Party in the Senate in Berlin, as well as Left Party policies carried out in many east German cities. But this is not necessarily the attitude adopted by those voting for the party and many other angry workers and youth.

Rapidly growing social polarisation and public anger could quickly boil over. The recent strikes in public services, the railways, and the post office and by transport workers in Berlin are witness to a growing mood of militancy. Millions in Germany, including broad layers of the middle class, are being severely hit by a combination of declining incomes, rising prices and precarious working conditions.

This situation lies behind the efforts to find a more decisive and effective alternative to the grand coalition. The ruling elite requires a “left-wing” option and is sceptical that the CDU in a coalition with the FDP could deliver the goods.

The Greens, who played an important role in implementing the Agenda 2010, are increasingly cuddling up to the CDU and FDP. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Green Party Chairman Reinhard Bütikofer stressed that his party would not “automatically” support the SPD candidate. The Greens will only make a final decision on the issue following the Bavarian state election in September. However, with social tensions on the increase, it is also not clear that the Green Party leadership could persuade its rank and file to follow its right-wing course.

Under these conditions, there is now serious consideration being given to the incorporation of the Left Party into federal government. The Left,

which has close links to sections of the trade union bureaucracy, could play an important role in suppressing social opposition. It has already earned its spurs in Berlin. No other administration has been able to introduce wage and welfare cuts comparable to those enforced by the Senate in Berlin.

Gesine Schwan, who as federal president would be able to influence public opinion, is considered to be the ideal choice in this respect.

The 65-year-old professor graduated from university in 1970 with a doctorate in the subject of Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, a member of the Polish Communist Party who switched to become a critic of the Stalinist bureaucracy before openly attacking Marxism—which he termed the “greatest illusion of our century.” From 1977, Schwan taught political science (specialising in socialism, Marxism and philosophy) at the Free University in Berlin as well as several American universities. Since 1999, she has been president of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) on the Polish border.

Born in Berlin, Schwan joined the SPD in 1970 and rapidly found herself in the right wing of the party. She took part in the creation of the right-wing “Seeheim Circle” and at the beginning of the 1980s, under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD), supported the stationing of US missiles on German soil. In 1984, she was removed from a leading SPD position because of her opposition to the party’s “Ostpolitik”—i.e., the encouragement of closer relations with Eastern European countries.

Unlike others in the SPD, Gesine Schwan is not afraid of making contacts with the Left Party. Following years of experience with Stalinist organisations in Poland and the post-Stalinist PDS-Left Party in Berlin, she can clearly distinguish between left rhetoric and the party’s right-wing practice.

At her press conference last Monday, Schwan made clear that she would openly seek the support of the Left Party for her candidacy—although SPD leader Beck was anxious to play down any cooperation. According to Beck, Schwan’s candidacy was “not in the slightest linked to any sort of coalition preparations.”

Schwan said she was calling on all parties to vote for her—including the Left party. She was hoping with her candidacy to encourage all those in the Left who support “constructive policies.” Her aim is to help “to make politics comprehensible and thereby encourage confidence.” The office of federal president offers a very good chance “to once again strengthen democracy, which is currently in a cultural crisis,” she said.

This professor of political science is quite aware that growing social tensions could undermine any basis for support in the capitalist system—which she is determined to defend. She had always queried “whether democracy is so deeply embodied in West Germany as many like to think” and she asked herself how it would look “if democracy is no longer regarded in a positive manner on the basis of the distribution of social and material wealth. The decisive test is still to come.”

For their part, the Left has made clear its willingness to establish a dialogue with Schwan. According to the leader of the party’s Bundestag faction, Gregor Gysi: “If the SPD wants us to help elect Gesine Schwan, then it is only civilised that it talks with us.” The chairman of the Left Party, Lothar Bisky, declared that his organisation would also wait until state elections in Bavaria before making its position clear, but it is already clear that the Party is quite prepared to back Schwan.



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