

Austria: End of the grand coalition

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Last week, the vice-chancellor and leader of the conservative People's Party, William Molterer, announced his party would no longer be collaborating with its coalition partners—the Austrian Social Democratic Party. His statement effectively brought to an end the grand coalition under social democratic chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer after just one and a half years.

The break up of the coalition in Vienna forms another chapter in the decline of European social democracy. Seldom has a government party been so quickly and so ignominiously chased from office.

The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) experienced the greatest losses in its history in the parliamentary elections of October 2006. This was the voters' answer to the ruthless welfare cuts and rightwing law-and-order policies implemented by the ÖVP in its six-year alliance with the far right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

Although the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) also lost approximately 200,000 votes in the same election, it was the strongest party and could thus nominate the chancellor. But its alliance with its coalition partner strengthened the conservatives, who withdrew their support for the social democratic chancellor after just one and a half years, demolishing the coalition.

The SPÖ election campaign in autumn 2006 had promised a break with the rightwing and neo-liberal policies of the ÖVP/FPÖ government, pledging to abolish university tuition fees introduced under the previous administration and to cancel the purchase of the Eurofighter combat aircraft. None of these pledges were implemented. The "reforms" of the conservative government remained untouched, and immediately after the new government took office it began planning additional cuts in the health and pensions systems, and also to strengthen the country's already harsh immigration laws.

The SPÖ has now received its reward. In state elections in Lower Austria and Tirol it suffered its worst election results since the party was founded. According to opinion polls, the SPÖ-led government is even more unpopular than its conservative predecessor.

Alfred Gusenbauer has since resigned as party leader in favour of transport minister Werner Faymann, who has also been designated as the SPÖ's leading candidate for the early parliamentary elections that will presumably take place in September.

Gusenbauer and Faymann embody the political decline of the Austrian social democrats. Both began their careers in the party's youth organization and then rose into federal politics through various local council positions. Their most important political characteristic is their complete superficiality. At election meetings and demonstrations they gladly speak in left tones, without the slightest intention of putting their words into deeds. Werner Faymann, whom Gusenbauer appointed infrastructure minister last year, differs from his predecessor as party leader only in that he is an even more colourless and bureaucratic apparatchik, who likes to embellish his speeches with literary and aesthetic quotations.

Immediately after his appointment as party leader, Faymann made clear that he would continue the bankrupt policies of his predecessor. In an interview with Vienna's *Standard* newspaper, he explained quite frankly that he could well imagine a new version of the grand coalition. And on a TV news station he stressed the fact that the SPÖ would not lay down pre-conditions for a coalition before the elections—which means keeping all options open.

These policies mean the SPÖ has lost not just votes, but also members. Over the past decades the party has shrunk from half a million members to 250,000.

As it became clear that the SPÖ's plummeting support in the opinion polls had not been stopped by the personnel changes at the top, the leadership decided to launch an initiative that was meant to symbolize the party's "closeness to the people", but in fact represents a further turn to the right.

Faymann and Gusenbauer are proposing that there should be a referendum in Austria on any revised version of the European Union's Lisbon Treaty rejected by Irish voters in June. They announced this proposal in a letter to the rightwing populist tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*. Allegedly, the newspaper's publisher Hans Dichand is supposed to have told his friend Faymann about this "golden opportunity" that could enable the SPÖ to regain popular support. A few years earlier, the paper had supported the anti-EU campaigns of former Freedom Party (FPÖ) leader Jörg Haider.

This announcement not only came as a surprise for their conservative coalition partners, but also for their own party. A majority of Austria's influential political figures, who had only learned of the initiative from the press, spoke decisively against it. Ex-chancellor Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ) condemned it as a

“cloak and dagger action”.

This initiative by the SPÖ has nothing in common with the justified popular rejection of the dictates of the Lisbon Treaty. Both social democrats and conservatives have so far supported all the decisions of the European Union. It was Haider’s FPÖ that won support in the 1990s because it opposed the policies of the European Union, channelling the mounting criticism of the EU in a nationalist and racist direction.

The initiative enables the SPÖ to stretch out its feelers even further to the right. For some time there has been a lively debate inside the SPÖ about how to deal with the far right FPÖ; with sections of the social democratic leadership favouring a pact with the FPÖ. Faymann has also not yet ruled out such a possibility. He has only stressed that an alliance is impossible with the “Strache FPÖ” (referring to its present party leader Heinz-Christian Strache), which means a partnership could be possible with the FPÖ under a different leadership.

The end of the grand coalition in Austria also raises the question in Germany of whether the alliance between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) will last the full term to autumn 2009. Prominent CDU/CSU politicians have already stressed several times that the “reservoir of what they have in common” has run dry for quite some time.

Three years ago, Gerhard Schröder (SPD) organized early elections as chancellor of the SPD-Green Party coalition, in order to push through the anti-social policies of “Agenda 2010” against mounting resistance in the general population. Prominent employers associations hoped that an alliance of the two largest parties would mean a sort of “government of national unity” could be created, with sufficient power to continue the attacks on Germany’s extensive welfare provisions.

But the opposite has occurred. Resistance to the effects of the welfare cuts has increased, benefiting the Left Party, which passed the five percent hurdle to win seats in the federal parliament and in ten of Germany’s 16 state parliaments. Within the CDU, the rightwing is manoeuvring for an end to the grand coalition with the SPD and for a law-and-order election campaign as soon as possible. On the other side of the political spectrum, there is speculation about whether a so-called “government of the left” comprising the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens would be better able to continue the assault on the welfare state. The SPD-Left Party state legislature in Berlin has proved to be the only state government that has been able to push through massive budget cuts despite widespread protests.

Six years of a right-wing coalition of the ÖVP and FPÖ (2000 to 2006) have resulted in the fact that both parties are completely divided, each blocking the other’s way. As a result, calls are also growing in Vienna for a “Left Party”.

Disappointed social democrats, time-worn union officials and all manner of “left” middle class groupings, including the

former Stalinists of the Austrian Communist Party, want to hold a grand “conference of the left” in the autumn, which could herald the formation of an Austrian Left Party.

Just like the Left Party in Germany, such an organisation, should it develop, would be anything but an alternative to the SPÖ. The majority of the social democrats who are taking part in this project are long-standing SPÖ members who have either lost their positions as a result of the electoral defeats of the past years, or fear losing them. Until the scandal surrounding the trade union bank Bawag, the unions were closely linked with the SPÖ. In the course of the Bawag crisis, the SPÖ tried to put a greater distance between itself and the unions; resulting in fewer union functionaries appearing on the lists of candidates for elections.

One of the initiators of the “left” project is Herman Dworczak, a member of the Socialist Alternative (SOAL), the successor organization of the Revolutionary Marxist Group (GRM), the Austrian section of the Pabloite United Secretariat. The SOAL consists only of a few members in Graz and Vienna, after the majority of the party joined the Greens and the SPÖ in the 1980s. The most prominent ex-member of the GRM is Peter Pilz, today a prominent member of the Greens, and who stands on the right wing of Austrian domestic policy.

A number of other groups, which falsely claim to be Trotskyist, are already clamouring around the “Left Party” project. Notwithstanding their radical-sounding names, the Socialist Revolution League (LSR) and the Socialist Left Party (SLP) have nothing in common with socialism; having so far always oriented themselves towards the social democrats, seeking the ear of the left wing of the SPÖ and the unions.

As in Germany, such a party would represent nothing other than a bureaucratic manoeuvre to control the increasing resistance to antisocial policies and channel it in a politically harmless direction.



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