

German TV debate between leading election candidates

Merkel and Steinmeier promote the grand coalition

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16 September 2009

The so-called duel between the leading election candidates of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) televised on Sunday evening simply amounted to promotion for continuing the existing grand coalition government – which regroups the CDU, SPD, and Christian Social Union.

Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and her deputy Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) spent most of the time praising their common policy of the last four years as a success. “We did a lot of good, but that good could be even better”, Merkel explained while Steinmeier repeated in almost identical terms: “We have achieved a great deal together, but we were not able to achieve everything.”

The pair repeatedly defended their common policy in the face of critical questions from the four moderators of the TV program. Any political differences of opinion remained minimal and limited to fringe issues. The two participants in the “duel” restricted themselves largely to generalities and refrained from asserting any concrete policies. Merkel described the state as the “guardian of order” and praised the “social free-market economy”. Steinmeier pledged his allegiance to social justice and called for new business ethics. Important topics such as education, social questions, the environment and foreign policy were not addressed.

Although Steinmeier explained in general fashion that the grand coalition between Germany’s most powerful conservative and social-democratic parties represented an exceptional form of government in a democracy, and declared his intention to head a different form of government, he did not explain which party he wanted to use as a coalition partner. Merkel routinely repeated her declaration in favor of a coalition with the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP), but failed to give her argument any substance. She barely mentioned the FDP and never referred to its chairman Guido Westerwelle. Even the FDP secretary general Dirk Niebel concluded after the 90-minute debate that it was nothing more than “a plea for a continuation of

the grand coalition”.

Most newspapers drew a similar conclusion. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the program was “in large part more a promotional meeting for the work of the grand coalition in recent years than a ‘duel’.” The *Frankfurter Rundschau* commented: “No convincing reason was put forward, why Merkel and Steinmeier should not govern again in a grand coalition”. And the *Rheinische Post* remarked Merkel and Steinmeier resembled a “married couple who want to separate but do not really know why”.

Most other commentaries scoffed over the tedious and boring fashion with which Merkel and Steinmeier sought to cuddle up to one another. One looked in vain for a serious analysis *why* the two want to continue with the grand coalition.

In fact this is the key to an understanding of the debate. Both Merkel and Steinmeier carefully tried to hide what the electorate can expect after the election on September 27. Their presentation of the economic and social situation was like a fairy tale. They insinuated that the worst consequences of the economic and financial crisis had already been overcome, while in fact the worst is still to come.

Thus both politicians took credit for the fact that the number of unemployed had sunk to 3 million in autumn last year from the total of 5 million when they took office in 2005. In the meantime, however, the number of the unemployed has already risen to 3.5 million and is expected to rise again rapidly after the election following the phasing out of such government measures as short-time working and the “cash for clunkers” program. According to the OECD unemployment will rise to over five million in the coming year. At the same time there are millions of underemployed or unemployed who for one reason or another have been blended out of the official statistics.

The sale of Opel to the auto supplier Magna, which both Merkel and Steinmeier claimed as a personal success, was characteristic of the dishonesty of the debate. It has since

become clear that the “rescue” of the car company will take place at the expense of its workforce. In Germany 4,500 jobs are to be eliminated, instead of the previously stated 3,000, and job losses will be much higher in GM plants in England, Belgium and Spain. At the same time the details of the sale have not been worked out and the deal could easily collapse after the Bundestag election.

The international financial crisis has also not been overcome. In its latest edition *Der Spiegel* concludes: “The pathogen remains in the system. National subsidies work like antibiotics. They suppress the destructive effect of the pathogen. But they do not heal.”

Thus, according to calculations of the International Monetary Fund, banks have only removed a third of their worthless assets from their balance sheets. The apparent recovery of many banks is mainly due to the fact that accountancy rules have been repealed. In the US 416 financial institutions are now assessed as “problem banks” by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC)—an increase of 111 compared to the previous quarter.

Should there be a further wave of bank failures, then the government would have to redeem the hundreds of billions of euros awarded by the grand coalition to ailing German banks in the form of cash investments, credits and endorsements. By anchoring a so-called “debt brake” into the constitution, the grand coalition has already insured that the gigantic debts incurred by state authorities will be shifted onto the backs of pensioners, the sick and needy and the working population.

The incoming government will undertake social attacks far outweighing the anti-welfare policies (Agenda 2010) implemented so far by the former SPD-Green coalition led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and continued by the current grand coalition. All of Merkel’s and Steinmeier’s palaver over justice, a social free-market economy and growth is aimed at disguising their real intentions.

The four moderators of the TV duel participated in this game of hide-and-seek. They repeatedly interrupted Merkel and Steinmeier, tried to get them to slip up and artificially produce a combative atmosphere. But, like the two candidates, they evaded the crucial issues. Only one of the moderators, Maybrit Illner, posed the question to Steinmeier: “Wouldn’t you have to say that it will be even harder than the Agenda 2010?”—only to promptly let the issue fall.

Steinmeier and Merkel refrained from attacks on each other because they regard the grand coalition as the form of government most suited to impose upcoming social cuts. The free-market FDP’s participation in a government pursuing such policies would infuriate broad sections of the working class. The trade unions in particular would have a

hard job of covering the backs of such a government. However, neither the CDU/CCSU nor the SPD excludes a coalition with the FDP.

As for the Greens and the Left Party, they are positioning themselves to head off social opposition and, should the political crisis intensify, join a government coalition. Both parties have demonstrated their reliability when it comes to shifting the burden of the budget deficit onto the population—the Greens during their time as coalition partners in the Schröder government, and the Left Party as partners in a coalition with the SPD in the German capital city, Berlin.

A further question, which was completely excluded in the TV duel, was the war in Afghanistan. Barely ten days before the duel over 100 persons, including many civilians, had been killed in an air strike near Kunduz, on the orders of a German army officer. The massacre in Kunduz destroyed the myth that the German army was carrying out some sort of humanitarian work in Afghanistan and was not involved in war. In reality the German forces act as an army of occupation and are increasingly coming into conflict with local resistance.

Both the SPD and the CDU/CCSU have unreservedly defended the massacre of Kunduz. In the meantime there is a growing chorus of voices demanding that the appropriate conclusion be drawn and that a “proper” war be conducted in Afghanistan. In its Saturday edition the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* demanded that one must “fundamentally change the conditions for the deployment”. The current contingent of 4,500 soldiers was insufficient, the German army must be able to conduct its own air strikes and its soldiers need “more legal security”—i.e., in future they should be able to kill without having to fear the public prosecutor.

There can no doubt that such demands will find a keen hearing in government circles after the election, but up until September 27 politicians have agreed not to raise these issues.



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