

# Germany: Resignation of Hamburg mayor deepens crisis for Merkel and the CDU

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The resignation of Ole von Beust (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), mayor of the city-state of Hamburg last Sunday, provoked extensive media coverage. Nearly all commentators emphasize two things: they point out that von Beust is the sixth conservative state premier to have relinquished his post within a year. In addition they see this as a further weakening for the CDU and its leader Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU).

“Led by Angela Merkel, the ability of the CDU to govern is only limited. It lacks the brains—and ideas,” wrote the financial daily *Handelsblatt* on Monday. Then follows the list of departures: Dieter Althaus (Thuringia) stepped down as state premier following a skiing accident in which a woman died. Jürgen Rüttgers (North Rhine-Westphalia) was voted out of office. Roland Koch (Hesse) switched to a business career, fearing he would be voted out of office. Christian Wulff (Lower Saxony) was “kicked upstairs”, and now sits in Schloss Bellevue as federal president. Günther Oettinger (Baden-Württemberg) chose the traditional means of departure for hapless senior politicians, and is now a European Commissioner in Brussels.

“But despite all the differences, these departures have one thing in common: they hit the chancellor’s party,” writes the business newspaper, adding that although Merkel has power, “it is running through her fingers.” The CDU appears “tired in office, sometimes almost burnt out.”

This “political fatigue” needs a closer explanation. It expresses a deep political crisis resulting from the rapid worsening of the international economic crisis and the demands of the banks to push the burden of the crisis onto the backs of the population through draconian cuts in the welfare state, which in turn is undermining the previous political foundations of the Christian Democrats.

It is necessary to look back at history. One can rightly say that the CDU was a cornerstone of post-war Germany

in two ways.

As a party of the bourgeois centre it managed, for the first time in history, to unite under one roof the bickering wings of the German bourgeoisie. Prior to 1945, political events in Germany had always been marked by violent feuds between the various conservative parties, whose roots went back to the days of German particularism. In the German Empire of Kaiser Wilhelm, a conflict raged between Bismarck and the Zentrum (Centre) Party. In the Weimar Republic of the 1920s and 1930s, the bourgeois political landscape was completely fragmented, a fact that facilitated the rise of the Nazis.

In the post-war period, even more than the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the CDU established itself as a “people’s party”, i.e., the embodiment of a form of corporatism that comprised the essence of “Rhineland capitalism”. It united the most varied groups and interests under one roof: entrepreneurs, tradesmen, farmers, civil servants and workers, Catholics and Protestants, social reformers and economic liberals. Conflicts of interest were not decided openly on the political stage, but were settled inside the party, in a complex system of dependencies, relationships, arrangements and dubious dealings.

In both respects, as a party of the bourgeois centre and as a people’s party, the CDU, like its Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), is experiencing the undermining of its political and social foundations.

The economic crisis has sharply accelerated social polarization. The once “stable middle class layers” are falling apart. While a small proportion has risen up the social ladder, the vast majority is sliding down towards more uncertain conditions of work and life. A few weeks ago, a new study on income distribution by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) in Berlin revealed how wide the gap has become between rich and poor in Germany. As early as 2006, the DIW had warned of the

erosion of the middle layers. Poverty is growing, while those at the upper end of society have seen their wealth increase enormously.

While 14 percent of the population live in poverty in Germany, the number of millionaire households rose by 23 percent last year alone. In Germany last year, there were 430,000 dollar millionaires, a new record.

Under the pressure of the banks, this social polarization is continuously widening. The financial aristocracy and the super-rich act ever more aggressively and ruthlessly. They are imposing one programme of austerity measures after another, with drastic social cuts, demanding the government defy growing resistance from the population.

Already in the “Schröder-era”, the SPD underwent a profound transformation. Anyone who harboured even the most modest hopes for a return to policies of social equality was taught otherwise by Schröder’s policy of “enough is enough” and was driven out of the party. The SPD is now predominantly a state-funded party-bureaucracy, which, in close collaboration with the unions, represents the interests of big business and the banks.

The CDU and CSU are in the midst of such a change. The resignations of some of their top officials are part of this political upheaval, but express the frustration of layers within the leadership that the transformation of the CDU into a more authoritarian political instrument is not proceeding with the necessary vigour and speed.

In this context, it worth noting that Ole von Beust announced his resignation on Sunday at the same time his coalition government with the Green Party was defeated in a referendum on education reforms.

In early 2008, he had invited three representatives of the Green Alternative List (GAL, as the Greens call themselves in Hamburg) into the government. From the beginning, the Greens had placed so-called education reforms at the centre of their politics. Before the referendum, the Greens, and especially their leading candidate and then education minister in the Hamburg state legislature, Christa Goetsch, had pleaded for non-selective education to be extended from the first four years of primary school to nine years in total. This would eliminate the division into different types of secondary school at the age of 11, one of the main reasons for the selective nature of the German school system.

In the coalition programme with the CDU, a “compromise” was then presented in the form of a complicated, cumbersome reorganization of the school system. All children would be taught up to sixth grade in

a primary school. Then they would go either to a newly set up district school or to the “Gymnasium” (grammar school).

But the plans did not include the provision of sufficient funds for the introduction of a six-year primary school education in order to ensure small classes, well-trained teachers, integration classes and thus to guarantee a high-quality education. Instead, the money for education is to be further reduced, giving all the arguments they needed to the opponents of educational reform, who unabashedly advocate a social divide in education.

When the proverbial “Hamburg Moneybags” (Hamburg is the city with the most millionaires in Germany) rebelled against the education reform, and took advantage of the referendum to launch a right-wing offensive, Ole von Beust resigned and handed over his office to his interior minister, who is known as a hard liner and advocate of law-and-order politics.

Beust had formerly made clear that he had no problems in collaborating with extreme right-wing forces. Following a slump in electoral support in 2001, Beust formed a coalition with the extreme right Partei Rechtsstaatliche Offensive and made its leader, Ronald Barnabas Schill, his interior minister.

For another five years, Beust ruled alongside his student friend and Hamburg Justice Minister Roger Kusch, who demanded an end to special legal treatment for underaged offenders. Kusch has since quit the CDU and formed his own right-wing party, campaigning in the meantime for his own bizarre “suicide machine” aimed at putting the retired “out of their misery”.

Beust’s resignation now opens the way for the return of such right-wing forces, who have already announced a further referendum against the introduction of free nursery places. Several weeks before his resignation, Beust had called for more leadership and a stronger crackdown by the party leadership, in other words, by party leader Angela Merkel.

This demand for more leadership and a “strong hand” is now repeated as a mantra in the media, and forms the background to the reshaping of the CDU, or the construction of a new right-wing party.



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