

The decay of Germany's CDU and preparations for a new right-wing party

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Numerous leading CDU (Christian Democratic Union) politicians have recently resigned from their positions at both state and federal levels. Along with former federal president Horst Köhler and six state prime ministers, who have either left the political scene altogether or taken other posts in the last 10 months, the exodus has also included a number of lower ranking politicians. In addition to Hesse Prime Minister Roland Koch, Environment Minister Silke Lautenschläger and Finance Minister Karlheinz Weimar have also signalled their departures.

Koch, who announced his withdrawal from politics in May, had been sidelined in the course of the CDU's internal debate about how the costs of the global economic crisis were to be off-loaded onto the population. He advocated an urgent and robust implementation of social cuts and declared, among other things, that state provision of day-care facilities for children of working parents was unaffordable.

In a further symptom of the disintegration of the CDU, Koch's long-time political companion, Karlheinz Weimar, is now following his example. The party's right wing is bitterly disappointed with the faltering progress of the destruction of social welfare and wage cuts.

Like the resignations of Köhler, Koch and Hamburg's Lord Mayor Ole von Beust, that of Weimar on July 16 also came as a surprise. The reason he gave for stepping down was the imminent cabinet reshuffle at the end of this month, instigated by Koch's nominated successor, Volker Bouffier. The 60-year-old Weimar claimed that this was "the right time to clear the way for new and younger political forces". Weimar will thus leave the state government on the same day as Koch.

Weimar served a total of 15 years as a minister in the Hesse state government, making him the longest serving minister in all of Germany. From 1987 to 1991 he was Hessen's environmental minister under Walter Wallmann. When an SPD-Green (Social Democratic Party and Greens) government under Hans Eichel (SPD) was in office in Hesse for eight years from 1991, Weimar worked in a law firm. But Roland Koch came to power in 1999, hauled his long-time political crony Karlheinz Weimar into his cabinet and made him finance minister, a post he retained for 11 years.

Together with Koch's successor Volker Bouffier and the departing defence minister, Franz Josef Jung, Weimar and Koch formed—as far back as in the time of their membership in the CDU's youth association—the notorious "Gas Station

Connection", named after their meeting place at the Wetterau motorway service area. They became the focus for conservative agitators within the right-wing CDU in Hesse.

The so-called "Hesse union of three"—Koch, Bouffier and Weimar—largely determined the state's political agenda for 11 years. This consisted of serving the interests of the wealthy, plundering the state coffers, and ruthlessly ignoring the needs of workers and the socially disadvantaged.

Under the sway of Koch and Weimar, Hesse's government accumulated an enormous mountain of debt. When Koch took over the business of government in 1999, the state had debts amounting to €22 billion. Over the 11 years of governmental rule, this increased to the current sum of almost €40 billion—which is now being used as a justification for social cutbacks.

Karlheinz Weimar had already cooperated with Roland Koch in 2003 to enforce a rigorous billion-euro austerity plan. This "greatest stabilization and savings programme in post-war history" was cynically titled the "Operation Secure Future" by the two politicians.

Among other measures, some 5,000 public service jobs were cut, the working week was extended to 41 hours, and authorisation was given to permit employers to enforce compulsory redundancies. All state subsidies and discretionary welfare endowments were reduced by a third. Citizens' council rates were raised, and students' contributions to administrative education costs increased. In line with the "Secure Future" project, funds for facilities like women's refuges, advice centres for those in debt and support for victims of AIDS were cut so rigorously that many of them were forced to close.

Weimar finally achieved nationwide recognition when he succeeded in safeguarding the wealth of the super-rich and privileged layers from troublesome "tax snoopers". In 2005, he used trumped-up reports to effect the swift removal of four tax investigators from a special unit of the Frankfurt tax office. They had investigated people with hidden foreign bank accounts, and went on to initiate legal proceedings in thousands of cases.

A psychiatrist, who had provided "expert opinion" about the investigators on behalf of the government ministry was sentenced by the Court of Professional Conduct to a fine of €12,000 for "filing an erroneous specialist report". He had declared the investigators "unfit for service" and justified his opinion by referring to their "paranoid, habitually querulous behaviour" and a "disorder relating to their reluctance to conform".

In 2006, the Federal Audit Court accused Karlheinz Weimar of offending tax law in an issue involving the Bensheim tax office. Although this tax office is responsible for the taxation of hundreds of millionaires, it turned out that none of their incomes had been examined for years. According to the Audit Court, checks were not carried out even in cases where the necessity to do so was “clearly evident”. This led to “a serious shortfall in tax revenue”.

In August 2009 Peter Bilsdorfer, deputy chairman of the Saarland Finance Court, filed charges against Weimar—and other authorities responsible for taxation—for misappropriation of tax funds. A commission of inquiry set up by the Hesse state government has been dealing with the affair since February 2010.

Further scandals have still to be settled. Weimar’s role in the Hesse CDU party funding affair remains unclear. In 1998, the CDU financed Koch’s election campaign with money from undeclared bank accounts in Switzerland and Lichtenstein. The party claimed that this financial godsend came from “Jewish bequests”.

A few days before the announcement of his resignation, Weimar’s last official act was to prepare a brutal austerity budget for 2011. As he himself said, the timing of his resignation was “intentionally chosen to take place after drawing up the austerity budget”.

The resulting draft provides for further cuts of €800 million in the state budget. Capital spending will shrink by 16 percent and the whole budget will be reduced by 3.2 percent. As well as termination of a further education agreement, involving cuts affecting schools and universities, municipalities already financially overburdened and deep in debt will be forced to close swimming baths, libraries and other public facilities.

The SPD and the Greens have criticised Weimar primarily for being the “Hesse king of debts”. But they have absolutely nothing to offer in place of his policies. Wherever they are in government, their own policies look much the same. As in the whole of Europe, Hesse’s alarming degree of indebtedness also stems from the bank bailouts and the economic stimulus packages that are supported by all parties, including the SPD.

Franz Kaufmann, spokesman for the Greens on budgetary policy, had words of praise for his colleagues. Weimar’s resignation was beneficial for Hesse as far as financial policy was concerned, but his departure “at the personal level had to be seen as a loss”. Kaufmann said that, like many others, he had not believed Weimar—the record-holder as far as piling up debts was concerned—was capable of successfully consolidating a budget. He now expected stable economic management instead of “frantic pseudo measures” from the future finance minister.

The role of the SPD and the Greens during the 11 years of Koch’s rule is symptomatic of their general behaviour. First, they prepared the way for the election victory of Koch, Bouffier and Weimar with their own anti-social policies while in government. Since then, they have been attacking the CDU government from the right. Instead of criticising its austerity policies, they attack it for being unable to consolidate the budget.

The departure of right-wing conservative CDU politicians from top political offices is being accompanied by preparations for the founding of a new right-wing party. An Emnid survey, sponsored

by the *Focus* news magazine and published on July 24, reached the conclusion that a party to the right of the CDU would be able to win 20 percent of the votes in an election. Emnid claimed that as many as 27 percent of voters up to 30 years of age would vote for a new right-wing party, and 25 percent of those until now voting for the Left Party would do the same.

The *Bild am Sonntag* boulevard newspaper, a product of the right-wing Springer publishing house, immediately seized upon the survey to quote the head of Emnid, Klaus-Peter Schöppner, as saying that 40 percent of CDU/CSU (CDU/Christian Social Union alliance) voters and 75 percent of FDP (Free Democratic Party) voters had turned their backs on their parties in the 10 months since the federal election. Less than half of these have transferred their allegiance to other parties. The majority was said to be “politically homeless”. This had to do with “Christians, who are concerned with traditional values and want to combine business with values, but increasingly come up against forms of social democracy within their own parties”. To give their votes to the SPD or the Greens would be anathema for these people, according to Schöppner.

As possible leading figures for a new right-wing party Schöppner named Roland Koch, Friedrich Merz (the former CDU federal parliamentary faction chairman), Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg and Joachim Gauck (the SPD and Greens’ recent candidate for the federal presidency). The former social democratic minister for business and employment, Wolfgang Clement—who has turned away from the SPD—is also being talked about as a member of a new right-wing party.

Bild am Sonntag commented, “When it comes to party programme and party personnel, the CDU and CSU are no longer able to maintain the allegiance of voters who want less government and more freedom, and for whom individual performance is more important than social services. The longing for the kind of politics that is sensitive to the values that once made this country strong unites many middle-class people”.

The continuing resignations of leading CDU politicians are not simply a consequence of personal quirks. Rather, they are bound up with the calculation that mounting discontent with Angela Merkel’s government, together with the continuing social demolition being waged by the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party—as is currently evident in North Rhine-Westphalia, Berlin, Brandenburg and other federal states—will eventually prepare the way for a new right-wing party.



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