

German defence minister resigns

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On Tuesday, German Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (Christian Social Union, CSU) announced his resignation. He was responding to growing pressure over a plagiarism scandal.

In the past two weeks, it was revealed that Guttenberg had copied entire sections of his doctoral thesis from other sources, without any attribution. The plagiarism was so blatant that many commentators suspect Guttenberg employed a ghostwriter for the text.

Guttenberg began by vehemently denying any plagiarism, describing such claims as “absurd”. However, Internet research continually revealed new incidences of Guttenberg’s copy-and-paste methods, forcing him to admit to accidental “mistakes”. Finally, he confessed that he had written “nonsense” and temporarily waived his doctorate. A short time later, he then permanently waived his doctor title. The University of Bayreuth, where he obtained his doctorate (*summa cum laude*) in 2006, also withdrew its recognition of his doctorate.

The debate over Guttenberg has split the conservative Union (CDU and CSU). While the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party had demanded his resignation, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) came to his support, arguing that she had appointed a defence minister, not a scientific assistant.

The *Bild* newspaper and the right wing inside the Union have conducted an aggressive campaign to defend the blue-blooded minister. They played down his brazen forgery as a minor offence (“everyone copies at some time”) and treated his plagiarism as a mere “lack of footnotes.” At a meeting of the CDU in Hesse attended by former Prime Minister of Hesse Roland Koch and his successor, Volker Bouffier (both of the CDU), Guttenberg was feted as a national hero, whose fraud and deception were all to his credit.

Last weekend, Guttenberg treated the crisis as over and stressed that he would remain in office. His arrogant behaviour, however, had unleashed a wave of public opposition that neither he nor Merkel had anticipated.

Above all, academics and Internet users were not prepared to passively swallow his evasions and lies. The web site GuttenPlag Wiki, which opened up shortly after the first allegations against Guttenberg, systematically scoured his thesis for plagiarism. Shortly after Guttenberg’s resignation on Tuesday at 15:00, the website reported: “Plagiarised postings have been found on 324 pages of the 393 page dissertation. This corresponds to 82.44%. There are currently 891 examples of plagiarism from over 120 different sources covering 8,061 lines of the 16,325 lines in the total document.”

Spiegel Online commented: “This Tuesday it is finally clear: [former German chancellor] Gerhard Schröder’s old quip that all one needed to govern was the *Bild* newspaper, the *Bild on Sunday* and the television, no longer applies. At least not when someone is actually guilty of something. There is a new public out there with its own forms of stimulation. This is also not the work of an ominously named ‘web community’. Germany’s intellectual elite is increasingly dependent on the web. German political circles must quickly ditch the notion of the few lunatics out there in the digital realm who can be safely ignored.”

Within the space of a few days, a protest letter addressed to the chancellor by young academics had gathered 50,000 signatures. Thobias Bunde, who wrote the letter and started the campaign with four friends, is not a member of a political organisation. He said his aim was to protect the integrity of the German scientific community.

“We are proud that we prevented any return to business as usual because that was what the Chancellor intended. And I’m excited about the power of the Internet, it is indicative of the emergence of a new form of politics which is moulding our generation”, he told *Spiegel Online*.

In addition to more liberally oriented newspapers, conservative papers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also joined in the criticism of Guttenberg and his behaviour. Then, last weekend, a number of high-ranking

CDU politicians and academics expressed their fears that their party would lose any authority amongst its supporters in the educated middle class and young professionals. They condemned the trivialisation of the charges of plagiarism as an attack on the integrity of science and questioned Guttenberg's suitability to hold ministerial office based on his character defects.

Education Minister Annette Schavan (CDU) told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: "As someone who graduated 31 years ago and has supervised many graduate students in my career, I am ashamed, and not just in secret." The Bundestag President Norbert Lammert (CDU) described the affair and its repercussions as a "nail in the coffin of our democracy."

Guttenberg's own thesis supervisor, the 76-year-old retired constitutional lawyer Peter Häberle, also spoke out after two weeks of silence. He said that the doctoral thesis contained "unimaginable deficiencies" that were "serious and unacceptable".

His successor, Oliver Lepsius, was even blunter. He described Guttenberg as a fraud and called for his resignation. If he drew no consequences from his behaviour, then "the relationship between science and politics would be seriously damaged". He went on to warn of "damage of potentially unimaginable proportions."

Guttenberg's resignation is a severe blow for Chancellor Angela Merkel. For the last two years, the 39-year-old scion of a long-standing noble family was the most popular minister in her cabinet, having apparently survived a series of scandals. His public image was a product of the media, which portrayed him as honest, dynamic and youthful. Now, this artificially created image has played its own part in his downfall.

After the recent disastrous defeat for the CDU in Hamburg, and only four weeks before important state elections in Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg, the resignation of the defence minister will only accelerate the decline of the Merkel government.

The list of leading Union politicians who have ditched Merkel, either under pressure or on their own initiative is growing longer: Friedrich Merz, CDU parliamentary faction leader and a leading light of the business wing; Roland Koch, the right-wing Hessian Minister President; Ole von Beust, the mayor of Hamburg; former Federal President Horst Köhler; and recently Bundesbank President Axel Weber have all thrown in the towel in the last year or so.

The Merkel government, which came to power intent on

restoring the budget and passing on the costs of the financial crisis to the working population, is increasingly beset by crisis. The fundamental reason for its crisis is the exacerbation of social tensions that in turn have consequences for those who vote for, and are members of, the Union parties.

The ruling elite has long since been looking for a politician with the necessary arrogance and ruthlessness to impose its dictates. Guttenberg was being groomed to play such a role. The implementation of his planned reform of the German army—i.e., the transformation of the Bundeswehr into a powerful international fighting force—was a first step towards higher posts.

The resignation of Guttenberg also shows, however, the extent to which the government has underestimated the political situation. The fierce opposition he provoked due to his arrogant behaviour led to his exposure as cheat and a fraud.

There is a growing lobby in the ruling elite—at least temporarily—that favours a return to power by the SPD and the Greens. The former SPD-Green coalition led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, with its Agenda 2010 programme, was far more effective in attacking the gains of working people than anything the Merkel government has accomplished so far.

Politically, the SPD and Greens have backed Guttenberg to the hilt. They also advocate the transformation of the Bundeswehr into an international combat army but do not believe that a media creation like Guttenberg is substantial enough to stand up to public opposition.



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