Change of chairs at the top of the German Free Democratic Party

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At a national party congress in Rostock on the weekend of May 14-15, the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP)—a member of the ruling German coalition government—attempted to change its image. Party members repackaged their traditional policies of promoting the interests of the wealthy and the business community, but without making any substantial changes.

Some 95 percent of the 660 congress delegates elected 38-year-old Philipp Rösler as the new party leader. He succeeds Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, under whose leadership the FDP has suffered a dramatic collapse in support since the high point of its popularity during the parliamentary elections in 2009.

Two years ago, the FDP attained its best election result ever with 14.6 percent of the vote. The party's poll ratings then plummeted, and it failed to win parliamentary seats in several state elections. Pursuing policies such as reducing VAT (value-added tax) on hoteliers and attacking Hartz IV (miserly state welfare benefits) recipients by accusing them of "late-Roman decadence", Westerwelle's obvious subservience to his "better-off" constituency turned many against the government before it had time to launch its attacks in earnest.

The Rostock party congress is now supposed to have turned the tide. The FDP has reconstituted its entire management team to this end. Rösler, the new party chairman, is transferring from the post of health minister to minister for economic affairs—a move opposed by his predecessor and party colleague, Rainer Brüderle. Brüderle moves to head the FDP parliamentary faction, while retaining his seat in the coalition committee. Rösler also replaces Westerwelle as vice chancellor. Westerwelle, the current party leader, remains foreign minister for the time being, but is excluded from any party office. Although he may attend meetings of the party presidium, he will have no right to vote. Nor will he any longer have a place in the ruling coalition committee.

The former faction leader, Birgit Homburger, who had to concede her position to Brüderle, has been compensated with the office of first vice national chairman. The 32-year-old Daniel Bahr, until recently secretary of state, replaces Rösler as minister for health. Only 34-year-old Christian Lindner remains what he was, secretary-general.

The so-called "young guard", centring on Roesler, Lindner and Bahr, tried to give the FDP a new look at the party congress. Rostock's Congress Hall was differently arranged in comparison to previous congresses. The aggressive slogans of 2009—"Achievement must be properly rewarded", "More net earnings from gross earnings"—were no longer displayed on the walls. "Now there are posters with likenesses of people who could be taken for typical Green voters", commented the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. One poster bore the inscription: "For me, freedom means the spirit of life".

In his inaugural speech as party leader, Rösler tried—unlike his vociferous predecessors—to present himself as calm, sensitive to feelings, and ready to sing in a different "register", as *Spiegel Online* put it.

However, nothing has changed in relation to the content of the party's policies. According to *Spiegel Online*, "At the end of the day, there was no debate on Guido Westerwelle's continuance in the foreign office, and no change of direction on the contentious issue of Europe". The theme of education was postponed to a party programme congress in November. Old proclamations were repackaged. The secretary-general, Lindner, thus declared: "Yes, we liberals are for the welfare state, but not the calcified bureaucratic welfare state we have today". The "mission" of the FDP was to "discipline" the demands made on the welfare state.

The FDP will continue to speak up for the better-off in society, the profiteers of the past two decades. Roesler opened his speech by declaring that Germany had never had it so good as at present, and went on to call for early tax cuts, just as his predecessor had done. Thanks to the favourable economic situation, the scope for such a policy would be all the greater, he claimed. Unlike Westerwelle, however, he refrained from inciting hostilities by offering the losers in the crisis a few words of comfort. In future, the policies of the FDP would have to be realigned more with the "everyday concerns of ordinary people in Germany", he said.

Secretary-General Lindner urged market freedom, but with the qualification that the FDP was "not for the freedom of every kind of business conduct". Although he had no objections to the growing inequality in society, he complained that the fate of one's course through life "doesn't depend on an individual's performance, but what he or she derives from the family home".

Anxious to retain their positions and offices, the party delegates in Rostock responded rapturously to this posturing. They "really wanted to like Rösler", wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and continued: "A part of the much-vaunted freedom of this FDP involves the freedom to indulge in ruthless opportunism". The same liberals who paid homage to Westerwelle and his unbridled trumpeting of success only 18 months ago could now hardly get rid of him fast enough.

Zeit Online even proposed comparing Rösler to the "messiah". The FDP in Rostock "has found a saviour, or so it seems", enthused the Internet publisher, adding that the new party chairman, Philipp Rösler, appeared "much more sympathetic than his predecessor". However, the journalist also warned that no one could tell whether this new and different concept of a "compassionate FDP" would be successful: "Philipp Rösler is like a messiah as far as the party members are concerned. But many forget that the 38-year-old has so far been rather unpopular with the people".

In fact, despite all his "compassion", Rösler as a health minister resorted brutally to the destruction of universal health care. Three days after the party congress, the first opinion poll by the Forsa Institute showed that the FDP had declined even further in voter approval. For the fourth time this year, it fell to a record low of 3 percent. The head of Forsa, Manfred Güllner, ascribed the main reason for the FDP's poor performance to the change in the economics ministry. Little could be expected from Philipp Rösler.

Although the media blatantly endeavoured to present the reshuffling of

posts on the FDP's command deck as a significant political event, the decline of the neo-liberals has profounder causes than a mistaken PR strategy.

The FDP has been involved in federal government longer than any other party in the history of the German Federal Republic, even though it rarely gained the support of more than 5 to 10 percent of the electorate and was repeatedly confronted with bankruptcy. From 1949 to 1998, the FDP participated in government with only two short breaks. It served first the Union (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union alliance/CDU-CSU), then the Social Democratic Party, and then the Union again as a coalition partner and majority builder. In doing so, it always proved itself a champion and faithful advocate of the interests of the largest corporations and banks.

These bodies repeatedly lent a helping hand when the FDP faced financial collapse. Donation scandals are thus a recurring feature of the party's history.

In 1987, Hans Friedrichs (FDP minister) and Otto Graf Lambsdorff (FDP parliamentarian and later party chairman) were sentenced to heavy fines for tax evasion in the Flick affair. The Flick Group, whose financial basis derived from Nazi crimes, provided the FDP with a total of 6.5 million marks in the 1970s. When the FDP coalition was again faced with bankruptcy after its coalition change from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to the CDU in 1983, its survival was only made possible by a 6 million mark donation from the department store magnate, Helmut Horten.

The FDP has also been able to count on donations from millionaire circles in more recent times. In mid-2009, it was instructed by the president of the federal parliament to pay a fine of €4.3 million, because its former North Rhine-Westphalia state chairman, Jürgen Möllemann, had concealed political donations. In the same year, a similarly concealed donation of €1.1 million from Baron August von Finck's business empire made the headlines. The Finck family is majority owner of the Movenpick international hotel chain, which had benefited massively from the FDP economics ministry's reduction of VAT for hotels. Finck's grandfather, an admirer of Hitler, increased his assets as a result of the Aryanisation (expulsion of "non-Aryans" from Nazi Germany) of Jewish banks.

Nevertheless, the rise of the Greens and their entry into federal government in 1998 marked a turning point for the FDP. For the first time, the 5 percent party could no longer play the kingmaker and guarantee the interests of large corporations and banks from its seats in government. The FDP thus became less important for big business.

During this time, Westerwelle took over leadership of the party. He was secretary-general from 1994 and became chairman in 2001.

Westerwelle embodied the layer of young social climbers that effortlessly attained wealth from the stock market boom of the 1990s. He started by adopting populist policies to win new voters for the party. He saw nothing wrong with parading himself in the Big Brother guise. During this period, he worked closely with Jürgen Möllemann—another FDP self-made populist, who did not shrink from anti-Semitic statements and eventually met his death in one of his parachute jumps in 2003. At the time, both Westerwelle and Möllemann flirted with Jörg Haider, who led the FDP's Austrian sister party on a radical right-wing course.

However, the wealthy backers of the FDP showed little enthusiasm for this manoeuvre. The Greens, whom they initially met with suspicion, soon turned out to be the more trustworthy advocates of their interests. The Agenda 2010 programme of the Schröder-Fischer (SPD-Green) government met their demands for wage reductions and cuts in social services far more effectively than the previous conservative-liberal government had managed to do. The Greens fully supported Schröder's Agenda 2010 and set the course for the deployment of German armed forces in international wars. They also had the advantage over the FDP of being able to rely on the votes of the academically educated middle classes.

Westerwelle responded by committing the FDP to an alliance with the CDU and burning all bridges to the SPD and the Greens. He hoped that a rapid loss of popularity on the part of the SPD would help to empower a government led by him and Angela Merkel. But the Iraq war of 2002 threw a spanner in his works. Because Schröder and Fischer refused the idea of German participation in the war, the CDU-CSU Union and FDP lost the chance of their seemingly assured election to government.

Nor did the federal election of 2005 result in a conservative-liberal majority. Although Merkel became chancellor, she chose to head a grand coalition with the SPD.

Westerwelle's plans only began to take off in 2009. Because many CDU-CSU supporters wanted to end the grand coalition with the SPD, whom they were unwilling to trust with planned attacks on the working class, the FDP received numerous preferential votes from the Union, achieving the best result in its history.

But the economic situation had now changed. The international financial crisis landed Germany in a deep recession. The federal government put the budget deeply in debt by making €800 billion of public funds available to the banks. Under these circumstances, Westerwelle's insistence on tax cuts and his tirades against Hartz IV recipients were met with consternation, even on the part of FDP voters. They were afraid that his reckless provocation might cause an already dangerous social powder keg to explode.

The rise of the Greens took place against this background. Although the environmentalist party had rarely achieved more than 10 percent of the vote, it is now rating more than 20 percent in popularity polls. In Baden-Württemberg, the Greens are filling the office of state prime minister for the first time in their history.

The substance of the Greens' policies is virtually indistinguishable from that of the FDP. They wage a brutal form of class politics in the interests of big business and the better-off, insist on drastic cost-cutting measures, and support the war in Afghanistan, as well as the transformation of the national armed forces into a professional army. However, they understand better than the FDP how to hide their right-wing policies behind florid phrases and thereby attract well-off sections of the educated middle class.

They present themselves as a pacifist party, while nevertheless supporting the wars in Afghanistan and Libya. They complain about welfare cuts and the decay of education and infrastructure, but at the same time support rigid austerity programmes. They maintain close relations with energy companies, and simultaneously declare them their opponents.

By changing its leadership at the Rostock congress, the FDP is trying to free itself from dependence on the CDU-CSU Union, and especially to reopen the door to the SPD and the Greens so firmly shut by Westerwelle. The slick young careerists, who have risen to the leadership of the FDP, get along well with the Green Party leaders who are just as career-conscious and opportunistic as they are.

As far as the camouflaging of right-wing policies is concerned, the new leadership of the FDP has already learned a lot from the Greens. Thus, the FDP now complains about the decline of democratic liberties, while simultaneously undermining them from within the governing coalition. It criticises the dependence of educational attainment on parental background, but denies poor parents any measure of support. It presents itself as a party for European solidarity, but demands "outright sanctions" against countries failing to comply with stability criteria. And although its relations with energy companies—most of them operating nuclear stations—could hardly be closer, the FDP firmly professes "in principle" a phasing out of nuclear power.

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