

All-party coalition supports Gauck as new German president

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22 February 2012

The 72-year-old Joachim Gauck will be the next German president. Two days after the resignation of Christian Wulff, five of the six parties represented in parliament have spoken out in favour of Gauck as their candidate for the post.

The chairs of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union, the Free Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Greens announced their decision Sunday evening at a joint press conference with Gauck. This means that his election by the Federal Assembly on March 18 is guaranteed. The five parties have a large majority in the election committee, which consists of all members of parliament and an equal number of state representatives. Only the Left Party is not included in the deal and was not asked its opinion on the matter.

By agreeing on a common candidate, the establishment parties are closing ranks. Only on one other occasion—in 1989 for the re-election of Richard von Weizsäcker—did they support a joint candidate.

This takes place amid growing social tensions and deep divisions in society. As a result of the policies introduced by the governments led by the SPD's Gerhard Schröder and by the CDU's Angela Merkel, the gap between rich and poor has grown explosively and the number of poor and those in precarious low wage jobs has increased significantly. Support for the governing parties has declined accordingly.

Under these circumstances it was stressed over and over again that the future president must stand above the parties and restore confidence in the state. With Gauck, a candidate has been selected who, while not being a member of any political party, stands firmly behind the continuation of austerity policies and defends right-wing positions on all social and political issues.

In this respect the support of the government and opposition parties for Gauck reminds of the situation in

Greece and Italy, where a grand coalition of almost all parties backs the technocrats Lucas Papademos and Mario Monti. There, as in Germany, a supposedly non-partisan figure is being used to justify the cooperation of all the bourgeois parties—from the right to the bourgeois “left”—against the interests of the people. As was the case in the selection of Papademos and Monti, the choice of Gauck as new German president represents a political swing to the right and a turn away from democracy.

Gauck was born in 1940 in Rostock, the son of a captain of the German Navy, who spent several years in a Siberian prison camp after the war, accused of espionage. This was the foundation of the negative attitude he adopted towards the regime in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Gauck went on to study theology in the GDR and served as a pastor until the GDR collapsed in the autumn of 1989.

Shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gauck joined the New Forum—one of the allegedly “democratic” forces that negotiated the transition to capitalism with the GDR regime. After the reunification of Germany, Gauck headed the office in charge of the files of the Stasi, the GDR secret police. This made him a well-known national figure.

The media and the political establishment have gone to great lengths to portray Gauck as a steadfast, incorruptible democrat. His conception of democracy, however, is marked by anti-communism and has an extremely right-wing bias, both on political and social issues.

In October 2010 he gave an extensive interview to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which reads like a propaganda speech to justify the current austerity measures and social decline. Under the heading “People have to get up from their cosy beds”, Gauck combines an appeal to patriotism with attacks on every form of public welfare.

At the outset of the interview, he expresses the hope that youth will seek to make something better come out of

“negative nationalism, i.e. not identifying as a German at any price”, and that youth will say Yes to the “region and the place where they live”.

“People need to get out of their cosy bed of expectations of happiness based on pleasure and prosperity. They should not expect others to do it for them”, he continued. “The hope that we can only be happy through consumption and neglect our civic duties is deceptive.”

He expressed his enthusiasm for “times of crisis or dictatorship”, in which life has to be tackled on a day-to-day basis. In affluent societies, however, “the challenge of having to define oneself is not so great. Life takes place. It is pleasant, often easy-going, entertaining. One notices only at certain turning points that something is lacking. There is hunger for a purpose.”

He praises statesmen who have the courage to follow a policy that “does not reflect the will of the majority of the people.” He endorses the labour market reforms introduced by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and the decision to allow NATO to rearm on German territory made by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD) in the early 1980s, in the face of massive popular opposition. Both men lost their posts as a result.

He prefers politicians “who were prepared to take the risk of not being re-elected”, Gauck explains.

In the interview, Gauck also expresses his support for the right-wing SPD politicians Heinz Buschkowsky and Thilo Sarrazin. Both made a name for themselves with vicious campaigns against Muslim immigrants. Gauck distances himself from Sarrazin’s “biological” arguments that Muslims lack intelligence, but praises Sarrazin’s courage.

While Gauck praises the courage of racist agitator Thilo Sarrazin, he is scathing in his criticism of those who protest against the power of financial markets. In October 2011 he described the Occupy-movement as “unspeakably stupid”. The idea of a world where one can free oneself from the grip of the bond markets is a romantic notion, he said. He was equally disparaging about the Stuttgart-21 protests, which he described as an expression of the “heinous” German inclination to hysteria and fear.

Gauck has explicitly campaigned for international military operations by the German armed forces. In a speech at the *Deutsches Theater* in the summer of 2010, he declared that he hoped to see more public support for the Afghanistan war, which in his view is “correct and necessary”.

Despite his right-wing positions, Gauck is supported

primarily by the SPD and the Greens. They already nominated him as their candidate for the presidential office two years ago. In the event, he was defeated in a third round of voting by the CDU’s Christian Wulff.

Now, representatives of the Greens and the SPD are singing the praises of Gauck. Green Party chairperson Claudia Roth declared him to be a man who could reunite society, lend new splendour to democracy, and modernise it. SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel called Gauck’s candidacy a good and important signal to the people.

The FDP also signalled its support. FDP General Secretary Patrick Döring declared that the party had backed Gauck “out of inner conviction”. And Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) said Gauck would “add to the international reputation of our country based on his career and his lifelong commitment to freedom and responsibility.”

Resistance against Gauck came mainly from inside the conservative Union camp. Chancellor Angela Merkel had considerable difficulty in advocating a Protestant from the former GDR (like herself), in the face of opposition from forces rooted in the Catholic milieu of southern Germany. It was only when the FDP decided unilaterally in favour of Gauck on Sunday afternoon—risking a breakup of the governing coalition—that Merkel finally relented and gave Gauck her support.

The fact that five parties have now put their support behind this right-wing candidate should be taken as a warning. The enthusiastic support for Gauck from the ranks of the SPD and the Greens once again demonstrates that there is nothing to distinguish these parties from the traditional right-wing bourgeois parties.



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