

German chancellor's sacking of minister exposes government crisis

Ulrich Rippert
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Last Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) dismissed her environment minister in a flagrant display of political power. Norbert Röttgen (CDU) was peremptorily dismissed.

It is not the first time the chancellor has replaced a minister and reshuffled her cabinet. Until now, however, her victims have been given the chance to announce their resignation themselves and justify their departure from office. It was quite different in Röttgen's case.

The chancellor appeared before the national press to announce and briefly explain Röttgen's dismissal and his replacement by Peter Altmaier (CDU), a colourless party functionary and Merkel flunky who served previously as secretary of the CDU's parliamentary faction. Merkel refused to allow any questions from journalists and ended the press conference after only five minutes.

According to media reports, the sacking was preceded by a violent quarrel, in which the chancellor blamed the environment minister—the CDU's top candidate in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)—for her party's disastrous defeat in the recent parliamentary elections in Germany's most populous federal state. Röttgen in turn is said to have admonished the chancellor because she had failed to defend him against sharp public criticism from Horst Seehofer, the chairman of the CDU's sister organisation, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

Merkel's ruthless behaviour was praised by some commentators as powerful leadership on the part of the "iron lady chancellor," but criticised by others. However, scarcely any of the commentators addressed the deeper political reasons for the irritable mood pervading the chancellery. Instead, they repeated superficial arguments about Röttgen's "unforgivable

errors" in the election campaign and his lack of strong leadership in effecting the transition away from nuclear power in the government's energy policy.

The fact is that Röttgen was a close associate of the chancellor for many years and regarded as a "the CDU-CSU coalition's shining beacon of hope" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*). Since his appointment as federal minister for the environment in the autumn of 2009, he has supported every turn in Merkel's policy-making. First, he defended Merkel's refusal to phase out nuclear energy, despite his own previous opposing views, and extended the operating periods of nuclear power plants. In the wake of the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, when Merkel made a 180-degree turn in her energy policy to announce the accelerated phasing out of nuclear power and development of renewable energies, he followed her lead.

Röttgen also adhered entirely to Merkel's line in the NRW election. In accordance with the CDU-CSU leadership and the chancellor, he focused his campaign on the consolidation of the budget through massive cuts in public spending. The chancellor advanced the same perspective in several campaign appearances along the Rhine and Ruhr rivers. She criticised the "red-green (Social Democratic-Green Party) borrowing policy", stressing that the German fiscal pact with its debt brake (constitutional spending limit) should not only be enforced as a model throughout Europe, but must also be the guiding principle for German federal state policies.

It was the chancellor and her finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), who turned the NRW election into a plebiscite on the state's financial and economic policy, and not Röttgen, who only spoke openly about this when his defeat became apparent and he came under heavy criticism from Konrad Adenauer

Haus (CDU headquarters in Berlin).

Precisely because it was a vote on the federal government's austerity policy, the electoral defeat of the CDU in NRW hit the federal chancellery like a bombshell. The state's ruling party lost 8.3 percentage points and garnered only 26.3 percent of the poll, by far the worst result in its history.

But the debacle did not end there. In the French presidential election on the same day, Nicolas Sarkozy, whose campaign had been supported by Merkel, lost to "socialist" Francois Hollande, who had levelled criticisms against her austerity course in his campaign.

At the same time, the political parties in Greece responsible for implementing the German austerity mandate were heavily punished. Some 70 percent of the Greek ballot went to candidates who had spoken out against the austerity measures.

Mounting opposition to Merkel's and Schäuble's austerity drive found expression in all three elections. This is why nerves are on edge in the German chancellery.

Throughout the preceding two decades of her political career, Angela Merkel had never faced serious opposition from the working class. Basing her policies on the continued support of the trade unions, which only rarely organised symbolic protests against the government, she conducted a massive redistribution of wealth in favour of the banks. The constant cuts in social welfare provision not only ruined the living standards of working people, they destroyed the social systems and economies of entire countries such as Greece and intensified the deepening recession in Europe.

Under pressure, Merkel is responding with panic and rage. This is evident not only from the sacking of Röttgen. Finance Minister Schäuble has threatened Greece with "consequences" if opponents of the austerity measures emerge even stronger from the imminent new election.

This attack has had unexpected consequences. Fearing the country's expulsion from the euro zone, depositors sparked a run on Greek banks that could quickly spread to Spain and Italy. The consequences of such a development are incalculable. They threaten to launch a new stage in the international financial and economic crisis, exceeding by far the impact of the Lehman bankruptcy in the autumn of 2008.

Relentlessly adhering to their deflationary fiscal policy, Merkel and Schäuble have now become largely isolated on the international stage. Not only the new French president, but also the British and the US governments have recently been pushing for an expansionary monetary policy that would result in higher inflation and greater financial risks for the German economy.

Both provoke strong opposition within the CDU-CSU, because a high rate of inflation and debt would threaten to undermine the German model of "social partnership". An inflationary economic policy would lead to wage demands that the unions would find extremely difficult to suppress.

The various governments agree on only one thing: further attacks on the working class. Currently, debate is centring on a so-called "growth pact" that will have two components. In the first place, it will remove "barriers to growth"—a roundabout way of saying it will introduce new far-reaching labour market reforms. Such "barriers to growth" will include sick pay, legal protection against unfair dismissal, statutory annual holidays, maternity leave, etc. Secondly, additional finance is to be funnelled into ailing banks.

The summary dismissal of Röttgen is supposed to signal power and leadership. In reality, it only serves to expose the instability of the coalition leadership and exacerbate the government's crisis.



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