

West Germany has returned a right-wing government. But the opposition is powerful and determined.

Pat Hudson  
**The Right and the Green**



The West German election result of March 6 was greeted by much of the world press as a major triumph 'for NATO, militant anti-Sovietism and the notion that the current recession is best served by a strong dose of free market medicine. The alliance of Christian Democrats (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) together with their new allies the Free Democrats (FDP) gained 278 of the 498 Bundestag seats which, it is argued, now gives them a clear mandate to press a rightist defence, civil and economic strategy on the ailing socio-economic corpus of the Bundesrepublik.

The Social Democrats (SPD) were mainly let down by a failure of their

traditional labour vote. The CDU gained in the old heartlands of SPD support: the industrial cities of the Ruhr, Hessen and Rhineland-Pfalz. All three Frankfurt seats were lost, parts of Essen and even Wolfsburg where 90% of employment is dependent on the Volkswagen works. With an average turnout of 88% these losses could not be attributed to apathy as in the recent French municipal elections.

There occurred a fundamental shift in electoral allegiance which, despite its implications for external affairs, can only be explained by considering the effects of the economic crisis. It was over the state of the economy that the election was primarily fought and lost. The failure of the post-war

'miracle' together with structural shifts in the economy have undermined the foundations of SPD support and the Right has capitalised on every opportunity to play upon widespread fear of mass unemployment and political instability: the spectre of the 1930s.

**The economy**

In the last two years unemployment has shown a much faster rate of increase than in the UK. Figures, published significantly just three days before the election, topped 2.5 million giving an official rate of 10.4%, the highest since 1949. Job losses have been heaviest in manufacturing industry, particularly iron and steel. Germany's postwar

growth was based on its role as major world supplier of heavy 'producer goods' and this helps explain why recession has been delayed here: the tail-off of orders occurred later than for consumer goods. Unemployment is aggravated by rationalisation, labour-saving technical change and international competition. At the same time, because West Germany experienced its baby boom later than elsewhere, its effects are still being felt in the high and rising proportion of the population of working age. There has also been an increasing propensity for women to enter the paid labour force and, in spite of measures to halt the inflow of foreign workers, the arrival of dependents has further swollen the ranks of the working class.

Although there have been moves to tighten up the qualifications for unemployment benefit and one third of the unemployed do not qualify for means tested unemployment benefit at all, the costs of unemployment have soared. As in the UK, this has been a major reason for the government's inability to curb public expenditure. Unemployment benefit is currently between 50 and 67% of the net wage. Employers pay half of this via the insurance premium and maintain that these social wage costs make German labour expensive and uncompetitive, imposing an especially heavy burden on small firms.

Soaring oil prices in the 70s hit West Germany particularly hard as it relies on imports for more than 60% of energy needs. This is one reason why nuclear power development is such a prominent and controversial issue. Energy costs coupled with falling demand, particularly internal demand, has precipitated a flood of bankruptcies: 8000 in 1981 and 12000 in 1982 creating around 500,000 redundancies. The spectacular rate of failure has been exacerbated by the fact that small and medium sized companies account for as much as one third of West German national product and two thirds of employment.

## The SPD just ran out of steam in the face of quite new circumstances

The economic situation is aggravated by falling levels of new investment, a slowness to move into the most advanced technologies and an increasing national debt (currently well over 300 billion DM). The negative growth of national product in the last two years has added to the general failure of business confidence. In this climate, the CDU electioneering message



*Hans-Jochen Vogel, defeated leader of West Germany's Social Democrats*

made a powerful impact with respect to the 'record' of the SPD governments in the 1970s:

S wie (for) Schulden (debts)  
 P wie Pleiten (bankruptcies)  
 D wie Dauerarbeitslosigkeit  
 (long-term unemployment)

It has proved only too easy for the Right to pin blame for Germany's economic ills firmly on the shoulders of the SPD. To some extent the latter's policies during the 1970s were hamstrung by reliance on coalition with the FDP and, particularly as the recession began to bite, the FDP lobby with Lambsdorff as Economics Minister thwarted attempts to find a formula for reflation and a 'social contract' with the unions. It is also true however that the FDP coalition provided the conservative wing of the SPD with a convenient excuse for not acting upon the more progressive elements of the 1970s manifestos.

More generally, though, the SPD just ran out of steam in the face of quite new circumstances. The SPD rose to office following the tide of postwar expansion, placing major stress upon a framework of welfare capitalism and co-operation in *Ost politik* (a new accord with the European socialist countries). With the economic and political foundations of their strength crumbling, the attempt to fight the 1983 election on a traditional platform was almost certain to fail.

### The Social Democrats

The SPD is plagued with fractions split along its right/left axis. On the Right is the corpus of official trade union support and public employees who have access to local authority jobs tightly controlled through

party membership. The Left takes in shop floor activists, liberal professionals and the progressive wing of the protestant church. The whole party forms an uneasy coalition and one reason for the increasing strength of the CDU/CSU has been internal conflict within the SPD.

The prominence of SPD losses in northern industrial towns long associated with a left vote compares markedly with the situation in 1980 when Strauss was candidate for the chancellorship. Then the traditional vote stood firm so the 1983 result may well reflect disillusionment with the SPD as much as a positive shift to the right. One factor in this is the alienation of left voters disgusted with the corruption as rife within the SPD as it is on the Right. This certainly played a role in the loss of the Frankfurt seats where the SPD in power, including the Mayor, were involved in bribes concerning catering franchises for the new airport and other aspects of city planning.

Accelerating since 1980 but present much earlier, there has also been a gradual shift of employment away from manufacturing industry in favour of service trades. Whilst not such a prominent feature as in the UK, this has had similar effects in disturbing traditional political configurations and in narrowing the SPD's established basis of support.

Most important by far however, in accounting for the waning popularity of the SPD is its failure to evolve an economic strategy to counter the recession and to structure Germany's economic future. Although somewhat more progressive than the CDU on the issues of social welfare, reduction of working hours and industrial subsidy, the SPD still poses in the fashion of the 70s as an advocate of economic growth without addressing the unemployment issue. On the Left, only the Green party tackles the real and long term implications of the world crisis, new technology and the fact that investment in itself will not create jobs. In recent years, the motive behind new investment has been overwhelmingly to encourage rationalisation and to install new technology both of which have a negative effect on employment.

*Der Spiegel* recently estimated that growth of real national product would have to equal 4%—4.5% pa with current technology to bring unemployment down to less than a million by 1990 and even this assumes that the number of foreign workers stays constant at 2.5 million. As growth is likely to be nearer 2% than 5%, unemployment looks set to hover around 4

million by the 1990s requiring radical new policies from any party purporting to represent working class interests.

### The Right

The CDU and CSU attract support across the social spectrum, the class basis of electoral allegiance being less prominent than in Britain where the Labour Party has organically closer links with the labour movement than has the SPD. The legacy of the Nazi period, the partitioning of the country and the influx of post war refugees (particularly from those areas that became Polish or Soviet after 1945) has left an abiding fear of political and economic instability and a veritable phobia concerning the Soviet threat which play into the hands of the conservative parties.

In many respects the economic structure of the country also lends itself to the political Right. Industrial companies with less than 500 employees predominate: accounting for as much as 95% of all enterprises in the southern states of Baden Wuerttemberg and Bavaria which are the powerhouses of the CDU and CSU respectively. These two Leander have developed since the war from relatively backward and predominantly agricultural states to become the leading regions of new West German industries, particularly electrical and mechanical engineering, cars, aircraft, armaments and high precision and computer sectors. Most of the famous giants of German industry now have their headquarters in the south: IBM, Daimler Benz, ZF, Siemens, BMW, Krauss Maffei. Each has hosts of smaller firms entirely dependent upon them. Small-scale industry and petty production against the backcloth of traditional agrarian Catholicism underpins the dominance of the Right

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in the southern states. Face-to-face social relations, close identification between employers and employed and, in turn, the dependence of all upon the industrial giants who have powerful (and often corrupt) links with both the CDU and CSU contributes to the strength of the Right both in the south and elsewhere.

In the recent election campaign many employers issued their workers with a circular letter warning of the consequences for jobs which would stem from an SPD victory particularly if that victory were to depend upon Green support. Many large

firms made their orders to smaller sub-contractors conditional upon a CDU/CSU victory, overtly highlighting the chain of economic dependence and its close links with the political Right. The CDU was thus able to capitalise on the fears of both workers and employers alike that an SPD victory would result in an 'investment strike' and massive redundancies. CDU hoardings carried the simple but effective slogan 'Vote for the Economic Upswing' which played a great deal on the memory of the Adenauer period and the boom of the 1950s and drew considerable strength from it.

### The Free Democrats

The FDP have remained now for many years a small but significant element in West German politics, hovering just above the 5% threshold for Bundestag representation and deriving their persistent presence in government from the failure of the two main parties to achieve an electoral majority. The FDP draws significant support from the professional classes who are most likely to benefit from its particularly brand of elitist libertarianism. At the same time it has a populist appeal to sections of white (and some blue) collar workers and their unions. It also finds support among small scale entrepreneurs and liberals who see the party as a 'buffer' between the two 'extremes'.

In the new coalition, there are likely to be tensions between it and its conservative partners. FDP policy clashes with many CSU-promoted issues such as tightening up the abortion laws, restricting refugee immigration, abandoning support for SWAPO in Namibia and a tougher *Ostpolitik*. The FDP's firm stand against the payment of unemployment insurance by civil servants and the self-employed and against the introduction of the wealth tax not only hampered the SPD whilst in office but is likely to conflict also with the right alliance. FDP losses at the polls are likely however to weaken their attempts to neutralise the rightward thrust of the new government in both domestic and foreign policy.

### The Greens

The Green party has risen rapidly in importance in the last five years establishing bases in local politics, in Leander representation and now achieving almost 7% of the Bundestag seats. It has a mixed ancestry from political organisations of the 1960s and from the ecology and peace movements. Its pluralistic composition is grounded in and varies with the

content of local political issues and with the personnel involved in local progressive politics. In Hamburg, for example, Alternative/Green political action has been focussed around major issues such as a proposed nuclear power plant and the extension of the docks which threatened the existence of working class areas, the livelihood of fishing communities and the further pollution of the Elbe. Green activity in this city differs markedly from

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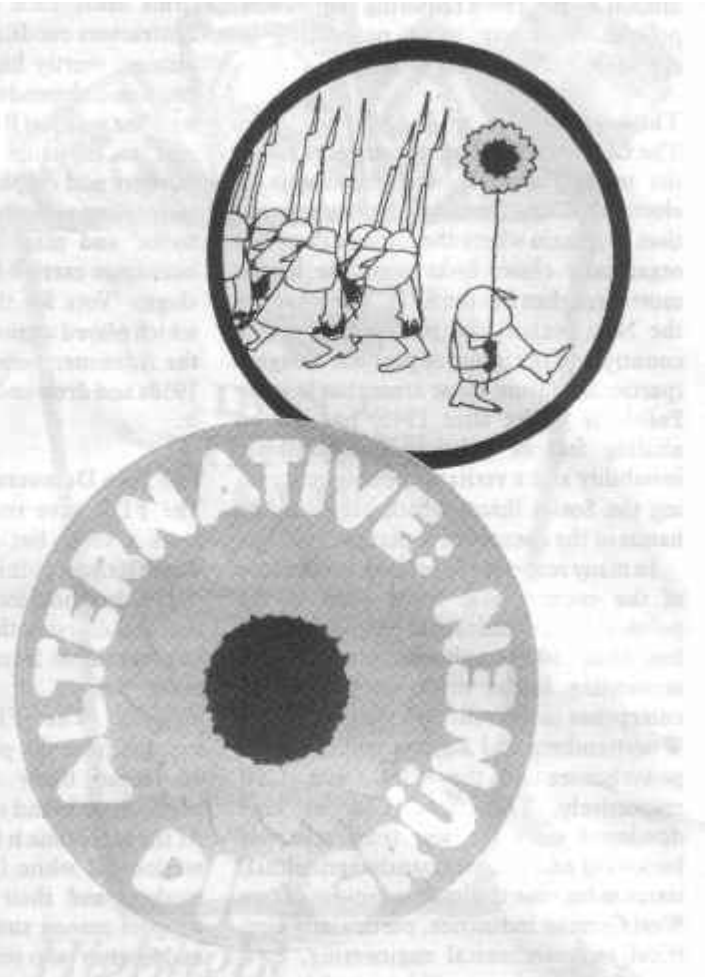
the complexion of Green politics in Frankfurt which has a greater tendency to court the idea of SPD coalition. This differs again from Gottingen where the Greens have two separate factions and from Berlin where alternative politics remains largely independent of the organised Green movement. Many of the local differences in approach stem from the varying legacies, both theoretical and practical, of people who became politicised and experienced at the time of the student revolts.

Throughout the different regions grass-roots Green politics is concerned with issues such as urban planning, housing, the existence and siting of nuclear plant, the building of social infrastructure, pollution, cooperative initiatives, alternative production and retailing and the control of private cars in cities in favour of public transport, bicycle and pedestrian schemes. Many Greens look no further than local action, being deeply sceptical of central parliamentarism with its tendency to undermine and then destroy local control and initiative.

At the level of national politics, the Greens are still thrashing out a coherent economic and social policy which includes a considerable shift in the structure of taxes and benefits and a massive fostering of small scale industrial initiatives aimed at creating employment in the manufacture of socially necessary and energy saving products. One scheme involves the insulation and restoration of all domestic buildings which it is said, would create a million new jobs over ten years. The dominant theme is the need to arrest current socially wasteful and ecologically devastating industrial trends and to radically restructure investment to create a spread of new types of employment. The Greens are also outspoken on the need to fight against political corruption and bribes, the extension of state powers of surveillance, the repression of civil liberties including *Berufsverbote*



Petra Kelly of the Greens



and the dismantlement of the welfare system

The most forceful plank of the Green platform is the overwhelming and immediate necessity to fight the slide into an abyss of ecological and nuclear devastation. These are the issues which have welded together a parliamentary party from a range of diverse groups on the Left. Levels of pollution in central Europe are considerably worse than in Britain. Newcomers to Berlin suffer headaches and nausea, seabirds die in their thousands from industrial waste on the north coast, and Germany's massive forest

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resources are being rapidly depleted by acid rain. An even more immediate issue is the stationing of American Cruise and Pershing missiles on German soil which the Greens

intend to fight both inside and outside the Bundestag.

**The new government**

So what strategy will the new right coalition pursue? In the first place, it will seek to stimulate profits and thus investment by introducing various tax concessions to industry paid for by large cuts in social welfare. At the same time state powers of control and surveillance will be increased and a much tougher line adopted on defence.

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Those who anticipate a return to 50s style conservatism, indeed, will be disappointed. The Adenauer government built up the welfare system; this government could destroy much of it. It is not, however, possible to draw a close parallel between the Kohl government and that of Thatcher. Whilst the same devotion to the free market mechanism is there and the coalition is united against the principles of job creation programmes and a high degree of protective subsidy for industry, the German Right has a stronger tradition of statism. This tradition dates from well before Bismarck but was prominent in the late 19th century and, of course in the 1930s. The government is therefore unlikely to set in train wholesale privatisation of public and strategic utilities. Kohl will also be constrained by the need to appease, at least in some degree, the FDP: moreover, he cannot entirely ignore the powerful opposition forces both inside and outside the Bundestag, not least on the defence questions.

Law and order is a much more prominent and important element of right politics in Germany than it is in Britain. Filming of political demonstrations is commonplace but improved technology is now being employed, including a mass of hidden cameras on city roadways. One technique enables computer-linked cameras to identify a person from stature and gesticulation where there is no clear view of features. Now on the cards is a new law forbidding demonstrators to wear a scarf or other items obscuring a full facial view and, following the lead of Baden Wuerttemberg, it is likely that the issue of plastic bullets to police will be generalised in the coming months. A further new policy already activated is to make individual participants in demonstrations pay the full cost of police presence which often amounts to tens of thousands of DM.

Police computers store more information per head of the population than any other country and the degree of potential social control has already reached Orwellian proportions. The census this month is likely to be met with a mass boycott. For the first time the law allows for the detailed information gathered to be used for 'administrative' as well as statistical purposes and it is feared that the data will get into private or police hands. These fears are aggravated by the fact that the census is processed on the police computer and because the forms must be completed in pencil and can thus be altered.

It seems certain that the census will be used to facilitate the recently stated CDU



West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl

aim to halve the number of *Gastarbeiter* within the next four years. Enumerators in Munich have been offered a 'head premium' of 4.80DM for each foreigner caught evading the record which is twice that offered for naming a German transgressor.

The Government's anti-Soviet, pro-American line will harden and may provoke the long seen need by many on the Right (particularly the refugee groups powerful in the CSU) to reopen the question of West Germany's Eastern frontier. Interior Minister Zimmerman recently reiterated that the German question does not end at the Oder-Neisse line and this revanchist outlook is likely to rear its head very positively.

### The opposition

The presence of the Greens in the Bundestag is likely to cause severe problems for the SPD and may even provoke splits within it which will further weaken its position. More hopefully, pressure from the Greens may stimulate the radical rethinking necessary for the longer term survival of the SPD as a governmental force. Whether, however, this will eventually work out in favour of coalition with the Greens is a doubtful question. The SPD both before and since the election has refused to accept this as a possibility whilst the Greens are split on the issue. The utter estrangement which many Greens feel from all the established parties is reflected in the number who voted Green with both votes even in areas where the first vote may have made a difference to SPD chances.

Although the parliamentary opposition may prove powerless to prevent the

rightward thrust of policy under the new government, the Greens will ensure that all issues get fullest discussion before the Bundestag TV cameras and that corruption and parliamentary absenteeism are brought into the public gaze. This should have some influence on the wider electorate.

The trade union movement is not in the best of condition at the moment. The recession has taken its toll and the election of a CDU/CSU government poses a new threat. More specifically, the corruption revealed in the Neue Heimat affair last year created widespread disillusionment with the trade union hierarchy. Nonetheless, it remains a powerful and well-organised force, and there has recently been a flowering of unofficial shopfloor activity. It could be that the Greens' economic policy will come to exercise a greater influence on trade union thinking: at the moment, however, the prevalent attitude amongst trade unionists is one of hostility rather than sympathy.

The major focus of opposition will undoubtedly be the peace movement in which the forces of the political Left — the SPD, DKP and others — combine with the Greens, religious groups and many more. The peace movement has now acquired an impressive presence in West German society. The mobilisation is likely to be powerful and largely peaceful. But where such peaceful means fail, or are provoked as during the Easter demonstrations by massive and violent police reaction, there exists another strand in the left opposition which will draw on quite a different legacy of the 1960s and prosecute its cause in other more desperate ways. D