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The Impact of a Grand Coalition on Political Events (November 22, 2005)

Shortly before the Grand Coalition took power, political scientist Franz Walter talked about how a Grand Coalition functioned and described its potential impact on the political system. He was responding to pessimists who believed that the Grand Coalition promised nothing but democratic shortcomings and a decline in the significance of the German Bundestag.

Behind Tightly Closed Doors

A word of advice for the Grand Coalition: compromises are best made in elite circles that are strictly closed to the public.

My political scientist colleagues from the 1968 generation do not like the Grand Coalition. They suspect that the robust remnants of an unbroken Wilhelmine authoritarian culture are lurking behind the desire for an alliance between the two mainstream parties. Similar interpretations can be found in liberal left-leaning journalism. Yet the Grand Coalition was by no means part of the political culture from the Kaiserreich to the end of the old Federal Republic.

Historically, the Grand Coalition was a rarity throughout, an exception always opposed by both left and right. The political culture of the Germans is not characterized by alliances, cooperation, or concordance between worldviews. Instead, the fateful characteristic of the political culture of modern Germany has always been confrontation, camp-style thinking, and the ascription of absolute status to the ideology of one's own class and basic convictions. In Germany, in contrast to other European countries, the parties were always decidedly programmatic and ideology-oriented, and any and all deviation from their own milieu was exceedingly difficult for them. Germany is one of the few Central European countries in which there was never an extended period of Roman-Red coalitions, as people referred to Christian Democratic-Social Democratic cooperation in the 1950s.

That is why the rapprochement between the Union [CDU-CSU] and the Social Democrats was so arduous at first. German politics is entirely shaped by a profoundly tough and – on account of the unusually high number of regional elections – virtually chronic competition between the parties during election campaigns. There is hardly another country in the world where political parties are forced into this many election battles. The constancy of these electoral contests has preserved the basic stance of antagonistic hatred toward one's opponent that emerged as early

as the nineteenth century. The evening of September 18, 2005, offered an especially good – or rather, depressing – example of this. Supporters of parties that had basically suffered bitter defeat burst into frenetic cheering and enthusiastically embraced each other for the sole reason that their adversary had also faltered. That is what remains of the ideological battles of the past: the malice, the spiteful pleasure, the degradation of the opponent. In contrast, the security of one's own positively articulated political aims has long since disappeared and is lost.

But the culture of political hostility in perpetual party competition clashes with the other harsh reality in German politics: the omnipresent need to cooperate. Institutionally, the German republic is more interconnected than almost any other regime among the democracies of Europe. Inasmuch, the major social forces – whether they like it or not – are condemned to collaborate. Politics in Germany only works through concerted actions, coordination, and cooperation. Conflict rhetoric – to saying nothing of a real, resolute confrontational strategy – leads only to obstruction and paralysis. Clear-cut decisions, governing without obstacles [*durchregieren*], and "politics from a single mold" (Angela Merkel) are utterly impossible in this system.

Craftsmen of Power

It is this fact precisely that provides the unquestionable justification for the formation of a Grand Coalition. It also formally executes what is otherwise just covered up and proceeds informally by way of a thousand tactical detours. But what will be the goal, the glue that will hold this coalition together? In order to create continuity and the ability to act, alliances need a specific ethics, a political vanishing point, a binding standard. Alliances are held together either through a strong, shared ideological opponent or an affinity for common values, and also through the myth of a collectively shared past, and, of course, through similar social interests.

The new coalition has hardly any of that. Shared pride in the extraordinary achievements of the old Bonn Republic, of the Catholic-Social Democratic social welfare state, could have been one such point of reference. But the political elites of both mainstream parties bizarrely detached themselves, in unison, from this by no means dishonorable past, and made it virtually contemptible. Thus, it will not be easy, but it is absolutely necessary that the Grand Coalition is not only a present-day alliance of two partners eyeing each other suspiciously, but that it also agrees on future goals that have something of a central purpose. Advocates of pure *Realpolitik* like to make fun of this, but it is precisely because of this inability to declare a purpose that they fail in all regularity.

This is where the Bundestag comes into play. What will become of it during these next four years of the giant merger? The public regard for Bundestag representatives is extremely low, as is their influence on major decisions. Journalists and scholarly experts have already been writing for years about the parliament's loss of power. During the Kohl era, decisions were made in exclusive coalition meetings; during Schröder's chancellorship, commissions of experts set the programmatic course. Bundestag representatives just had to give a nod to whatever the

executive oligarchs had agreed upon among themselves. According to the firm convictions of most full-time political commentators, the process of deparliamentarization could continue more than ever under a Grand Coalition. In this alliance, all that matters are arrangements made by the likes of Merkel, Müntefering, Kauder, Struck, Stoiber, and Steinbrück, and not what the other 600-odd members of the Bundestag regard as right or wrong.

The dismal prognosis about the increasing de-democratization of German parliamentarianism is not a complete absurdity. In the coming weeks, two parties will come together to form a governmental alliance, though this was clearly not their political aim. Furthermore, they represent different material interests, continue to be very different in terms of culture, and are present and entrenched in different spheres of society. A Grand Coalition will not integrate a cohesive socio-cultural camp from within; instead, it will attempt the difficult task of bundling very heterogeneous backgrounds, interpretations, and perspectives. In order for such a coalition to succeed, the opposing parties will have to find a constructive channel for cooperation, compromise, and concordance. The electorate has high expectations. Voters want the government's work to be efficient and move toward solutions. The two mainstream parties must therefore find a rational negotiation structure in order to quickly determine action-oriented consensus points in which neither of the two parties loses face.

There is a clear logic to such negotiation structures: They are not particularly democratic, and, in fact, they must not and cannot be. If you were to seek a Grand Coalition balance under the ideally optimal conditions of a democracy – that is, unrestricted transparency, a critical and engaged public, and an intensely participatory political base – then you might as well give up, since that is not the way to achieve reasonable results. The democratic marketplace, public meetings, and the public forums of opposing parties all serve to reward inflammatory speeches, rhetorical thunder, loudly proclaimed allegiance to one's own convictions, and devotion to the essentials of one's own core group. Democratic public discourse thus promotes the pathos of adhesion to principles and the unswerving fixation on basic policy positions. Insight into the motives of the other side, the will to cooperate with the negotiation partner, the ability to abandon rigid initial positions, sever dogmatic fetters, and seek a balance – all of that is least likely to emerge in the public arena of fundamentalist democratic debate.

Therefore, compromise-oriented talks should not be conducted in the spotlight, and the audience should not be made up of highly motivated core supporters. When representatives of greatly divergent parties are negotiating, then the doors should be closed tightly, all spectators should be banned, and one's own circle should be kept as small as possible. Non-transparency promotes reasonableness, tempers the shrill rhetoric of conflict, and demobilizes the political tribunals.

Of course, this will enrage those driveling orators of democratic virtuousness. But compromises in coalition policy come more easily and are more likely in decision-making circles that are oligarchic, elitist, and strictly closed to the public, and which are politically autonomous and given sufficient leeway. The puppets of grassroots decision-making and the temple guards of

party identity are totally unsuited for the kind of negotiation and settlement systems needed to formulate compromises in a Grand Coalition.

We should in fact reckon with a coalition committee of about eight to ten members forging the major political compromises and operating the legal machinery in the coming years. But then what remains of parliamentary debate on basic principles, of the parties' function as an orientation aid, of democracy's enlightening ethics? Just that: enlightenment, orientation, and general debate – for the coalition meetings are filled with nothing but bustling engineers of compromises, technicians of consensus decision-making. There they work out the details of what others drafted for large strategies and perspectives. The Kauders, Münteferings, Strucks, and de Maizières of this world might be the perfect organizers of political procedure, but so far none of these political administrators of the here and now have ever entertained any interesting ideas, original thoughts for the future, or even a political design strategy. They don't have those kinds of talent, and they don't need them. They are pure craftsmen of power, not conceptualists or visionaries or charismatic speakers. Basically, they only carry out and enable what others have forged and sketched – admittedly often imprecisely. Influencing, conceiving, drafting, planning, introducing ideas, leading the great debate, anticipating the future, setting agendas, defining the essential issues of society and politics – that is the task of brilliant parliamentarians and formidable party members. No coalition meeting can take this away.

Center for Political Blueprints

The political leeway for this in the German Bundestag is greater than usual under the conditions of a Grand Coalition. Grand Coalitions loosen the fetters of discipline and relieve the pressure of uniformity. There are greater options for dissenting opinions, special groups, unorthodox motions, and headstrong speeches than in times of smaller coalitions with slim, precarious majorities. That is why the self-esteem of German Bundestag representatives increased so much between 1966 and 1969.[1] The parliamentary factions of the government coalition no longer saw themselves solely as the cabinet's parliamentary executive; rather they also saw themselves as the primary site for making decisions and setting agendas.

That is how the German Bundestag should view itself in the coming four years: as a center for political blueprints. And that is precisely what was lacking in previous legislative periods. The parliament did not lose influence on account of para-constitutional coalition meetings and expert commissions. Complex societies have long since stopped being able to exist without such informal structures and negotiation systems. Parliament forfeited its clout because, in the end, the Bundestag representatives were no longer able to outline major goals, substantiate norms, set standards and priorities, and create meaningful interrelationships. It was the loss of the programmatic as well as the oratorical and imaginative fabric that damaged the standing of the Bundestag.

[1] The period of the first and – until 2005 – only Grand Coalition government – eds.

Modern, fragmented, enlightened societies require both compromise-ready efficiency and charismatic, programmatic persuasiveness. These two things thrive in different arenas with opposing logic. That is what makes politics so difficult and often so hard to comprehend. Political coalitions require effective, reliable, and silently operative elite groups in order to forge compromises. But they also need self-assured, publicly engaged parliamentarians who set the standards, come up with catchy slogans, and even more: who are able to prioritize key concepts that guide the political alliance. [. . .]

Source: Franz Walter, “Die Türen fest geschlossen” [“Behind Tightly Closed Doors”], *Frankfurter Rundschau*, November 22, 2005, p. 7.

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