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The Greens after the Change in Government (November 21, 2006)

Dietmar Huber, press spokesman for the parliamentary faction of Alliance 90/The Greens from 1994 to early 2006, analyzes why the Greens had such a hard time in the opposition. After Joschka Fischer's departure, Huber explains, the party lacked leadership, and the older generation failed to make room for the younger one. The fact that environmental issues are no longer the exclusive preserve of the Greens also caused problems for the party. Moreover, the party struggled because other important "Green" issues had been acted upon, politically speaking, in the meantime.

No Captain, no Course, no Destination

The Green leaders are jealously ensuring that none of them gets to take the helm – so the entire party is wandering around lost.

A sculpture on the mantelpiece of a house somewhere in Berlin's Grunewald forest. Three people are pulling on one end of a rope, and one person is pulling on the other. Three against one. It's actually a cut-and-dried case, if you're familiar with the physics of a tug-of-war. But here, the lone person is clearly pulling the others over to his side: forcefully, passionately, irresistibly! You don't see much of that among Alliance 90/The Greens these days. In contrast to the way in which Joschka Fischer once pulled the Greens into the Red-Green project, no one is pulling at all – much less with passion. Fischer's heirs are occupied. With themselves. And with using the rope to make little nooses for each other.

While many Germans are gaping in disbelief at the grotesque battle scenes of the Grand Coalition, and while Westerwelle's FDP is calmly plundering the conservative troops, the Greens have been wandering around on the sidelines. It makes you wonder why. They got 8.1 percent of the vote in the Bundestag election, and with this result, they perhaps achieved – despite being relegated to the opposition – the most significant outcome in their party's history. This result was hard-won by Fischer and his camp against public opinion, against their coalition partner, and especially against the doubters from their own ranks. In programmatic terms, the party is very up-to-date, and it does not lack for presentable people. But even a solid year after the early Bundestag elections, the Greens still look colorless and faceless. The new leadership is having a hard time positioning the Greens as a strong force in the opposition. What was actually an interesting economic conference last Friday could not make up for this impression.

This situation can no longer be excused as part of the difficult transition into the opposition or as a result of the caesura left by Fischer's departure. They've had a year to deal with that.

If a man knows not what harbor he seeks, then no wind is a favorable one; even Seneca knew that. Captain, course, and destination harbor remain unknown among the Greens, even after a year in the opposition. At least four or five wannabe captains are issuing commands from the bridge, just as many are waiting for someone to slip on the wet upper-deck, and the ship's kobold is smirking in the crow's nest. The party and the parliamentary faction leaders are eyeing each other jealously, scuffling over every last crumb of the small media-spotlight pie. When, for example, Fritz Kuhn, one of the two parliamentary faction leaders, argued in a Sunday paper about the colors of a traffic light,¹ Claudia Roth, one of the two party leaders, immediately added her two cents: that kind of discussion "hurts the party."

In such a climate, it is hard to make any fundamental decisions. It is indisputable that the Greens have to reposition themselves strategically if they want to govern again in the future. But a new perspective on power, no matter which perspective that may be, does not emerge on its own, that is, through simple arithmetic alone. The Baden-Württemberg Greens had to learn that the hard way when they pinned their hopes on a Black-Green coalition, and now so do the Berliners who thought that the SPD would prefer them, once again, to the Left Party. A perspective on power needs preparation and grounding. And it needs leaders who clearly stand behind it. This also applies to Red-Green, and yet, up to now, the party has avoided analyzing why, within only a few years, the Greens have been voted out of all governments. Some protagonists are still clinging to the notion of the Greens being a briskly buzzing (and, of course, environmentally-correct) reform motor.

In Berlin, Mayor Klaus Wowereit preferred a truncated and acquiescent PDS to the Greens, who came with a lavish 13 percent dowry and acted like a dolled up bride in Berlin's autumn sun. The Greens' entire countenance, however, promised one thing: marital strife. Wowereit's decision could have some long-term repercussions – at least it might put wind in the sails of those who are looking for Green prospects beyond the Social Democrats.

Political conditions suggest a three-way alliance as an alternative to the Grand Coalition on the federal level. In that respect, the parliamentary faction leaders' coy winks at the FDP are a pure and simple necessity. The Greens' relationship with the FDP was shaped for far too long by irrational animosities stemming from the personal aversion between Westerwelle and Fischer.

The Greens could be pioneers on the road to new majority constellations. Could be. At the moment, it doesn't look that way. Within the party, events are dictated by mistrust. There is

¹ The political parties in Germany are commonly identified by their traditional colors: black for the CDU (and CSU), red for the SPD and the Left Party, yellow for the FDP, and, of course, green for the Greens. An SPD-FDP-Green coalition is referred to as a "traffic light" coalition because of the parties' traditional "red-yellow-green" colors – trans.

winking and blinking in a lot of directions. And some things suggest that overdue clarifications will lead to new-old party infighting. The question of strategic positioning has become one of internal power struggles. There are good people. But no one seems to be strong enough to assume leadership.

The party cannot afford such intrigues, and even the young people who turned out in droves for the recent “Congress on Future Perspectives”² have different expectations: about how the party wants to shape the future, for example. The agenda of past years – from gay marriage to citizenship rights – has largely been implemented. This urban middle-class party is not really well suited to being society’s “social conscience.” Its top leaders are not very sensitive to the plight of a nurse or a mechanic. So what lies ahead? When the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* recently referred to the “return of ecology,” it was not talking about the Greens. Why should it? The issue of ecology is being lifted out of party politics. It has become too important. The world is waking up. Climate change is advancing and is becoming an existential as well as an economic challenge.

The [Greens’] virtual suppression of the generational shift after the Bundestag elections is slowly becoming a burden for the party. It is ironic that the very party that attaches such importance to having a youthful appearance should mistrust young people when it comes to power. The founding generation is stubbornly clinging to key leadership positions as though the idea were to protect private property from gold diggers. How long the interregnum will persist depends on the outcome of the next Bundestag elections. Then the Greens will have to put their cards on the table once and for all. By the way: the sculpture on the mantelpiece in Berlin’s Grunewald was a present from the Greens to their parliamentary faction leader on his fiftieth birthday. That person was Joschka Fischer.

Source: Dietmar Huber, “Kein Kapitän, kein Kurs, kein Ziel” [“No Captain, no Course, no Destination”], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 21, 2006, p. 2.

Translation: Allison Brown

² The “Congress on Future Perspectives: How Do We Reach Tomorrow?” [“Zukunftskongress: Wie geht’s nach Morgen?”] took place on September 1-3, 2006, in Berlin – eds.