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The SPD's Future (September 6, 2009)

Journalist Volker Zastrow discusses some of the SPD's longstanding problems. This article was published before the SPD's disastrous performance in the Bundestag election in September 2009, in which it registered its weakest showing since the founding of the Federal Republic.

The SPD in a Lasting Slump: Requiem for a Large Mainstream Party

It has never fallen so low: after three disastrous regional elections, the SPD is overjoyed because it is now in a position to tip the scales. The big SPD of the past no longer exists. And the future does not look promising.

Small parties have more influence than large ones, at least when they are needed to form a government. The SPD is about to become a small party, and because this change in size means that the party's relative influence is growing, the Social Democrats were completely overjoyed by last Sunday's elections. How else can one explain their cheers and smiles after such a disastrous performance? Yes, in Saarland and Thuringia the SPD is now in a position to tip the scales – congratulations! That's better than languishing away unnoticed in the opposition or propping up Angela Merkel in the Grand Coalition.

It is less, much less, than large mainstream parties usually aspire to.

Of course, Saxony, Thuringia, and Saarland are all special cases. The SPD is weak in the East, and the deep Southwest of Germany is former Oskar country, where the only beneficiary of the Lafontaine bonus is Lafontaine himself. If the results are averaged, the SPD received just 18 percent of the vote. Saxony brings down the average; if we don't count it, then we have 22 percent for the SPD. Surveys have shown the party hovering at this level for five years, mostly two to three percentage points above it.

The decline began in 2003 as a result of Agenda 2010 – Chancellor Schröder's labor market reform program. Then, in February 2004, the SPD fell to 21 percent in the Politbarometer [Political Barometer] poll. The party was beginning to come apart at the seams. An "Initiative for Labor and Social Justice" was launched in the early part of the year. It consisted mainly of functionaries from the IG Metall trade union who had been tinkering with their plans for almost a

year. They accused the SPD of abandoning the principles of solidarity and justice. The SPD responded by booting out its critics, who were already threatening to found a rival party. This sowed the seeds for the establishment of the “Left Party,” because the initiative gave birth to the Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice [WASG or *Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit*], an electoral alliance with the PDS, and finally the merging of the two. The man who forged this alliance was former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine.

The Opel among Parties

In the last Bundestag election, the SPD once again cleared the 30 percent hurdle, but since then it has received only about 25 percent in surveys. For the last eighteen months, it has been virtually glued to the spot. Basically the party is faring like Opel. The car company does not lack money, but rather buyers, and buyers cannot simply be bought, at least not until Opel invents a perpetual motion machine. Opel’s dilemma with car buyers is the same as the SPD’s with voters. Their numbers are declining. This is a process that can occur in full view of the public and yet still seem impossible. We tend to think that institutions older than ourselves cannot cease to exist – forgetting that most of them already did a long time ago.

[. . .]

The large mainstream parties want to represent everybody, not only the small groups bound together by special interests, community ties, hopes or fixed ideas. Incidentally, this is why the use of the term “large mainstream party” [*Volkspartei*] to describe the SPD was controversial for so long. The SPD originally wanted to be a party for just one class of society, and it stuck to this goal well into the 1950s. But in the end, the term also caught on for the SPD – and justifiably so, based on its size alone.

A Small “Grand” Coalition

But all of that is water under the bridge, a glacier melting in a global warming. [. . .] Although no one expects the Left Party to catch up with the SPD on the federal level, it will probably be able to snatch enough votes to push the SPD well below the 30 percent mark.

In the case of parties of this size, it is not a question of whether they want to be large mainstream parties. They cannot be, because they are not mainstream. The arithmetic is simple: with three leftwing parties in the parliaments – the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Left Party – the SPD can currently only govern in a coalition with the two others or with the CDU/CSU. Everyone knows this. The only remaining hope is that the Social Democrats will oust the Left Party or become united a second time with that product of a forced marriage, the former Party of Democratic Socialism/Socialist Unity Party.

Mercilessly Pressured

Will the Left Party disappear? On the other hand: why should it? It has a geographical base in the East that has turned out to be quite stable. It plays the role of a large mainstream party there, at least by habit, in a way that the SPD does not. When it comes to clearing hurdles in the West, it has enjoyed some success. This is certainly due to Lafontaine, and the Social Democrats seem to hope that he either dies or becomes disenchanted with politics (not because they bear a grudge, but because they still cling to the dream that the Left Party will then lose support in the West). But what's done is done. Once in parliament, the party can show its voters the value of their vote, thereby creating new reasons for them to cast their vote for it again.

[. . .]

Even the rigorous programmatic demarcation from the Left Party does not make the Left Party weak but strong – and widens the divide that cuts across the SPD. As Müntefering put it, “The mistake has been made.” But the mistake was not the fuss that Beck made, but Agenda 2010. The SPD could not tolerate Schröder’s reform policy, even though it was correct – or perhaps because it was correct. But now it cannot be undone. And this is why Agenda 2010 was wrong, at least if the criterion is the SPD’s desire to remain a large mainstream party. No matter. The chapter has been written, and it will be closed in the upcoming elections.

One should listen closely to the left-wingers of the Left Party: Lafontaine, Bisky, and Ramelow. Their statements exude a solid self-confidence. They show how sure they are that they see the SPD more realistically than the SPD sees itself. Lafontaine openly names his constituents: the unemployed, the fearful, and – please take note! – retirees. It is a group of people who surely do not have control over whether they do well or badly. And Lafontaine promises the SPD an option for wielding power, one that many SPD members are quite pleased about. They believe that the dream of a structural “leftwing majority” – a dream that has been inspired by surveys over the past thirty years – is now within easy reach. A zero sum game is more probable. One way or the other: the SPD has ceased to exist as a large mainstream party.

Source: Volker Zastrow, “SPD im Dauertief: Requiem für eine Volkspartei” [“The SPD in a Lasting Slump: Requiem for a Large Mainstream Party”] FAZ.NET, September 6, 2009.

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