

International press pours scorn on German voters

By Peter Schwarz
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The international press has reacted to the German parliamentary (Bundestag) election held on Sunday with a mixture of horror and indignation. The message given by voters was clearly understood. The result expressed a rejection of the policies of welfare cuts and “free market” reforms which are currently being pursued by all European governments.

The anticipated clear-cut victory of the conservative opposition, consisting of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Free Democratic Party, over the ruling coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, failed to materialize. Instead, neither camp won a majority in the Bundestag, the German parliament, and both the Social Democrats and the CDU recorded lower votes than in the previous national election.

It was, above all, a sharp defeat for the CDU and its candidate for chancellor, Angela Merkel, who had until recently enjoyed a double-digit lead over the incumbent chancellor, Gerhard Schröder of the SPD, according to pre-election polls. In the aftermath of the election, both Merkel and Schröder were insisting that they would head a new government.

The result of Sunday’s vote marked the first time in Germany’s post-war history that a national election failed to produce a clear victor, ushering in a period of parliamentary horse-trading and political uncertainty.

The overwhelming response of the European and international press to the election was indicated by the Milan-based *Corriere della Sera*, which lamented that in Germany “fears of economic decline and the loss of its welfare state had won.” The Spanish newspaper *El País* commented: “The Germans tend anyway towards the left. They seem to prefer a moderate reform in the form of the Agenda 2010 to a radical change of the social system, as the right-wing intended.”

Following the “no” vote in the European Union

referendum in France, the German election marks the second time voters in a major European country have delivered a decisive blow to plans by the ruling elite to reorganize Europe on the basis of strict “free market” criteria.

“European politics, which was already in crisis following the no to the European Union constitution in France, threatens to be more paralyzed than ever,” complained the Paris-based *Figaro*. The *Corriere della Sera* came to a similar conclusion, writing, “[I]t will be Germany and all of Europe which will have to pay the price.”

The British *Daily Telegraph* concluded: “Beyond that, the absence of a black-yellow partnership [a government of Germany’s conservative opposition] will mean, at best, scant advance on the limited changes introduced in Mr. Schröder’s second term. And that, in turn, could slow reform in countries such as France and Italy. Europe as a whole is a loser from this profoundly unsatisfactory result.”

The Danish *Jyllands Posten* lamented: “The result of the elections in Germany was just about the last thing which Europe needs now from its largest and most important nation.”

From Stockholm, the *Dagens Nyheter* complained: “The signal for friends of reform in Europe is bad: Those who dare to take up responsibility for necessary steps run a large risk of being punished.”

The staunchly conservative Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reminded German voters: “The fact that the situation which has now come about excludes any reasonable future option can only be termed catastrophic. One is tempted to say that this fact must now penetrate deep into general consciousness. The people must look into the mirror and ask themselves what they really want.”

Other newspapers joined in heaping abuse on the

German electorate. The most extreme example was the Paris-based *Libération*, which, like the German Greens and their house organ *taz*, has its roots in the 1968 protest movement, but has in recent years developed into a reliable prop of the bourgeois order.

“Europe will emerge even more unsure of itself... from this strange election in Germany,” *Libération* grumbled. “Germany now joins the club of countries in which protesters and radicals can create such damage that any normal political change is blocked and long-term policy paralyzed.”

Almost unanimously, the British press adopted a similar tone, accusing German voters of being too stupid to understand the necessity for reforms. The *Guardian*, which has close links to Tony Blair’s Labour Party, wrote: “For all the comparisons with Margaret Thatcher, ‘Angie’ [Angela Merkel]... demonstrated neither the charisma of Britain’s “iron lady” nor the sort of radical policies needed to take Germany out of the doldrums where it has languished for the last seven years... This election was marked by deep pessimism, profound disillusion with the big parties and volatile voters who recognized the need for change but feared the effects it may bring. Much horse-trading and haggling lies ahead as these extraordinary results are digested. Germans may well want reform. But now paralysis looms because their nerves appear to have failed them.”

The conservative *Daily Telegraph* blustered: “The German electorate yesterday failed to grasp the opportunity for reform presented by the Christian Democrats (CDU) under Angela Merkel.”

Both the British head of the government, Tony Blair, and the British conservative opposition had made no secret prior to the German election of their sympathies for Merkel. Blair even precipitated a diplomatic tiff during his last trip to Berlin in June, when he demonstratively visited the leader of the opposition before meeting with Germany’s Social Democratic chancellor, Gerhard Schröder. Now there is even greater disappointment over Merkel’s debacle in the elections.

Nearly all international newspapers warn against a grand coalition of the SPD and conservative parties which, they claim, would lead to economic paralysis and stagnation.

The London *Financial Times* based its comments on economists who warned that “... such a coalition would make it difficult for Europe’s largest economy to adopt the structural reforms needed to overcome stagnation and record unemployment.” The newspaper then quoted an

executive at the auto concern BMW: “This is exactly what the country didn’t need—a long period of uncertainty and negotiations. We will all be losers.”

The American *Wall Street Journal* took up the theme: “The muddled result, with neither major party able to form a stable parliamentary majority, means that Germany will not be taking decisive action anytime soon to reform its unwieldy welfare state, which has helped bring it 11 percent unemployment and zero economic growth. That will not be good for the world...”

The *New York Times* came to the same conclusion: “In a grand coalition any reform of the German economy would be virtually excluded, as well as any rapprochement with the United States, as Merkel had indicated.”

The vehemence with which the entire international press attacks the election result must be understood as a warning. The ruling elite is less and less willing to accept democratic procedures if they stand in the way of its own business and political interests.

This applies not only to the international press, but also to the German media, which comes to very similar conclusions. Under the heading “A Debacle,” the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* intoned: “There seems to be less chance of convincing citizens to see the sense of fundamental changes and be prepared for changes of policy than some have maintained.”

Last and not least, at the end of a long article in which all of the parties were subjected to some biting criticism, the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* claimed that the German election result presented a “great chance”: Finally all principles and election promises could be thrown overboard in favor of unrestrained expediency.

Wrote *Der Spiegel*, “Because outside of the election campaigns everybody knows each other in the political arena, what differentiates the parties today are above all cultural differences and historical factors... After this election, SPD-Green projects and intellectual-moral maneuvers can be finally dumped in the garbage can of history in favor of a blithe pragmatism.”

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