

Former German Chancellor Schröder's right-wing offensive

By Ulrich Rippert
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For the past two weeks, former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) has dominated the German media. He was featured in the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, has appeared on a succession of TV shows and has given numerous interviews to the press.

The publicity campaign began with an October 26 appearance by Schröder to present his new book, *Decisions—My Life in Politics*, at the Willy Brandt House, the SPD headquarters in Berlin. He has since commenced a series of meetings and readings encompassing 20 cities.

At the Willy Brandt House event, a laudatory introduction to Schröder's book was given by Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker. The conservative Christian Democrat was full of praise for his "social democratic friend," declaring, "Gerd, you were a great chancellor!"

Juncker was above all impressed by the way in which someone "who came from such a low position in society" had fought his way to the top. It took time for Schröder to advance to the point where he could take over the German chancellorship, but then he made "courageous decisions" that are of lasting importance, Juncker said.

Most media commentaries have taken a very superficial view of the contents of the book. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote of the 544-page volume: "A heavy book, undoubtedly, but is it also heavy in content?" The newspaper went on to describe it as a "very airy book" with "much room for notes, thick paper and large letters" and noted that "malicious gossip says the book is like its author—a little puffed up."

In fact, the book is far more than a "skilfully staged money-making operation," as other commentators have claimed. Schröder's book and the former chancellor's intense media campaign to promote it are part of a deliberate right-wing offensive.

The book has little to offer that is either new or surprising, but Schröder does make two things unmistakably clear: first, he unconditionally defends the policies of his SPD-Green Party government, although the disastrous social and political consequences of that government's two terms in office (1998-2005) are visible for all to see. Since the social catastrophe of the 1930s, no government has carried out such an aggressive redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich and so brazenly ridden roughshod over accepted democratic norms as the government of Schröder and his Green Party foreign minister, Joschka Fischer.

Second, Schröder is adamant that the offensive he initiated be carried forward regardless of the popular opposition.

In an interview prior to the publication of the book, Schröder accused the current chancellor, Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), of weak leadership. He accused his successor of lacking the will and drive to continue the measures that he had begun. By means of his memoir, Schröder has sought to forcefully intervene in the current political debate.

In recent weeks, the grand coalition government headed by Merkel, consisting of the traditional conservative parties—the CDU and the

Christian Social Union (CSU)—and the SPD, has come under fierce criticism. Business circles and the media have demanded a "faster pace of reforms"—i.e., an intensification of the programme of dismantling the welfare state. Chancellor Merkel has been accused of having no real control over either her party or the government she heads.

When the CDU prime minister for the state of North-Rhine Westphalia, Jürgen Rüttgers, recently suggested a mild softening of the Hartz IV unemployment law, big business and the media responded with a storm of criticism. Rüttgers had suggested that workers who have paid into the unemployment insurance system for decades not lose unemployment benefits after only 12 months, as the law introduced by the SPD and the Greens stipulates.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* derided Rüttger's proposal, writing that "it is time to start worrying about the expertise of the CDU when it comes to matters of economic policy," and warning against any return to the economic and social policies of former CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The current labour minister, Franz Müntefering (SPD), was applauded by business circles when he harshly rejected Rüttger's initiative and declared that he would not allow Germany's conservative parties to water down the job market reforms that had been so labouriously fought for and implemented by the former SPD-Green government.

Schröder is now intervening directly in this dispute. He is stepping up the pressure on the grand coalition to throw caution to the wind and intensify the onslaught on welfare benefits—if necessary, through openly anti-democratic means.

A central section of Schröder's book is devoted to his decision in May of 2005 to precipitate an early national election. An entire chapter is devoted to this topic under the heading "The Election." He also begins a long chapter entitled "Courage for Change," which deals in detail with the government's draconian programme of welfare cuts (the Agenda 2010 reforms and four Hartz laws), with his decision to call an early election.

Schröder describes the discussions he had with his closest ally in the SPD, party chairman Franz Müntefering, after the defeats suffered by the SPD in state elections in Schleswig-Holstein (March 2005) and North Rhine-Westphalia (May 2005): "Franz Müntefering and I had agreed that we would decide how to proceed on the basis of the election results. We met at noon on May 22, 2005, in my office at the chancellery and were prepared for the worst. We were, nevertheless, shocked by the figures we eventually received. The result was catastrophic for the SPD, enabling the CDU to obtain a rather convincing victory in the former SPD stronghold of North Rhine-Westphalia.... Franz had prepared two alternatives. One possible response to the North-Rhine Westphalia election was a cabinet reorganisation; the other—a fresh election."

Schröder makes no secret of the fact that his party's defeat in North-Rhine Westphalia—the most densely populated German state and a former industrial centre—was due to broad popular opposition to his social policies. He writes: "We had lost 11 elections in a row...even I was surprised by the extent and intensity of the wave of protests against

Agenda 2010.” He acknowledges that “the attempts at reform in 2003 and 2004 led to turbulence across the country.”

Looking back at that time, Schröder makes clear that his conception of democracy has absolutely nothing to do with the will of the people. As opposition and public outrage with the SPD grew to a point where eggs “and even stones” were thrown at Schröder on demonstrations, he decided to launch a counteroffensive. “From this point onwards, I was determined to continue my course even more vehemently and make clear to the public that such assaults did not impress me. I also wanted to make this particularly clear in the east of Germany.”

Unemployment in the east of Germany was, and still is, twice as high as in the west, and opposition to the policies of the SPD-Green government was particularly intense in that region. It was the large pro-SPD vote in the east of Germany that had secured Schröder’s election victory in 1998, but by the summer of 2004 hundreds of thousands of east Germans were participating in protests against the Hartz IV laws, in the futile hope that they could bring the government to its knees—just as the old East German Stalinist regime had been toppled following mass protests in 1989.

Schröder took the protesters head-on and made clear that the slogans referring to “democracy and freedom” that had been glorified at the time of German reunification had nothing to do with genuine popular democracy or making government responsive to the wishes of the majority.

“One thing was completely evident and always clear to me,” Schröder writes. “I had to stick to the political course we had begun. The Agenda 2010 was a decisive policy, and any change of course on my part was inconceivable and would have been a disaster for the SPD. If pressure from parts of the party or its parliamentary group had forced such a change, my resignation would have been inevitable. That was how I saw the situation, and that was the reason why I confronted Franz Müntefering with the idea of early elections.”

Thus, the decision for early elections was clearly part of an offensive to implement social cuts against widespread popular opposition. “I remain convinced—it was a decision of national political necessity,” Schröder writes.

The formulation “of national political necessity” is revealing. Who determines what is “national political necessity?” The democratic will of the majority of the people, or the profit interests of a small, privileged elite? Schröder comes down unmistakably on the side of the latter.

Because such a policy is bound to encounter resistance, “national political necessity” requires drastic measures by an authoritarian state. Schröder argues bluntly for casting away all democratic inhibitions. In so doing, he evokes a tradition that had disastrous consequences in the previous century.

Ever since its historic vote in favour of war credits in 1914, the SPD has elevated the defence of the bourgeois order above the defence of the interests of the working class. In the 1930s, the party supported Chancellor Brüning’s emergency decrees against the workers. Even the West German welfare state was primarily conceived of by the Social Democrats as an instrument of control. In the 1970s, SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt was still able to combine such undemocratic measures as the Emergency Laws and the ban on public employment for radicals with a rise in living standards, but the globalisation of production has stripped away any basis for lasting and serious social reforms under capitalism.

As a result, the SPD has ever more directly turned to the promotion of authoritarian forms of rule in the interests of “national political necessity.” To what extent it rejects democratic principles emerges in those passages where Schröder deals with the judgement by the German Constitutional Court on his move for early elections.

The German Constitution proscribes the dissolution of parliament on the basis of a staged vote of no confidence. This provision was drawn up at the end of the Second World War precisely to avoid the sort of political

instability that characterised the pre-war Weimar Republic. Schröder, however, repudiated this constitutional norm—and won the support of all the other constitutional organs: the president, the parliament and the Constitutional Court. Looking back, Schröder describes this coup as a great success.

He praises the judgement issued by the Constitutional Court legitimising an early election, writing that Germany’s highest court gave the chancellor the right to stage “a fake vote of confidence—i.e., to deliberately bring about the dissolution of parliament—if he has the impression that he lacks a sufficient majority in the Bundestag [parliament] for his policies.”

Thereby, according to Schröder, the role of “the chancellor is clearly strengthened in the constitutional structure.” To put it another way: in future, the executive is empowered to act much more independently of parliament and the will of the electorate.

Schröder’s contempt for democratic structures and his support for authoritarian forms of rule emerge as well in other sections of his book. On page 34, he praises Vladimir Putin as a great statesman and personal friend, and applauds the close cooperation between Germany and Russia. While in office, Schröder had referred to the Russian president as a “flawless democrat.”

Schröder has not a critical word to say about Putin’s Russia, simply ignoring the growing attacks on the freedom of the press, the murder of journalists, the increasingly flagrant turn to militarism at home and abroad, the signs of racism and anti-Semitism, and the worsening social misery in the country. Echoing Putin, Schröder speaks of a “resurrection of Russia” and praises Putin as a guarantor of “free-market thinking” and western-oriented “economic values.”

Since Putin has assumed political responsibility for Russia, investors no longer have to fear for their investments, writes Schröder. He continues: “In his function as president, Putin made possible the reestablishment of national structures and for the first time established for its citizens as well as for entrepreneurs and investors something like legal security. This constitutes his real historical merit.”

In light of “America’s disastrous foreign policy,” Schröder contends that Germany must work towards a closer cooperation between the European Union and Russia and use Moscow’s traditionally good relations with Syria and Iran to stabilise the situation in the Middle East. “Instead of encirclement fantasies,” as still favoured by conservative circles, Russia’s security interests should be taken seriously and efforts made to secure close economic, political, cultural and military cooperation.

In his section on Russia, Schröder makes clear that he has fully integrated himself into the corrupt elite that consolidated power in the Soviet Union 15 years ago, plundered the country’s resources and wealth on the basis of capitalist restorationist policies, and then discovered its most important ally in the former KGB functionary Vladimir Putin. Indeed, just a few months after stepping down as German chancellor, Schröder announced that he would take over the presidency of the North European gas pipeline company under the direction of Gazprom—with an appropriately lavish salary.

In his book, Schröder bluntly spells out the close connection between the main plank of his domestic policy—the Agenda 2010—and the foreign policy pursued by his government, aimed at establishing Germany as a “medium power” on the basis of increased militarism.

German military participation in the 1999 Kosovo War was “undoubtedly the turning point of the first legislative period,” Schröder writes. “In our discussions, the connection between tackling foreign policy crises and the domestic strength of the country always played a considerable role. We were increasingly aware of how foreign policy sovereignty was bound up with the economic potential of Germany.”

“We would only be able to maintain our independence in foreign and

security policy decisions by increasing our economic potential and being socially and politically mobile,” Schröder writes in a further passage. “Therefore, we had to be prepared for change on the domestic front.”

When one puts aside the euphemisms, two conclusions emerge: first, Schröder’s opposition to the Iraq war was predominantly based on the desire to step outside of the shadow of the US in order to translate the postulate of “German sovereignty” into political practice. Second, the government’s programme of social cuts was directly bound up with the revival of German militarism. Billions that had been saved in the sphere of social and welfare insurance could now be directed towards transforming the German military into a well-equipped army of intervention.

Schröder does not directly draw out the connection between militarism abroad and the militarisation of society at home, but it can be clearly read between the lines.

In the closing pages of his book, Schröder returns once again to the early elections of last year. In the course of a short and vigorous election campaign, the SPD was able to cut back greatly on the 20 percent lead enjoyed by the conservative parties at the start of the campaign. As a result, the SPD became the driving force in the grand coalition that was formed after the election. “The SPD could impose its unmistakable stamp upon the agreed government programme,” Schröder stresses.

The result of coalition negotiations was a “moderate social democratic programme,” which “on the whole...could have been supported by a Red-Green government.” As a result, the “task of the SPD is basically laid down: the Agenda 2010 course must be defended and consistently implemented.”

A few pages later, Schröder demands the continuation and intensification of welfare cuts through the elaboration of a so-called “Agenda 2020.” The SPD, he argues, has now begun its third consecutive legislative term in government and is thereby the most crucial and formative force in German politics.

There could be no clearer way of putting it: the “social-democratic era” to which Schröder refers “with great satisfaction” is, in fact, a conspiracy against the working people by all of Germany’s established political parties, under the leadership of the SPD.

While containing no new revelations, Schröder’s book is useful in demonstrating how far social democracy has moved to the right. Over the past 15 years, 400,000 members—nearly half of the membership—have quit the party, and recent reports speak of entire local organisations disbanding themselves.

But make no mistake, Schröder, Müntefering and company are less concerned about such losses than they pretend. They are quite prepared to accept the departure of all those who expected from the SPD some sort of policies aimed at social justice. The current SPD leadership is willing to head a rump party capable of carrying forward the interests of the ruling elite in Germany. After all, they do have the slightest concern for the needs and problems that confront the working people who make up the vast majority of the population.

Schröder’s new book makes absolutely clear how misplaced are the arguments and hopes of those who maintain that the SPD can be reformed by grass-roots pressure. The opposite is the case: In response to pressure from below, the party responds with a further shift to the right.

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