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Why the Grand Coalition Worked (December 28, 2009)

According to the author of this piece, the Grand Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD worked well because the CDU under Angela Merkel embraced many issues that were typical SPD cornerstones. The good cooperation between the CDU and several SPD ministers, the election battle that was actually no battle at all, and the SPD's poor showing at the polls – all of this, the author argues, was attributable to this fact.

Farewell to Our Secret Love, the Grand Coalition

The basically botched start of the alliance between the CDU/CSU and the FDP has made the Grand Coalition look all the more successful, but it will not be returning any time soon. After all, the SPD has not really been a large party for some time. Three-way alliances seem more likely in the future: the CDU, the FDP, and the Greens here, the SPD, the Left Party, and the Greens there.

Out of a mixture of desperation, ambition, and statesmanlike responsibility, the Social Democrats joined the Grand Coalition as junior partners in 2005. Unsurprisingly, they were not rewarded for this decision in the 2009 elections: twenty-three percent of the vote was the result of a great deal of inconsistency.

After his courageous Hartz reforms, Gerhard Schröder waged a bizarre oppositional campaign against his own policies, which tugged the SPD to the left from its position in the new center. But this shift to the left brought no options for wielding power, and the Social Democrats were forced into a coalition with the party whose fictitious market radicalism had previously been their worst enemy.

But the Social Democrats were soon able to breathe a sigh of relief. The Grand Coalition quickly reached a consensus – not on continuing Schröder's reform efforts, but rather on doing good deeds and refraining from spending cuts during the economic boom years of 2006 and 2007. Grumbings about the Grand Coalition were barely heard when the focus was on the unchecked expansion of the state; they grew louder when the coalitionists occasionally revealed their differences in opinion.

While many SPD traditionalists looked longingly to the Left Party and its even more shameless election pledges, its business wing grew moist-eyed upon hearing the speeches of the disciplined FDP guard gathered around Guido Westerwelle.

But a majority had positioned themselves comfortably between these two poles in Germany. When the “coalition of new possibilities” took up the reins of government, it had the people’s approval. A total of 60 percent of Germans were enthusiastic about the coalition. Merkel’s calculation had proven correct. The Christian Democrat leader stole the Social Democrats’ ideas and feel-good arguments without their provocative edges, while on the left side of the political spectrum, the former Socialist Unity Party presented its social conscience as a new core expertise to be marketed.

Secretly, the CDU has always been a Social Democratic party. Now, in the alliance with the SPD, it was able to live out its inclinations. One result was the largest tax hike in the history of the Federal Republic; another was the weakening of its business wing. And even when revenue rose sharply during the boom years, neither Steinbrück nor Merkel felt much like saving.

The Merkel/Steinmeier government¹ – or more accurately, the Merkel/Steinbrück government² – did an excellent job of managing the financial crisis. One unforgettable moment came when the chancellor and the finance minister, during an impromptu television address, guaranteed the safety of bank deposits in Germany without first obtaining parliamentary approval. Due in part to their action, there was never a bank run in Germany, and the population was able to sleep easy at night during a time of great economic turbulence. The once so nervous Germans were hardly fazed by the crisis.

In the area of foreign relations, the chancellor and her businesslike foreign minister worked together so harmoniously that the chroniclers of the Berlin Republic had to accept the fact that Merkel and Steinmeier would not lash out at each other during the 2009 election campaign. But as health care reform clearly showed, the two mainstream Social Democratic parties do indeed have different focuses, which resulted in an ungainly and relatively ineffectual compromise that must now be undone by Philipp Rösler (FDP).

After four years of the Grand Coalition, even Social Democratic voters believed that Ms. Merkel was capable of leading a social-liberal coalition together with the FDP. This is one political parallel with the government that succeeded the [first] Grand Coalition [under Kurt Georg Kiesinger] in the period from 1966 to 1969.

¹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, SPD, was Vice Chancellor of Germany (November 21, 2007-October 27, 2009) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (November 22, 2005-October 27, 2009) – trans.

² Peer Steinbrück, SPD, was Federal Minister of Finance (November 22, 2005-October 27, 2009) – trans.

This strategy reflects the political wisdom of the chancellor, who has been able to present herself as the embodiment of the Grand Coalition – as a politician with a Social Democratic heart and a business-friendly mind.

Her tactics should not be disparaged or diminished. The Federal Republic owes much of its success after the Nazis' reign of terror and after the peaceful revolution of 1989 to the respect that parties of all stripes have shown toward previous administrations. After a century in which domestic unrest and extremism transformed Germany into a source of war and barbarity, democratic domestication appears to have become deeply anchored in the national psyche.

In Grand Coalitions, people come to understand the lessons that Germany has learned from its experience of extremes.

The basically botched start of the supposed love match between the CDU/CSU and the FDP has made the Grand Coalition look all the more successful. The harmony between Steinmeier and Merkel during the election debate was memorable. When asked about his relationship with his boss, the likeable chancellor candidate sought to allay fears by saying: "No, we do not call each other by our first names."

Peer Steinbrück was so enthusiastic about the cooperation that he expressed hope that the coalition would be continued – at which point he was reined in by his party. But the coalition is unlikely to return any time soon. After all, the SPD has not really been a large mainstream party for quite some time, and there are signs on the federal level that, if the FDP and the CDU/CSU cannot garner enough support, the country might very well see its first three-way alliance in government.

The surprise Jamaica coalition³ in Saarland is a harbinger of things to come, and the SPD is preparing for a coalition with the Left Party and the Greens in North Rhine-Westphalia. The taboo for which Ms. Ypsilanti was punished in Hesse has ceased to exist.⁴

Source: Ulf Poschardt, "Abschied von der heimlichen Liebe große Koalition," ["Farewell to Our Secret Love, the Grand Coalition"], *Die Welt*, December 28, 2009.

Translation: Adam Blauhut

³ An alliance between the CDU, the FDP, and the Greens. Their traditional colors – black, yellow, and green – are the colors of the Jamaican flag – trans.

⁴ In the 2008 Hessian state elections, Andrea Ypsilanti, SPD, had promised that she would never cooperate with the Left Party – trans.