

Report on the German Federal Elections 2009

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By Frederick Peters

It didn't take long for the results to come in on Sunday night – indeed by 8:15 there was a stack of the Monday edition of the *Berliner Morgenpost* with the headline "Black-Yellow wins" at the Telekom HQ, where the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* were hosting an elegant *Wahl* party and from which the ZDF, one of Germany's large public TV stations, was broadcasting live. Earlier in the evening, the SPD leadership team of Steinmeier and Münterfering had already conceded defeat with Steinmeier labelling the result "A bitter day for German social democracy." Having seen SPD support fall by more than 10 points from their 2005 result, and not even doubling the performance of their rivals The Left Party (Die Linke), that odd coupling of malcontents (west) and commies (east), bitter seemed an appropriate enough choice of words. And if you'd had the sound off, the pinched looks on both their faces would've told you the story too.

Sipping French white and waiting for our dinner in the old switching hall of the Telekom (your choice of asian noodles, rice and chicken, salad or that Berlin delicacy, the *currywurst*), no one in the crowd of professional media and academic types, young people overdressed in pink ties or showing off their *Unterwäsche* beneath charcoal blouses seemed too surprised by the results. Indeed, surprise is not what these elections were about from the start.

Even at places where people could and should have been pleasantly surprised, for instance at *The Left Party's election bash* in their stronghold neighbourhood of Prenzlberg where one would have thought bringing in a more than respectable 12% of the vote might have been cause for celebration, the vibe was a bit subdued. It was as if the folks were drinking beer to soften what they saw as the harsh reality of Westerwelle (FDP) as Foreign Minister. One older man, clutching seven glasses of pilsener in his two hands replied to my question of whether it was time to celebrate with a shy smile and a, "Naja, not really, but a bunch of friends are here and it's my round." The spirit of victory is not what was going on here as Black-Yellow was apparently not easy to swallow for Left Party voters, many of whom are from "the new federal states" - as one 31 year-old

Saxon kept reminding himself to say - instead of more politically and culturally loaded term of "the East" which still gets bandied about with great regularity.

Opinion here is divided as to what the Left Party's success mean with some pundits suggesting it is short lived, pointing to the demographic reality that their membership is made up of a large number of retirees, shorthand for implying that these are former members of East Germany's ruling party the SED, the "true believers". One would have to check the numbers, but that perception is definitely there amongst Green voting *Ossis* (Easterners).

Interestingly, the Brandenburg and Berlin results for this election are much darker in both shades of red than the national numbers and seats reflect. The big story in today's *Berliner Zeitung* is about voting trends from 2005 and last Sunday. They suggest that the major move in the former-East was from the SPD (down 11.28% in the east), to not voting at all (up 9.36%). In the west, the story was a bit different. (SPD: - 10.10%, non-voters: + 6.02%, Greens + 3.25%, Linke + 2.14%, FDP + 3.05). The other story is about how indeed the CDU/CSU lost more votes in the west (-4.31%) than the east (+0.41%).

At the party rally of The Left Party at the Alexanderplatz, the former centre of Berlin (East), two days before the election, the crowd was a mix of retirees and anarcho-student movement types. The leadership tag-team of Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi scaled the rhetorical heights with Lafontaine beginning, seemingly subdued, but hitting hard, reading the crowd well, and making the case for social democracy. (You know, the SPD could use someone like him! - ha, ha!) Gysi brought the crowd to tears with the story of how the teenage daughter of a single mother who is a welfare recipient worked a summer job to buy a guitar only to have authorities cut that amount from the family's monthly check. The stories were effective, his critical points were well directed and, ... well, he kept at it for a very long time with the result that the crowd thinned before he was done. It looked like they would still vote Left, but they'd heard plenty.

At a CDU rally on Saturday best described as "American", there was no shortage of subdued pink ties under charcoal suits. Merkel entered through a gauntlet of attractive young people in orange Team Germany t-shirts – orange being apparently the colour of political mobilization in Europe - to the riff of the Rolling Stones' "Start me up....I'll never

stop". Last time it was "Angie", also by the Stones. And if things go pear-shaped this term, maybe they can use "Sympathy for the Devil" next time.

Lots of suits on hand at the Brandenburg Gate on Friday where the SPD was holding its last rally. Where their rivals the Left Party had a modest stage, a small tent and wall of red flags, some t-shirts and rubber courier bags with *Die Linke* logo at their rally on Alex, the SPD underlined their stature with two huge video monitors of the type used for a public viewing of the World Cup finals. When Steinmeier, sartorially splendid in red tie and dark suit, finally graced the stage, he went on the attack against Black-Yellow potential with the rhetorical grace of a union leader in his hand gestures and turns of phrase. Speaking only in terms of vision, not record, a result of the SPD's role in the Grand Coalition, he argued how it was only the SPD that had tried to save Germany from war and famine. Not unimpressive, but too little too late, as the results later showed. No celebrating for them.

And now the papers are talking about any potential to repair the split between brothers, between the Left Party and the SPD, the real telenovella story of this election. Not that anyone is suggesting it is likely, but they are certainly talking about it.

Where there was celebrating on Sunday night was among the FDPers. In fact, their party was so full that our invitation as election observers to come and join them was pulled. Overjoyed to finally be back to power after more than a decade on the outside looking in, their leader Westerwelle could hardly contain himself. Today's *Berliner Morgenpost* found an old picture of Merkel and him on the election campaign of 2001, on their way together in a shiny old-style Beetle convertible. She was not yet a Chancellor candidate. He was driving. A sign of things to come? The numbers for the FDP suggest that this Black-Yellow coalition could have a different dynamic to those of the late 1980s and 90s where the FDP were clearly a junior partner. With more bums in chairs at the Bundestag than ever before, this year's election result will give the FDP more say than they are used to. That said, even those sympathetic to the cause of (neo-)liberalism in Germany don't believe the party will be able to make good on the kind of changes to hiring and firing and other liberal platforms which they see as crucial to Germany's betterment. The Union (CDU and CSU) will end up defending social welfare – no certainty it is true, but my prediction nonetheless.

If their campaigns are to be believed, all Germany's parties hold the country to be in crisis, though none of them took great pains to explain why they feel this way or what they'd do to address this grave situation. (Perhaps heeding Kim Campbell's opinion that election campaigns are not the place for debates on policy.) The national debt however has become quite something and will prove to be the basis of many decisions to be made in the next mandate.

Interestingly, sexual politics provided only a sideline during the campaign. Merkel, the strong woman with a husband who makes Dennis Thatcher look like Lindsay Lohan in terms of his public profile, and Guido Westerwelle, the openly gay leader of the FDP, have both seen their private lives come under public scrutiny in the past. This go-round, happily, the topic rarely came up. Though today's headline in the mass market tabloid *Bild* was worth a snicker: Westerwelle: His husband makes him so strong.

Indeed, Merkel and Westerwelle are what Germans wanted apparently, this being a healthy, functioning democracy and all. Or perhaps, as in many of the mature democracies of the world, it is what the electorate deserve. Still, the results mean that the opposition voice is strong and will speak from a decidedly left-leaning perspective. And Black-Yellow should play along, giving the SPD, Left Party and Greens plenty to oppose.