

An Assessment of the CDU/CSU-FDP Coalition (September 13, 2013)

Abstract

Swiss journalist Ulrich Schmid considers the various policy initiatives during the four years of the government coalition between CDU/CSU and FDP. He pays special attention to the nuclear phaseout and the ensuing energy transition, an important and sudden policy change in redirecting Germany's energy sources toward renewable energy.

Source

Orderly, visionless muddling through

The work of the Christian-Liberal coalition of Chancellor Merkel has been moderately successful. Pragmatism shapes the picture; visions there are none. The dowdy opposition has not capitalized on that.

German politics loves the polarizing intensification, because it makes it possible to cover up so pleasantly just how much one is in fact situated in the middle. This has been the best government since reunification, says Chancellor Merkel, and she is in fact referring to her Christian-Liberal cabinet, with which she is stumbling toward the end of the legislative period. It is the worst government Germany has ever had, say all the leading Social Democratic figures, like chancellor candidate Steinbrück, party chief Gabriel, or parliamentary group leader Steinmeier. It sounds even more sarcastic among the Greens; among the Left, sarcasm turns into contemptuous, hostile cynicism.

Schröder's legacy

The truth, of course, lies in the middle. This government has been moderately successful, and quite evidently there is no compelling reason for a large segment of the citizenry not to elect it for another four years. There has been neither a spectacular failure nor an important, society-transforming success, says the political scientist Josef Janning, Mercator Fellow at the Center for European Policy. There were failings, to be sure. Taxes were not simplified, as was promised, and we are still waiting for a fundamental reform of nursing care insurance and the pension scheme. Still, there was continuity. In essence, the basic societal consensus of the Schröder era was carried forward. Women receive assistance in the workplace, childcare is facilitated, support is offered to the elderly, students, gays, the handicapped, or transsexuals, while efforts are made simultaneously not to strangle economic productivity, which provides the tax basis.

Most striking in this legislative period was surely the double shift on energy. First, Merkel pushed through the "exit from the exit" and extended the operational lives of various nuclear power plants. Then, after Fukushima, she decreed within days the "exit from the exit from the exit," the famous energy turnaround, on which Germany is still chewing today and will be for quite a while. It was a striking demonstration that she is in fact not always the great procrastinator, and that she can act with breathtaking speed when necessary. The energy turnaround was necessary, at least if one conceives of politics as functionally as Merkel does. A majority of Germans no longer wants nuclear power, and Merkel does not want to govern against the mood of the Germans. She acted with similar speed and boldness when she stepped in front of the camera with her tried-and-true Finance Minister Steinbrück and assured the citizens that their savings were safe. The tough, determined hand of the Chancellor was also felt by Environment Minister Röttgen, who had become unruly and unpleasant. Merkel threw him out of the

cabinet with a ruthlessness that no one had believed her capable of.

Still, the double energy turnaround is a weak point, since it lacks a consistent action program. The purely intellectually justified promotion of sustainable energy through the feed-in remuneration and the de facto elimination of the market has brought insurmountable systemic and financial follow-up costs. But Merkel wants to keep the citizenry well-disposed and not demand too much of them, at least before the election. Yet the bill for the energy turnaround will arrive, and it will be steep.

Merkel was far more successful with her European policy. This is quite surprising, since the political management toolbox with which she operates is the same. Yet “in Europe” she is forced into more compromises and small steps, a bold move like in the energy turnaround is impossible in this environment. Merkel is often criticized for this lack of “big” thinking. But it’s useful to her. She carefully integrated German sentiment into her actions. While she affirms European solidarity, she is reluctant to part with German money, insists doggedly on the importance of reform in the crisis countries, and endures the wrath of the southerners, who want greater generosity.

Stalemate in European policy

In the process she is always navigating by sight. Visions there are none in Merkel’s realm. The citizens do not know what “her” Europe looks like. In the summer of 2011 there was a brief period when the ministers Röttgen and von der Leyen were speculating about the “United States of Europe,” something that provoked conservatives, like the parliamentarian Bosbach, to angry reactions. People were already looking forward to a discussion about Europe with a certain depth when Merkel returned from her vacation and ended the debate with a robust “both....and.” Euro bonds, she declared, could exist only in a Federal State Europe. But that state did not exist, it does not exist, and Merkel is not even doing anything to at least clarify the question how the decision should be made as to whether it will ever exist. That serves her well domestically, since there is no indication that the Germans are eager to give up national sovereignty.

Merkel is emerging as the clear “winner” out of the Black-Yellow coalition. Christian Democrats and Liberals never got on harmoniously, and the smaller FDP naturally suffers more from this than the big CDU. Just how bad it would be could not be foreseen. Before the election, the combination Merkel-Westerwelle was long regarded as an “ideal marriage,” the chancellor was probably hoping that she would be able to excuse some market-oriented concessions by pointing to the ordo-liberal “nature” of her partner. But then the degree of agreement turned out to be small. [...]

Failing liberals

[...] But the opposition, too, did not accomplish any major things. There are two questions the SPD and the Greens cannot answer. If everything is as terrible as they make it out to be – why aren’t people complaining? And if Merkel is doing everything wrong – why does the opposition permanently vote with the government on questions relating to energy and Europe? The constant criticism by the opposition cannot cover up the fact that the opposition lacks a plausible “narrative” about Europe and the energy turnaround just as much as the government does. Anyone who complains that Merkel is “driving by sight” when it comes to European policy has to offer visionary alternatives, realistic approaches to a solution, which go beyond the next few years. Merely noting that Europe has long since become a union of shared liabilities and would do well to save Greece is not enough. In this regard the opposition parties have utterly failed. Moreover, the SPD has to lament the fact that Merkel is resolutely occupying the terrain in the middle, which party leader Gabriel vacated in an effort to weaken the Left Party.

The pleading SPD

However, what has to be more unpleasant for the opposition than everything else is the realization that

Merkel is much more successful with her moderating, balancing political style than they are. More successful, because she is more modern. She is completely free atmospherically and ideologically, she does not have to link her fate to anything. The opposition, however, has no facilitators. Steinbrück is not one, Gabriel most definitely is not, Trittin and Roth are not. Persuasive younger ones still need to prove themselves. And so the opposition continues to bank on the conflictual, the polarizing. In the age of the Internet, that seems old-fashioned, overzealous, uncool. With a lot of wailing the SPD laments the absence of a Merkelian vision, sometimes it seems as though they are virtually pleading with the chancellor to finally give them something to which they can loudly respond with “No!.” Merkel, delicately smiling, is not doing them that favor.

Source: Ulrich Schmid, “Ordentliches, visionsloses Sichdurchwursteln,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, September 13, 2013.

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