

Will Schröder Resign As German Chancellor?

by Rainer Apel

The surprise resignation on Feb. 6, of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder as national chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has been read—in Germany as well as abroad—as the first step towards his withdrawal from the chancellorship in the near future. The resignation announcement came after the publication of disastrous popularity ratings for Schröder (14%), and his government and SPD party (24%). The SPD is expected to lose votes heavily in all 14 elections—on the state and municipal level, as well as the European Parliament—that will be held in Germany this year. The first election takes place in the city-state of Hamburg on Feb. 29, and the month of March is expected to tell more about Schröder's further plans.

On March 21, the SPD will officially replace Schröder with the designated new party chairman, Franz Müntefering. On March 25 Schröder will deliver a "State of Germany" address in Federal parliament. It cannot be ruled out that he will use that occasion for a vote of confidence. With his thin majority in the parliament of only 4 seats over the opposition, Schröder might lose that vote, because his Agenda 2010 budget-cutting policy is meeting very strong opposition inside his own SPD and the labor unions. If five SPD members of the Bundestag vote against or abstain, Schröder's thin majority is gone. There are 2 Bundestag members of the post-communist PDS, who, because their party opposes the Agenda 2010 from a leftwing-populist side, will also not vote for Schröder.

Neither Schröder's withdrawal as SPD party chairman, nor a lost vote-of-confidence, would be to the instant benefit of opposition leader, neo-con party chairwoman of the Christian Democrats Angela Merkel. Merkel's proclaimed desire for a "regime change in Berlin now" stays 6 seats short of a majority in the national parliament, and because of her neo-con positions, she is not likely to pull SPD members over to her side. She cannot openly challenge the incumbent Chancellor in a no-confidence vote that she would not win. There are also enough serious policy differences between Merkel's own CDU party and the allied CSU, the autonomous minor Christian Democratic party of Bavarian State Governor Edmund Stoiber, to undermine Merkel's own ambitions. Stoiber himself responded to the Schröder announcement on Feb. 6 with the warning that the Christian Democrats

should “rather build an account of voters’ confidence in the elections of 2004, than hang on to unrealistic dreams (sic).” Moreover, Merkel is not more popular than Schröder, and several polling institutes even place her behind the incumbent Chancellor.

In addition, the German constitution impedes abrupt government changes, by demanding either a “constructive” no-confidence vote or early elections as the only legal procedure to change government: A government cannot be voted out, without an alternative candidate for chancellor gaining an absolute majority of more than 50% of seats (the “chancellor’s majority”) in the federal parliament.

One should furthermore not underrate Schröder’s talents as a “survival specialist,” which have kept him in office through numerous highly-critical periods after he took office in October 1998. The way Schröder worked himself out of a virtually hopeless situation, a few weeks before the national elections of September 2002, illustrates his special survival talent. He suddenly outflanked the opposition through “national emergency” rhetoric during the big eastern German flood of August 2002, and successfully tapped anti-Iraq War sentiments in the overwhelming majority of the population, which secured his re-election with a thin edge of only a few thousand votes over the Christian Democrats.

The opposition Christian Democrats have never been able to challenge Schröder openly. The incumbent Chancellor’s acute problems have been caused by his own incompetence and indecision. For example in the aforesaid difficult Summer of 2002, Schröder could have listened to a widely-circulated and widely-discussed *Open Letter To The Chancellor*, authored by the German LaRouche Movement’s chairwoman, Helga Zepp-LaRouche. There, she urged Schröder to scrap all the budget-cutting insanity and go, instead, for a national pro-infrastructure, job-creating program of industrial recovery in the larger framework of Eurasian Land-Bridge development. There were short moments during which Schröder and several cabinet ministers of his discussed the option of national infrastructure bonds to fund the reconstruction in the flood-savaged regions of eastern Germany. But Schröder opted instead for budget-balancing.

Another missed chance for Schröder was on New Year’s Day 2003, when he took part in the maiden ride of the world’s first commercial maglev track—just-completed—in Shanghai, which China built in cooperation with Germany. From Shanghai, Schröder could have sent a special New Year’s message home, appealing to German technological pride and calling for such infrastructure projects in Germany. He did not do that, instead axing for budgetary reasons, a few weeks later, one of two small maglev projects envisaged in Germany. And during the Summer of 2003, Schröder gave the go-ahead for the second round of Agenda 2010 budget cuts.

It may be that Schröder will muddle through the coming weeks and stay in office. But if his policy remains unchanged, Germany will be run down further.