

German political landscape is transformed

CHANCELLER Gerhard Schroeder and his Right-wing opponent Thatcherie Angela Merkel might be stealing the headlines in Germany's election, but it is the volatile new Left Party which dominates the campaign. The current German election campaign is unusual – and not just to foreign observers.

The major reason why this campaign seems so odd is the emergence of the new Left Party which represents the biggest change in the German political landscape for at least 25 years.

In the wake of Schroeder's surprise election call, the Left Party quickly constituted itself under the leadership of former Social Democrat (SPD) chairman Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, the most charismatic figure of the former Communist Party, the PDS. This link up is not a big surprise as both have been flirting with a joint political project for some years.

Politically, the Left Party advocates populist policies aimed at the poor and unemployed as well as pensioners, rejecting any reform and promising to revoke recent changes. Its high poll ratings are based on the support of a mobilised hard Left, especially in the east, as well as former SPD votes, particularly in the west.

And the damage the Left Party has done to the SPD is decisive. In



Regardless of its longevity, the Left Party is sure to have a decisive impact on Germany's forthcoming general election, writes **Henning Meyer**

Lafontaine's home state, Saarland, for instance, the Left Party recently scored 20 per cent in an opinion poll, with the SPD dropping to a mere 24 per cent (from +6 per cent at the 2002 election). Given that almost half the electorate is still undecided, it is nearly impossible for the SPD to defend its narrow lead as the strongest party and thus keep Schroeder in office. The perception that the top job is already lost has enabled the Chancellor to start a sort of valediction tour rather than a real campaign for another term in power.

It is this possibility of a grand coalition that most worries the CDU/CSU. Its preferred coalition with the liberal party, the FDP, is at stake. Fighting against a split but fully mobilised Left may mean that a grand coalition is the only feasible

alternative. The CDU's Bavarian sister party, the CSU, fears being marginalised in a grand coalition. Against this backdrop, the rationale behind attacks by Edmund Stoiber, the 2002 runner-up to Schroeder, on east Germans becomes clear.

It is an attempt to maximise the CSU vote in its Bavarian heartland, where a result under 55 per cent would be a disaster. CSU leaders are desperate to strengthen the party's position within the conservative bloc and are even willing to accept the potential side effect that the bigger sister party, the CDU, might lose popularity, because of his attacks.

In effect, the emergence of the Left Party has changed the prospects of the SPD and forced the two conservative sister parties into an internal power struggle which would not be necessary if a

coalition with the small FDP were certain.

The question remains whether the Left Party is more than an ad hoc electoral alliance and whether it will have a long-term impact on the German party landscape. There are some good reasons to doubt this. In fact, for the time being, the Left Party is effectively nothing other than the renamed PDS that recently opened its candidate lists for the western German WASG, a small group founded by some Left-wing trade unionists and disaffected Social Democrats in protest against the Chancellor's reform "Agenda 2010".

The first cracks within the Left Party became obvious right from the start when Lafontaine made controversial overtures to attract Right-wing voters. In addition, it is widely believed that the two leading figures, Lafontaine and Gysi, will fall out of love shortly as they cannot handle a shared leadership.

But while there are doubts whether the new Left Party will have a substantial long term future, it will shape the outcome of the forthcoming election and even if it fizzles away, leave a lasting impression for at least the next Parliament.

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