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LETTER FROM BERLIN

Social Democrats Turn Left for Salvation

By David Crossland

Kurt Beck, the leader of Germany's ailing Social Democrats, is stamping a cuddly new image on the party to woo back estranged voters. Analysts say the provincial politician has been underestimated -- just like former Chancellor Helmut Kohl.



Getty Images

Beck, pictured here celebrating his 2006 re-election as premier of Rhineland-Palatinate, is shifting the SPD to the left.

Kurt Beck, the bear-like son of a bricklayer, is trying to rescue Germany's Social Democrat Party from extinction as a dominant political force by scrapping key parts of a reform agenda that has alienated millions of its traditional voters.

Though the party has spent much of the last week patching over wounds inflicted by **internal debate** earlier this month, the leftward shift has divided the SPD's leadership. It is also pre-programmed to cause tension in the grand coalition, where the center-left party has been languishing as junior partner to Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives for the last two years, and quietly fuming at her **surging popularity**.

Beck, who has been chairman of the SPD for the last 17 months, has only recently moved to stamp his authority on Germany's oldest party after criticism of his lack of leadership in the run-up to several key regional elections early in 2008.

He won a victory in a meeting of the SPD executive on Monday which overwhelmingly backed his proposal to extend full unemployment benefit payouts for over-55s from 18 months to 24 months. That decision reversed an important element of the "Agenda 2010" program of labor reforms and welfare cuts the SPD implemented in 2003 and 2004 under then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

REPRINTS



Current SPD Labor Minister Franz Müntefering, who helped Schröder implement the reforms, has strongly opposed the U-turn, and several other SPD cabinet ministers quietly disapprove of it, but they have been drowned out by Beck and the party's resurgent left wing.

The Agenda 2010 was so unpopular that the SPD has suffered a haemorrhage of voters and party members as a result of it. Many supporters feel the party that emerged from the 19th century labor movement, fought Hitler and helped shape post-war Germany no longer stands for social justice, and has betrayed its 144-year-old history of defending workers' rights.

Beck, 58, will seal the shift away from the center ground at the SPD's party conference on October 26-28 in the northern port city of Hamburg. The congress is expected to strengthen his leadership of the SPD and fuel expectations that he will run against Merkel in the 2009 general election.

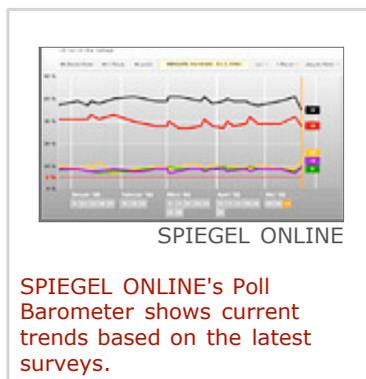
Warmth and Coziness

"We need a bit of warmth," said Beck, summing up his bid to woo back traditional supporters with more generous plans for welfare spending. The new-look SPD also plans to increase pension payments for over-60s who are still working, to push for a minimum wage and to water down plans to raise the retirement age from 65 to 67.

With his regional southwestern accent, fulsome cheeks and hedgehog hairstyle, the avuncular Beck, governor of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, cuts a cozy provincial figure in the slick political environment of Berlin.

But commentators have started likening him to Helmut Kohl, who hails from the same part of the country, has a similar appetite for hearty food and was decried as an intellectual lightweight by his opponents but ended up as post-war Germany's longest-serving chancellor.

POLL BAROMETER



"Kurt Beck is a jovial, personable cuddly kind of guy. Like Kohl he's a comfortable but temperamental bear, calm in himself, with a folksy provinciality and deep roots in his Palatinate homeland," Richard Schütze, a media and PR coach for politicians and business people, told SPIEGEL ONLINE.

"And like former Chancellor Kohl he rose through local and regional politics to national politics," said Schütze, managing director of Berlin-based Richard Schütze Consult. He said Beck's occasional clumsiness in intellectual debates made him more likeable. "He's an ideal campaigner on market squares, in streets and taverns," said Schütze.

No Alternative

Analysts say Beck had little choice but to distance himself from the tough reform course that Schröder stamped on the party.

On the left, the SPD has been losing voters to the new Left Party which was formed this year by former communists and disgruntled Social Democrats, and is co-led by firebrand Oskar Lafontaine, a former SPD leader with a populist style.

And on the right, Merkel's Christian Democrats have gone soft on reforms and are busily encroaching on traditional SPD ground on the environment and family policy, offering generous new payouts to parents, for example.

Merkel has dropped the radical tax and labor policies with which she fought the 2005 election. The woman once dubbed "Germany's Iron Lady" now likes to stress that the aged, the weak and the sick must partake in the country's economic recovery. That has left the SPD's outlines looking decidedly blurry.

The party has been in steady decline for years. Since Schröder ousted Kohl in the 1998 election, the SPD was only able to gain ground in seven of 36 national, regional and European Parliament elections. The loss of a state election in its industrial heartland of North Rhine-Westphalia in May 2005 prompted Schröder to call a general election a year early.

Since the end of 1998, SPD membership has slumped by around 230,000 to 545,000. Schröder's benefit cuts for the long-term unemployed -- a measure which has had some success in encouraging jobless people to seek work -- have stoked fears of social decline.

NEWSLETTER

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End of Social Justice

Opinion polls show that almost 80 percent of Germans feel they're not profiting from the economic recovery over the last couple of years that ended a period of chronic stagnation under Schröder. The SPD currently scores around 30 percent in opinion polls, far behind Merkel's conservatives at 40 percent. Significantly, however, Beck's proposals for a revision of the Agenda 2010 boosted the party by a couple of points



last week.

"Beck didn't have an alternative, in fact he's proceeding in a very measured way, cautiously and with respect for Müntefering," Karl-Heinz Nassmacher, political scientist at Oldenburg University, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "Like with Kohl, people are underestimating him. Just because he kisses every village harvest queen, people doubt whether he has the makings of a statesman and the necessary political skills."

"But I still don't think he'll be chancellor," Nassmacher continued. "If he does stand in 2009, he'll be ground down between Merkel and Lafontaine. She's the better statesman, and Lafontaine's the better populist."

With reporting by SPIEGEL staff

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