

Steering Germany Through the Climate Storm

Article by Peter Unfried

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Ever since he took climate policy from word to action in Germany, Green Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck has been in the crosshairs of the other parties, traditionally hostile to change, and of parts of the Green movement itself, which demand more radical action. But to reconcile the physical reality of climate change with the attitudes of German society, pragmatism is key.

In the last five years, awareness of the need for serious transformational politics has increased considerably in the German mainstream. This is due to two factors: the shift by the Greens from the outer margins of the polls to the centre of society since 2018 and to an even greater extent, the civic youth movement Fridays for Future, which has stirred the conscience of its parents' generation like never before and literally mobilised it. In this context, the Green election campaign slogan "Ready, because you are" seemed plausible and smart in 2021. We won't be telling you what to do, the message was, but we will be pursuing the politics you want and demand.

The switch from word to action by the new Economy and Climate Minister, Green Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck, has sent society into shock. Talking about how important and crucial it is to transform the economy to mitigate global heating and its associated problems had become routine in the years of Angela Merkel's chancellorship, yet no political deed followed.

Consensus on inaction

While the latest climate act, passed in June 2021 by the then federal government comprised of CDU/CSU and SPD, did step up the goals, nothing more was tackled (as nothing was tackled by those two parties generally) which would make compliance with the Paris Agreement even remotely possible. This was not only due to the diminishing substance of the two big parties of the 20th century, but also to an unspoken agreement between politics and society to do everything possible theoretically, while doing nothing or much too little in practice was okay.

Inconvenience anyone, in any form – perish the thought. Lignite phase-out? Push it well off until 2038, with billions in funding. CO2 pricing? Homoeopathic, so that the gas boiler can keep on humming, and, when fossil fuel prices explode, the government can foot the bill. That was the Social and Christian Democrat approach. And obviously, it had consequences. As for the technologically necessary innovation in the boiler room, this has led to a full-insurance attitude even among solid earners: if there has to be climate protection at all, then let the state pay.

The way CDU and FDP, early this summer, augured the downfall of millions of German homeowners based on a proposed heating law has obstructed future climate protection even more firmly than the "Last Generation" activists' superglue tactics. The German Federal Constitutional Court has put the approval of the law on hold until after the summer recess. But the bill's substance is that even very high earners will be getting almost half of the costs of a heat pump paid for by the state. If every little regulation needs to be funded by billions of Euros, though, we will indeed be unable to afford climate protection.

Everything that has happened since the 2021 Bundestag election also has to do with the Greens' result: 14.8 per cent. In the face of expectations, it was a crushing defeat. A clear vote against the self-appointed chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock, but also a vote that says that, while society expects climate protection from the government, it should be beautifully fenced in by fossil-based Social Democratism and classically fossil-based libertarian thinking.

An additional difficulty is that Christian Lindner's one-man show, a.k.a. the Liberal coalition partner FDP, is struggling on the 5 per cent threshold in many places. The Social Democrat Olaf Scholz, for his part, is often reproached for having styled himself on election posters as the "Climate Chancellor". But we know how advertising works. A fool who took that seriously.

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Ultimately, however, the much-criticised contradictoriness of the governing coalition is only the expression of that of Federal German society, which does not know what it wants – though if in doubt, don't. The same applies in equal measure for large sections of the centre-right CDU/CSU electorate, incidentally.

Incompatible realities?

In the first phase of the so-called "traffic-light coalition", Habeck's self-reflexive no-bullshit talk and his energy provision beyond Green ideology made him the political leader of the social majority. During the multiple crises triggered by Russia's full-scale aggression on Ukraine, he even managed to win support for concrete engagement from citizens, who economised on gas, for instance. However, the closer he came to taking the transformative action he had promised, the more his popularity ratings fell.

Now, Habeck may always be saying that his aim is not to be popular but to achieve something in the four years that he has. In a hyper-nervous media society, though, the two aims are interconnected. Popular politicians who succeed at election time are the ones who do not bother people with change. That applied to Angela Merkel, who only saw justification for taking action in crises, and it applies to her successor Olaf Scholz. It also applies to the CDU's potential Chancellor candidates who are currently regarded as successful at state level.

The big question these days is: (How) can we DO politics for the future?

If Habeck points out that he is only doing the politics he is obligated to do by the coalition agreement, the climate act of the previous government, the verdict of the German federal constitutional court on climate change, and the global Paris Agreement, others – even in his own government – dismiss it with some kind of drivel, as though whatever a politician agreed to and signed up for was nothing to be taken seriously. While the idea that Habeck is trying to do too much too fast obviously matches the sentiment of a majority, Luisa Neubauer, voice of German civil society, tells him that, given the physical reality, it is much too little. Now, the question is how one can bring the societal and the physical reality closer together, and how Habeck's ministry can succeed in joining market economy and regulation to drive innovation.

Scapegoating the Greens

Meanwhile, it is increasingly clear that transformative economic and climate politics does not simply work with “green leadership” and cannot be forced through parliament, but that it takes at least one of the two former big parties to seriously make it its concern, or even a basic consensus among all democratic parties. At the moment, though, Germany seems further away from that than anticipated. All parties are trying to score points by setting themselves apart from the Greens and from transformative policies.

The palette is broad. First and foremost, it is the far-right AfD that is misusing the Greens as its polar opposite. Then there is Die Linke (The Left), in whose eyes the Greens are elite fancy-pants greenies; the lifestyle-Liberals, who are afraid of CO2 emissions cuts; Bavarian grilled sausage and gas heating lobbyists; and eastern German life-attitude right and left-wingers who are worked up about too much liberalism and too much prohibition at the same time. There are conservatives insisting on “normality”, even though fossil fuel reliance is their normal; and social democrats, who are well known to be conservative too and for whom, ultimately, the same applies.

It looks as though all parties, given the accumulation of crises and their lack of political means to respond to them, are hiding behind attacks on the one person who is at least trying to make headway with reform policy in the form of real-world policy: Robert Habeck.

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It is important to realise, at the same time, that the Greens are hated in reactionary and anti-democratic circles at the moment not because of scepticism towards the state or revolutionary stances, but because they seem to be the party that most committedly defends the state and the EU, as well as – this might sound a bit strange – law and order, constitution, rights and principles. And sustainable real-world policy. That is why it is so dangerous when CDU leader Friedrich Merz declares the Greens the main opponents and trots out the old accusation of their being a prohibition party of ideologists. And when CSU leader Markus Söder appears at a demonstration of rabid heat-pump opponents who find mottoes like “Hang the Greens”.

In doing so Merz and Söder are not only boosting populism against the Greens, but they are also betraying both the values and goals of the CDU/CSU. Up to now, the Union had been largely in agreement with the policy understanding of the Greens: the constitutional state, Europe, social market economy, and climate protection. If larger sections of society really believe Merz and Söder that regulations in the boiler room are an unacceptable deprivation of liberty, this will backfire on the CDU – at the latest, if the party goes back in charge of its own climate act in a few years. Who will protect it then against populist hostilities from the right, the excessive stoking of economic fears and the scandalising of necessary proposed laws? The CDU revolt against the heating law is basically a revolt against government action in real-world policy. In the case of a party that hitherto underpinned the state, it is also highly dangerous for democracy.

Pragmatism over ideology

At the moment, the Greens (Habeck, but and also Foreign Minister Baerbock, of all people) are figures who stand for at least halfway grown-up politics by a business-like government that is orienting itself to reality – including hard-to-digest things like LNG terminals and EU refugee policy – and not to ideology or the theoretical ideas of their forebears.

Within the Greens, however, things still look otherwise, and it begins with the very party and parliamentary group leadership. Left-wing know-it-all continue to abound, along with unregulated emissions of yearnings for “radical” talk again at last, so the party feels more authentically itself, regardless of whether that produces anything constructive. Greens are also wary of having the concrete transformation of the economy as their political core, and not a more beautiful world. Party functionaries and electors are being forced to deepen their political and intellectual maturity. We will see whether, and how extensively, that succeeds.

There is one example where the Greens, through governing, have grown continuously in the electorate’s favour, and that is, of course, Baden-Württemberg. It was a historic coincidence that Winfried Kretschmann became the state’s first Minister in 2011, but it was the evolution into a social-ecological economy party which subsequently brought the Greens two election victories, which they used first to dwarf the SPD and then outclass the CDU. Whereas, amid doubt, Habeck in Berlin is being discounted or at least relativised by two partners/rivals, the power relations in Baden-Württemberg are clear: it has become “the norm” that the Greens are stipulating the direction of travel.

Yet the first minister is leading as Kretschmann, not as a Green, and this is key to his success. It also has bitter consequences though. For instance, when he believed it necessary to stab Habeck in the back in matters of the heating law. And Kretschmann is right: in crucial circumstances – see diesel, driving bans, and heating – the Green party has not managed green leadership, but bowed to the majority’s fossil-fuel sentiment.

However, the activists’ cry that “We’ve run out of time” is totally ineffectual, because it is much too much for the liberal-conservative-social-democratic people. We must try to win democratic majorities in favour of a balanced and slower policy for the future that unites social security and conservative needs with ecological and economic necessity.

It may seem that balancing the asynchrony of physical and societal reality is an impossible mission. But inertia gets us nowhere.



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