



Library

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Helge Heidemeyer (eds)
Die Grünen im Bundestag.
Sitzungsprotokolle
und Anlagen 1983-1987
With the collaboration of Tim
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Among the many books in the series “Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus”, this is an unusual one, which provides insights in the inner life of a party of such an intimacy and based on such a range of documentary evidence as have rarely been matched so far. The volume encompasses the founding years of the Green Party, that is, the first legislative period during which they were represented in Parliament. Initially, the struggle against new nuclear arms race gave their public image a strong boost, opening up a vast horizon in the triviality of every-day parliamentary life and uniting the Green individualists in a common passion for peace and life. Three years later, in the early days of Perestroika, the fear of a “Euroshima” was forgotten, but with it the Greens lost a dimension that transcended every-day preoccupations. It then became dramatically evident that the word “environment” embraces a diffuse spectrum of themes that pull political activity in many different directions and are more than a small party, which only manages to accomplish something through the release of concentrated energy, can handle. Add to this the tension between the parliamentary group

and the party, where a bitter antagonism developed in those years between the *Fundis* (“fundamentalists”) and the *Realos* (“realists”).

There was indeed the catastrophe of the Tchernobyl reactor on 26 April 1986, right at the time when the Green parliamentary group was agonizing over the dilemma of the relations between Israelis and Palestinians. But then all of a sudden everyone turned against nuclear energy, first and foremost the SPD. The Greens, who had sprung up out of the anti-nuclear movement, found it more difficult than ever to maintain a distinctive profile, especially since, rhetoric aside, the *Alternative* hardly had a concrete alternative to nuclear power to offer. The debate on renewable energy sources had taken place elsewhere. The Green members of parliament, hopelessly overburdened with a multitude of issues, would not even have had the time to familiarize themselves with this theme, which back then was much less clear-cut than it is today. But was it really necessary, in addition to all this, to maintain a commitment to census boycotts, gay marriage, and multiculturalism; all issues lacking a positive correlation with environment protection, and which made the dispersion of the party’s objectives even more hopeless?

The change that took place between 1983 and 1986 is reflected in the sometimes humorous illustrations of both volumes. At the beginning, the entry of the Green VIPs in the Bundestag, arm in arm and wearing triumphant smiles. In the appendix to the second volume, a party meeting of 1985, with grim faces and signs of exhaustion. In between (p. 470), a picture showing a party member with a hippy mane and a prophet’s beard trying to talk a gardener out of employing pesticides in front of the Bundestag building. The gardener appears to be playing possum.

The material includes documents of the inside life of the party of the kind that normally are not made public: not only the minutes of parliamentary group meetings, but also those of meetings of the party directorate and of workshops, as well as meeting documents of a confidential nature; and, throughout, page-long outbursts by party members venting their frustration, whether with the political ineffectiveness of the parliamentary group’s work or what they found to be an unbearable human environment. And time and again deception at finding that “party friends” were not real friends, just as the party was striving for the unity of politics and private life. “This climate is merciless, the egotists and exhibitionists put their stamp on the debate,” complained Heins Suhr, party press spokesman, as early as 7 September 1983 (p. 233). Many of these

minutes are not merely sanitized accounts that were rubber-stamped in the following session. Some are truly indiscreet reports where the minute keeper occasionally lets his or her own views and emotions creep in. As, for example, in the minutes of the discussion on Israel of 22 April 1986 (p. 910): “Gina and Michael Düllmann hand out matzo, a very dry Jewish bread. Silbermann expressly warns against its consumption. Anyhow, I find it tasty.” Or in the minutes of the parliamentary group meeting of 20 November 1983, where the participants debated whether the Greens should form a “silent circle” during the Bundestag debate on rearmament, going counter to parliamentary speaking customs. “Sabine Bard finds the human act of keeping silent would be a mistake in an inhuman and cynical place like the Bundestag. ... Following Joschka Fischer’s question: Who is going to do this?, chaos breaks forth: who, where, how, what, when; in the vote that follows it turns out that eight want to keep silent and the rest not.” Towards the end of the meeting another “small commotion” breaks out, “and thus the meeting somehow comes to an end.” (p. 355) Once again we find the Greens tangled up in the dilemma of whether to be the “anti-party party” or join in the parliamentary game. In 1985, Michael Vesper exhorted them in the *Tagesszeitung* to become full-fledged members of Parliament. “They must be active in the assembly, even agitate, intrigue, integrate, ‘antechamber’...” (p. 812) Indeed, that is the law of parliamentarism!

The Greens’ transparency in freely giving out these minutes for publication deserves recognition, especially in consideration of the fact that these documents are a treasure trove for those wishing to represent the Green party of the time as a political kindergarten, and sometimes makes for agonizing reading for those who feel in any way close to the party. However, one should not forget that if others parties had made public so much unsanitized material, one would realize that their management, too, was often neither orderly nor efficient, and find no lack of ejaculations about “this pigsty that goes by the name of a party”. Most characterizations of the Greens in those early days – whether as nuts, crypto-Communists, or a spiritual movement – were projections that deeply underestimated the rational pragmatism of leading Green exponents.

To realize the historical significance of the Green party, one must alternate between nearness and distance. As Andreas Wirsching argued (p. XI), in a long-run perspective it brought about the “most radical change in the German federal party system since the 1950s”. Seen in

an international perspective, the party is the world leader among Green parties. Indeed, it is more admired from afar than from close-by. When we come up close, instead, the question keeps coming up: How green were, and are, the Greens? In those times, only seldom did environmental problems take center stage in the internal party debate. It seems that the party drew neither momentum nor a uniting force from environmental politics. The managing of “up-the-list movers” (*Nachrückern*) in its lethal rotation system occupied the party three times more than all environmental problems taken together. In a 1984 outburst, Roland Vogt called the Sindelfinger resolution that prescribed the two-year rotation a “work of the devil”. (p. 535) Dirk Schneider, who in 1991 was exposed as a Stasi informant, was the one who spoke most loudly in favor of the rotation system (p. 565 ff.), to the detriment of the party.

Thus, it was hardly the Green party that brought new environmental themes to the national political agenda. It is striking that in both volumes environmental organization and action groups are only mentioned sporadically. Indeed, a detailed study of Green politics clearly shows in what measure an alliance between new citizens’ movements and the media is necessary to approach newly recognized environmental issues. The “Greens’ lack of history” is sometimes mentioned as a well-known fact (p. 912). This is another aspect that damaged them. For example, they showed greatly exaggerated apprehensions about the Nazis’ appropriation of the terms “homeland” (*Heimat*) and “nature” – as if this was not all the more true of terms such as “movement” and “socialism” – and thereby cut themselves off from a vital source of environmental awareness, namely, love of nature and of one’s homeland. On p. 914 we read: “Jo (Müller) recounts the shock he felt, when he first saw the green Farmer’s Day poster, at the way the German oak (what a symbol!) thrust across the poster like a phallus.” Reading these documents, one realizes that, although the Greens, as radical liberals, were always ready to conjure up the bogeyman of “bureaucracy”, many enthusiastic bureaucrats issued from their ranks. The Green experiences were such as to allow them to rediscover not just the functional, but also the human value of institutions. Thus came the “ah-ha experience”, the realization that so much deception and friction loss could be avoided as soon as specific distributions of tasks, hierarchies, and procedures were accepted and maintained. The obscure hero in these documents is Michael Vesper, who was not a member of Parliament, but a “mere”

party secretary. While the Greens were still debating over the trustworthiness of the new electronic devices, Vesper sat all night at his PC and with rugged patience brought the necessary minimum of order, and also gave the decision-making processes a consistent written form that was to be of use for future historians.

In spite of all the endless discussions on record, it is often hard to figure out where and how the political agenda of the Green party was set, because its hierarchies – which most surely did exist – were of an informal character. The “iron rule of the small number” applied to the Greens as well as other parties. Decisions were taken in small circles, and just as well in bars at night as in official recorded meetings. The party’s flaunted openness actually went hand in hand with a strong “insiderness”. Indeed, for today’s new generation of historians many Green records are harder to understand than the Reichstag minutes of the time of Bismarck. More explanations for outsiders, in addition to Helge Heidermeyer’s excellent introduction, would have been useful. All in all, however, this is a groundbreaking collection of documents. It sets studies on the history of environmental movements on a new foundation and, with its tangy liveliness, offers much food for thought for those wishing to shed light on the origins of our present age.