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Monday October 11th 2010

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## Germany's Greens

# Greenery in high places

## Germany's Green party is flourishing

Oct 7th 2010 | BERLIN

LEADING lights of Germany's Green party can sound like Zen masters. "Only one who changes can stay true to himself," intones Renate Künast, co-chairman of the Greens in the Bundestag. Ludger Volmer, once party chairman, speaks of the "art of inconsistency". Koan-like utterances come naturally to a party that grew out of youthful protests in the 1970s, became an "anti-party party" in 1980 and then wielded power as part of a centre-left government from 1998 to 2005. Now in opposition, the Greens are riding higher in polls than ever. In elections next year they could take charge of one or even two state governments for the first time.

That would be a big shift. Post-war German politics has been ruled by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which usually form majorities by recruiting smaller partners (the CDU now governs with the liberal Free Democratic Party, or FDP). But the big parties' share of the vote has been declining for years. In Baden-Württemberg, a CDU stronghold that holds elections in March, and in Berlin, an SPD fief that votes next autumn, the Greens are ahead of the SPD (one poll says they have also closed the gap nationally). This threatens to upend the traditional hierarchy of the centre-left parties, which Gerhard Schröder, a former SPD chancellor, likened to that of "cook and waiter."

If Germans are developing a taste for Green cuisine, it is partly because the other options look unappetising. Voters are disappointed with both the governing parties, especially the FDP, some of whose supporters are tempted by Green-tinged liberalism. The SPD is still in the throes of an identity crisis brought on by its relatively reformist record in government, which alienated its working-class base.

More important, Greens insist, is the tastiness of their own recipes. "The values and political purposes the Greens fought for for 30 years are now becoming mainstream," says Ralf Fücks, head of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, a Green-linked think-tank. Ecology matters as much as ever but now it is seen as the driver of an innovation-fuelled "great transformation" of the economy. Rights for women (half the Greens' political jobs are reserved for them), immigrants and gays are big themes. The state has much to do, from improving education and welfare to re-regulating finance. Reassuringly, all this is to take place within the "framework of liberal democracy and a market-based economy", says Mr Fücks.

This is radicalism plus responsibility, greenery plus growth, party politics and anti-party attitudes all at once. In pursuit of their goals the Greens are "prepared for every pragmatic compromise", says Mr Volmer, who wrote a book about them after leaving politics. But as the party advances it will find it harder to sustain tactical agility along with fidelity to principle.

Its keenest supporters are well-educated urbanites; no party's voters are richer. Socially and economically they are *bürgerlich* (bourgeois) as supporters of the two centre-right parties. But they vote for their values, not their interests. "We don't represent a *Bürgertum* that thinks only of itself," says Ms Künast.

Now they are at the barricades once again. Protests erupted in September after Angela Merkel, the chancellor, decided to extend a 2022 deadline for phasing out nuclear power set by Mr Schröder's SPD-Green coalition. In Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg's capital, the Greens have helped lead resistance to a grand project to shift the city's rail traffic underground. On September 30th scores of demonstrators were hurt in clashes with police. Mr Fücks sees a "danger we will fall back into hostility we thought we had overcome."

Conflict has been clarifying. The Greens had been flirting with the CDU as a possible coalition partner. This makes sense, especially since hopes of resurrecting the SPD-Green coalition have diminished now that the ex-communist Left party is established as a fifth force in the Bundestag. But a pairing with the CDU would stretch the Greens' capacity for creative inconsistency to the limit. That option is off the table and left-right polarisation has returned, at least temporarily.

The Greens will soon start to discover just how mainstream their ideas really are. Mrs Merkel has begun to attack them as enemies of progress. Plans for spending and taxing more can be made to look dreadfully left-wing rather than intriguingly progressive. Some analysts think the Green ascent is a political bubble.

Not so, says Lothar Probst of the University of Bremen. The Greens' middle-aged, university-educated constituency is growing as a proportion of the electorate. The party is unlikely to eclipse the SPD by the time of the next federal election in 2013, but it

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could catch up soon after that. The first Green chancellor will no doubt have a taste for paradox.

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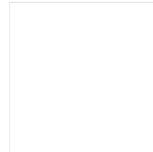
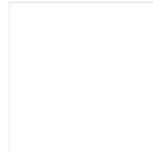
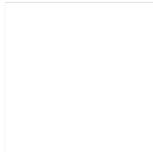
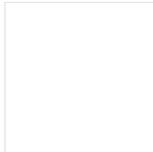
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