

FRIDAY, November 9, 2007: In a conversation: Ottmar Schreiner (SPD), André Brie (The Left) and Christian Ströbele (Greens) on communicating valves, left voters – and left governmental majorities

“Coalition of the Willing”

First, there was the unification of Left Party and WASG, then came the Afghanistan vote by the Greens in Göttingen, now there are even the resolutions of the SPD party congress. Last but not least the surveys on social justice, minimum wages and Hartz IV. Is Germany shifting further to the Left? Is there a left structural majority? Or is that more myth than political reality? The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Hessen wanted to know it, and at the end of October invited three politicians for a dispute that engaged for a cross-over between SPD, Greens and the Left, but in their own parties are not necessarily considered opinion leaders. The debate was moderated by the journalist Wolfgang Storz.

STORZ: Mr. Brie, Dietmar Bartsch said on occasion of the 100-day anniversary of the party The Left that if the pension at 67 and Hartz IV were abolished and the federal army was withdrawn from Afghanistan, it would not be bad if the Left Party became superfluous that way. Possibly a somewhat pointed remark, but it raises a central question. How strong you want to have the SPD if it now possibly executed a change of direction concerning the Agenda 2010? Do you have to imagine that like communicating tubes – will you then go down again?

BRIE: I was not very happy with the way Dietmar Bartsch expressed that, he is supposed to have said that with a wink of the eye. Of course, the Left is about more than that – we need a real profile that goes beyond the demands you mention, even if these touch many people in an existential way. However, I think that the actual function of the Left reaches far beyond getting underway a strategic project with the SPD and the Greens.

STORZ: Therefore, no communicating tubes...

BRIE: No, and no zero-sum game, because the SPD in past years has lost adherents mainly to the non-voter camp. If now a left party like ours fetches such people from this camp into politics, there may also develop a win-win situation that benefits democracy and helps another social project in this republic on the way.

STORZ: Mr. Ströbele, we have had here in Frankfurt for one and a half years a very well functioning city government, not only the Union says that, also the Greens. There are now discussions on black-green options in the federal countries or also at the federal level. Small skirmishes or a real strategic option for your party?

STRÖBELE: I should lie if I did not confirm that of course such reflections come up ever again among the Greens at the federal as well as at the regional level, for instance, in Berlin or in Baden-Württemberg. I myself think nothing of that, because such a project from the point of view of interior and legal policy alone, where I am myself very engaged, is excluded. I cannot imagine to be sitting together with Mr. Schäuble and to discuss how we should introduce online investigations.

STORZ: At the end of November, you will have a party congress that will deal last but not least with social policy. Won't it come there to similar refusals of the Agenda 2010 as now within the SPD?

STRÖBELE: I think it would be illusionary and also wrong to completely wrong to part from the Agenda 2010 and from the merging of unemployment insurance and social support – that was correct. Yet, we have told again and again, ever since the introduction of the Agenda 2010, that cannot have been all. We need changes in Hartz IV, for instance, the increase of the normal rates. At the same time, the Greens are discussing completely new ways with respect to social justice – a social insurance in the health system or an unconditional basic income, which distinguishes itself completely from today's social system.

STORZ: Mr. Schreiner, is the decision in your party in favour of a prolonged receipt of UM I a step to simply let out air, or the entry into the exit and a turning away from Agenda 2010?

SCHREINER: First of all, I do not believe in the letting out of air, because the point on UM I is embedded in a nine-point catalogue that Beck presented. Moreover, there exists for elder unemployed as before a special need for protection. If you look at the increases in employment in the current business cycle, they correspond among the elderly unemployed more or less to those during the business cycle 1998-2000, and that means without Agenda 2010 – to the dot exactly the same increases. At the same time, the unemployment quota among the over-50-year olds is as before significantly higher than among other age groups. We have, among the over 60-year-old an absolute employment level of somewhat more than 700,000, meaning an exorbitantly high unemployment. Therefore, there is this need for protection, and in contrast to the position of the Greens an extension of the length of receipt of Unemployment Money I.

That is one justification, the second one is: We need, far beyond this UM-I story, an offensive employment politics not only for the elderly, but also for the elderly. We hide a number of unemployed people in the One-Euro jobs, calculated for six months, after that people are out on the street again as before. That means we need employment projects over several years especially for elderly unemployed, who even when the business cycle is lastingly high, would no longer have a chance to find a job. Therefore, I follow those who say: encouragement of occupation has absolute priority.

STORZ: You say, no air was left out. Is it therefore the entry into a political turn, as far as the Agenda 2010 is concerned?

SCHREINER: Peter Glotz once said that the SPD is not a fast boat that abruptly changes its course, but a big tanker that navigates at a fast pace. To repeat, this UM I story is embedded in a more comprehensive catalogue. There also counts here the reform of lease work. In the year 2003, the greatest economic minister of all times, Wolfgang Clement, liberalised lease work almost completely with the result that we have today up to 800,000 leased workers, tendency on the rise. A third point from this catalogue is the demand for a concept against child poverty as one of the consequences of Hartz IV.

STORZ: Thus a form of entry into a change of course?

SCHREINER: Yes, in a form of change of course.

STORZ: To all of you the question, is there a perspective for red-red-green policy after the federal elections in 2009, or is that a mere illusion? How large are the overlaps between the SPD, the Left and the Greens? How many obstacles need to be jumped?

BRIE: You ask: perspective or illusion? To me, the question does not look like that: to me, this perspective exists without any doubt. I don't know, however, whether it is realistic as an option already in 2009. We urgently need – Ottmar Schreiner just said that – a completely different policy. We witness a division of society which is growing ever deeper and in the process of solidifying. Hartz IV families are really excluded, and the worst is: Even if neoliberalism, following my impression, is beyond its zenith, it has nonetheless conquered a last big victory, the society now also deals culturally with its million-fold exclusionary practice. To me, this is the most urgent challenge of the last two years – and at the same time the impulse for my conviction that the perspective, for which you are asking, is necessary.

We have – for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic – the possibility of a structural and cultural majority beyond CDU, CSU and FDP. For my party, this may not, however, be a question of a merely numerical alliance. Also not a matter of working off a minimal catalogue, as Oskar Lafontaine has described it – pension with 67, minimal wage, Afghanistan and so on. It would need to be a strategic project – what is required is serious restructuring of the whole of social policy, employment policy, environmental policy, foreign policy and democracy in this country. To this end, we need a change in the intellectual climate in this country, because only then can there be a social movement that carries such an alliance.

The lack of dialogue between the three parties is irresponsible. Even if we contemplate the whole thing only for 2013, the debates should be started now.

SCHREINER: I do not want to discuss any years now, the question is whether one can agree on such a project, or however you may call it. There are enough challenges that a project of social justice – I do not even call it that way – would be faced with. We have to do in fact with a social split as our republic has not seen it since 1949. If you only look at the happy message of the 50s, packaged in the book cover “High standard of living for everybody”! The title itself spoke volumes, because there was contained in this welfare-for-everybody message by Ludwig Erhard a central point. The social market economy is the overcoming of an outdated cleavage between rich and poor. In that respect, we need to be concerned at present mainly with a social integration project against additional division.

STORZ: With what contents?

SCHREINER: There, the keywords are clear: We have again more working poor, so that the demand for minimum wages would already result in an amendment of Hartz IV. Hartz IV has solved the rules for impositions on people in the possibly most radical way, where an unemployed – no matter how qualified he is – can be forced to do work at any, however so shitty income. The minimum wage would sweep away

this central pillar of the Hartz laws, which is why the demand for it is of strategic importance. If the past years had one advantage, then the one that thanks to the debate about the Agenda 2010, light was really thrown into the caves of this society and poverty became a public topic. We know today how the working poor live, we know about starvation wages and about exclusion.

Because that is so, we need to discuss mainly about an adequate economic policy. During the past years, there has been neither a modern, nor a left, nor a right-wing economic policy, but none at all. Economic policy was replaced by repressive labour market policy. Why do we not debate about the solution approaches chosen in Scandinavia? If we had a public employment sector like Sweden, there would be full employment in Germany. In Sweden, we have areas of pre-school care, into which we force 1€ jobbers without the appropriate training, whereas in Sweden, the people who work in the pre-schools are full professionals.

The next point, childhood poverty, educational misery: The Scandinavian countries spend up to 8 percent of the GDP for education – in Germany it is four. Tendency falling despite all Sunday speeches! There we need not talk long about the fact that in Berlin the child of a secondary school teacher that grows up in Zehlendorf, has 90 times higher chances to get to a high school diploma and study at a university than the child of a migrant in Kreuzberg. These for me are central pillars of a social integration projects deserving of its name.

STRÖBELE: On the question of left electoral majorities, I need not beg conspiracy theories. I already saw that after the elections to the federal parliament in 2005, if I simply looked at the numbers, added percentages, and said, if I judge the votes that were cast for SPD, PDS and Green as rather more left – I shall say that cautiously – then this is a larger majority for a left government than 1998, when we did Red-Green. And I said immediately after the election 2005, if we take seriously the wish of the voters, one should at least think about this option – I was almost ostracised. I know that from further times, the feeling that you then stand alone in a corner and are treated as if you were completely crazy.

As we know, it was considered completely inconceivable in the former Cold war bastion West Berlin, in the light of the experiences with the wall and the oppressive SED regime that the population there would ever resign to a situation, where the PDS participates in government in the whole of Berlin – yet, we now have there a coalition between SPD and PDS. And even got it back after the vote of September 2006, be it with clear losses for the PDS.

STORZ: The question is, do you need to wait until the social atmosphere admits for such a constellation?

STRÖBELE: In order to answer that question, you need not even remember the time when the Greens were still the urchins; you may just as well refer to the Berlin experiences. In other words, I consider it completely possible and also necessary to turn left electoral majorities into governmental majorities. And I even go one step further, why does everybody always talk only of 2009? I am a lone prophet in the desert who says that this grand coalition won't last as long. We shall in the near future – at the latest in 2009, however – be faced with the question. What do you do

with an electoral result as it ever again shows up in surveys? There you need to clarify already now, what really fits together.

However, I warn André Brie against saying that it is the big project to build up the completely new society. I myself fell completely on the face, with such ideas, when I committed to the first red-green government coalition in Berlin, and also said somewhat euphorically, that is now the chance in a century, finally, it will be possible to do politics in the interest of the people. That did not last long – measured by the pragmatic nature of daily politics that was probably a completely wrong expectation. You should not make too many claims, because these can't be realised the way planned.

STORZ: However, there is a number of common points between these three parties, I hear.

STRÖBELE: They exist, ranging up to and into social policy, because after all even the PDS does not seriously demand the elimination of Hartz IV. You can read that in its last electoral programme, in which you can still find this phrase, but where there then appears a whole number of proposals on how Hartz IV can be changed. That only makes sense if you basically accept Hartz IV. Because at the SPD as well as among the Greens, there are now half a dozen or even a dozen reflections – depending whom you ask - on changing basic things to Hartz IV: from higher normal amounts up to corrections as far as the exemption of money saved for old-age prevention are concerned etc. etc. etc. Among the Greens, this is large undisputed and transspectral – in other words, everybody agrees on that.

And in peace and security policy, there is not only Oskar Lafontaine. Who recently listened to the federal parliament debate on the Afghanistan mission, what party chairman Lothar Bisky told – that was miles away, from what I usually hear there. There was certainly the one or the other note, where I nodded and thought, oh well, if the PDS develops in this direction...

Yet, the large problem remains, and that also shows with André Brie, that the PDS up to now is not yet positioned at all, that on several fields of policy, we do not even know yet what they want. However, I would be the last one, who would say that we should not try it with one another, because society is not yet ripe for it.

STORZ: Why is there not already now a fraction-overarching oppositional work? Why don't left people in the Left Party, the Greens and the SPD say: we shall simply enter a motion on minimum wage or railway privatisation and so on. If you take seriously parliament and information of the people, this would be a first step after all. Why is it not taken?

STRÖBELE: There I can answer with a simple sentence, because that is excluded in the coalition agreement between SPD and CDU/CSU. There it says: alliances with other parties and fractions terminate this coalition. We could maybe sit down together and write something on railways or minimum wage and then propose it to our fractions. I should think that would largely be accepted. Against that, there goes the fact that the SPD is still in the large coalition.

STORZ: Well, I imagine that I am apparently profoundly naïve. I still think. There are deputies in the Federal Parliament, they have convictions, and they suddenly realise it is all so bad as Mr. Schreiner has said here. So, you need to do something.

BRIE: I think it is pretty much as Christian Ströbele has just presented it – it is primitive and as profane. However, I still want to say something on his reproach that one should not think immediately on the great, overall social transformation. I do not think of another society; yet I want a little bit more than Oskar Lafontaine's four minimal demands: minimum wages, retraction of pension at 67, Hartz IV and retreat from Afghanistan. That won't cover it, and for my party it would be irresponsible to leave it as narrow. It needs to be something more, meaning, a reform of Hartz IV needs to be really debated substantially. I also know that in the SPD many want an inflation adjustment of the regular rates; however, that to me is no change of Hartz IV. It really needs to go into the direction of a basic income for people that gives them independence. Then also the putting together of unemployment and social aid is certainly something reasonable – but not at the current level, and not at today's conditions. Maybe Ottmar Schreiner - to return to your question – will sign a corresponding motion. Whether the SPD as a whole is prepared to go along with such a break, I don't know.

What I call a project is a basic political change in Germany that I consider urgently required. Therefore, my plea that the Left in the three parties begins to discuss the content of such a change and of a coalition.

STORZ: Mr. Schreiner, the word basic income has been used here. There has just been a decision by the Baden-Württemberg Greens who asked this. Within the Left Party, this is also an important topic. Up to now, the trade unions, and – if I really followed that – also parts of the SPD said that is out of the question for us, even less so an unconditional basic income. Is that so?

SCHREINER: To say the least, the question hardly plays any role in the SPD and also not in the trade unions. I am also myself very sceptical – maybe that will look different in ten years. Before we discuss this topic, and possibly struggle there for majorities, we need to take care of a work-related basic income. That I consider fundamental in the light of the continued wage dumping in Germany. If we managed to push through an adequate minimum wage – and there is a clear majority in the population for that – this would be a gigantic step. And if we managed to push through, in analogy to minimum wages, also minimum pensions, this would even better. After all, I may not explain to anyone, why a woman who has worked 40 years as sales clerk and in that context has earned poorly, will have to make do with social aid, when she gets old. That means, if I move in the direction of such a minimum income related to preconditions, there might from that then later on also result possibilities for a minimum income free of pre-conditions. At this point, we do not even have a minimum income for those, who make major advance contributions in the sense of gainful work.

Home where I live the ceramic workers at Villeroy and Boch go home with maybe 1800 or 1900 gross. I would have to explain to them, why they with their taxes need to finance a basic income free of any preconditions to a lawyers' son. They would with justification put their bare arses into my face.

STORZ: But the ceramic workers would also get that.

SCHREINER: I warn of now opening this can of worms, because there are at least twelve different models. There is the model of this superintendent-pharmacist, Götz Werner, there are left models. You would have to clear very precisely, how do the financial transfer go, because in some of these basic income models, they run from the bottom to the top, there the small folk still finance those on top an additional income who do not even know already where to put their money.

STRÖBELE: There I want to object quite decisively – and for a quite different reason. I am after all of the same opinion with Ottmar Schreiner that we need the minimum wage. I also agree that we need important corrections of Hartz IV. And I think that one may not qualify the one-Euro jobs and this whole low-wage culture as work, because as a matter of fact, those concerned still belong in the unemployed, not in the working people statistic. Yet from a completely different angle – I am after all basically a law and interior policy politicians – I imagine that interior minister Schäuble would demand of the whole population that it needs to inform a state organ, with whom it shares its refrigerator, or whose tooth brush it uses. I mean all the deep cuts into personal affairs, to which millions of unemployed people are exposed if they want to receive UC II. We have a gigantic apparatus for supervision, observation and control that can no longer be combined with human dignity any longer. We need to exit from these constraints.

Human dignity is just as much ignored if you force people to send off 30, 40 or a 100 job applications a year, even though there are not any jobs for them on the job market. That is crazy and schizophrenic. Therefore, a vehement plea, which is also still very much disputed among the greens, to discuss the idea of an unconditional basic income on principle. It won't get introduced today and not tomorrow, but it needs to be the perspective. We need to take this constraint and undignified treatment from those who are unemployed and live of transfer services.