

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL

INDIVIDUAL STUDY TOUR TO GERMANY

25 SEPTEMBER-12 OCTOBER 2013

Mr Ben Oquist (Australian Greens)

Chief of Staff to Senator Christine Milne, Leader of the Australian Greens, Senator for Tasmania

Contents

- Executive summary3
- Observations of the Election4
 - Failure to Focus on Core Business - Ecological Transformation.....4
 - The “Verbieten” Party and ‘Veggie Day’4
 - Too Many Taxes, Too Many Policies5
- The Process of Reflection6
 - The Post-election Conference Debrief6
 - Member Engagement.....7
 - Public Engagement – The Bubble7
 - The Future8
- Background:.....9
 - Greens Party General Information and Structure9
 - Green Youth9

Executive summary

The German Greens are widely regarded as a power house for Greens worldwide. The Party first entered the German national parliament, the Bundestag, in large numbers in the 1980s and has played significant role in German politics since then, both in and outside Government.

The objective of my study tour was to observe and learn from the operations and strategy of the successful German Greens. I had a range of questions and issues I wanted to explore, including how they handled power, coalition negotiations, ministries, party relationships, staffing and more.

I arrived in Germany immediately following the 2013 German national elections. Earlier in the year the Greens had been expected to perform very well, with the potential to be in a power-sharing national Government. The result of the election, however, fell short of these expectations.

While the Greens all but maintained their numbers in the parliament, the Greens vote dropped from 11 per cent at the previous election to approximately 8.5 per cent. More significantly, the vote dropped from polling highs, which had had the party well into the 20 per cent plus range 18 months ahead of the election. So it wasn't that the vote was down 2-3 per cent on the previous election, rather most people saw it as a fall of well over 10 per cent from where it had been during the course of the electoral term.

Of course, there were also external factors not in the Greens control like the popularity of Chancellor Merkel and her move to 'steal' Greens policy by agreeing to phase out nuclear power in Germany following the Fukushima disaster.

Loss of support for Greens came from across political spectrum with a leading faction member stating 300,000 voters went to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), 400,000 to the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and some to the new Euro sceptic party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). There was unanimous agreement amongst all Greens that the election had been a near total failure on expectations.

Initially I had planned to visit Germany during the election campaign to witness campaign politics in full swing. However, in retrospect it was much more informative to go after the election when lesson were being learnt, when honest reflection and introspection were happening and party members, officials and politicians were not involved in the 'hype' of campaign mode.

Indeed, once I got to Germany and began talking to people, I soon realised I was going to gain more valuable and unique insights from the recent failure of the Greens than from their earlier success. The focus of my study tour changed to the reasons why the Greens had under-performed at the 2013 election and the *process* the Greens used following the election to understand and learn from the poor result.

During my study tour, I met and interviewed Greens MPs, staff members, academics and Party officials at state and national level in Berlin, Munich and Stuttgart.

In broad terms, those I spoke to raised two themes:

- the Greens' failure to concentrate on their core business – the ecological/economic transformation (energy and climate policy); and
- the perception of the Greens as the "Verbieten" Party ('forbidding' party) - the Party that wanted to ban things rather than the 'freedom' or libertarian ideology.

In addition, two specific issues repeatedly came up as to why the Greens did badly:

- the push by the Greens to increase taxes; and
- the debate about banning meat.

I will outline my observations on each of these in this report and discuss the process of post-election reflection undertaken by the Greens Party.

Observations of the Election

Failure to Focus on Core Business - Ecological Transformation

The big repeated strategic error of the overall Greens campaign approach was the failure to focus on the big ecological, climate change and energy policies. The Former leader, Joschka Fischer, has made this point publically where he criticised both the SPD and the Greens for their failure to focus on energy policy.

With the benefits of hindsight, it seemed everybody recognised this as a fault. Indeed, as one MP put it *“after the election, everyone is an ecologist now”*. What wasn't completely clear, was why the error was allowed to take place in the first place given there was such widespread acknowledgment of the issue.

Greens State Premier Winfried Kretschmann gave a passionate speech at the election debrief conference, and at the Realo-faction debrief, about the failure of the Greens to properly articulate the core business of the Greens, that is, transforming the economy so it is ecological and is not based on resource depletion. The speech could be summarised this way - *“if not now, when? If not us Greens, who?”*

He argued passionately that Greens must show how a transformation between ecology and economy can happen and how it can be done. *“If the Greens can't do that, if the Greens can't do that in Germany - where we have the engineers, education and wealth, who can!!?”* It was the Greens responsibility to do this. First and foremost. *This was the Greens role in history”*.



Another said *“it's not true that social policies are not important, but they don't win us votes. We won't win by leading with them”*.

Overall, many felt the Greens failed to play to the Party's environmental strengths. A party MP who lost their seat said *“we Greens did badly because we thought like a decathlon athlete they should make their weak sports stronger and bring them to the same level. Actually, a good decathlete has two or three very strong legs that they strive for.”*

The “Verbieten” Party and ‘Veggie Day’

A common critique of the election was that the Greens had become the “Verbieten” Party. That is, the party came to be seen as the party that wanted to ban or forbid people doing things. Tax this, stop that, ban something else.

The move for a vegetarian day when people would be encouraged to not eat meat became a huge symbol for this perception. The negative impact on the Greens from this ‘veggie day’ controversy cannot be underestimated. It was one the most cited reason for why the Greens did poorly in the election.

Interestingly, the proposal for voluntary vegetarian day had been a long standing Greens policy, however at this election the issue gained much more controversy and Greens political opponents manipulated it in to something that is wasn't. The public quickly got the impression that the Greens were going to stop individuals from eating meat. That eating meat would be banned. Of course the Greens approach was not this, and was actually in line with much mainstream thinking that would simply encourage people to eat less; meaning a climate, animal rights and health policy.

As said by one MP, *“yes reform agriculture, but people thought we wanted to ban them from eating meat”*.

Some of the professionals of the party, with hindsight, say the party wasn't well enough prepared for the attacks; that they should have realised that the attacks would inevitably come following the big successes over recent years; that the Right and the CDU would not stand by quietly to see their vote being eaten into by the Greens, without a concerted campaign against them.

There are certainly big lessons for the Greens to learn from this election. What can look like relative small weaknesses, or problems, can be blown up by opponents into a much larger issue. It is usually the case that these seemingly small problems feed into an already existing narrative or part-belief about the party.

Nonetheless, many saw this not just as a reputational problem for the Greens, but a fundamental issue of principle. The Greens had let themselves drift politically and ideologically away from one of the core principles or values where the Greens came from. The Greens have deep libertarian roots. Indeed many of the seeds of the Greens were sown in the 1960s freedom counter culture movements.

As one MP told me *‘we lost our Libertarian wing. Freedoms and liberty should be at our heart.’* With another saying we *“should be party of civil liberties and rights. Not just the party of banning. We need more respect for the personal life. We can't regulate everything. Loving the world, loving people. More positive”*.

One key advocates of this view is Reinhard Bütikofer a leading German Green now a member of the European Parliament. He repeatedly said that the Greens didn't pursue our libertarian wing, and *“we do this at our peril”*.

Reinhard described the Greens as having two important wings - one collective based on the need to protect the environment and the other about freedom for people. The Greens often present gay marriage as a right – never a libertarian issue. *‘The party only flew well when both wings were flapping’*.

Too Many Taxes, Too Many Policies

The Greens went to the election with several plans to increase tax paid by individuals. While the political context across much of Europe allowed discussion of increased taxes, many felt the Greens went too far or in particular were *‘too complicated’* in their tax increase pitch.

“I find the Greens good, but not if they want to take too much money from my pocket, I don't vote for them”

Note that the French Socialist Party (which won their election) went to the recent election proposing a new marginal tax rate of 75 per cent and indeed immediately after the election, the CDU in Germany began talking about the need for a modest tax increase to help balance the books.

So it was not without some popular and economic credentials that the Greens went to the election proposing tax increases. However the Greens proposals were comprehensive, complex and difficult to understand. Many people were led to believe that the tax rises would hit them personally rather than just the very well off.

The Greens had proposed:

- High earner income tax;
- Capital gains tax increase; and
- A clamp down on generous (by Australian standards) income splitting.

The complexity of the Greens proposals also meant they lost some of their popular appeal. As one staffer said *“the Left had a tax for millionaires while then Greens had this complicated costly proposal to tax the top 10 per cent, but looked like it taxed everyone”*.

As Winfried Kretschmann said *“We shouldn't do so many taxes raises. Maybe one or two but not five or six”*.

The ‘too many taxes’ issue was in a way a subset of a wider problem for the Greens - too many policies. The Greens official policy platform was a 300 plus page dense book, which it seems safe to assume, that literally no one read, but had taken significant resources to produce. The public couldn't really care less, yet it distracted from the Greens core strengths.

As one state MP said *“we did badly in the election because we were very Green. Merkel did well and could run without topics. Germany is good and we have a good time and nothing has to change. We should have known that tax increase would be unpopular”*.

Or as another Green said we had *“too many policies. Not enough emotion, instead our figures added up. There were 15 main themes – this was way too many. We needed just four. They got lost”*.

The Process of Reflection

Of particular interest were the methods by which the Greens conducted their election post mortem. It was a fully public affair. Of course there were private meetings, informal discussions and factional meetings, however MPs immediately acknowledged their defeat and disappointment in the media and at public conferences.

The process was made slightly easier because, despite fewer votes, the number of MPs was not greatly affected (although many less than the Party had hoped for). This was because two other small parties just missed out on the five per cent threshold meaning the remaining parties were allocated the additional seats between them.

The Post-election Conference Debrief

There was a formal delegates council conference debrief two weeks after polling day of 150 German Greens elected delegates. It was open to all media, the Greens and public. Approximately 750 people attended over the weekend with a huge media presence, including TV networks crossing live to the conference and a car park full of TV satellite vans. Delegates did most of the speaking at the conference, but other members were able to have their say by putting their names forward, with a ballot used to determine speakers.



what went wrong.

The discussion and speakers were very forthright in their criticisms of what went wrong in the election campaign. Speaker after speaker, including many leading Greens politicians and party leaders spoke strongly against what the Greens had just done and said during the election campaign. From an outside perspective it seemed a very cathartic process. With a range of people allowed, and indeed encouraged, to have their say and the issues debated publically. Very publically.

Effectively there were three days of conferences where people were able to vent, contribute and get stuck into

Almost anybody playing a serious role in the Greens and certainly seeking to play a role at the national level will belong to one of the two factions in the German Greens. The Realo faction is now commonly called the 'reformer' group. The other faction is simply called 'the left'.

Factional meetings were also a forum for debate about the election campaign. I attended the post-election debrief of the Realo faction with some 300-400 people in attendance with MPs from state, national and the European Union parliaments as well as general party members and officials. While the media were not given access, they were door-stopping delegates on the way in, so there was plenty of coverage of the event.

Member Engagement

Around the world, many political parties are grappling with how to re-engage or re-energise their membership supporter base. They are actively debating issues such as whether leaders should be elected directly by members and whether there should be primaries to elect candidates. The Greens in Germany and Europe are also grappling with member engagement, despite having a more active membership base than most.

The Greens across Europe are using a primaries system for the first time to select their leaders for the European Union election. Anyone in Europe (an email and European mobile number as identification) can vote for the two leaders or spokespeople for the Greens EU campaign (to stand for the position, candidates have to be nominated by your state party and at least three other countries Greens party).

The Greens sent their entire draft election program to all members. This was a 300-page plus book first prepared by working group from the board of the party. The members then submitted 2600 proposed amendments and additions! The working group tries to accommodate those amendments, if possible but if the mover isn't satisfied they have the right to put it to a vote at the national council of 800 delegates. Three days of debating amendments ended up with the huge book.

Members also voted to select the nine 'projects' for the election campaign from 58 possibilities. Three had to be selected from each of three areas: modern society; ecology; and social justice. The nine selected were:

1. "Energy-change" program with 100 per cent renewables by 2035
2. Minimum wage
3. More kindergartens and removal of the 150 Euro rebate if you don't send your children
4. Remove private health insurance
5. Stronger regulation of banks
6. Reform agriculture, promote small farms over industrialised farming
7. New alternative to GDP economic indicators
8. No weapons for dictators or undemocratic regimes (Germany is third largest exporter of weapons)
9. More money to projects to combat fascism and racism.



Public Engagement – The Bubble

An innovative campaign tool used by the Greens during the election campaign to engage the public was again used in the 2013 campaign - the green bubble. It has now been picked up by the Austrian Greens.

The bubble is a large interactive public office in the centre of Berlin ('Breitscheidplatz') where members of the public could walk in or online address any question to the party. It was set up for the last three days and nights of the campaign.

They had about 400 party volunteers for the three days to answer around 8000 questions.

The Future

The day I arrived in Germany, the front page of the paper featured Merkel choosing between a green frog and a red frog indicating which coalition partner she would chose to form Government.

Despite 'winning' the election she did not have an absolute majority and would have to rule with another party. Her only two possible partners were the Greens or the SPD. Much media speculation whirled around these possibilities.



But in talking to Greens MPs and officials it became very clear there was no way the Greens were serious about the idea about going into coalition with Merkel, even if it meant they could be in Government with a range of ministries, policies adopted and a seat at the cabinet table.

During the election debriefs and discussion, many Greens, particularly from the Realo faction, expressed concern that the Greens had positioned themselves in that way. Their view was that the Party should have chartered a more independent course able to deal with the SPD and the CDU. As one said *“we used to be positioned in the middle. Even sitting in the middle of the parliament. Now we just in the middle of the SPD and the left”*.

“Our power perspective was too narrow. Red – Green (Greens and SPD) wasn't even possible, yet we weren't able to free ourselves from it”.

Background:

Greens Party General Information and Structure

Key facts:

- 61,000 members and growing.
- Boards are the basic governing body of the party. One national, 16 at regional or state level. 400 at sub-state level and over 1700-1800 at local level.
- The party has an internal court mechanism with clearly defined process for disputes. This is required for all societies and clubs in Germany.
- National office has a €4.5 million annual budget. The total party annual budget is €38 million.
- As well as the six person Board, there is the 16 person Parteirat or party advisory board with no real decision making power but important political power. It is designed to be the forum where the different elements of the party, MPs and members communicate.
- Federal office structure with six bureaus (headed by each elected board member).

There are three principles that guide the operations and structure of the Greens party operation:

1. The Greens' rules for guaranteeing places for women. Greens have strict 50 per cent plus rule for all boards. If for any reason a place reserved for a women cannot be filled then the relevant meeting must vote to allow those places to be filled by men. Then even if such a vote is carried it must also be separately carried by a women-only caucus meeting. Then there is a cooling off period, over approximately two weeks, where an additional women candidate may be sought.
2. Separation of Party and MPs structures a key organising structure.
3. Principle of rotation of MPs - even if that doesn't work in strict practice anymore it is still an important idea that is attempted to be implemented at least for a section of MPs at each election.

Green Youth

The Young Greens have a formal, well-established role with the German Greens. The Young Greens are partly independent of the party, but receive an allocation of resources, staff and office space from the main party at the national and state level.

Some factors of note for the Young Greens:

- Strict under 28 years of age rule for membership.
- 9000 members, 200 local groups, 16 state boards.
- Members do not have to be members of the Greens and about 40 per cent of Young Greens are not members of the Greens Party.
- The Young Greens host two national congress meetings each year and about a dozen "seminars" - two or three day conferences with 50 people run by an education board.
- Young Greens leaders attend every national party Board meeting.
- Young Greens attend the weekly caucus meetings of MPs.

