

Stoiber Shadow Cabinet Damages His Campaign

by Rainer Apel

Edmund Stoiber, the German Christian Democrats' challenger to incumbent Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democrat), began in May to form his "competence team," a combination of politicians who were expected to radiate "reputation" and "high governmental skills" to the voters for the Sept. 22 national elections. But reality, and economic crisis, have intervened.

Once every week, Stoiber presented another name for that team, beginning with Lothar Späth, a former Governor of Baden-Württemberg, and now, chief executive at the Jenoptik optics plant in Jena. Another prominent name was Wolfgang Schäuble, a former Cabinet minister of the Chancellor's office and former chairman of the Christian Democrats' Bundestag parliamentary caucus. The idea was that prominent personalities like these would contrast to the governing Social Democrats' shrinking popularity, which was plunging with the worsening economic situation.

Reconstruction by Budget Cutting Fails

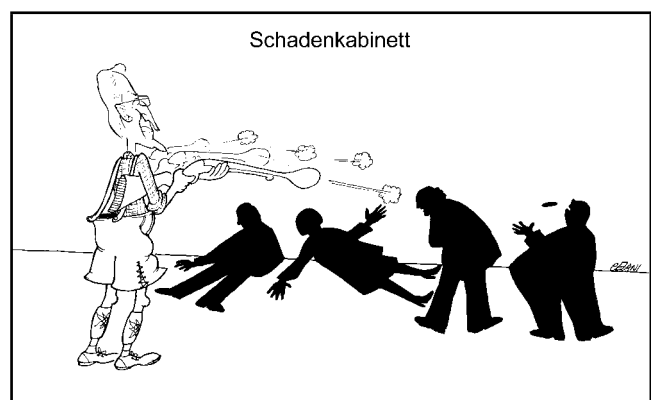
The nomination of Späth for the team posed questions, though, because he stands for tough neo-liberalism—budget cuts and privatization—whereas Stoiber himself has been careful in recent years, to build the image of caring for those

with lower incomes, and who would defend the small firms against the big corporations and banks often protected by the Social Democrats.

A conflict of interests inside the Stoiber camp seemed pre-programmed. And indeed, the troubles for Stoiber's election campaign began when, in early July, Späth endorsed Social Democratic proposals for deep cuts in the labor and welfare budgets as "revolutionary" and called on the incumbent Chancellor to implement them immediately. Stoiber had to restore his authority, and intervened to make clear that cuts in these budgets were not his own policy. Späth then blurted out that he would also advise Schröder, should *he* be re-elected, and left people wondering which candidate Späth was actually working for. Stoiber had to intervene, again, to declare that Späth was his man, and was assigned a post in a Christian Democratic Cabinet.

The next big trouble emerged for Stoiber during the Elbe River flood which hit one-third of eastern Germany and caused gigantic damage. Chancellor Schröder responded promptly and declared the flood a "national catastrophe" to be fought with "a spirit of national common sense." His staff even proposed to issue national bonds, guaranteed by the government, to create billions of extra off-budget funds for flood recovery programs in the German east. This proposal was dropped, but the debate is continuing. Schröder also began to polemicize against the European Union's Maastricht budgeting criteria, as being invalidated by the need to combat the flood with extra funds. Späth hurried to the press to declare that Maastricht had to be absolutely respected, adding that Schröder's proposal was a "miracle box" that would achieve nothing; Späth allied right away with the banks that opposed the bonds.

Here, Stoiber failed to intervene: Instead, he backed Späth and attacked Schröder on the Maastricht issue, insisting on creating reconstruction funds only by new budget cuts; he promptly lost popularity against Schröder, whose flood crisis management was met with approval by an overwhelming ma-



jority of Germans.

Stoiber then added a hasty proposal to utilize Central Bank currency-trading earnings of more than 7 billion euros, for the recovery effort, but that did not do much good for his popularity either, because he also insisted that the other areas for which these Central Bank funds were earmarked, be cut out altogether.

All of this helped to undermine Stoiber's carefully crafted image of being the big defender of lower-income German citizens, as it was clear his axe would cut the social welfare and labor budgets.

Iraq War Debate Crucial

Another big problem for Stoiber, was the decision by the Chancellor in early August, to oppose the Bush Administration's Iraq war drive in frank words, and to make it a centerpiece of his campaigning. Since the war is opposed by more than two-thirds of Germans, the traditionally pro-American Christian Democrats were faced with the danger of walking into a trap: supporting Bush but losing the support of the German voters.

Stoiber first resisted the temptation to go on a pro-Bush line, and he even went so far as to echo Schröder, remarking that German troops would not take part in any Iraq war. But then, Stoiber lost the initiative, and got drawn, step by step, into a position that would combine pro-war with anti-war views. This became most visible during the nationally televised election debate with Schröder on Sept. 8, when Stoiber failed to say anything convincing on Iraq, such that an opinion poll taken among viewers yielded 50% support for Schröder, against only 29% for Stoiber. Already before the televised debate, polls had found that the Chancellor's anti-war stance had enabled the Social Democrats to recoup support lost since April-May.

A very detrimental role in that loss of support for Stoiber has been played by Schäuble, who serves the "competence team" as chief foreign policy adviser. Schäuble has stated again and again that the importance of German-American relations implied German solidarity with Bush's "war on terrorism" wherever it goes, that a German military role in an Iraq war should not be ruled out, and even that—as the Chancellor and Stoiber said—no new United Nations mandate was required for an attack on Iraq, since the 1991 mandate was perfectly sufficient. Stoiber at first voiced differing views, but increasingly adopted his Shadow Cabinet leader's argumentation.

With that, Stoiber shot himself in the foot. A cartoon from the election campaign of Helga Zepp-LaRouche, who heads the slate of the Civil Rights Solidarity Movement (BüSo), portraying Stoiber's "*Schattenkabinett*" as a "*Schadenkabinett*," plays with a pun on the words *Schatten* (shadow) and *Schaden* (damage)—much to the delight of many German voters who have seen it.