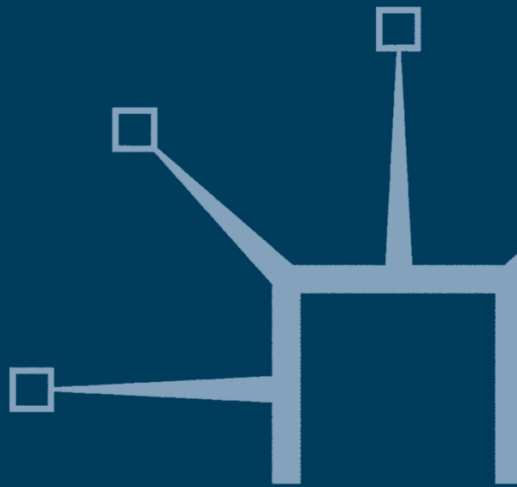


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The Left Party in Contemporary German Politics

Dan Hough, Michael Koß
and Jonathan Olsen



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Dan Hough, Michael Kofß and Jonathan Olsen

Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| AG | Working Group (within the PDS) |
| AL | (Green) Alternative List (Berlin) |
| ALEKSA | Alternative State Development Plan (Saxony) |
| APO | Extra-Parliamentary Opposition |
| ASG | Initiative for Social Justice (forerunner of WASG) |
| B90 | Alliance 90 |
| <i>Basis</i> | The rank and file of a political party |
| BEWAG | Berlin's Electricity Company |
| BSR | The Berlin City Cleaning Department |
| BVG | The Berlin Public Transport Company |
| BWK | Association of West German Communists |
| CDU | Christian Democratic Union |
| CSU | Christian Social Union |
| DKP | German Communist Party |
| DVU | German Peoples Union |
| FDJ | Free German Youth (of the GDR) |
| FDP | Free Democratic Party |
| <i>Fraktion</i> | Parliamentary Party |
| FRG | Federal Republic of Germany |
| <i>Fundis</i> | 'Fundamentalists' within the Green Party |
| GAL | Green Alternative List (Hamburg) |
| GDR | German Democratic Republic |
| Hartz IV | A package of welfare state reforms instigated by the last SPD-Green federal government |
| IG | Interest Group (within the PDS) |
| IM | Unofficial agents of the Stasi |
| KITA | Day care centres |
| KPD | Communist Party of Germany |
| KPF | Communist Platform within the PDS |
| LP | Left Party |
| MdA | Member of the Berlin <i>Land</i> Parliament |
| MdB | Member of the German Parliament |
| MdL | Member of a German <i>Land</i> Parliament (not Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg) |
| MEP | Member of the European Parliament |
| MV | Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania |

| | |
|---------------|---|
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| NPD | National Democratic Party of Germany |
| NRW | North Rhine-Westphalia |
| PDS | Party of Democratic Socialism |
| ÖBS | Publicly subsidised employment sector |
| OWUS | The Association of Small and Medium-sized Businesses and the Self-Employed in Saxony |
| <i>Realos</i> | 'Realists' within the Green Party |
| REP | Republican Party |
| SAV | Forward with the Socialist Alternative |
| SED | Socialist Unity Party of Germany |
| SPD | Social Democratic Party of Germany |
| Stasi | The GDR's state security police |
| Ver.di | Public Sector Trade Union |
| WASG | The Electoral Alternative: Labour and Social Justice |

Introduction

'A week' as former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once said 'is a long time in politics'. If a week is a long time, then a year can sometimes feel like an eternity, a fact that would seem particularly true for the politicians, activists, members and supporters of the German Left Party (*Die Linke*) when they look back on 2005. The jubilant scenes at the post-election party in Berlin's Schlossplatz, just off Unter den Linden, on the evening of the federal election on 18 September would indeed have been hard for most of them to conceive of just 12 months previously. The event was the stuff of which politicians (and their supporters) dream. The enthusiastic, frequently ecstatic, party faithful had turned out in their hundreds, throngs of newspaper journalists queued for a word from the much sought after victors and TV camera crews lapped up every moment of the jubilant celebrations. At around 7 p.m. Oskar Lafontaine, Gerhard Schröder's former finance minister, long-time doyen of the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) left-wing and now leading light in *Die Linke*, and Gregor Gysi, the ebullient, sharp-tongued and quick-witted talisman of the old Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), entered the victory tent to a cacophony of noise, striding confidently on to the stage to salute their supporters. *Die Linke* – all but non-existent on the national stage between 2002 and 2005 – had returned to the federal parliament (*Bundestag*) with an impressive 8.7 per cent of the popular vote. The Left Party became Germany's fourth largest political party, boasting 54 MdBs (MPs) and subsequently a stronger parliamentary presence than both the Green Party (51 MPs) and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (46 MPs). 'A serious political competitor to the left of the Social Democratic Party now exists in western Germany for the first time since the 1950s' boomed Gregor Gysi from the platform.¹ Few would argue that he did not have a point.

Twelve months previously the world looked a very different place. Gesine Löttsch and Petra Pau, the PDS's only elected representatives in the 2002–5 *Bundestag*, cut a sorry sight, sitting at the back of the plenary hall in Berlin's *Reichstagsgebäude*. In what seemed curiously symbolic of the PDS's position in the German party system, they were deprived for most of the legislative period of tables (which the most prominent members of all parties possessed) and telephones (other MPs possessed them; Löttsch and Pau had to leave the plenary hall to make a call as they did not, somewhat ironically, possess a table to place a telephone on)² as they no longer enjoyed the status of a 'parliamentary party'.³ The PDS appeared to be slipping into an eastern German regionalist trough, rarely seen or heard at the federal level, largely insignificant in western Germany, with politicians who received precious little media attention and were, for the most part, hardly household names in their own households.⁴ The PDS was dying, desperate to make a political impact, but devoid of enough electoral support or enough political imagination to be able to barge its way on to the political stage. The return, at the Potsdam conference of the PDS on 30–31 October 2004, of Gregor Gysi to the front ranks of the party following his partly self-imposed exile and his partly health-induced spell on the political sidelines represented the PDS's last throw of the electoral dice. Although the PDS had systematically failed to gain a foothold in western Germany under Gysi's tutelage through the 1990s, and with this the vital votes needed to hurdle the 5 per cent barrier for federal elections, delegates forgave his scandal-tinted resignation as Berlin's economics minister in July 2002 and hoped that the PDS's media star would be able to talk the party back into the *Bundestag*.⁵ But they were only hopes, and the PDS rank and file realised that finding an extra 500,000 votes was a big ask even for Gregor Gysi working at full throttle.⁶ Gysi's return and the next election (then still planned for autumn 2006) were, according to one well-informed source, 'going to be, come what may, our last chance'.⁷

A number of things happened in the intervening year that transformed the hopes of PDS/Left Party⁸ members into hard and fast expectations. Several of these were outside the party's control. A battered and bruised Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, continued pursuing policies of social and economic reform. Backed by a Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-dominated upper chamber (*Bundesrat*) he left clear (red) water to the SPD's left for new protest movements to take shape. In its pre-2005 guise the PDS was in no fit position to immediately lead any such movement; it was seen by many western Germans as too eastern, too dogmatic and, most significantly, as too attached to a failed state, the GDR.

But other forces could, and did, tap into the reservoirs of dissatisfaction that were deepening, giving the disaffected a political voice and, eventually, bringing them into the PDS's sphere of influence. Indeed, the emergence of 'The Electoral Alternative: Labour and Social Justice' (WASG) party, and subsequently the Left Party, was one of the key reasons for Lafontaine and Gysi's moment of victory in the tent on Schlossplatz on the 18th of September.

Other external influences also assisted the Left Party in finding its political feet. Gerhard Schröder's controversial decision to bring forward the date of the federal election by a full 12 months did not worry the Left Party unduly. On the contrary, it prompted the various parties and interest groups to the left of the SPD to channel their efforts into gaining parliamentary representation at the federal level. An extra 12 months would, given the traditional machinations and rivalries that are never far from the surface of left wing politics, have simply given the PDS and the WASG more opportunity to fall out with one another. The inevitable teething problems of forming a new party were subsequently postponed until the relative tranquillity of the post-election period.

Developments on the right of the political spectrum also played into the Left Party's hands. The CDU/Christian Social Union's (CSU) chancellor candidate, Angela Merkel, was, despite being born in Hamburg, an eastern German (she spent most of her youth in the Brandenburg town of Templin) and was previously leader of the CDU in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, in Germany's north-east. However, her eastern heritage never seriously looked like assuring her of any sort of *Ostbonus* (eastern bonus). On the contrary, the collaboration of the CDU with the SPD in pushing through the controversial package of social and labour market 'Hartz' Reforms, or Agenda 2010, as well as ineffectual performance as a government-in-waiting through 2005 dismayed many eastern German electors.⁹ Not enough to cost Merkel the chancellorship, but the members of her 'competence team' clearly flattered to deceive; one needlessly brought high-explosive issues such as hypothetical flat tax rates onto the political agenda (Paul Kirchhoff, Merkel's potential finance minister) while others bemoaned the fact that 'frustrated' eastern Germans could again vote in silly ways that might cost the CDU/CSU the election (Edmund Stoiber, Bavarian prime minister and federal economics minister designate). Jörg Schönbohm, CDU-deputy prime minister in the eastern state of Brandenburg, further claimed that easterners were 'proletarianised' by the pre-1989 GDR state in which they lived and were therefore more likely to accept violence as legitimate behaviour and generally behave in more wayward fashion. On message, Messrs

Kirchhoff, Stoiber and Schönbohm certainly were not. A familiar story of 'Left Party against the rest' was developing; the nuances may have been slightly different – there was no 'red socks' or 'red hands' campaign, as there had been in yesteryear, and there was little attempt to undermine the Left Party's democratic credentials – but the Left Party was certainly not unwilling to let a picture of it as (once again) a persecuted party be painted all the same.

The Left Party's success in 2005 was nonetheless not all down to being in the right place at the right time. Political opportunity structures abound, yet parties and politicians are frequently unable and/or unwilling to make the most of them. Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky – the enigmatic and sharp-tongued campaigner allied with the cool-headed and competent party manager – steered the PDS through tricky negotiations with a new and largely unknown set of western German WASG leaders. Managing (frequently without actually looking like they were trying to do so) complex processes of alliance building, while avoiding legal pitfalls, and keeping a vocal array of ideological '*Querdenker*' onside was not straightforward. Bisky and Gysi, Bodo Ramelow (the Left Party's election manager) and WASG executive board members Klaus Ernst, Axel Troost, Thomas Händel and Sabine Lösing could not have conducted this process much better.

Of protest and anti-capitalism, extremism and milieus

That the 2005 federal election was a great success for the Left Party is therefore indisputable. The election result speaks for itself. Yet understanding how the party got to this point, and what the future may hold for the 'new' party, divides, often starkly, academics and practitioners alike. Through the 1990s the PDS's successes were certainly explained in strikingly different ways, with varying emphasis placed on particular facets of the party's make-up. One thing is clear; there has been no lack of literature on the PDS, and it has become one of the most-studied parties in contemporary Germany. Through the 1990s, most analysis generally fell into one of two main schools of thought. The first saw the PDS (and it will no doubt see *Die Linke*) as a dysfunctional, disruptive element within the German political system, often bordering on the extremist fringe, contributing to a destabilising of political life; the second saw (and is also likely to continue to see) the PDS more as a stabilising, reforming, corrective influence, stressing its integrative and representative functions. It would nonetheless be a mistake to view these schools of thought as individual and distinct; significant degrees

of overlap and co-ordination exist, even if core assumptions may differ. When analysed more closely, there tend to be four key strands within these schools of thought.¹⁰

For many, the key element of the PDS's success was the post-unification protest that it gave voice to. The party was subsequently viewed as a representative of diffuse and uncoordinated protest movements.¹¹ A complex mixture of economic, political and socio-psychological dissatisfaction was perceived to be the basis of a vote for the party, and it was widely felt that as the eastern *Länder* became further integrated into German society, and as, in particular, the economic environment there improved, the reasons for protest voting would subside. Yet protest voters are generally viewed in the political science world as volatile swing voters. 'Protest parties' are, by their very nature, seen as transient phenomena that citizens only turn to in extraordinary conditions of political, economic or social dissatisfaction. In the case of the PDS, voter loyalty is strong and sustained. In fact, the PDS has traditionally had the most loyal supporters of any party in eastern Germany – a trait that fits uneasily with the protest party thesis.¹² Although the PDS played on its reputation as a protest party in the early and mid-1990s in particular, it is now clear that if Easterners wish to protest at the political level, then they tend towards the parties of the far right, principally the German Peoples Union (DVU) and the National Democratic Party (NPD). Hence, although the PDS profits from feelings of general dissatisfaction in the eastern states, characterising the PDS as a 'protest party' does not help explain the successful mobilisation of votes by the PDS in eastern Germany *over a sustained period of time*.¹³

Commentators keen on putting the PDS's ideology and self-perception under the microscope tended to adopt an altogether different mode of analysis. The 'left-wing politics' approach was only invoked by a minority of authors, many of whom appeared to hold principles near to those which the party espouses. The PDS was viewed as a renewed, democratic-socialist party that grew out of the reforming wing of the SED. Rather than treat the party as a transitory 'protest' phenomenon, the emphasis shifted to the important long-term role that the PDS could/should play as the heir to the long-established socialist tradition in Germany. Through the 1990s this approach remained in stark contrast to the hostile responses that the party generated across the majority spectrum of academic literature, as well as in most journalism – left wing newspapers *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt* excepted – covering the party's activities. The PDS could, for these observers, contribute to the 'ideological rearmament' of the German Left, pressuring and cajoling the SPD to

remember its socialist conscience.¹⁴ Decidedly unpopular through the 1990s, this approach gained ground as the PDS (and particularly *Die Linke*) stabilised itself in the German party system at the beginning of the 21st century.

Through the early 1990s most of the literature produced on the PDS took a(nother) completely different line to that of the protest and left-wing-politics approaches. A group of scholars, centred primarily in and around the conservative Hanns Seidel and Konrad Adenauer Foundations, saw the PDS as nothing short of a threat to Germany's democratic order, dismissing its commitments to democracy as shams covering up much more sinister aims. As time has passed, the anti-system approach has gradually lost its dominant position, even if authors such as Viola Neu and Jürgen Lang still insist on viewing the PDS through the prism of extremist politics.¹⁵ The PDS allegedly polarised and destabilised the German party system, 'ideologising' political discourse and broadening the political spectrum to include 'left-wing extremists'. Jürgen Lang, for example, claimed that the PDS's parliamentary orientation and commitment to representative democracy were purely functional.¹⁶ Attempts to sideline elements such as the Communist Platform (KPF), the *AG Junge GenossInnen* (the party's youth wing in the early 1990s) or the *Westlinken* (a group – long since defunct – of radical western Germans) were, above all, tactical steps, assisting the PDS in achieving its anti-democratic aims.¹⁷ Now, in the mid-2000s, this approach appears quirky at best. In truth, it was – once the PDS had got through the initial 12–18 months after the fall of the Berlin Wall and had begun to stabilise itself – quirky for most of the 1990s as well. Put another way, those who go hunting for witches will, sooner or later, eventually find them. The all-encompassing Marxist-Leninist ideology of the SED has long since been replaced and the PDS now attempts to portray itself more as a broad church of leftward leaning opinion, having denied the importance of the leading role of the working class and chosen to accept – however begrudgingly at first – the democratic rules of the game.¹⁸ The (in)coherence of this socialist alternative is irrelevant (such things are for voters to pass judgement on); the party has adapted to the system, and now adheres to the rules of the political game like every other democratic party.

A final group of commentators saw the PDS as a representative of a distinct 'milieu' in eastern Germany.¹⁹ The party remained specific to both its social environment and its culture, maintaining elements of a particular form of self-help group. These authors highlight how the party united different groups, characterised by relatively high levels of

education, secularisation and urbanisation while sharing similar cultural and political orientations.²⁰ These groups may have been quite diverse, but they were united within a broad cultural milieu whose interests and problems in coming to terms with life in the FRG were articulated by the PDS within the political arena.²¹ Throughout the 1990s this approach clearly had something to offer and it was only in the late 1990s that non-milieu members moved towards the PDS with any sort of enthusiasm.²² By the turn of the 21st century this approach had metamorphosed into a slightly different beast, stressing the PDS's skill at articulating and representing (largely self-defined) eastern German interests in the political process. The PDS became an expression of the east-west value conflict, attracting not only those who saw themselves as critical of capitalism, but also those who were suspicious of western (German) culture and who saw their 'eastern German-ness' as something to be (reasonably) proud of.²³ The PDS flourished in an eastern German community that needed political representation at the local, regional and national levels.

It is with these wide and diverse analyses of the PDS in mind that this book attempts to bring some clarity to our understanding of what sort of party its successor, the *Linkspartei*, or *Die Linke*, as it has been known since June 2007 is and where it is going. Is the coalition of disparate forces that have come together in the new party sustainable or will the tensions and (considerable) potential areas of conflict prove to be the death of it? How is it likely to come to terms with the practical and programmatic dilemmas that its (apparently) more established position in the German party system will bring? And how will the rest of the party system react? The book begins, in Chapter 1, by mapping out the PDS's development since the collapse of the GDR in 1989/90 up to its triumphant performance in the 1998 federal election. During the 1990s the PDS was consistently underestimated and frequently written off. Chapter 1 illustrates how it nonetheless managed to survive the implosion of the system (the GDR) with which it was, for many, indelibly linked. It moved away from its dogmatic, and at times positively Stalinist, past and reinvented itself as both left-wing protest movement and skilful articulator of eastern German distinctiveness. It possessed an ideological diversity unique among German parties. Skilful leadership prevented too much internal rancour, as the more or less universal climate of derision that surrounded the party spawned a backs-to-the-walls mentality which helped foster a spirit of solidarity between activists with divergent agendas and the party and its voters. Through the 1990s the PDS remained a broad church of left-ward leaning opinion, and the merger of WASG and PDS in

2007 ensures that managing heterogeneous sets demands from actors with at times strikingly different understandings of where the *Die Linke* should progress from here remains one of the new party's biggest challenges.

Whereas Chapter 1 explains how the PDS stabilised itself in the German party system, Chapter 2 illustrates how – between 1998 and 2005 – it very nearly threw all of this good work away. Polling 5.1 per cent of the popular vote in the 1998 election looked like it was going to be the high watermark of the party's success, ensuring full parliamentary rights, and the apparent end of the PDS's transformation into a democratic party. Perceptions can, however, be deceptive of course. The failure of the party to repeat this feat in 2002 – when it polled just under 600,000 fewer votes than it did in 1998 – and the internal wrangling and indiscipline that followed pushed the party into an existential crisis. No matter that at least some of the reason for the party's difficulties in 2002 were external and largely unique to the time; the party's pacifist credentials were undermined by Gerhard Schröder's anti-Iraq War rhetoric in the summer of 2002 and the floods in significant parts of eastern Germany gifted the then Chancellor an opportunity to look dynamic and in touch with an area of the country where the PDS has traditionally polled very strongly. Factional battles within the party's executive, weak and disjointed leadership and the virtual disappearance of the party from federal politics led the party to the edge of the political abyss; something that, perhaps more by luck than by judgment, it was only able to pull away from in the months running up to the September 2005 election.

In order to make sense of the ups and downs of the PDS and Left Party's development in recent times, the third chapter introduces an analytical framework that should help us to understand a little more about how the party works and how it may develop in future years. Political parties, as has been well documented in the literature on party behaviour, are faced with a number of strategic dilemmas. The 'policy, office, votes' trichotomy developed by Kaare Strøm illustrates that parties can and do attempt to trade off these different aims against one another without ever (completely) neglecting any one of them.²⁴ They may, firstly, stress the need to participate in government. Parties who expressly emphasise this aim seek, above all, concrete advantages for themselves and their clientele that result from governing. They therefore tend to stress the importance of manoeuvring themselves into an advantageous position within the party system, and with other actors, so as to gain significant ministerial portfolios. A genuine influence on governmental outputs remains important, but office-seeking parties do

not tend to stress ideological consistency and programmatic purity in the way that other actors may choose to do. Secondly, they could place a stress on policy-seeking. Policy-seeking parties are in many ways the antithesis of office-seeking parties. They have particular programmatic goals and aims and seek to do all they can to implement them in as 'pure' a form as is possible. These parties are likely to have a coherent political agenda stemming out of core ideological beliefs that have been developed over many years. Alternatively, they may be individual issue-orientated parties who seek to profile themselves on a much narrower policy base. Office-seeking remains important to policy-seeking parties – but it does not become an end in itself. Such parties may subsequently find decisions on when, and under what conditions, to enter government particularly testing. Thirdly, parties may place most emphasis on simple vote maximisation (vote-seeking). The principal aim that these parties adopt is that of maximising the number of votes they achieve in elections. Again, policy-seeking and office-seeking are not completely insignificant, but the initial emphasis remains one of expanding a voter base. Party programmes are likely to be less ideologically rigid and office-seeking may be either implausible or unwanted – the emphasis therefore moves to embedding the party's position within the electorate.

Although this framework is ultimately derived from deductive, rational choice reasoning, it can still function quite easily as a framework or a heuristic. It helps us to throw light on processes and deeper meanings without purporting to provide law-like generalisations about the ways that politicians make tough decisions. Indeed, Müller and Strøm actively seek to confront formal modellers with the ways that real actors deal with tough choices in real-world situations.²⁵ They seek to do this at the level of the party. We take this a step further and look at how inner-party democracy is affected by such choices. Territorial groupings (i.e. *Landesverbände*, *Fraktionen* in *Land* parliaments), ideological platforms and working groups within the Left Party do not believe, just as is the case within other parties, that the party should seek to pursue any of these three aims independently of the others. Linkages, and trade-offs, therefore inevitably exist between all three. However, over time the federal party has the ability to stress particular strategies, just as do individual *Landesverbände*. And this can lead to frictions, as happened with the PDS/Left Party post-2002. Chapter 3 therefore introduces an analytical tool with which we can analyse these frictions, pinpointing the different aims and strategies that the PDS/Left Party (at federal and *Land* levels) has used before

honing in on where these relationships might take the party in the years to come.

Chapter 4 brings another dimension to the Left Party's development by bringing in an overtly comparative element. The Left Party is not, of course, the first party to rise up and challenge the traditional cartel of institutionalised actors. Challenger parties on the far right and far left have periodically risen and fallen. The one party that grew from radical roots to successfully challenge the established actors and find a niche for itself in the German party system was, however, the Green Party. The Greens were, at least in their early stages, every bit as dismissive of capitalism and the dynamic of party competition in Germany as is the Left Party. Yet, as is widely known, they proceeded to march through the institutions of German government to eventually take up positions of power not just in *Land* governments, but also as a junior partner in Gerhard Schröder's two SPD-led administrations between 1998 and 2005. The processes of institutionalisation that the Greens have undertaken can be seen either as evidence of selling out at the expense of their radical ideals or as proof that parties develop their ideas over time and learn how to 'play the political game'. Either way, there are clearly distinct parallels with the development of the PDS through the 1990s and early 21st century. Yet, as Chapter 4 illustrates, there is no guarantee that the Left Party will ultimately become coalitionable at the national level and that 'institutionalisation' is an inevitable process. This might happen, but there is certainly no incontrovertible logic that says that it has to. This chapter concludes by illustrating that there is not, as yet, a fully developed red-red model of government and it is for this reason that the Left Party has some way to go before it genuinely establishes itself as preferred coalition partner for the SPD. Thus far, and this is illustrated in more detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, coalitions have come to bear for largely pragmatic reasons centring around personalities and practical politics. A concerted red-red style of governance and programmatic agenda appears to us to be some way from fruition.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 turn the focus on the Left Party itself. They illustrate that factions within the Left Party are indeed able to articulate particular wants and needs over and above those of the federal party. There is, indeed, plenty of institutional wriggle-room available for a *Landesverband* that actually wants to make use of it. Chapter 5 illustrates that in eastern Germany's northernmost *Land*, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the Left Party has followed the Green path closer than is the case elsewhere. But, even then, the reasons for this are unique to Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The Left Party in Schwerin concentrates on developing and

implementing specific policies that might help to solve the (many) socio-economic problems that exist in Germany's north-east. This is in contrast to the Left Party in other eastern German states (including Berlin), where policy-seeking goals play a much less significant role. The party subsequently entered the coalition with the SPD in 1998 with a clear set of programmatic aims and concrete proposals – a situation that was not in any way replicated in Berlin, for example. Governing has therefore not changed the Left Party in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania as much as we would originally have hypothesised.

The Left Party entered government in Berlin (in 2001) for altogether different reasons. Berlin remains a domain of modern socialism (defined in Chapter 1) within the party. For many in the party the importance of a long-term strategic vision comes into play. Gregor Gysi and the modern socialists saw the German capital as a test bed for persuading western Germans (in the shape of West Berliners) that the Left Party was not the eastern German demon frequently portrayed in the media and that effective, non-dramatic performance in government was of fundamental importance in doing this. The lack of a coherent socialist programmatic profile was abundantly evident both to Left Party insiders as well as to those (both critical and sympathetic) looking in from the outside. The Left Party in the German capital is evidently willing and capable of articulating goals and aims that go well beyond those of its rank and file, and also arguably beyond those of its most loyal electorate, mainly as it wants to increase its ability to exert influence on the western part of Germany – no matter how small the steps are towards this goal – through competent and coordinated behaviour in the Berlin sub-state government.

Chapter 7 moves the microscope away from eastern *Länder* where the Left Party has governed over to those where it has been in permanent opposition. It throws light on the heterogeneity of aims and strategies within the Left Party, illustrating that there is most certainly not a clear route to pro-government attitudes, stances and aims within the party. The Left Party remains a diverse and at times contradictory political actor. And it is for this reason that the merger with the WASG that took place in the spring of 2007 is such a challenge; Chapter 8 illustrates how the merger actually took place and what different beasts were entering into it. The Left Party may indeed be the first socialist party to the left of the SPD that has established itself in the *Bundestag*, but, as the old adage goes, the road to hell can still be paved with good intentions. The conclusion therefore explains the challenges that lie ahead for the party and where possible potholes may lie.

1

Unification and the Fight for Survival

Introduction

Had they been given prior warning of the 2005 election result, observers of German politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s would have been astonished at what they were being told. No doubt they would have found the idea of Germany's first female Chancellor intriguing; that she should be a Protestant from the East would also have prompted considerable interest; the failure of the two main parties to genuinely mobilise support around their programmes for reform would also have prompted comment and observation, as would the discussion of 'traffic light' and 'Jamaica' coalition options.¹ The real astonishment would, however, have come when they heard that the Socialist Unity Party's (SED) successor party, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), had metamorphosed into a left-wing protest movement capable of persuading over four million electors to vote for it and entering the federal parliament with 8.7 per cent of the popular vote. What on earth, they may well have asked, had 'gone wrong' with German democracy to facilitate such a strong performance by a party that should be out of democratic bounds? How on earth had such a party survived that long? How had the PDS/Left Party pulled off the (apparently) unthinkable and (apparently) stabilised itself as a respectable force in the German party system?

The Left Party's strong showing in 2005, as well as the PDS's – if only in eastern Germany – through the late 1990s, should not disguise the traumatic and, at times, positively schizophrenic early period of the party's development. The path to that 2005 success has been characterised by as many stops as starts, and, even now, its position in the German party system is not completely secure. The threat of the SPD moving back leftwards to tempt back some of its old voters, the danger of internal

splits and general discord within the newly created *Die Linke* and the perennial worry about slipping towards the 5 per cent trapdoor out of parliament ensure that it has plenty to keep it honest. Compared to where it was in 1989, however, the Left Party is facing a completely different set of challenges, and conquering them would appear to be child's play when compared with what the PDS's immediate predecessors had to come to terms with.

The PDS, and the SED before it, grew out of a dictatorial and inherently anti-democratic predecessor – the GDR's Socialist Unity Party. Its starting position as Communism began to crumble was, therefore, anything but advantageous. Over 40 years the SED had proved itself to be one of the most hard-line and dogmatic Communist parties in central and eastern Europe, and, as the GDR collapsed, it was only at the last moment that its leaders appeared to realise the true severity of the crisis affecting their party and their state. As the GDR imploded in the weeks and months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the party leaders began to grasp that radical changes in ideology, organisation and policy were necessary if the SED were to survive in post-unification Germany. Indeed, survival – nothing more – was the name of the game, and in late 1989 and early 1990 the SED set out on an uneasy and disjointed process of reform with precisely this aim in mind. Parties naturally become conservative beasts, reticent to set out on new programmatic paths, never mind slaughter sacred cows. It takes skilful leaders, mixed with advantageous opportunity structures, to carry party members along and to coax and cajole them into reinvigorating their party. The stumbling nature of the SED's reform process stemmed not only from the traditional reticence of party members, but also from the nature of the dilemma which the leadership faced. Once it became clear that unification was highly likely to take place, the party needed to make rapid and quantifiable progress in aligning itself with the structures enshrined in the West German Basic Law. The key pillars of a society that SED leaders and members had pilloried for years suddenly had – in a plausible way – to be accepted and internalised. A new programme was needed, new leaders were required and a new *raison d'être* had to be crafted. A couple of million voters needed to be persuaded (of something as yet undefined) too.

Yet, at the same time, the leaders of the SED realised that wholesale reforms were completely out of the question. If the SED was too quick to condemn the GDR, or too keen on embracing western German 'bourgeois democracy', then its truest supporters – the believers who had stayed loyal to socialist ideals through thick and thin in the GDR – would