

Austria: Jörg Haider uses his power base in Carinthia as a springboard for broader ambitions

BY MELANIE A. SULLY

In the Spring of 1999 Jörg Haider became state governor of Carinthia, Austria's southernmost province bordering Slovenia. It was a post Haider had held before (1989-1991) but had lost after alluding to the "sound employment policies" of the Third Reich. Although he soon withdrew the remarks his first period in office was abruptly over.

During this short time he claimed that he had made a start in abolishing ancient titles and symbols (such as replacing the portrait of the governor in official buildings with the coat of arms.) As well, he reached out to the Slovenian minority living in the state and gave support to the burgeoning of democracy in Croatia and Slovenia.

Haider saw himself as a modern reform politician – his opponents saw him as a dangerous threat to democracy and the rule of law.

Carinthia was a state that had long been under the hegemony of the Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ). After the Second World War, efforts were made by the SPÖ to woo former Nazis with a view to integrating them into the new democracy. This was especially important in a state like Carinthia, where pan-German nationalist sentiment was particularly strong. Haider was born in Upper Austria but felt emotionally and politically at home in Carinthia. It was from its capital, Klagenfurt, that he launched his attack on the federal Freedom Party making a bid for the national leadership of the FPÖ in 1986. And it was to Carinthia that he was later to turn as a power base for greater ambitions.

A campaign on social policy

Haider was and remains the first governor in Austria to have come from the Freedom Party (FPÖ). Article 2 of the federal constitution states that "Austria is a federal state". Austria has a highly centralized federal system consisting of nine autonomous member states (Länder). They have limited legislative powers, some executive powers but no separate court system. Seven states have governors from the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the Socialists (SPÖ) rule two. Governors can often achieve the aura of benign "father" figures and possess considerable powers of patronage. Traditionally, state governors can score points by attacking the politics of "Vienna", playing on anti-capital sentiment in much the same way as US politicians rail against "Washington".

In 1999, the FPÖ gained 42.1 percent of the vote in the Carinthian state elections, becoming the strongest party. It was a sensational turn around in political fortune. Haider had fought a campaign on social policy, promising cheaper rents and electricity prices and a better deal for those with young families. It was a programme which was attractive to workers and which was to prove successful in the federal elections of the same year. Such a platform makes it difficult to pigeonhole Haider as merely a right wing extremist. His policies were a challenge to the old party system of Austria that had failed to respond adequately to a new age.

In his second period as state governor Haider pioneered a scheme of monthly cheques for those with young children. This had been a particularly attractive

election pledge and eventually became a project that was adopted by the new coalition government of the FPÖ and ÖVP for the whole of Austria. The scheme allows for 436 Euro to be paid per month for those with babies for three years. Both the FPÖ and the ÖVP see the project as a milestone in family policy and as a model for Europe. Haider was particularly proud that the initiative had come from Carinthia.

A "simple party member"

Haider has remained a controversial and, for the media, a fascinating politician. No cover story on an Austrian magazine has sold so well as one with a photo of Jörg Haider. His reputation as a radical, extreme populist has spread across the borders of tiny Austria.

In October 1999, federal elections were held in Austria. Haider had promised to stay in Carinthia and technically, although leader of the FPÖ, was not the party's leading candidate for the election campaign. Inevitably, his personality dominated the campaign and his election rallies were attended by the masses, including a fleet of foreign journalists and camera crews. The result was yet another shake up for the old party system and for the first time the FPÖ overtook the ÖVP to become the second strongest party in Austria.

Long and protracted negotiations ensued until eventually, in February 2000, a coalition government was formed between the FPÖ and the ÖVP bearing the signature of the governor of Carinthia, Dr Jörg Haider. The new government was possible because Haider refrained from claiming the post of federal chancellor for himself

or his party. International furore was so great that such a move was unthinkable.

Haider had to content himself with returning to Carinthia, leaving his party in office. Soon afterwards, after intense media exposure, he resigned as party leader becoming as he wryly put it a "simple party member".

No one really expected that the simple party member would go back to Carinthia and quietly take a back seat. Haider's charisma and ability to mobilize voters and his hold on the party functionaries was too great. Some FPÖ members in cabinet gradually felt torn between their former leader's oppositional style and their new roles as responsible members of a government. Haider blissfully criticized the government from afar, crossing swords with the FPÖ Minister of Finance in fighting for policies for Carinthia.

In 2001, Haider campaigned in the Vienna elections in which his party suffered heavy losses. The result sent shock waves throughout the party.

Haider became increasingly irritated with his party's participation in a government that had to take unpopular measures to stabilise the budget. The 1999 election had been won on the platform of policies for the "man on the street" not on social welfare cutbacks. Although he was no longer leader, Haider still sought to direct the course the party followed. Indeed, his successor, Susanne Riess-Passer, had stated after her election by the party congress that the party would "remain the party of Dr Haider". Many of the ministerial appointments for the party were Haider loyalists and the meetings of the federal party and its parliamentary party were frequently held in Haider's Carinthia.

The agenda of the party, it seemed, was set by the "man in the South" – often to the embarrassment of the party in government and to the irritation of the coalition partner, the ÖVP.

One such source of tension was the question of EU enlargement. Austria's relations with the Czech Republic were

particularly strained over the nuclear power station across the border at Temelin. Three state branches of the FPÖ initiated a "popular initiative"¹ calling for the closure of Temelin or a veto on Czech membership. The initiative gained over 915,220 signatures in January 2002 despite the fact that it was opposed by Haider's party's coalition partner, the ÖVP.

Handshake with Saddam

Haider was particularly fond of using the instrument of direct democracy for furthering his aims. He fought a decision of the constitutional court to extend bilingual signposts in Carinthia by organizing a public consultation. He frequently cited Article 1 of the

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constitution that states, "Austria is a democratic republic. Its law emanates from the people". For Haider the constitutional court was "politically corrupt" and motivated by party political interests.

These events were overshadowed in February 2002 when the Carinthian state governor was suddenly seen on Iraqi television jovially shaking hands with Saddam Hussein. Haider had gone to Iraq ostensibly for humanitarian reasons and to help start up a blood bank to help children suffering from leukaemia. The visit became a front-page story at home and abroad although Haider had frequently visited Arab countries.

For almost a week there seemed to be no story of interest to the Austrian media other than Jörg Haider. It drowned even the success of the country's Olympic athletes in Salt Lake City. Haider's Baghdad trip coincided with a visit of the FPÖ leader to Washington. Confusion and turbulence in the party back home led to a

dramatic exclusive television interview in which Haider announced he would withdraw entirely from federal politics to concentrate on Carinthia.


FPÖ leader Riess-Passer abruptly cut short her visit to New York where she was to have visited Ground Zero and flew back to an emergency meeting of the party executive.

From Carinthia, to Austria... to Europe?

Haider stood by his decision to nominally withdraw from federal politics and left the coalition committee – that in any case had met irregularly. Riess-Passer was entrusted with full powers to deal with internal problems in the party. She was immediately confronted with the resignation of her Infrastructure and Transport Minister and found a quick replacement from Carinthia in a man dubbed "Haider's clone".

Now the FPÖ team in government had an above average contingent from Carinthia. Many believed that the "de facto" leader, Haider, was in a position of "remote-controlling" the cabinet from the confines of Klagenfurt. The problem with having an "informal" leader as an important power player is that it is not easy to vote him out of a position he does not formally hold!

No one really believes that Haider will stay out of federal politics. He is a member of the top organs in the FPÖ, including the party presidium and executive. He also seems to have taken on the role as chief advisor to Vice-Chancellor and leader Riess-Passer.

It is rumoured that his ambitions could however lead elsewhere to the European stage. The diverse parties in the countries of the EU that are sceptical about EU enlargement and a centralized Europe have no real focus or leader. Carinthia possibly could act as a springboard not just for the national political arena but also for the European stage. 

¹ A popular initiative aims to collect signatures to force action in parliament. Voters must sign the petition in the presence of officials. The public consultation is advisory and poses a question to be answered by a "yes" or "no".