



Austrian far-right vote cut by two-thirds

Conservatives gain seats from party that Haider led.

BY MELANIE SULLY

The parliamentary election of November 2002 saw the largest fluctuation in voter support in post-war Austrian politics. It led to the dramatic electoral collapse of the far-right Freedom Party, dominated by Jörg Haider, to the benefit of the centre-right People's Party under the leadership of Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel. Austrians were also surprised to see the Social Democratic Party lose its position as the party with the most votes and seats in parliament for the first time since 1966. Schüssel had called a snap election for the 183-seat parliament in September, following resignations by key Freedom Party ministers from his coalition government.

In the campaign, a number of federal-state issues emerged, some as a complete surprise:

- a possible increase in the power of states and cities ("subsidiarity", a People's Party promise);
- bringing animal rights under federal control (equality for pigs in all states!); and
- the role of state parliaments in an enlarged European Union.

A vigorous debate concerning the scope and limits of these areas of federal and state jurisdiction would play an important role in subsequent negotiations to form a governing coalition.

The road to Knittelfeld

Some senior officials and ministers in the Freedom Party (FPÖ), including leader Susanne Riess-Passer, withdrew from politics after disputes with Jörg Haider, far-right governor of the state of Carinthia. Haider had embarrassed his party leader earlier in the year by an impromptu visit to Iraq where he shook hands with Saddam Hussein. His frequent "resignations from resignations" had become the laughing stock of the political columnists. Haider had become an unpredictable factor for his party's work in government. Furthermore, many of his zealots were disgruntled with the party's poor performance in regional elections and yearned for a return to the heady days of opposition.

A stormy meeting took place in September in the Styrian town of Knittelfeld when a compromise paper that had been hammered out between Riess-Passer and Haider was to have been put to the radicals for discussion. The Haider rebels tore up the paper in disgust and the moderates around Riess-Passer

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could see little point in continuing in government. The coalition that had begun in February 2000 under the shadow of EU sanctions had come to an abortive end. Knittelfeld was to become synonymous with a political culture rooted in radical politics, inability to compromise and anti-Europeanism.

Jörg Haider, whose astute political judgment had for so long brought him unabated success, had badly miscalculated. He had banked on his ministers staying in office and had been sure that Schüssel would not call an early election. For Schüssel the gamble paid off in spite of its inherent risks. The People's Party (ÖVP) had not stood high in the public-opinion polls and the implosion of the Freedom Party, which in 1999 had been so favoured by working people, had threatened to benefit the opposition Social Democrats (SPÖ).

"No" to Red/Green

The coalition between the ÖVP and the FPÖ revolved around a reform project to bring in lean government and social welfare reform and to cut the budget deficit. Over its short life span it began to tackle a backlog of problems in the pensions and social-security system with varying degrees of success. Many voters apparently wanted to continue with these policies in 2002 and were prepared to entrust Wolfgang Schüssel with the realization of such a program. On the negative side, voters were deterred from opting for a change to a left-of-centre government by the weak economic performance of the Red/Green government in neighbouring Germany.

The SPÖ seemed apathetic in appealing to disillusioned Haider fans; it preferred instead to woo the Greens. The strategy of the Social Democrats had always been to ostracize the FPÖ – a party that, particularly under Haider, the SPÖ saw as fundamentally repulsive. The Social

Democrats' inability to court disaffected Freedom Party supporters was a logical continuation of this politics of exclusion. In contrast, the ÖVP adopted a tough stance on asylum and immigration to entice wavering FPÖ supporters. It also staged a spectacular coup just before polling day by announcing that Karl Heinz Grasser, who had resigned as FPÖ Finance Minister after Knittelfeld, would be included in a future ÖVP cabinet.

Anti-Vienna complex

Grasser, the youthful and good-looking "sunny boy" of the nation, had been mocked by the Haider rebels for his affluence and smart life-style. He was reckoned to be out of touch with

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2002 Election Results

Party	Seats	Gain + Loss -	Per cent of votes	Gain + Loss -
Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)	69	+ 4	36.5	+ 3.3
Freedom Party (FPÖ)	18	- 34	10.0	- 16.9
People's Party (ÖVP)	79	+ 27	42.3	+ 15.4
Greens (Die Grünen)	17	+ 3	9.5	+ 2.1
Others	0	0	1.6	- 2.6

Turnout: 84.3% of eligible voters

the “ordinary man” that the radicals purported to represent. At the root of much of the Knittelfeld rebellion was resentment against Vienna and its chic, trendy “jet set”. Many FPÖ ministers were welcome in the Establishment circles of the Austrian capital and obviously enjoyed the social life. The provincial branches of the FPÖ, however, detested the Viennese “air”.

Riess-Passer's successor as party leader who should have led the FPÖ in the election was Mathias Reichhold, a Carinthian. He lasted just over 40 days in the job before resigning, ostensibly on the grounds of ill health. From the beginning Haider issued a warning that the new boy should not become too influenced by the insidious atmosphere of the capital. Reichhold's support by the Carinthian party was lukewarm and election posters in the state failed to carry his photograph. He was succeeded by yet another Carinthian, Social Minister Herbert Haupt, who defended the Haider line with gusto for the rest of the election right up until the disastrous results.

Federalism and animal protection

Most of the interest in the campaign circled around whether the ÖVP would overtake the SPÖ as the strongest political force. Many issues were subordinate in this struggle for the post of Federal Chancellor. There was little movement in the standard policies supported by the parties. The SPÖ predictably stressed jobs, pensions and education. The Green Party wanted a ministry for women and an end to student fees.

One surprise change came a few days before polling day on the issue of a centralized animal-protection law endorsed by the influential mass daily, the *Kronen Zeitung*, and all the main parties apart from the People's Party representing the interests of farmers. The ÖVP abandoned its hostility and announced that it would support a measure in the new parliament to ask the federal states to hand over animal protection to the federation. Under this program, laws on hunting would remain within the competence of the states whilst the varying statutes from state to state on animal rights would be brought within the jurisdiction of the federation. As the leader of the Social Democrats Alfred Gusenbauer stated: “A pig in Upper Austria should not be treated any worse than a pig in the state of Vorarlberg.”

The Green Party further supported the transfer of competence over matters concerning social assistance and homes for the sick from the states to the federation. Generally speaking, the Greens support decentralization and more financial autonomy for local authorities. The Freedom Party is an advocate of the concept of “subsidiarity” – in other words, that to the greatest extent possible action should be taken by the order of

government that is closest to the individual citizen, in the jargon of the European Union. In contrast, the Social Democrats, by virtue of their party structure and *Weltanschauung*, take a more centralistic view of politics. The People's Party, on the other hand, with a decentralized party structure favours a larger degree of federalism. In its “A-Z” election platform it stressed the decentralization of power to smaller units and supported self-administration for the municipalities.

One federal element in the Austrian constitution consists of the Second Chamber or *Bundesrat* (Federal Council) with 62 members,

permanently in session, representing the constituent units of the country. Changing the procedural rules and their application in the Bundesrat to make it a true “chamber for the states” is a perennial item on the political agenda – even though such a constitutional change would require a two-thirds majority.

Reform of the federation had been agreed upon in the coalition pact between the ÖVP and the FPÖ in 2000, but the parties together lacked the necessary majority in parliament to effect substantial reform of this nature. The coalition pact of 2000 aimed to “strengthen the rights of the states and local authorities with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity.” Further, it referred to the removal of “existing restrictions in the federal constitution to give sufficient scope to state organs to adopt statutory provisions of their own.”

A new government with a solid majority in parliament could return to the pressing issue of the interaction between policy-making at the EU on the one hand, and the national and *Länder* governments on the other. Ideas for reducing the size of the state parliaments have been discussed but are sensitive points involving job losses and vested interests. For a small country, Austria has a superfluity of decision-making organs at several different levels that could benefit from rationalization. The debate on the European Convention could also lead to change and a greater role for the national parliaments in an enlarged Europe. Under this scenario the national parliaments could become “state parliaments” on the road to a federal Europe.

Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel has several options open for coalition building, a process that can often be harder and longer than the election campaign. He seeks to continue the reform policies begun in 2000 reflecting as far as possible the message from the electorate. The President of Austria entrusted Wolfgang Schüssel with the task of forming a government but this has proven to be a long, drawn-out process. Two months after the election there were no signs of a breakthrough in negotiations between the ÖVP and the other parties in parliament. ☺

Further Reading

Federations, Vol. 2 No. 3, April 2002, “Jörg Haider uses his power base in Carinthia as a springboard for broader ambitions”, by Melanie Sully

Werner Zögernitz, *Bundesrat-Geschäftsordnung*, Manz, Vienna, 2002 – a detailed account of Austria's second chamber