



# TRAVELLING BRIEF

## Dangerous omissions?

### One day in October

On 3 October I was in Berlin. An important day for Germans, as they celebrated the eighth anniversary of their nation's reunification. It was also an important day for Australians, as voters decided who will govern our nation into the next millennium. Part of that decision was an electoral verdict on the xenophobic offerings of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation party.

Just six days earlier, Germans had been faced with similar decisions as they voted in their own Federal election. German voters, however, chose quite differently from their Australian counterparts. Australians narrowly returned our Prime Minister, John Howard, and his Thatcherite coalition for a second term of government. Germans voted overwhelmingly to oust their own incumbent right-wing leader — Helmut Kohl, Chancellor for 16 years, and political architect of German reunification — and his Christian Democrat-led (CDU) coalition government. Germans instead voted for a coalition government led by Gerhard Schröder's Social Democrats (SDP). Schröder describes his politics as the 'New Middle'. This is a kissing cousin of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'Third Way', which in turn borrows very heavily, and directly, from the centrist economic and social policies adopted by the Australian Labor Party in the 1980s and 1990s under Prime Ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. The junior coalition partner in the new German government will be Joschka Fischer's *Grünen* (Greens), a party of environmentalists, pacifists, feminists and liberals that has been an influential force in German politics since the 1980s. The aims and political philosophy of the German Greens closely resemble that of the Green movement in Australia.

### Voting for racists

German voters also differed from Australians in that they gave much less support to parties advocating explicitly racist views. Before the German

elections, there were fears that any of three right-wing extremist parties, all of which are anti-foreigner and anti-Semitic — the Munich-based German People's Union (DVU), which gained almost 13% support in an election earlier this year in Saxony Anhalt; the National Party of Germany (NPD), which is particularly popular with East German youth; and the Republikaner, based in southwestern Germany — might gather enough electoral support to gain representation in the Bundestag. In the event, however, all three parties attracted far below the minimum 5% of votes needed to secure Bundestag seats under Germany's system of proportional representation. Their combined support stood at just 3.7%.

Against this result, the fact that at the same historical moment One Nation attracted over 8% support nationally and 14.5% in Queensland in the Australian Federal election, and that Pauline Hanson personally attracted 37% of the primary vote in her own electorate (in two-candidate preferred terms she polled 47%), hardly seems to be cause for great celebration on Australia's part. It is certainly encouraging that One Nation did not win any seats in the House of Representatives and that Pauline Hanson is no longer a member of our Federal Parliament. These results owe more to the vagaries of the Australian electoral system, however, than to any unequivocal national rejection of One Nation's brand of white supremacy. The election of One Nation's Heather Hill to the Senate — at the expense of Bill O'Chee, the National Party's only Asian-Australian Senator — is a disturbing sign. Not the least because by all accounts Hill is 'smarter and meaner' than the deposed Hanson.

### Silence on race

Even more disturbing to some, is that the Australian election campaign was characterised by a timidity of approach by the major parties to the controversies over race — in particular, over Asian immigration, reconciliation with indigenous Australians and the future of Australia's hitherto successful multicultural project — that have raged in Australia in the last three years.

Opinions certainly differ as to whether the most effective way to counter the racist aspects of One Nation's agenda is by direct exposure and confrontation. Whatever the answer to that question might be, both John Howard and Opposition leader Kim Beazley deemed it politic on this occasion to duck the 'hard' questions about race. In favour of talking endlessly about something much safer: tax reform.

So it was with the leaders of the two main parties in the German election campaign. No doubt in a shared concern to avoid ruffling the voting feathers of middle Germany, both Kohl and Schröder avoided directly addressing Germany's own pressing race issues.

### Citizenship laws

One such issue is the question of reforming Germany's citizenship laws. Under the current laws, German citizenship is conferred automatically on anyone with 'German' (read: Teutonic, Aryan) ancestry, regardless of their place of birth, whilst the German-born children and even grand-children of 'foreigners' (read: Turks in particular, who have been a significant presence in Germany since they began arriving in the 1950s to provide the hard labour needed to rebuild the post-WWII German economy) lack this entitlement. Further, German law does not allow dual citizenship. What this means in practice is that around 9% of people living, working, paying taxes and building lives in Germany are presumptively not German, solely because of their racial origin.

For many years these citizenship laws have been criticised as racist by the SDP and by the Greens. This criticism has been lately expressed with particular force by Green parliamentarian Cem Ozdemir, aged 32, born in the Black Forest and popularly known as *der Anatolischer Schwabe*, who was elected in 1994 as the first 'Turkish German' member of the Bundestag. Under Chancellor Kohl, however, reform was blocked mainly because the CDU's coalition partner, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU), strongly supported the laws and their underlying

notions of what it means to be German. Kohl himself did not ever press for reform. A stance that arguably was consistent with his failure to denounce with any particular vigour the rising incidence of racist violence in Germany in the 1990s. This failure included his refusal several years ago to attend the funeral of Turkish children killed in racially motivated firebombings, on the basis that he did not want to indulge in 'graveyard tourism'.

### More silence on race

Neither Kohl nor Schröder revisited these matters in the leadup to the German election. Schröder did not recant from the SPD's promise to reform German citizenship laws, but nor did he push the issue. When 5000 neo-Nazis demonstrated on the streets in the German city of Rostock a week before the election, neither party leader took the obvious political opportunity to unroll any hidden blueprint for a multicultural, tolerant Germany. Instead, they both chose to talk of other things.

Specifically, their focus was on 'bringing Germany together'. This was not a reference to matters of citizenship or racism. Rather, it was to the need to bridge the continuing political, social and economic divide between *Ossis* and *Wessis*, the inhabitants of former East and West Germany. Were both leaders blissfully unaware that their attacks on the evil of unemployment, combined with their explicit commitments to law and order and to dealing with the 'problem' of 'foreign criminals', could in fact have encouraged

rather than defused support for the claims of the extreme racist right?

The German President, Roman Herzog (like Kohl, a member of the CDU), certainly seemed aware of this potential risk when he spoke out on the subject in the middle of the Federal election campaign. He chastised both Kohl and Schröder for their failure to be sufficiently 'courageous' in attacking right-wing radicalism. His criticism had little public effect on either politician.

### The past, the future

The future of race politics in both Germany and Australia remains to be seen. It is to be hoped that in neither country will parties advocating explicitly racist agendas gain — or, in Australia's case increase — Federal parliamentary representation. It is also to be hoped that the major parties in both nations will resist allowing parties of One Nation's ilk to set any part of the agenda for debates about immigration, citizenship and national identity. In Germany, the presence of the Greens as coalition partners in this new federal government should prevent any temptation on the part of the SPD to backslide on race matters for 'pragmatic' reasons. In Australia, as yet it is less clear where the equivalent political checks and balances might lie, to ensure that advancing racial tolerance is a non-negotiable aim of our own new federal government.

My visit to Berlin was sobering and educative. Partly because of the powerful similarities and differences between the contemporary political scenes in

Germany and Australia. Partly, too, because Berlin itself is an overwhelming city. Of course, what any city is, changes with time and with the political climate. But one of the many things that Berlin still is — and shall always be — is the metropolis that was the cultivated centrepiece of Adolf Hitler's world order. The 1936 Olympic Stadium still stands, next to a huge field used for Nazi rallies. Both are still regularly used for sporting events. The elegant villa that housed the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, where a group of elite Nazi officials planned the detailed execution of the Final Solution, still sits in an affluent, leafy Berlin suburb on the edge of a lake. The area around Oranienburger Strasse, in the former East Berlin, still contains a wealth of buildings that commemorate the long Jewish history of Berlin. Quite rightly, no amount of Allied bombings, Communist walls, groovy bars, even groovier art galleries, or feverishly busy post-unification construction sites (gleaming stainless steel cranes sponsored by Mercedes-Benz) have, or will ever, eradicate the moral stain of Nazism from Berlin.

But the enduring political and moral lessons of Nazism shouldn't just be for Germans. They should be for Australians too.

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series of roundtable discussions with various peak bodies and community groups, and culminating in a joint media conference, with groups including Victorian Trades Hall Council, VCOSS, the Law Institute, the Criminal Bar Association, Youth Affairs Council, Ethnic Communities Council, Environmental Groups and the National Union of Students. The resource sharing that occurred through this process resulted in a large number and variety of community and peak organisations putting submissions to the Parliamentary inquiry.

And likewise, networking and information sharing should not be confined to one State or Territory. Many of the issues that CLCs are concerned about are

common across the State and Territory borders. The introduction of the electronic bulletin board, the use of computer conferences on particular issues, and the formation of national networks on particular issues, allows for a far greater exchange of information on a more regular basis. This will assist in preventing the 'reinvention of the wheel' on various law reform issues, as they repeat themselves across the country.

### Conclusion

The current political and economic climate presents a significant challenge to CLCs in ensuring that the essential elements which formed part of their establishment do not get left behind in the

age of National Competition Policy. We need to carefully strategise our law reform initiatives in this environment, rather than compromise them in an effort to safeguard the survival of CLCs — which at the end of the day can't be guaranteed in the current political and economic environment anyway. We need to remember that the survival of CLCs depends on their integrity and not on whether they can escape government cuts by foregoing the essential and definitive part of their work practices.

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