

Left Parties Everywhere

Oskar Lafontaine

Oskar Lafontaine served as Prime Minister of Saarland and President of the German Bundesrat. He was the SPD's candidate for Federal Chancellor in 1990, when a woman attacked and critically wounded him with a knife. In September 1998, he was appointed Federal Minister of Finance, but resigned the following March. In 2005, he left the SPD and founded the Left Party, which subsequently merged with the PDS, the successor to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in the German Democratic Republic. Lafontaine is now joint Chairman of the merged Left Party (Die Linke). He recently gave an interview to the newspaper Neues Deutschland, from which we reprint excerpts. The questions are in italics, and Mr Lafontaine's replies in ordinary type.

Mr Lafontaine, since Die Linke was founded, not even so much as an historic blink of the eye has elapsed, and already the party has moved into four state assemblies in the West. It is on the point of becoming an all-German party, maybe even an all-German catch-all party. Did you think this success possible?

Two years ago I would not have thought that we could be so successful so quickly. Yet, apparently more and more people want politics in Germany to change. The policy of the grand coalition is marked by value added tax fraud, social decline, increasing the retirement age to 67, and involvement in wars in defiance of international law. The majority of people refuse this and see in Die Linke a new political force that counters it.

SPD Chair Kurt Beck said your party was an adversary. Is the SPD also an adversary to you?

Of course. Parties compete for voters. And in this respect the SPD is an adverse party, like other parties, too. Naturally, as the example of Hesse shows, there are overlapping features in the programmes of the SPD and Die Linke. After the elections, it would be natural for all parties involved to sit down together on the basis of what they said in their programmes and ask: where is the common ground and what is the best way to co-operate? The parties competing with us are not that mature at the moment.

Do you think Kurt Beck's course has a future in the SPD? Does the SPD have a future pursuing this course?

Originally Beck stood for a strategy that had to fail. It was that you can co-operate with Die Linke in the East but not in the West. It was certain that this strategy would not last. He has now corrected this mistake. Now we have to

wait to see how things develop. Die Linke adheres to its fundamental statement: we want to change politics. And we are ready to co-operate with others on the basis of our programme.

Your party is accused of living in cloud-cuckoo-land: your programme is not financially affordable.

I only have to say one sentence: not a single cut in welfare services would have been necessary in the past few years if we had the average European tax rate, which is about 40%. Ours is 35%. I promised each journalist, each professor and each politician a gold watch if they managed to refute that statement. So far I have not yet had to give away any gold watches; that means the objections of our adversaries are wrong, knowing the figures ...

Quite often it is questioned that you are on the left. Are you?

What is left? I have a simple answer: Left is when you side with the employees, the pensioners, and the socially needy, when in doubt. That is what we do. And I do, too.

Cue 25 April 1990. Do you still remember that day? Do you dream about it?

That was the day an attempt was made on my life. That was 18 years ago, and I think I have come to grips with it to a large degree. During the first years, it kept me more on my toes. What was decisive for me was that I recognised one always has to live in a way so one can say I did things right, because tomorrow life can be over.

Do you manage?

When it comes to my own demands and yardsticks, yes. It is important to me that you should treat people the way you would like to be treated yourself. This is also a short programme for Die Linke.

Nevertheless, your life is inseparably linked to social democracy, is it not? In 1985, you became the first Social Democratic Prime Minister of the Saarland, and in 1990 you ran for Chancellor. In 1995 you were elected party chair. Does your heart still beat for the SPD, the SPD as it once was? Or have you found a new political home in Die Linke, which you co-founded?

When it comes to the SPD, membership always meant commitment to programmes and political ideas. The party was not a club such as a choir or sports club, but rather an association used to achieve political goals. Willy Brandt

described one pivotal goal: peace. When he received the Nobel Peace Prize he called war the *ultima ratio* in his speech. These days the SPD again says war is the *ultima ratio*. I stick with Willy Brandt's sentence: war is the *ultima irratio*. My heart still beats for this sentence.

On the other hand, I have a hand in founding Die Linke. It takes a lot of work, heart and soul. Die Linke is my political home now. It is already about to change German politics, and this is very important to us.

Why do you think today's SPD has veered so far away from Willy Brandt's SPD?

The heart of the matter for the Left is to what extent does it manage not to fall for the temptations and seductions of capitalist power structures? The SPD did not manage to do so, resulting in leading social democratic politicians ending up with some private equity firms or major gas consortiums. Still, some decades ago this would have been unimaginable. Brandt and Wehner in a private equity firm or temporary employment company? Unthinkable ...

What is your goal? Do you want to unite both parties, Die Linke and the SPD, one day?

This question is often raised. Yet, the SPD and Die Linke are completely different. Without a doubt there is only time for one thing: German politics needs a left party. Not only German politics, but also European politics, because the formerly socialist and social democratic parties have been pocketed by neoliberalism over the past few years. If you want a social renewal you need new left parties everywhere. No things can grow together that do not belong together.

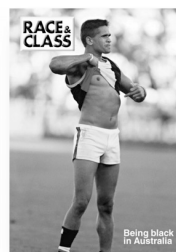
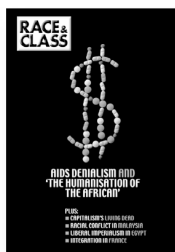
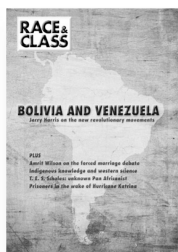
You once said Die Linke now stood for the SPD programme which had still met with much approval from the voters in 1989. You were head of the commission then, which drew up the social democratic principles that are known as the Berlin programme. Almost 20 years have passed. Is this programme still timely? Do programmes not have to change, inevitably?

Yes and No. If the programme includes giving employees and pensioners a decent share of the increase in prosperity, this is timeless. The same applies to the pension formula that avoids poverty in old age. And saying that we need a foreign policy that respects international law, and never gets involved in wars in defiance of international law, as was the basis for the SPD programme in the times of Willy Brandt, this is timeless as well. Sometimes it is really aggravating to see that such principles are treated as if they are no longer modern. There are programme principles of Die Linke that are as constant as the guarantee of human rights by the Basic Law (constitution). Yet, certainly each time needs its new answers. Let's take the discussion on the general strike or mass strike, which Die Linke has

triggered in Germany. Such positions were neither discussed by the SPD nor the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in the past. And talking about an ecological renewal today, and making re-municipalising a programme principle of Die Linke, and noting with surprise that other parties pick up on the subject of re-municipalising energy suppliers, this is very much an answer of the present time. Thirty or forty years ago, energy supply was still a municipal business. Later it was more and more privatised. Now we say that step was wrong and correct it. It stands out particularly in this place how thoughtless the argument is that you cannot suggest anything that used to exist some time ago ...

Once again about your election successes, you personally are said to be for involvement in government. Is that true?

That always makes me laugh because when you add up all the times I probably was in government longest in Germany including the time as Mayor of Saarbrücken. My position is clear. If you can accomplish your own policies, you have to enter government. If not, you must try to do so in opposition. We, Die Linke, are particular proof of the fact that a relatively small political force can change politics as an opposition party.



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