

“Admit that the waters around you have grown”

UN Climate Change Conference is imminent after Germany’s federal elections

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When the UN Climate Change Conference COP23 convened in Bonn in November 2017, Germany as its host country missed the opportunity to showcase itself as a pioneer of climate policy. This was because the fraught negotiations under way at the time over forming a new coalition restricted the federal government's ability to speak out. History may be repeating itself when COP26 convenes in Glasgow in November. This is even more unfortunate given that COP26 is expected to breathe new life into multilateral climate policy after the delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Arguably, it will be the most important climate change conference since the Paris Agreement was signed off in December 2015. Among other things, COP26 is intended to reconcile short- and long-term goals and measures and to find answers to the remaining questions surrounding the negotiation of market mechanisms in climate policy.

When a federal government was finally sitting in Berlin in 2018, the new Environment Minister at the time told the Bundestag in her inaugural address that German climate policy had to be “resuscitated”. As it happened, however, the “Grand Coalition” of conservative CDU/CSU and social democratic SPD barely managed to get to its feet on the climate policy front before Germany's supreme Federal Constitutional Court essentially applied the defibrillator in April 2021 by issuing a ruling. It therefore takes a lot of chutzpah for the currently governing Grand Coalition parties to present themselves unashamedly as proponents of ambitious climate policy in the ongoing election campaign.

As Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, a state with a large lignite mining industry, the CDU/CSU's candidate for chancellorship admittedly has a difficult balancing act on his hands. However, his own description of himself as a climate policy “doer” seems rather bold. And, while the SPD's candidate can claim to have enabled significant increases in international climate financing as Federal Minister of Finance, his party has likewise yet to be associated with a resolved climate policy at either federal or state level.

Nevertheless, the growth in Germany's contribution to international climate financing is no mean feat. It has saved Germany's face in multilateral climate policy on numerous occasions. It also underpins the development policy mission of German climate policy, especially since over 80 per cent of the country's public climate financing flows directly or indirectly into the partner countries and regions of German development cooperation. With the assistance of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and its context-specific experience, these countries and regions are thus being supported to align their development pathways with climate policy requirements and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This is significant and logical given that small and poor developing countries are anticipated to see a further increase in

greenhouse gas emissions as a result of their growing energy needs coupled with rapid urbanisation. Based on current estimates, the German government's bilateral partner countries alone will emit more greenhouse gases in total than the European Union within approximately ten years. The efforts that these countries make in their climate policy will hinge decisively on ample and credible support from the industrialised countries, whose affluence is largely based on their continued exploitation and consumption of fossil fuels.

Yet anyone who takes this as a reason to suggest that Germany and the European Union could see to their climate policy obligations chiefly and relatively inexpensively abroad would be recklessly jeopardising the credibility of German and European climate policy – a credibility that is desperately needed on the international stage. International cooperation is both urgently required and ethically appropriate in order to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement. However, it can never replace getting one's own house in order.

The Greens' election chances are being boosted by the fact that tackling the climate crisis has become a central issue in the campaign. Regardless of whether the Greens' manifesto lives up to the requirements of the Paris Agreement, their candidate for chancellor can legitimately argue that her party has long been calling consistently and credibly for much more climate action and is also conscious of Germany's international responsibility at the same time. Yet she needs to say how her party's stated aims on climate policy can be reconciled with the kind of lines of compromise on which government coalitions can be built and how they will meet with the challenges of development policy. Potential coalition partners are unlikely to simply give the pioneers free rein on climate policy.

Whatever the outcome of the elections and the subsequent negotiations over a coalition, Germany's new government will also be able to draw on the non-partisan recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Climate, which met between April and June 2021 under the patronage of former German President Horst Köhler. Any German government would be well advised to take the guiding principles formulated by the Assembly seriously and to make sure even as early as in November in Glasgow that Germany “leads the way as a global role model for climate-neutral living and business”. Another bout of speechlessness brought on by domestic issues would be the polar opposite – irrespective of who will be leading coalition negotiations in autumn and who will be running the government during COP26.

As far as climate policy goes, there's no time to spare: “You better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone.”*

*This quote and the title are taken from *The Times They Are a-Changin'* by Bob Dylan, 1964.