CHAPTER 5

The Weimar Left Between Opposition and Coalition: Varied Strategies

Introduction

The SPD was always torn between its traditional function as a party of opposition to the existing system, and its role under Weimar as a party of government. It could be described as a governmental party because of both its frequent participation in government at national and local level and its readiness (in the first few years) to construct and join coalition governments. As Wilhelm Schröder has commented ‘in the Weimar Republic the Social Democrats moved out of their enforced ghetto of “negative integration” and began to change into one of the parties that upheld the state’.¹ There was, however, considerable opposition from within the Party to its entry into coalition cabinets with bourgeois parties. At some points even the established leaders of the Party lost patience with the idea. After the SPD’s disastrous showing in the elections of 6 June 1920, when its share of the vote fell from the 37.9 percent secured in 1919 to 21.7 percent, largely owing to losses to the USPD, the Chancellor, Hermann Müller, felt obliged to resign because his coalition government no longer had a majority in the Reichstag. President Friedrich Ebert thereupon gave him the mandate to form a new government, which he tried to fulfil by calling on his left-wing rivals to take part. The USPD leader Crispien refused even to discuss a possible coalition, such was the degree of distrust that prevailed between the two parties at this point (5.1). Faced with this, Müller abandoned his task, with some relief, as he explained in detail to a meeting of party leaders (5.1). Later on, at the next party congress, he reaffirmed this position: ‘None of us has any desire to re-enter the government. I would point out that the Party Congress has made this declaration: there must be compelling reasons for the SPD to be forced to send comrades into the government again’.² Nevertheless, the Party did not stay in opposition for long. It re-entered a government coalition a year later, in May 1921, and stayed there till November 1922. The Social Democrats were also in coalition between August and November 1923 in the situation of national emergency associated with the period of hyper-inflation and threats from both Right and Left against the continued existence of the democratic

¹ Schröder 2001, p. 78.
² Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands 1920, pp. 35–6, 270.
republic. It was the refusal of the Stresemann government to employ force against a defiant right-wing government in Bavaria while intervening militarily against the SPD governments in Saxony and Thuringia which led the SPD to withdraw from the coalition in November.

After this, they remained out of office nationally for long periods (between 1924 and 1928, and from 1930 onwards). For much of this time, however, their opposition was hardly irreconcilable. They always ‘behaved as a government party if foreign policy required it’, because without their votes measures like the Dawes Plan of 1924, the Locarno Treaties of 1925 and the entry of Germany into the League of Nations would not have passed the Reichstag against the combined opposition of the nationalist Right and the communist Left. As regards economic and social policy, the SPD did indeed have a distinctive position, though paradoxically the most successful advances in social policy in the mid-1920s were achieved by non-socialist governments, with the SPD providing support from outside. Moreover, the Party was almost continuously in office between 1918 and 1932 in the largest German state, Prussia, in coalition with the Centre Party, the DDP and sometimes the DVP. It also formed governments in several smaller states. There was, however, a strong trend within the SPD, especially after reunification with the USPD in 1922, which opposed the strategy of coalition with bourgeois parties and demanded resolute opposition to all bourgeois governments (5.16. 5.17). In fact, it has been claimed that the reason why the SPD was able to stay in a well-nigh permanent coalition with the Centre Party and the DDP in Prussia was the absence of any mechanism in Prussia for controlling the Party’s leaders from below. The opponents of coalition were never able to win the support of the majority of delegates at the crucial party congresses, but they did make things difficult for the leadership.

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3 Schönhoven 1989, p. 118.
4 Prussian coalition cabinets led by SPD members: Hirsch cabinet, January 1919 to March 1920; Braun cabinet, March 1920 to April 1921; Braun cabinet, November 1921 to February 1925; Braun cabinet April 1925 to July 1932 (formally until March 1933). There was one coalition cabinet led by Wilhelm Marx (Centre Party) with SPD participation (February 1925 to April 1925). The only period during which there were no SPD ministers in Prussia was between April and November 1921.
5 There was a sizeable group of middle-level former members of the USPD who supported the left opposition after joining the SPD (such as Kurt Rosenfeld, Robert Dissmann, Heinrich Ströbel, Toni Sender, Karl Löwenstein, Siegfried Aufhäuser, Mathilde Wurm, and Lore Agnes). They were joined by the ex-communists of Paul Levi’s KAG. But most of the former top leaders of the USPD (such as Crispien, Dittmann and Hilferding) did not support the Left after 1923.
6 See in detail Möller 1985.