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'We need a sustainable agreement'

German MP Matthias Miersch on the Social Democrats' task to reconcile climate protection and social justice

Read this interview in German.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) is facing a deep crisis. It's unclear for many people in the country what the party stands for and what it's striving for. You are on the left wing of the party. In your view, what role does ecological industrial policy play in the future programme and renewal of the SPD?

> We need to talk about three main areas of action and, in those, develop a very clear profile. The first is the subject of international peace. The second is a strong, functioning state. And, in fact, the third is the recognition of our planetary boundaries, reconciling our lifestyle with limited resources. Here, ecological industrial policy plays a considerable role. In comparison to the other parties, we can combine the three pillars of sustainable development: environmental rationality, economic vision and also social justice.

The German Greens are flying high. Does that have more to do with the current polarisation in society or also the fact that, after a summer of heatwaves, people have witnessed the importance of climate protection first-hand?

> Of course, the Greens seem to offer a platform for many concerns at the moment. But if we look at our federal governments, then we see 'nothing but hot air' and wasted potential in the actions taken by, for example, the Jamaica coalitions [i.e. a coalition of Conservatives, Liberals and Greens in Germany].
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> But it's correct that the SPD has not resolved certain things. For instance, we appear to be split over energy policy. On the one hand, we speak of a dangerous assault on the coal industry. On the other hand, we highlight climate protection legislation as our success in the coalition agreement.
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> In this grand coalition, we are also not showing any clear position

towards automobile companies. There's a need for clarity in content. I expect that too from the party's renewal process. Incidentally, the SPD's debating camps have very clearly shown that members want to put precisely these subjects high on the agenda.

In the public debate and also within the SPD, again and again we see a contradiction emerge between jobs and environmental protection, economic well-being and protecting the climate. How can the social democrats offer sustainable compromises here?

I think that we are, based on our programme, best placed to really find an agreement between different interests. One thing is clear: social democracy cannot push back environmental boundaries either. That is why I say: we have to accept that the capacity of our nature, of our resources is simply limited.

On the subject of climate protection: here, for example, the 2030 goal is binding for Germany according to international law. And we have to comply with that in the various areas, such as in energy policy. But it's just as important for social democracy to equip the affected coal regions with clear and stable future prospects. That means, we have to think about developing our regional structures *and* climate protection. In the automobile industry, this means thinking about the future of the industry, investing in new propulsion technologies and thereby safeguarding the jobs of the future.

Coming out of coal production and generating electricity from coal is a difficult subject for the SPD. Do you see the 'Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment', which will prepare a roadmap for the phase-out of coal, moving in the right direction?

My colleague Stephan Weil and I managed to push for the creation of this committee in the coalition negotiations. At the time we sat in the Willy Brandt House, with the IG BCE [a major German trade union] on the left in Wilhelmstraße and Greenpeace on the right in Stresemannstraße. It was clear to us: we must not repeat the mistake made in extending the lifespan [of power stations].

We need a sustainable agreement between the different groups in society, which needs to last for decades in energy policy and in the coal phase-out. That's why we have to bring everyone to the table. At the moment, I am full of hope that everyone in the committee knows what's at stake. I believe that this is really the right way to reach a joint decision, even when we are all coming from different points of view. In my opinion, this is also a strength of social democracy: we are thinking in a holistic way, and not in terms of isolated issues.

For a long time, the energy transition has been considered as a German pioneer project. But the implementation is faltering and we are moving further and further away from our climate goals. How can this important environmental and economic project be saved?

I really think that, also because of this summer and the extreme weather, awareness has increased in the population. However, we are facing a problem: we can talk about climate protection at the meta-level forever. But when it's about concrete implementation, there local difficulties: take, for example, the citizens' initiatives against wind power or similar things. Germany's carbon footprint benefited above all from German unity, from the disappearance of whole branches of the economy in former East Germany.

As things stand, we will not achieve the 2020 climate goals. That is why we set up the committee, which is supposed to deal with the subject of energy and coal phase-out. But, in addition, we have agreed on climate protection legislation and given it a year: 2019. That's a central point. I think the public and possibly also some MPs have not fully grasped it yet. In the coming year we want to legally set down what we will do in order to comply with the binding 2030 goals agreed under international law, to which Germany has legally committed itself.

That does not just apply to the area of energy. Admittedly, we are talking mostly about energy policy. But traffic, buildings and farming will also be crucial aspects of climate protection legislation. Then we come to the crunch as to whether we mean it seriously or not. At the end of 2019, we will revise the whole coalition agreement. In my view, there will be an important question as to whether we reach effective climate protection legislation. Here the coalition can prove that it is indeed effective.

The SPD has made it its mission to shape the digital transformation. What political course needs to be set now so that digitalisation leads to a fair and sustainable economic and societal order?

The state must have a very strong role in steering digitalisation. On the one hand, that concerns everything from the provision of public services to infrastructure. We must avoid entire regions being left out of digitalisation. We need a mixture of administrative law and financial support.

Let's take a small example: the issue of heating in buildings. If we would manage to ensure that heating adjustment mechanisms are set up totally differently as part of digitalisation, then there is huge potential to increase energy efficiency. However, we are also seeing with other technologies that digitalisation unleashes the so-called

‘rebound effect’, namely that the potential for savings is being counteracted by other measures. Therefore, we need a mix. That will also have to be resolved in climate protection law: a framework for action according to regulatory instruments, i.e. clear specifications, but also providing targeted support in terms of research and the like.

The UN climate conference COP24 in Katowice has started. What are your expectations?

We celebrated the Paris agreement. But these are just letters on a blank piece of paper. Now, it’s really about agreeing how the countries make good on their commitments. It’s about clarifying how one can compare these commitments. The devil lies in the detail of course. The issue will be whether the countries will actually act beyond abstract declarations of intent.

That’s why we’re back to square one again. Germany too must now acknowledge that we have, for example in the area of traffic, not a reduction but an increase in CO2 pollution. What do we conclude? Each state now has to do its homework. In Katowice, we will see whether the countries actually deliver or not. Whether everything is only on paper or whether progress will actually be achieved. That’s what it will be about.

Claudia Detsch conducted this interview.



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