



Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser. *The Schüssel Era in Austria: Contemporary Austrian Studies, XVIII*. New Orleans: Uno Press, 2010. 375 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60801-009-7.

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The “Wende” Ten Years On

Ten years ago Austria experienced its “turn towards hysteria” (coined by Michael Fleischhacker) when the Socialists lost power after thirty years and Christian Democrat (ÖVP) Wolfgang Schüssel started his coalition with Jörg Haider’s right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). The ensuing uproar begs the question whether there was any substance to the “Wende,” the turn to the Right. In general, this volume produces an ambivalent, slightly paradoxical answer.

The most readable contributions are those in the first part devoted to Schüssel’s leadership. Peter Gerlich provides an elegant sketch of Schüssel’s personality; coeditor Fritz Plasser and his pollster companion Peter Ulram roll out the truth: “It’s the economy, stupid.” What sent Schüssel’s ratings down in 2003 was the pension reform, the equivalent of America’s “third rail of politics.” The chancellor obviously was not an “I feel your pain” politician. Voters gave him credit for leadership and efficiency, but not for “understanding people’s problems.” Günther Lengauer questions some of the clichés associated with Schüssel and the media: he was not quite such a mute “Schweigekanzler” and his relationship with Hans Dichand’s powerful *Kronen Zeitung* was not all that antagonistic. (In an interesting aside, Lengauer also documents the use of a completely fake interview to discredit Schüssel during the 2006 election campaign.) David Wineroither and Kurt Luther ably chart his relationship with his own party and his coalition partner, the FPÖ.

In its second part, the volume suffers from a surfeit of foreign policy issues even though access to primary sources of the period are still lacking. No less than three essays are devoted to “Austracism” and its aftermath—the bilateral measures briefly imposed on Austria by her EU partners. These so-called sanctions produced more smoke than fire and ended in a thinly disguised retreat by Jacques Chirac and others. (More recently, Joschka

Fischer has emphasized in his memoirs that “sanctions” were primarily the product of a fight among conservatives; only the decision to publicize them prematurely was due to EU Socialists.) The best of the three essays is by Reinhard Heinisch, who combines an Austrian background with a long spell in American academe. Elder Statesman Heinrich Neisser’s talents might have been better employed providing an insider’s view of the ÖVP.

Economic policy is dealt with by two fairly orthodox partisans of both the Right and the Left. Johannes Ditz praises Schüssel’s performance (but even more so his own role as secretary of state during the 1990s), while Max Preglau castigates all sorts of dangers associated with Schüssel’s neoliberal agenda. Paradoxically, though, for Schüssel supporters Preglau makes the case far better than Ditz that Schüssel actually got things done. Incidentally, readers might wonder how many women refused to take up their entitlements because they tend to conform to “the established gender order” (p. 273)? A thought worth pursuing further is Preglau’s observation that Austria differs from other European countries with her “high standard of monetary allowances and a relatively low standard of institutional services” (p. 276)—a strategy that recently has also been implicitly criticized by Germany’s iconoclastic (ex-?) Social Democrat Theo Sarrazin. Josef Leidenfrost, Vienna’s student ombudsman, charts the path of Austrian universities into the brave new world of EU directives. Universities are no longer that dependent on governmental bureaucracy and as a result, even if Leidenfrost does not say so outright, they have enlarged their own bureaucratic procedures with a vengeance.

Coeditor Günther Bischof and PhD student Michael Maier provide an essay on Schüssel’s “Geschichtspolitik”—a term and practice that often does little credit to either politics or history. Somehow Bischof

and Maier manage to create the impression that politicians should run for reelection directed by panels of progressive historians. Readers willing to delve into the footnotes learn there is even such a thing as an “index of contrition” (p. 229 n14). Austrian voters presumably enjoyed that Schüssel and his deputy prime minister, Susanne Riess-Passer (FPÖ), rank low on that list. If there was a “lot of trite commentary” in the speeches on the jubilee year 1955-2005 and if “an undertone of liberation from the four Allies marked the State Treaty celebration,” well, what else did you expect (pp. 221, 220)? Incidentally, “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” does not translate as “a notion of the past”—even if it says much about the more open-minded English (or Italian) mentality if their languages lack an equally misleading Freudian term. The schizophrenia of much commentary is admirably reflected by Anton Pelinka’s summing up,

which concludes that Schüssel tended to continue and reinforce trends rather than change the course of Austrian history. But then Pelinka goes on to insist he was breaking taboos even though he did not change things, after all. Such a conclusion, representing a victory of mind over matter, would probably embarrass Marxist-trained earlier generations of left-wing professors.

Among the forum and review contributions, Steven Beller’s review of a book on Bruno Kreisky, Joerg Haider, and Austrian identity is worth reading for the way Beller—while basically agreeing with the authors’ premises—still manages to run rings around them intellectually. Reinhold Gärtner’s “annual review” with its didactic comments should simply be deleted. The statistics speak for themselves. Either have an American-style “Crossfire”-like juxtaposition of left- and right-wing interpretations or no commentary at all.

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