

AUSTRIA - MARTENS ON 'VIRTUALPOLITIK'

EPP News 08b - 2000. Special issue

Brussels, March 17, 2000

The "Black-Blue" government coalition of the Austrian People's Party (OeVP) and the rightist Freedom Party (FPÖ) led by Jörg HAIDER - who came second in the 1999 elections by 415 votes - has created one of the most complex and divisive controversies since the European Union was founded. Fourteen EU Member States have decided to impose political sanctions in protest against the coalition. At last month's (Feb. 10) EPP Political Bureau meeting, three member parties demanded that the OeVP be excluded from the party while the coalition lasts. In an interview with EPP News, President Wilfried MARTENS (pictured below at the Feb. 10 Political Bureau) sets out the options.



EPP News: *The PSC, the francophone Belgian Christian Democratic party, is one of the three parties demanding the exclusion of the Austrians. Your own party, the Flemish CVP, is also very concerned about Austria.*

MARTENS: This is quite true. It is no secret that here in Belgium there is a xenophobic movement, the Vlaams Blok, and an understandable fear of an "Austrian model" of cooperation with extremists. There has been a similar controversy over the Front National in France. Each country sees the issue through its own national prism. The Austrian controversy is partly one that has nothing much to do with Austria itself.

EPP News: *So how deep is the ideological divide?*

MARTENS: Despite some of the distorted commentary of the last few weeks, the argument in the EPP is not between proto-fascists and Christian Democrats. Absolutely not! We are and remain a moderate, centrist European party, and we will resolve this problem fairly and democratically. By the time we come to a vote at the next Political Bureau, I think we will have arrived at a decent and coherent position.

EPP News: *Is this why you are delaying the decision?*

MARTENS: No, the rules of procedure are clear: if there are three applications for exclusion, which there have been, at least a month has to follow before it's decided by the party. But yes, I am pleased that that means there is a brief delay for people to reflect more calmly.

EPP News: *And then?*

MARTENS: As you know, the February 10 Bureau mandated me to appoint three Vice-Presidents to evaluate developments in Austria and to report back to the next EPP Summit. I have meanwhile studied the "Black-Blue" programme, which is very detailed, and also the joint public declarations signed by Wolfgang SCHÜSSEL [OeVP party leader and now Austrian Chancellor] and by Haider.

These policies and statements are, I have to say, unimpeachable, including the positions taken on European integration and on EU enlargement. The Austrian Foreign Minister Mrs FERRERO-WALDNER, who is from the OeVP, has re-emphasized the party's public commitment to abandon the coalition if common EU principles cannot be ensured.

I hesitate to add to the present polemics, but it is worth noting that the Austrian Socialists now so venomously denouncing the coalition were themselves allied to the FPÖ during the 1980s, with two former SS men sitting in the cabinet. And in those days, the FPÖ programme really was far-Rightist. I do not remember any special fuss about that. Why not?

EPP News: *Are you saying that this affair is trivial, essentially a confected party-political quarrel?*

MARTENS: Of course not. It raises all sorts of important issues which it's high time were discussed - not least the extent to which the EU is a polity, with fixed rules about dealing with this kind of problem. But for now the furore remains entirely verbal - verbal attacks, verbal recriminations, things that have been said in the past being dragged up, frequently quoted out of context, quoted and misquoted again. It's not terribly edifying, and is being exploited in a way that only gives succour to extremists and anti-Europeans.

But the present mood will soon, I hope, calm down, and we can then find a more serious political perspective. I have to say that, if we look back at this period in a few years' time, we will wonder what on earth was going on.

A minor Austrian populist ruling a province of less than 500,000 people - he is not even a minister in the new government - has been elevated to global stardom, or notoriety. The really important things - the terrible war in Chechnya, to name but one - are hardly considered worth our attention. This may seem a little perverse.

EPP News: *But as far as the EPP is concerned, how do you see the next stage in the debacle?*

MARTENS: I cannot prejudge the conclusions of the presidency delegates. But I would be surprised, and personally saddened, if the end result is the expulsion of the ÖVP, or further trouble for Chancellor Schüssel, who is a decent man I know well, and whom I trust. Most of our party leaders feel the same, and would not favour expulsion.

Nor, by the way, do I believe that the third of the vote Mr Haider collected last autumn proves that Austria has mysteriously turned its back on civilisation. The evidence is more mundane: this was in large part an election about breaking a logjam - 13 years of a ruling coalition, any coalition, is stifling, and in this case blocked the kind of sensible reforms which the ÖVP can now carry through. Those changes will, I hope, deepen Austrian democracy, and lessen the role of the state in the economy.

But of course I do not deny that the FPÖ support also includes those with extreme ideas. Such voters exist everywhere. The point is whether the party itself is now a democratic one and if given responsibility will become, so to speak, a "normal" party. The ÖVP believes this. We will see.

I would only say this: if the Black-Blue government realises any of the fears now being expressed about a rebirth of xenophobia, or of turning against the EPP's European commitment, I will - I promise you - be the first to denounce it. So far there is no evidence that that is on the agenda. The opposite.

EPP News: *But the realpolitik of the situation...*

MARTENS: ...is, as I suggested earlier, often a kind of *virtualpolitik*, if I can coin a phrase. In these days of overwhelming media pressure and campaigns, *virtualpolitik* gets hopelessly mixed up with *realpolitik*. I accept that, to an extent, even if it's painful to read idiotic headlines in France about the EPP "appeasing" the extreme Right, and so

forth.

We're not appeasing anyone, and it is ridiculous to use language of the 1930s about this affair. Europe has advanced a little since then, I hope.

EPP News: *How, ideally, would you envisage the best, least divisive, way forward?*

MARTENS: We are already moving towards a compromise which would defuse things. Everything depends on the delegates and the perspective of the EPP's member parties. We are a democratic organisation, after all.

EPP News: *Suspension or exclusion of a party would not be a first in the EPP's history?*

MARTENS: No. The Portuguese Christian Democrats, the CDS [now called the PP] was thrown out in 1993 when it was taken over by eurosceptics, and started campaigning against the Maastricht Treaty. But the OeVP is not a eurosceptic party.

So there is a precedent, and I can imagine parties in the future leaving us as well as joining. We are a political party, not some kind of social club.

And today, as the EPP grows, and with the political landscape changing so rapidly, as well as expanding to the east, I'd say it was more than ever vital that we remain true to our core beliefs. Last week I reiterated that our basic documents and action programmes have always opposed any form of racism or intolerance. We also have a track record to prove that's what we mean, and who we are. The EPP has no intention of moving from its fundamental positions