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# A Green vanguard for the full breadth of society

*A guest contribution by Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck*

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There is a need for a party that thinks ahead for politics to regain its creative power. But we have to develop cohesiveness across our environments and outwards. We have to renew the formerly Social Democrat pledge of fairness and solidarity in an extremely individualised society. That is the task for the Greens – as a Left wing liberal, social and environmental force that is progressive and European, argue Annalean Baerbock and Robert Habeck.

The Greens emerged from a sense that something wasn't quite right. There was a kind of politics, which had no answers to what was lying ahead in society's path: to the call for peace and freedom, for the same rights for women, for homosexuals, for minorities and to the longing for a new dawn. A politics which ignored the questions relating to our livelihoods. **We have broken with this limited politics as a radical vanguard, demanding that the country becomes environmentally freer and fairer.**

Now we're again faced with this uneasy feeling that politics of the world is lagging behind. But the omens are different: **The world is in a mess, the old political camps are crumbling, the main political parties are in crisis.** Germany will probably get a grand coalition once again, if the SPD members vote for a coalition agreement. But it is no longer a refuge of stability: the grand coalition is an emergency camp, somehow knocked together out of old slats of wood that are still hanging around and rusty nails.

## **More radical answers to offer a foothold**

Despite nuances in programmes, the dividing lines of political debate no longer run solely along the old Right-Left axis, between capitalism and a socially constrained version of the market economy. **Newly added to that is the confrontation between liberalism and illiberalism.** Some experience a cultural opening of lifestyles, in which everyone is happy in their way, you can love who you want to love, a hypermodern style which countermands the old standards, values and creeds. Others want a culture closing, new units of identity, a neo-nationalism, a religious fundamentalism.

And many have lost their way in this new chaos. And that they look for a foothold in the status quo is understandable. But faced with global turbulence there need to be changes so that the new developments don't wash us away. **There is a need for a party that thinks ahead so that politics regains its creative power.** So we have to dare to go for more radical answers to offer a foothold.

## **Filling the vacuum of the growing crisis in the main parties**

The Greens can tie that in with their original role – that of being the vanguard. But there is a new demand that is to be added too: because where earlier individual gaps were emerging, the growing crisis of the main parties is today leaving behind them a gaping hole. **If we want to**

**fill this hole, we have to offer a kind of politics for the whole breadth of society.** Not everyone has to agree with us and we don't have to be right in everything. But we have to develop cohesiveness across our environments and outwards and also be ready to reach compromises. If two thirds of society see the climate crisis as the biggest danger, but we only get nine per cent of the votes, we have to work for new majorities.

### **Environmental issues are social issues**

It is up to us to bind together the different, partly also contradictory tasks. First the environment with social issues: **Environmental issues – the climate crisis, access to water, food and resources, maintaining livelihoods – are social issues.** They decide on, how and whether people can live. It is in the loud streets that are particularly affected by nitrogen oxide from combustion engines where people live who cannot afford a house in a peaceful side street. These are the poorest of the poor, who no longer have any fertile land or water and are therefore forced to flee. Yes, many jobs depend on the coal industry and also on the fossil fuel combustion engine. But if the transformation of these branches of industry is not clearly structured, accompanied by the state and approached together with the employees, there will be a sudden disruption. And it won't affect the head of the board but the least qualified most of all.

### **We have to civilise the digital world**

**So, as social democracy formerly restrained the industrial revolution, we must now civilise the digital, postmodern world.** The more serious difference to earlier is that the industrial revolution made many people the same. A working class emerged, which basically had the same living standards and for which the Social Democrats were able to eke out and have eked out rights and security, education and opportunities for promotion.

In the Social Democrat age, the main parties united the different interests of the different milieus and groups. Workers, employees, Protestants, Catholics, north Germans, south Germans, they were all integrated. The individual was brought into the fold. That was a big achievement! **However, the digital revolution makes our lives more and more individual, society breaks up into new groups and subgroups.** But today the main parties no longer manage to bind together the disparate lifestyles into one idea of a society.

The world of work will radically change: Robots will not only take over simple jobs but also replace the reasonably paid jobs in the services sector. Work contracts will be limited in time, firms will be globally traded and sold. You can find that all miserable and count on the idea that nations sealing themselves off is the solution. But the knock-on costs of that will be high not just for society but also in economic terms. **The alternative is to stick with progress and globalisation – but to shape both in an environmental and social way.**

### **Renewing the pledge of fairness and solidarity**

**Against this background, Left means renewing the formerly Social Democrat pledge of fairness and solidarity in an extremely individualised society.** We have to reform the general conditions so that the different lifestyles can find common ground.

People need basic security, which protects their dignity and recognition in different lifestyles. We can tamper with the Hartz IV system, which deduces the value of a life from success in the working world alone, for years – but that just increasingly passes by reality. If child poverty arises because families are collapsing from the bureaucracy and are no longer sending in their claims, if having children becomes a poverty trap, if the flexibility of the working world eats up the soul, if the labour market is global, then the issue of social security is also back on the table.

Then there are the radical questions: Can there be a claim for disbursements of social services, a negative income tax? If robots and machines do the work, should firms, which install them, then not also participate in the financing of our community? If labour comes under increased pressure but is considered a value, do we not have to reduce the selling pressure exerted on human labour? And how do we finally manage it so that, instead of environmentally damaging industries being subsidised, they finally have to pay for the environmental damage?

### **Strong institutions and strong infrastructure**

We can give some footholds in our borderless world via a new understanding of the welfare state. **If we want to prevent poverty and frustration from taking hold, that people feel dependent or are, we need a renaissance of community thinking: strong institutions and a strong infrastructure, from nurseries to schools, from buses to medical care, especially in villages and regions lacking in structures.** As simple as that sounds, it will be difficult. Does the federal government not have to play a stronger role – as with education and the rollout of broadband – in services for the public so that we are again fairer in meeting the demand to produce equivalent living conditions? And so that cities and communities can again become stronger as an anchor for social cohesion?

### **Whoever wants to make a country “great” through nationalism, makes it small**

**The strengthening of the common welfare is very important for liberal parties.** Because in an argument between an authoritarian-national conception of the world and a liberal Left conception of the world, the Right – and meantime also the Left nationalists – play on something: they play the majority against the minority. They insinuate that open borders and trade are only of use to “the others” – the neighbour with better income, big companies, which save taxes, or the “foreigners” who are coming. Their answer to the problem is that one should rather seek isolation in order to maintain what has existed up until now. However the bus does not travel either if the border to Austria stays closed. And isolation doesn’t mean that multinationals will suddenly start paying taxes either or that new jobs will be created. These problems do not have their origins in the opening of borders in 2015 but in the neoliberal waves of deregulation of the past.

### **Liberalism creates cohesion**

Whoever wants to make a country “great” through nationalism, makes it small in truth. It is the other way around – we need to think smaller in order to achieve bigger. **We need to**

**create space for individual happiness, irrespective of where someone comes from, how they look, who they love, irrespective of whether they live in cities with excessive rents or in dying villages.** The answer to identity-driven, nationalistic politics is therefore not to strengthen the model of segregated group identities. Instead of that we have to look for what binds together in the differences. We must make it so that people feel individually addressed and win them over for the collective. That is the alternative to exclusion: illiberal politics divides, liberalism creates cohesion.

### **Only as Europeans do we remain capable of acting**

We will not solve the issues of security and peace, of wellbeing, work and environmental protection, if we stay stuck in the national space. **All that is going European because the nation state is too small to regulate the big things alone: only in this way will we remain capable of acting.**

**In this sense we Greens are a liberal Left, a social and environmental force, progressive and European. A vanguard for the whole breadth of society.** There is a contradiction in there, yes. But it is our task to resolve it.