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*Thomas Heilmann*

## Putting aside climate dependency

Can the centre-right deliver solutions to fight the climate crisis? The answer to this question will be decisive for the future. In Germany, the CDU and CSU's long-standing commitment to climate action will only become credible if we accept the magnitude of the task and offer a politically consistent response.

With war raging in Ukraine, the imperative to act has only strengthened. We must end our reliance on Russian gas and transition the German economy away from

fossil fuels altogether. This is no longer purely an environmental issue. For the sake of our security and the competitiveness of our industry, Germany must act. My party, now in opposition, must be at the forefront of the move to a prosperous and green future.

The CDU and CSU experienced a bitter election loss after longstanding Chancellor Angela Merkel stepped down in 2021. Many are complaining that we have failed to focus on our core values after 16 years in government and are suggesting we go back to old solutions. Why this is not a good route back to power can be found in a lesson from our past.

After losing the Bundestag election in 1969, we Christian Democrats experienced years of bitter opposition under the social-liberal coalition of SPD and FDP from 1969 to 1982. Major changes of that time, such as coming to terms with the legacy of National Socialism, stronger co-determination and, above all, “Ostpolitik” (the foreign policy of the social-liberal coalition of the FDR towards the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany), are today viewed as undisputed achievements. At that time, the majority of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group abstained from voting on the Eastern treaties in the Bundestag, symbolising an ambivalent attitude. Lip service could not conceal the lack of proper positioning at that time. The views within their parliamentary group were divided. This was one of the reasons why the CDU/CSU lost the Bundestag election 50 years ago and thus lost its position as the strongest parliamentary group for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic.

Today, climate change demands clarity in the same way. Those who spend their time questioning clean technologies or arguing that we must put the brakes on the transition in energy or transport are sending misleading signals. Anyone who wants to be in a pro-climate action party needs not only knowledge of the devastating human and financial consequences of global warming, but above all

an understanding of what a new world energy infrastructure could look like and what historic economic and ecological opportunities it holds. However, this potential can only be achieved with significant investment. Those who believe that nations can successfully tackle this task alone fail to recognise the magnitude of the assignment, the weaknesses of any state economy, and the power of competition.

This is where the task of the German centre-right lies with its tradition of overcoming economic challenges by free-market means. We want climate protection to become the driving force of prosperity. It does not help just to prophesy an impending apocalypse. We must act on common sense that it is better for everyone to leave the fossil fuel age now and build a new sustainable energy infrastructure.

This infrastructure takes advantage of what we have today. Through innovation and digital control, we are attracting new suppliers to produce or store electricity exactly when there is demand. In the much-cited dark periods where solar output is low, even base-load power plants offer too little energy, and if we built so many large plants that they could also cover peaks, the old centralised system, with its exorbitant costs, would remain.

Competition will bring us the necessary flexible solutions. We already know of six climate-neutral solutions, each of which can provide 10 to 30 percent of the respective electricity demand: geothermal energy, hydropower and bioenergy, price incentives for saving at the right time, swarm storage in private households, large-scale storage (with different technologies) and gas-fired power plants that work with hydrogen.

Mistakenly, it is always said that renewables have received particularly large subsidies. In fact, state subsidies for nuclear power and coal, i.e. for the old large-scale base-load systems, amount to three times as much in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany at well over 700 billion euros. This does not include the many billions

for final storage, the coal penny and the grid fees, nor the cost of the environmental damage they cause.

The new system will be cheaper, even if we have to invest a lot in the changeover first. It would also be surprising if, almost 150 years after the invention of our current energy system, we could not find something more efficient today. Our transport and communication networks no longer function as they did in the middle of the last century. The transition requires not only investment, but also cutting off the exploiting of old investments. Anyone sitting on an oil well naturally has a vested interest in still selling every litre. With depreciated plants, this always remains big business, whose profiteers openly obstruct climate protection.

Ten or twenty years ago, German business was also quite sceptical. That has changed fundamentally, and not only in Germany. Many companies are now pushing for the green transformation - and demanding clear rules. These include calculable and reliable pricing of climate and environmental damage into the fossil fuels, open competition and good investment conditions for the private sector. If, on the other hand, the current German government of Liberals, Greens and Social Democrats wants to have, for example, new hydrogen infrastructure built by the state, that is not a good idea. As much as the federal government rightly pushes the expansion of renewable energies, it is mistaken in its belief in state control.

Better news comes from Europe. Here, in the EU, at the turn of the year, emissions trading was extended across Europe to transport and buildings - a fundamental decision that makes the old system more expensive and thus opens up the space for new things that are thus increasingly profitable. At the same time, the next step was developed, i.e. how to create a level playing field with non-European competitors via a carbon border adjustment mechanism. This means that other countries which are able to use fossil fuels to undercut

products like low-carbon steel will be imported with a carbon levy to prevent a flood of cheap material undermining growing low carbon industries in Europe. This is an effective market-based solution to internalising the externalities of increased carbon emissions. It means that producers are forced to take responsibility for the problems they cause, rather than simply leaving it to the rest of us.

This green new world promises previously unimaginable advantages. We have more resources at our disposal than we could ever consume. Renewable energy can be produced almost indefinitely. If we can produce an abundance of electricity, we can also pay much less for it. This has endless potential, in medical advancements, in automating labour and improving human prosperity. Not to mention the fact that with enough cheap energy we can pull carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and bury it, and produce clean hydrogen to decarbonise industry. When we talk about renewables we often think about them in terms of reductions - reductions in emissions but also in reliability or flexibility. We should really be thinking about them in terms of gains. After all, when our electricity is largely home grown, we gain a level of security from hostile nations that we have always struggled to achieve with fossil fuels. We gain the ability to have an overabundance of energy under various conditions, when scarcity has historically limited human progress. We gain cleaner air, waterways free of pollution from coal mine runoff, and a cleaner world.

We are sitting on an abundance of information and ideas, enhanced by artificial intelligence that can synchronise demand and supply much better. The private sector - driven by human creativity and demanding customers - is moving along a path towards value-based and sustainable business. As Christian democrat and free-market parties, the CDU and CSU must vigorously promote this development. Only then will our climate protection be consistent and our commitment to the Paris climate goals meaningful.

After the Second World War, the CDU/CSU resisted all despondency. With confidence in the market economy, reconstruction was approached optimistically - despite 12 million refugees and devastating destruction. This is also the right attitude for the energy transition, which is nothing less than a total restructuring of our energy infrastructure and thus a new foundation of prosperity for us all.