

## **German Left Party leader Katja Kipping: “As a Marxist, you can never be dogmatic”**

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### **The Corbyn ally on how to defeat the far right, the EU’s flaws and what she’s learned from Labour.**

In 1998, during New Labour’s imperial phase, Tony Blair and then German chancellor Gerhard Schröder were united in promoting the “Third Way” or “*die neue mitte*” (the new middle). Two decades later, a new Anglo-German partnership is being forged: between Jeremy Corbyn and Katja Kipping.

Rather than courting the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Labour’s official sister party (which recently polled only 16 per cent, behind the far-right Alternative für Deutschland), Corbyn has built links with the rival Die Linke (the Left), which polls about 10-11 per cent and finished fifth at the 2017 election.

In May, Corbyn hosted Kipping, the Left’s 40-year-old co-leader, at Westminster and she was one of the principal guests at Labour’s conference in Liverpool. “Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum prove that, even in these times, the left can grow and develop and potentially even take over the government,” Kipping – immediately recognisable from her auburn hair – said when we met in Liverpool.

“It shows you don’t have to go to the middle, you don’t have to be the junior partner to a conservative party [the SPD governs in coalition with Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats], there is the chance of a shift to the left.”

Kipping’s party was founded in 2007 through a merger of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the official successor to East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party) and Labour and Social Justice, a 2005 breakaway from the SPD. She was elected co-leader in 2012, and since then the party has benefited from its rivals’ decline.

“There is a social alternative to Chancellor Merkel,” Kipping told me. “A government where everybody is saved from poverty, which advocates climate justice and clearly pursues the politics of peace instead of raising defence spending.”

The Left favours the disbandment of Nato (as Corbyn historically has) and its replacement with a new European collective security system, potentially including Russia. “We have to introduce a new policy of détente in the tradition of [former German chancellor] Willy Brandt.”

Corbyn’s meeting with Kipping was condemned by some, such as the Labour MP Ian Austin, on account of the Left’s historic ties to East Germany’s Stalinist regime. But Kipping, who grew up in Dresden and joined the PDS in 1998, rejects such associations. As editor of the *Prague Spring* magazine, named after the 1968 revolt against the Czech communist government, she emphasises that she is a genuinely democratic socialist.

In his bicentenary year, how does she now regard Karl Marx? “I went to his tomb [in Highgate Cemetery, north London] and laid down some flowers. His books are always worth rereading because they are the best way of training your critical thinking, but that doesn’t mean you need to follow any of his judgements... being a Marxist you can never be dogmatic, you always have to reflect on how the productive forces are changing.”

This nuanced stance sets Kipping against Sahra Wagenknecht, the party’s parliamentary co-leader and founder of Aufstehen (“Stand Up”), a political movement that resembles a fusion of the Corbynite activist group Momentum and the socially conservative Blue Labour.

Kipping did not disguise her disdain for Aufstehen’s support for new limits on immigration (Germany has accepted more than 1.3 million refugees since 2015). “It’s not a project of Die Linke, it’s an initiative – I don’t call it a movement... they want to take our party politics to the right.”

She believes that far right supporters can be won over by other means: “Some people voted for AfD just because they are frustrated, they need the promise of a real improvement in their lives: lower rents, higher pay, better pensions. They could be attracted back: say no to racism, say yes to solidarity.”

Kipping sympathises with the Brexit vote. “I agree with all the criticisms of the EU, the way it was built, the way it was shaped, the austerity politics.” But, she added: “I would have voted Remain with the clear intention of totally rebooting the EU.”

What would that entail?

“It has to be democratised; austerity politics has to be stopped immediately. And if you have a currency union, you also need a social union and common economic policies.”

In Britain, the German economic model is admired for its high productivity, worker representation and trade surpluses. But Kipping warned that the country’s export dominance was partly “responsible for the instability before the [2008] crash” – having encouraged excessive borrowing among other states – and could lead “directly to the next crisis”.

Unlike some Left politicians, Kipping is open to the possibility of a future coalition government with the SPD and the Greens, who are rising again in Germany. “If we want to stop the shift to the right, we need all of these forces to work together.”

Katja Kipping ended our encounter by invoking what Rosa Luxemburg, the German Marxist leader, called “revolutionary realpolitik”: “you have to fight for any small improvement for the people’s sake, but also constantly expose the limits of capitalism.”

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