



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### **Monthly Report October 2009 (Germany) - Local parties for young people are successful - in Monheim they even provide the mayor**

In several German *Länder* the age for voting in local elections has been lowered to 16, at roughly the same time as voting rights for EU citizens in local elections came into force. In the five *Länder* where this is the case (North-Rhine Westphalia, Lower Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein) the changes were introduced between the year 1998 and 2001. Interestingly, in Hesse, it was introduced first in 1998 and was valid for one local election only, before it reverted back to the previous age limit of 18 years.

Around this time a number of so-called local 'youth parties' were also established in Germany, and not only in *Länder* which have the lower voting age. These parties which are explicitly aimed at a younger audience are mostly very task-oriented and cannot be put into the usual political categories, which is why it is important to distinguish them from the youth wing of the established parties. These local youth parties concentrate entirely on local issues and will very often incorporate themselves as 'local electors associations' and not as political parties, something that is very common in the German local political landscape.

In Monheim in NRW, a city of 43.000 people immediately to the South of Düsseldorf, the youth party 'Peto' - which is Latin for 'I demand' - was founded in 1998 by a group of young people who wanted to improve provision for young people in the city, and in preparation for the first local elections in 1999 in which 16 year olds could vote. 16 years old having the vote means a lot of them would still be attending school. Although to participate in the election they had to field slightly older candidates (the age for standing in elections is still 18) they were immediately successful and gained 6.1% of votes, meaning that two seats were taken in the 40-strong city council. In 2004, they increased their share to 16.6% and took 7 seats, and in 2009 they nearly drew equal with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU); and with 29.6% took 12 seats, the same number as the CDU. From these results it becomes clear that the party was very successful in its engagement within the council, and able to increase its support not only among young people, but also among other sectors of the residents. Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that in the 2009 elections for mayor which were held at the same time, the Peto candidate came out top among the seven candidates with 30.35% and thus gained the mayoralty. (In 2007, the electoral law was changed to a relative majority being sufficient to win, not requiring a run-off election.) This means

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that at 27, Daniel Zimmermann, one of the original founders of Peto, who first became a member of the city council in 2004 (in the 1999 election he was not able to stand because he was still a minor), is now the youngest full-time mayor in North-Rhine Westphalia.

Peto has 300 members in Monheim, which means it is bigger than the local organisation of the CDU. However it is a mistake to assume that their support is only within the younger generation. Through their consistent work on the city council where the Peto councillors distinguished themselves by thorough preparation and knowing their briefs, they build good relationships within and outside the council. Their willingness to get to grips with things and really put in the working hours has led to them being called the 'shredders'. Also, by being in a group of people their own age, there is no problem of acceptance and not being taken seriously, and a spirit of teamwork prevails within the party. According to the testimony of other parties in the town where there is always inner-party strife about positions and influence, the Peto party members concentrate on the issues and not on inner-party squabbles. By now, there is also a working group '30 Plus' in the party, to welcome older people who want to contribute their expertise and experience.

The new mayor, who started his term in office on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2009, has taken time out from his PhD studies at the university in Cologne to concentrate on the office of mayor. However at some point he hopes to work as a teacher for French and physics, for which he is qualified. His political colleagues as well as his opponents laud his calm and his professionalism; he is somebody who unifies rather than divides people. Considering that Monheim last year decided to pursue the aim of becoming a 'Children's Capital', it is perhaps fitting that the city as, in the words of some people on the city council, 'governed by children'.

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