Like Australia, Germany has seen a shift in the political middle ground. But there, it’s ended up in an intriguing place, writes Klaus Neumann.

Germany’s interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich of the conservative Christian Social Union, greets Syrian refugees at Hanover Airport in the final days of Germany’s election campaign. Federal Ministry of the Interior

FOR AN election campaign to be of interest to anyone apart from politicians, political scientists and pollsters, two conditions need to be met: the outcome must be unpredictable, and there must be a genuine contest between personalities, policies and visions for the future.

Not even diehard Liberal supporters got excited about the recent Australian federal election. Tony Abbott’s win had been anticipated for at least the past couple of years – except, perhaps, during two weeks in late June and early July immediately after Kevin Rudd’s third and finally successful attempt to oust Julia Gillard. In the final weeks of the campaign, the only person who seemed to believe that Labor could win the election was Rudd himself; in fact, his concession speech suggested that his belief didn’t waiver even after the votes had been counted.

Predictable election outcomes seem to be the order of the day. Well before Norwegians cast their votes in last week’s parliamentary election, all observers were agreed on the result. The Labour Party’s popular and competent Jens Stoltenberg, who had presided over a booming economy, would be defeated, and Erna Solberg of the Conservative Party would become the country’s next prime minister. The results duly confirmed the expectations.

In Germany, the campaign leading up to this weekend’s election has been as uninspiring as Australia’s. That’s not least because everybody assumes that the incumbent, Angela Merkel, will remain Bundeskanzlerin. Her challenger, the Social Democrat Peer Steinbrück, has performed well during the campaign, but his approval ratings still lag by at least fifteen percentage points. The Christian Democrats – the Christian Democratic Union and its sister party, the Christian Social Union – will undoubtedly win the largest share of the votes.

But the situation in Germany is quite different from that in Norway, where Solberg was always expected to form government with the help of the populist, right-wing Progress Party. It’s different from Australia, too, where Tony Abbott was always expected to be the prime minister of a Liberal–National coalition government – even in the unlikely event that the Liberal Party had won a majority of seats in the House of Representatives. While Merkel may be Germany’s next chancellor, the make-up of her government is difficult to predict.

Merkel currently presides over a governing coalition of Christian Democrats and the Free Democratic Party. Together, they hold 320 of 620 seats in the Bundestag, the German lower house. The Social Democrats (146 seats), the Left Party (seventy-six seats) and the Greens (sixty-eight seats) form the opposition.

According to the most recent opinion polls, the Free Democrats and Christian Democrats will win about as many seats between them as will the other three parties currently represented in the Bundestag. If the governing coalition has fewer seats than the Social Democrats, Left Party and Greens combined, however, the latter won’t necessarily be able to form a coalition; Steinbrück has ruled out governing with the help of the Left Party, an
amalgam of former left-wing Social Democrats, in West Germany, and the successor party of the communist Socialist Unity Party in East Germany. The government’s position would become much more difficult, however, if the vote for the Free Democrats, which currently sits on between 5 and 6 per cent, falls below 5 per cent. In that case, the Free Democrat vote would be below the threshold needed for its representatives to enter parliament.

The situation may become even more complicated if Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) wins more than 5 per cent of the vote and thus enters parliament. Formed as recently as February by a former World Bank economist, Bernd Lucke, and Konrad Adam, a former editor of the conservative broadsheet Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the party’s sole aim is the abolition of the Eurozone. But although Lucke and Adam want to get rid of the common currency (not just for Germany), they aren’t eurosceptics; in fact, they argue that the euro hinders rather than advances European integration. As I observed previously in Inside Story, Germans are committed to the idea of Europe but fond of dreaming about a return to the Deutschmark. Until very recently, opinion polls predicted around 3 per cent for the new party, but the most recent polls have reported a surge in support. While Alternative for Germany is still predicted to fall short of the required 5 per cent, it wouldn’t be the first time that pollsters have underestimated a new party’s pulling power, as the performance of the Palmer United Party in the Australian election demonstrated.

All that means that a continuation of the current government is just one of several scenarios. The second-most-likely scenario is a coalition between the two major parties. Steinbrück has been finance minister in a Merkel-led government once before, between 2005 and 2009, so there is certainly a precedent for that option. Or the Greens could become a junior partner in a Merkel-led government. Or Steinbrück could resign and open the door for a coalition between Social Democrats and Greens and Left Party, or for a minority government tolerated by the Left Party. In other words, Merkel’s chances of not having to vacate her current position are fairly good, whereas a Bundeskanzler Steinbrück is a rather unlikely prospect.

Germans have experienced all manner of coalitions in the past, including one between Christian Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats (between 2009 and 2012 in Saarland). Currently, only one state out of sixteen is led by a government comprised of members of only one party: Hamburg, where the Social Democrats rule in their own right. In five states, Social Democrats and Greens form the government; in one of these, Baden-Württemberg, the Social Democrats are the junior partner. In Schleswig-Holstein in Germany’s far north, Social Democrats and Greens rule with the help of a minor party that represents the state’s Danish minority. Five states are run by coalitions between Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, with the former in the driving seats in two cases. Brandenburg is governed by a coalition of Social Democrats and Left Party. Finally, in three states the government is currently a replica of the federal government in Berlin – although that is about to change, as the Christian Social Union won an absolute majority of seats at yesterday’s elections in Bavaria, while its partner, the Free Democrats, failed to reach the 5 per cent threshold.

So even if most commentators and the majority of Germans were right in predicting another Merkel-led government, the outcome of the elections on Sunday – the make-up of the next government – is uncertain. Why, then, hasn’t there been more interest in the current contest? Before answering that question, I return once more to Australia.

Much of the reason why the Australian election campaign was a rather tepid affair was that in key areas, the two major parties embraced each other’s policies. “Stop the boats,” Tony Abbott repeated ad nauseam, and as soon as he returned to the prime ministership Kevin Rudd announced a policy that was more draconian than anything ever contemplated by the Liberals. “We’ll scrap the carbon tax,” Abbott promised – and a few weeks before the election, the government, too, said that the carbon tax would be abolished from next year. Labor prided itself on the Gonski school funding reforms and on DisabilityCare; despite its misgivings about Gonski, the opposition agreed not to reverse the reforms should it win government. DisabilityCare always had bipartisan support.

When shadow treasurer Joe Hockey finally announced where an incoming Liberal–National government would make cuts, he singled out the foreign aid budget. But here, too, the Labor government’s policies had set a precedent. Under Labor, Australia had deferred the millennium development goal target five years in a row. And last year, the government decided to divert at least $375 million of the foreign aid budget to pay for the accommodation of asylum seekers in Australia – strangely enough, without contravening OECD guidelines.
about the expenditure of foreign aid. At the time, the opposition’s foreign affairs spokesperson, Julie Bishop, pointed out that the diversion would make the Gillard government “the third-largest recipient” of Australian foreign aid after Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

Germany’s election campaign has been a lacklustre affair for much the same reason. Like last time around (and reported in Inside Story), disagreements between the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats about key policy directions have been rare. While Labor Party policies have resembled those traditionally associated with the Liberals in Australia, the opposite has happened in Germany: the Christian Democrats have become the larger of two social democratic parties. The Christian Democrats have also embraced policies that were traditionally associated with the Greens: most importantly, the Merkel government has moved Germany away from its dependence on nuclear energy, and has implemented policies designed to result in a significant reduction of Germany’s greenhouse gas emissions.

Compared with positions now held jointly by the Labor Party and the incoming Coalition government in Australia, the German government’s position is radical. Although last year CO2 emissions went up by 2 per cent, and a significant reduction of emissions over the past twenty years was largely due to the restructuring of East Germany’s economy, Germany is on track to further reduce its ecological footprint. All parties represented in the Bundestag are in favour of further steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Germany and worldwide.

In 2012, according to the UNHCR, Germany received 64,540 asylum applications, or 13 per cent of such applications worldwide. (Australia received 3 per cent.) Recently, Der Spiegel reported that Germany is on target to receive more than 100,000 asylum seekers this year; close to a third of them are likely to be recognised as refugees or otherwise allowed to remain in Germany. Despite the increased number of asylum applications, in March the government offered to accommodate 5000 refugees from Syria for at least two years. They will have work rights and will be entitled to attend free German language classes. Last week, the first 107 Syrians arrived from Lebanon in a plane chartered by the government, joining about 30,000 Syrian asylum seekers and refugees already in Germany. Opposition parties have criticised the Merkel government over its response to Syrian refugees – not because they don’t want them to come to Germany, but because they believe Germany ought to take in more than 5000.

The Australian case couldn’t be more different. The PNG solution and the Liberals’ “turn-back-the-boats” policy have signalled to the rest of the world that Australia is unwilling to live up to its legal obligations and moral responsibilities. Most Australians would not countenance anything else, according to both major parties. But this is a chicken-and-egg situation. While neither Labor nor the Coalition were prepared to challenge anxieties such as the one articulated by the Liberal candidate for the seat of Lindsay – that asylum seekers contribute to traffic congestion in Western Sydney – all parties represented in the Bundestag condemned the views of the organisers of a campaign against asylum seekers in Hellersdorf, a suburb in outer East Berlin. (In socioeconomic terms, Hellersdorf is comparable to some of the suburbs that make up Lindsay.) In Australia, for the past twelve years, the majority of Liberal, National and Labor politicians have condoned, if not encouraged, irrational fears of asylum seekers (which makes Chris Evans’s unruffled period as immigration minister, 2007–10, all the more remarkable). In Germany, even conservative politicians have been careful to avoid a similar response. Perhaps they know that the racist genie, once let out of the bottle, isn’t easily coaxed back in.

AS ANGELA Merkel has turned the Christian Democratic Union into another, albeit more effective, social democratic party – with green credentials, to boot – it has become difficult for the Social Democrats and the Greens to distinguish their policies from hers. It matters little that Merkel’s policies are not necessarily the same as those of the government, since she has had to accommodate the views of the Bavarian Christian Social Union, which has traditionally always been more conservative than her own party, and of the free-market Free Democrats. In some parts of Germany, the Social Democrats are no longer one of two major parties: in three East German states they rank third (behind the Left Party), and in Baden-Württemberg they have been overtaken by the Greens.

The seeds of the social-democratisation of the Christian Democrats were sown during 1998–2005, when Gerhard Schröder, a Social Democrat chancellor, presided over economic liberalisation and a partial dismantling of the German welfare state. Thanks to Schröder, Merkel didn’t need to shift too far when she made the policies
of the Social Democrats her own. She managed this particularly effectively during her first stint in government, when the Social Democrats were the junior partner in a coalition with the Christian Democrats. But it was also easy for Merkel to occupy positions that had traditionally been associated with the left side of politics because, unlike her predecessors, including Helmut Kohl, the former East German research scientist was unencumbered by ideological ballast.

In Australia, the opposite has happened. During the reign of John Howard, Labor felt compelled to embrace Liberal policies in key areas (with the significant exception of industrial relations). During Kevin Rudd’s first term as prime minister (2007–10), Labor’s claim that its policies were distinct from those of the previous Coalition government had to rely largely on the symbolism of the apology to the Stolen Generations. Like Merkel, Rudd and, albeit to a lesser extent, Julia Gillard came to office without major ideological commitments; the election of Bill Shorten to lead Labor in opposition would continue the trend. Where Merkel turned the Christian Democrats into a social democratic party that is in many respects more credible than the original, Rudd and Gillard only managed to create a poor copy of John Howard’s Liberals.

What is particularly interesting about the respective realignments in Germany and Australia is the fact that the retreat from traditional Labor positions (in Australia) and from traditional conservative positions (in Germany) doesn’t seem to have crowded out other parties on the right in Australia or on the left in Germany. To the contrary: in Australia, there still seems to be room for Hansonites to the right of the Liberal Party. In Germany the Left Party remains a viable force on the left side of the political spectrum, and the Pirate Party may well have managed to successfully navigate the Bundestag’s 5 per cent threshold if it hadn’t been for its inexperienced leadership. The Pirates are currently represented in four state parliaments, including in North Rhine-Westfalia – by far the most populous German state, with 17.5 million people – where they won 7.8 per cent of the vote in 2012. In Sunday’s election, they are likely to benefit from Germans’ continuing unease about the surveillance by American, British and German intelligence agencies, which has featured prominently in the news since June and has been a sore point for Merkel’s government. At the other end of the spectrum, the neo-Nazis of the National Democratic Party of Germany, which is represented in two state parliaments in East Germany, can count themselves lucky if they get more than 1 per cent of the national vote on Sunday.

This suggests that the realignments overseen by Merkel, on the one hand, and Rudd and Gillard, on the other, reflected a shift in the electorate’s overall mood. That shift can’t easily be measured on the old “left-right” scale. But given that climate change is indeed, as that otherwise largely forgettable Australian prime minister once said, “the greatest moral, economic and environmental challenge of our generation”, labels such as “left” and “right” are not particularly helpful anyway – and neither are they when assessing the response to refugees and asylum seekers. •