

# Germany embraces the family: Calls for free child care and tax breaks for parents [DE] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In the macho world of German politics, the Family Affairs portfolio is usually reserved for lightweights and rarely taken seriously.

But Ursula von der Leyen, a feisty doctor and mother of seven, has shaken up the ministry since taking on the job in Chancellor Angela Merkel's Cabinet, making controversial proposals that have put the family high on the political agenda.

Her calls for free child care and extensive tax breaks for families with small children have put the spotlight on Germany's low birth rate and increasing shortage of children.

The Federal Statistics Office said yesterday Germany's population fell for a third straight year in 2005. The data show the number of Germans has fallen by 3.2 million in the past 33 years, a drop masked until recently by the flow of immigrants.

Determined to overhaul Germany's childcare system and end the frosty attitude to families, the Family Affairs minister sparked a heated debate by urging states and communities to slash or even eliminate pre-school charges that far exceed university fees.

"I am in the middle of a storm now, but you can be sure I will stay the course," she told a news conference.

Ms. Merkel's Christian Democrats and their Social Democrat partners are now competing for votes by offering more help for families in the run-up to three state elections in spring.

In November, the federal government pledged to expand pre-school care in the next four years for children of three and under, to give parents with new babies generous financial aid to stay at home for one year, and to give tax breaks for day-care costs.

Ms. von der Leyen, whose conservative father was for many years state premier in Lower Saxony, has a tough task ahead.

There is also an acute shortage of facilities. In western Germany, there were three day-care places for every 100 children under three in 2002, the last year for which data are available.

While Ms. von der Leyen's demand that child-care fees that can reach 3,700 euros (about \$5,200) a year be scrapped was welcomed by all political parties and cheered by parents, the local authorities who would have to pay for childcare in future said no.

"Free child care might be a nice idea," said Stephan Articus, head of the association of German municipalities. "But we simply don't have the two billion euros needed."

- reprinted from the National Post

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[3]</sup>

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