



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Kaiser Wilhelm I's Royal Proclamation on Social Policy (November 17, 1881)

Although Bismarck had implemented the Anti-Socialist Law in 1878, the socialist movement was still growing, as the 1881 Reichstag elections demonstrated. To supplement the stick of legal repression and political intimidation, the chancellor offered German workers the carrot of social welfare legislation – a series of paternalistic social reforms that can be considered Europe's first labor protection acts. This ambitious program was announced in the Royal proclamation [*Kaiserliche Botschaft*] of November 17, 1881, excerpted below. It is worth noting that when he announced this new direction in social legislation, Bismarck had no parliamentary majority that he could rely on to pass it. Through the 1880s, he had to fight tooth and nail for his social reform program, abandoning parts of it along the way.

Proceedings of the Reichstag

5th Legislative Period. – First Session.
1881.

Opening Session in the **White Hall of the Royal Palace in Berlin** on Thursday, November 17, 1881.

In accordance with the Supreme Royal Decree of November 4, 1881, the official opening of the Reichstag took place at 1:30 this afternoon in the White Hall of the Royal Palace.

[. . .]

As soon as all the Reichstag representatives had gathered in the White Hall, the plenipotentiaries to the Federal Council appeared, led by Prince Bismarck, and took their places to the left of the throne.

Proceedings of the Reichstag

The Reich Chancellor then gave the following address to the assembly:

Due to indisposition, His Majesty the Emperor finds Himself, contrary to expectation, unable to open the session as His Majesty had intended. His Majesty has given me orders to express His regrets to you, dear Gentlemen, to welcome you on behalf of the allied governments, and to

convey a Supreme Royal Proclamation, which it is my honor to read, at the opening of your session:

We, **Wilhelm**, German Emperor by the Grace of God, King of Prussia, etc., are announcing and hereby decreeing for all to know:

[. . .]

As early as February of this year, We let Our conviction be known that curing social defects will have to be pursued not only through the repression of Social Democratic excesses but also through the consistent and positive promotion of workers' welfare. We deem it Our Imperial Duty to urge the Reichstag to take this task to heart once again, and We would look back with all the more satisfaction on the many successes with which God has blessed Our government if one day We could be content in the knowledge of having left the fatherland new and lasting guarantees of internal peace and having given the needy greater security and the abundance of assistance to which they are entitled. We are certain that our efforts toward this purpose enjoy the support of all the allied governments, and we trust that we have the support of the Reichstag, despite party differences.

As a first step along these lines, the draft bill submitted by the allied governments during the last session on insuring workers against industrial accidents will be revised with a view to the debate that took place in the Reichstag on this same bill, in order to pave the way for still more debate on this proposal. As a supplement, another bill will be added; the additional bill will aim to give consistent organization to the commercial health insurance system. [It should not be forgotten], however, that all those persons who have become unfit for gainful employment through age or disability also have a legitimate claim to a greater degree of state welfare than they have received thus far.

Finding the proper ways and means to ensure this level of welfare is difficult, but it is also one of the highest tasks of any community that rests upon the moral foundations of a Christian national life. Closer connection to the real forces of this national life and the combination of those forces in the form of corporate cooperatives under state protection and state support will, as We hope, allow us to successfully accomplish even those tasks that are beyond the reach of state authority alone. But reaching the goal, even in this way, will still be impossible without the investment of substantial funds.

[. . .]

Documented by Our own hand and affixed with an Imperial Seal.

Given in Berlin on November 17, 1881

L.S. [instead of a seal] **Wilhelm**

von Bismarck

Then, the Chancellor, Prince Bismarck, announced the opening of the Reichstag with the following words: "In the name of the allied governments, I declare, on the order of His Majesty the Emperor, the Reichstag open."

After this, the royal Bavarian plenipotentiary to the Federal Council, the extraordinary envoy Count von Lerchenfeld-Koefering, gave a Hail! to His Majesty the Emperor, and the assembly joined him enthusiastically.

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags* [*Stenographic Reports on the Proceedings of the Reichstag*], 5th Legislative Period, First Session 1881/82. Opening Session, November 17, 1881. Berlin: Printing Office of the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1882, pp. 1-3.

Translation: Erwin Fink