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The Path to New Elections in September 2005 (May-June 2005)

In his memoirs, former chancellor Gerhard Schröder describes his decision to call for new elections a year before his term came to an end. In the end, his decision was motivated by two factors: his party colleagues' resistance to his reform program, Agenda 2010, and the defeat of the SPD in several state elections. His recollections also testify to his close friendship with former SPD chairman Franz Müntefering.

[. . .]

I had always been able to count on my deep and restful sleep. But during my term in office, there were three occasions that left me sleepless. Kosovo and Afghanistan – both meant deciding to send young soldiers into an uncertain future. I couldn't stop asking myself how I would be able to justify any loss of life. Such exceptional situations, the awareness of being responsible for the life and death of human beings, are among the great burdens of this office. And I also had trouble sleeping after the election disaster in North Rhine-Westphalia on May 22, 2005, during the days when Franz Müntefering and I decided to call for new elections. This affected me in a very different way. What bothered me, above all, was not knowing whether new elections would actually take place or whether they would be prevented on constitutional grounds. The decision-making power rested with the Federal President and the Federal Constitutional Court.

During this interim phase, which, for me, was a never-ending cliff-hanger, I was completely insufferable. Even now, I would like to apologize in retrospect to everyone who had to deal with me back then. During those restless nights on the ninth floor [of the chancellor's office], I reviewed my seven years as federal chancellor. Again and again, I thought hard about the objections that had been raised [to my call for new elections] and about the doubts expressed above all by Joschka Fischer as to whether new elections were actually necessary and unavoidable. And Joschka's opinion was very important to me. The things we had gone through together in those seven years, from Kosovo to Iraq! He had been a reliable partner the whole time, and I disliked disagreeing with him when he had trouble accepting a decision. The decision to hold new elections was one such decision.

Joschka Fischer, with whom I had shared my ideas early on, raised two essential objections. For one thing, he was concerned about the long delay between the announcement of the beginning of the process of organizing new elections and the announcement of the final

decision [on the constitutionality of the elections] by the Federal Constitutional Court, which could possibly take months. Also, he believed that an improved economic situation in 2006, which everyone expected, would create a more favorable starting point for the election campaign. Both arguments had to be taken seriously, though they failed to persuade me in the end. I, too, kept wondering if there was any alternative to my chosen course.

We were still feeling the catastrophic effects of the election in North Rhine-Westphalia and, up north, of the debacle surrounding Heide Simonis, who failed to win reelection as minister president [of Schleswig-Holstein] on March 17, 2005, obviously on account of a lone sniper from within her own ranks in the state parliament [*Landtag*] in Kiel. After failing to secure a majority in four votes, she had no alternative but to step down. One consequence of these events was the plummeting fall of the red-green coalition in public opinion polls. The trigger for the rapid drop in public approval was the news that unemployment figures had topped the five million mark. In January 2005, there were exactly 5,037,000 registered unemployed. The increase basically resulted from the statistical effect of merging welfare benefits and [long-term] unemployment assistance – for the first time, welfare recipients who were fit for employment were included in unemployment statistics. Still, this fact in no way diminished the symbolism of that large figure. Of course, that was the main issue in the final phase of the election campaign in Schleswig-Holstein, and three months later in the election campaign in North Rhine-Westphalia. Our generally good prospects in the north withered away. The election disasters discouraged the party; that was particularly noticeable. And, for me, that posed the question of how much longer I could continue to count on support from my own ranks for my reform policies and for Agenda 2010. I wanted to put these policies to a vote in order to build up new trust. The only way I could do that was to call for early elections.

This chapter was one of the most difficult of my entire political career. I kept reliving the days and weeks leading up to the moment when the path was free to call for new elections through a vote of confidence in the Bundestag. One thing was absolutely obvious and perfectly clear to me: I had to hold fast to the policies I had been pursuing. Agenda 2010 was a policy course, and abandoning it was unthinkable to me and would have been catastrophic for the SPD. If the pressure of relevant sections of the party or the faction had forced me to abandon it, my resignation would have been unavoidable. That was the situation. That is how I saw it, and that is why I approached Franz Müntefering with the idea of holding new elections.

During the intensive talks we conducted after losing the election in Schleswig-Holstein, I said to him: “If you’re absolutely certain that you’ll have a majority for the Agenda policy in your own faction up to the very end of this legislative session in 2006, then we won’t need new elections. But if you can’t guarantee that, then we have to push for new elections. That’s the only way to avoid being forced to step down, with all of the negative consequences it would have for the future development of the SPD.”

All the scenes from these days and weeks continued to run through my head as I paced the small room, strode into the dining room, and opened the door to the terrace, stepping outside to

look out, once more, at Berlin at night; and with the Reichstag and the liberty bell [on Schöneberg City Hall] before my eyes, I thought about these two symbols of a series of events that had given this country, once so degraded by the Nazi period, a new chance to arrive at the place where we belong: in the alliance of enlightened and democratic nations.

And again I experienced, and still experience, the disillusioning insight that this 21st century does not seem to be living up to the hopes that accompanied the fall of the Iron Curtain. It will likely be a century that will place high demands on reason and on the democratic world's ability to arrive at a peaceful balance. More than ever before, social equalization will assume a global dimension. The previous hegemony of the Western industrial world has long since become a thing of the past. Others have closed ranks and entered the world market as competitors. All of our policies for reform and renewal were a reaction to this global challenge. Such thoughts came to me as I stood on the terrace of the chancellery, eight stories above the ground, with a view of the backdrop of this city and its history, during the most horrid chapter of which the country and its people had shown themselves to be so detached from the world, so destructive and at the same time so self-destructive.

On those nights, I kept thinking about Election Sunday in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). Franz Müntefering and I agreed that we would base our decision on how to proceed on the outcome of the elections. We met on May 22, 2005, at around noon in my office in the chancellery, and braced ourselves for what was to come. And even though we were prepared, the figures we finally received still shocked us. The results were catastrophic for the SPD. The CDU won a very convincing victory in the formerly red [i.e. Social Democratic] stronghold of North Rhine-Westphalia with 44.8 percent of the vote. The SPD only got 37.1 percent of the vote, and Alliance 90/The Greens had a respectable outcome of 6.2 percent. The FDP also ended up with 6.2 percent.

Franz had prepared two alternative scenarios. One possible response to the NRW election was to reshuffle the cabinet; the other was to call for new elections. Gazing out at the Berlin sky at night, I recounted our conversation: "Franz, what do you think? Will we manage it? If so, we won't need new elections. I'm thinking first and foremost of the party. My concerns about myself are only secondary; I'll be fine." And he responded: "I'm not sure." It is the historical truth; together we decided to push for new elections.

The alternative that I had to face, namely the possibility of failing within my own party and having to step down, seemed unfeasible to both Franz and me. This scenario would not have improved the situation for the SPD. So new elections it was – this was the political conclusion we drew from the election fiasco, and Franz Müntefering announced the decision to the press on the evening of May 22, as we had agreed. [. . .]

Source: Gerhard Schröder, *Entscheidungen. Mein Leben in der Politik* [*Decisions. My Life in Politics*]. Hamburg: Hoffman and Campe, 2006, pp. 374-79.

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