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Vote of No Confidence (April 1972)

The first constructive vote of no confidence in West German history was made possible by the defection of several members of the governing parties. Responding to both the vote and the defections, Chancellor Willy Brandt vehemently defended his policies and accused the opposition of power-mongering.

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### **Willy Brandt, Speech before the *Bundestag***

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The first question I had to ask myself before this day was: Are you even permitted to take part in this debate? Shouldn't you better stay away from it? I have come to the conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, as you can hear and see, that I should say something. I think I owe it to the high office to which I was elected in October 1969, just as I owe it to the coalition of Social Democrats and Free Democrats that has supported me, and to my many friends in the country who have expressed their solidarity, especially in recent days, in such a moving way.

Let me perhaps briefly return to the question I asked myself. This is the first time that the constitutional option of the so-called constructive vote of no confidence is being employed here in the *Bundestag*. It is referred to as constructive because it is not intended merely to say the chancellor has to go, but at the same time it must be said – and that is the purpose of this article of the constitution – that we would like Candidate X as the new chancellor.

It is true that when electing the Federal Chancellor on the suggestion of the Federal President, there is explicitly no discussion. With the so-called constructive vote of no confidence, the procedure is different. And this alone shows that for the discussion and other actions, different standards apply than for the regular election of the chancellor. I think that was somewhat overlooked yesterday.

The opposition [in parliament] is important and besides that it is strong, but it is not the head of state. So this is not an election of a federal chancellor, as results from new *Bundestag* elections. This is why a lot of what was presented here yesterday about the procedure was erroneous.

I agree with those who resist the view that a party change is something defamatory. But I have my own opinion on whether one can arbitrarily take mandates along with him, ladies and gentlemen.

That is a broad field, as they say. But there is one thing I just don't understand. If petitioners received approval from representatives who are not from the same party, then why don't these representatives at least stand up?

Why don't they show themselves to the German people?

What do they have to fear? What are they afraid of? Or what do they want to hide?

Let me add a word to the numerous people who expressed their support in recent days, for which I offer my heartfelt thanks.

Yesterday I explained – and I think it was understood – what can only be decided here in the *Bundestag* and what nevertheless is the opinion of the people on this occasion. What I do not understand is when someone speaks of the street from an authoritarian way of thinking, or if someone – as was done in a party announcement – implies that the women and men who support their government in a different way than just sitting in front of their televisions have a “fried potatoes relationship”<sup>1</sup> to democracy – that is how it was worded in a party announcement; I think it is a disgrace.

Those who have spoken up in the last few days are politically mature citizens and active young people, without whom this country would be a lot poorer.

The CDU/CSU resolution to topple the government corresponds to an option offered by the constitution, and it is not hard to understand, both psychologically and as regards power politics. If you would allow me one final judgment: This is an attempt to take the bull by the horns, to break out of the irresponsibility of a sterile “No” to the fateful questions of our people, but it carries the risk of breaking into a responsibility whose bitterness will be felt. Dr. Barzel and his friends would only end up with this responsibility if they were to receive a “Yes” from a couple members of this High House<sup>2</sup> about whom it could be said that they have strained their conscientiousness beyond recognition.

[ . . . ]

I have expressly made sure that the Transit Agreement will not be initialed at this time. But the negotiators are already at a point where they can present the results of their talks to both governments.<sup>3</sup> The applicability of the Transit Agreement also to West Berlin is no longer disputed.

The other side is willing to discuss questions that have fundamental and practical significance for the coexistence – and then hopefully some day the cooperation – of both states and the people living in them. The details of the agreement still have to be worked on. All of its aspects will bring essential relief.

Relatives and, in the future, acquaintances from the Federal Republic will be permitted to enter the GDR not only once but multiple times per year. Analogous to the Berlin Agreement, it will be

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<sup>1</sup> “Bratkartoffelverhältnis” is an expression used to refer to a superficial relationship (in this case, to democracy) that someone enters into for what they can get out of it – trans.

<sup>2</sup> Reference to the *Bundestag* – eds.

<sup>3</sup> Reference to negotiations between the two German states – eds.

possible to receive entry permits for religious, commercial, cultural, or athletic reasons if the corresponding invitations are presented. Trips for purposes of tourism will be possible if both governments conclude an agreement on that. I especially welcome the fact that in family emergencies the authorities on the other side will enable trips to the Federal Republic. Others talk about step-by-step plans. We are actually progressing step by step in the interest of the people, peace, and the nation.

You might want to ask about the framing of the Transit Agreement: so what does it accomplish? What does it accomplish, if we look at it together with the Berlin regulations? I say, where were we up to just a few years ago? And I ask in all seriousness, do you want, do we want to risk all of this? I can't imagine that.

As regards German unity, Colleague Kiesinger, it is in fact about the question: Should we keep on talking or should we do something? Do something, on the one hand, for Berlin (that was mentioned) and the people (that was also mentioned) and, on the other hand, for change in the relations between West and East in Europe – even if this takes a long time – so that this will offer the German people, the whole German people, a chance for a good future. That's the way, it's the only way! As important as trips otherwise are, Colleague Schröder, you will not find the key to German unity at the Great Wall of China.

[ . . . ]

The opposition is really playing – albeit unintentionally, of course – with the danger of isolating the Federal Republic. We cannot let this danger come to pass, which over the ages and under other circumstances Adenauer worked against in his way and before that Bismarck in his way. We cannot merely talk of peace. We have to ask: What can Germany contribute to this process? German interests are only noticed if the development is not going on around us or even over our heads. Everyone should please remember that.

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Source: Willy Brandt, Speech before the German *Bundestag*, *Bulletin* (Press and Information Office of the Federal Republic), no. 62, April 28, 1972, pp. 861-64.

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