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The End of the Kohl Era (September 28, 1998)

Mathias Döpfner, editor-in-chief of the conservative daily *Die Welt*, praises the achievements of outgoing chancellor Helmut Kohl. His analysis focuses on Kohl's successes in foreign and European policy but also acknowledges his deficits in the domestic policy arena. As Döpfner notes, incoming chancellor Gerhard Schröder would inherit the task of implementing overdue reforms in the areas of economic and social policy.

The Victory of the 1968 Generation

September 27 [1998] was a day of victory for the 1968 generation. With Schröder's chancellorship, activists from the extra-parliamentary opposition [*außerparlamentarische Opposition*] will be sitting in the highest offices of the country for the first time.

The "march through the institutions" was successful; the troop has made it to the top. But Schröder's electoral victory is a structural victory, not a victory of the ideology of the 1968ers. Their ideology was done away with quietly and without much ado. Instead of change, a kind of ideological vacuum took over in many places. Pragmatism for the politics of pop culture. That makes the generational victory seem hollow. Victory without substance?

No chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany was in office longer or was politically more influential than Helmut Kohl. With the end of his term, the Bonn Republic that he shaped with confidence and stability comes to an end. What he has done for the country will look greater from a historical perspective than it does in the light of current political criticism.

What one is, what one was – this becomes obvious upon one's departure. The departure of Helmut Kohl has long been celebrated, in a flood of books and editorials over the past six months. Helmut Kohl himself contributed to this mood of farewell. Despite all his efforts and all the impressive physical strength he showed during the last weeks of the electoral campaign, the autumnal golden glow of retrospection and leave-taking crept indiscernibly into his sentences. Kohl knew that his political era was coming to an end, but he wanted to leave the stage victorious. That is why he fought with all his might. Now he leaves as a good loser. He deserves thanks for his achievements and his dignity.

The man who always profited from being underestimated experienced a turning point in his career in the fall of 1996, when people celebrated his [new] record for time in office. At that time, he was praised even in the “Hamburg magazines”¹; politicians on the left and intellectuals paid him unusual respect. It was a historic point: at the moment when Helmut Kohl was no longer underestimated [*unterschätzt*] but appreciated [*geschätzt*], the tides turned. It was all downhill from there.

The balance sheet for the Kohl chancellorship is clear. His decisive political achievements – decisive because they are irrevocable – stem from the manner in which he consistently pursued, grasped, and clung to the goals of German and European unification. In the process, Kohl proved that he had the strength of political leadership, for he advanced what was right even when it was against majority sentiment. Kohl was not someone who waited things out; next to accusations of provincialism, that is one of the dumbest anti-Kohl clichés. Kohl was – compared to the backward-looking opinion poll opportunism of many of his challengers – a political avant-gardist. Leading means moving ahead, not running behind. On truly decisive issues Kohl was always a leader.

This was also true of his success in foreign policy: his efforts on behalf of German-French relations, which were unyielding, almost one-sided, and propelled by a genuine personal friendship with François Mitterrand; his knowledge and relative control of our Russian neighbor (the former having been shaped by personal contacts); his strengthening of the transatlantic alliance, which Kohl advanced at just the right time, thereby dispelling any fears that might have arisen at the decisive moment when the Wall fell of a German drift to the East; and finally, his reliable support for the state of Israel, which led to an improved Jewish-Christian dialogue in Germany as well.

Kohl’s deficits lay in the area of domestic security as well as economic and social policy. In both the fight against crime and efforts to reform social policy, the chancellor and the various responsible ministers acted halfheartedly.

Despite his general insusceptibility to what he calls the “doubt worm,” in the end, the ceaseless criticism from the left did in fact influence Helmut Kohl in these areas. The standard accusation was: social indifference. Ultimately more disposed to consensus than his sometimes barking manner would suggest, the chancellor at times spoke and acted too indecisively. His closeness to [labor minister Norbert] Blüm might have had dire effects in this regard, because it shifted social solidarity to centralized redistribution by the government, rather than creating the prerequisite for prosperity, jobs, and social balance through increased performance incentives.

If Helmut Kohl had acted with greater resolve at the beginning of his last term in office, he could have reaped the benefits himself and probably would have been reelected. But he didn’t stumble over social indifference; rather, it was too much social romanticism that tripped him up.

¹ The liberal weekly news publications *Spiegel*, *Stern*, and *Die Zeit* are published in Hamburg – eds.

Gerhard Schröder now has to take over where Helmut Kohl prematurely stopped. Whether Schröder will turn into a “Clintonblair” is doubtful. The differences are evident: Blair changed his party; Schröder did not. Schröder has Lafontaine, a traditional leftist, behind and above him; Clinton does not. And both Blair and Clinton had predecessors who created a framework for economic policy that both statesmen could profit from. Not so Schröder. Schröder had no Reagan or Thatcher, whose strict market economy course he could advance in a socially refined manner. Schröder has to do the unpopular work himself.

There are two options here: He can commit the reform savagery that Kohl never committed (or never could commit on account of the Bundesrat blockade) at the very beginning of his term and to the utter horror of his party. That would stabilize the country and his position. Or he can get caught in Lafontaine’s maelstrom. That would cut Germany off from globalization and turn it into a crisis region.

What Germany needs in particular in the coming years in the way of domestic policy is an investment-promoting and job-creating tax cut, a fundamental reform of the social system, a regulation of immigration that is compatible with human rights, a victim-oriented security policy, and performance-based education reform.

We will judge the SPD by [shadow economics minister Jost] Stollmann. Is it true that people who voted for Schröder will end up with Lafontaine? If Lafontaine – in the name of the traditional left-wing base of the party – eliminates the businessman Stollmann as the modernizer of the SPD, then the fears of many will have come true: Stollmann was a PR gag and Schröder, the media personality, a Trojan horse. Or else Gerhard Schröder will be the new strongman to lead Germany into the Berlin Republic, into a united Europe, and into the century of globalization.

Source: Mathias Döpfner, “Sieg der Achtundsechziger” [“The Victory of the 1968 Generation”], *Die Welt*, September 28, 1998.

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