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No Ordinary Change in Government – 1969 (Retrospective Account, 2001)

In this retrospective account, Rainer Barzel, a former parliamentary leader and Christian Democratic candidate for chancellor, describes how the change of government in 1969 was perceived as a dramatic turning point in West Germany's still-young democracy. He emphasizes his moderating role within the CDU, which was ill-prepared for life on the opposition benches.

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With almost youthful élan and undeviating resolve, the usually more cautious and reluctant Willy Brandt took control. He already took hold of the steering wheel on election night! Those who witnessed him at that time report that he “carried them away.” Walter Scheel had a similar aura. People said he left the impression of someone who acts “out of conviction.”

We were pervaded by phrases like “historical break,” “change in power,” “turning point in German history.” The parliament was filled with emotions; and many newspapers with visions and high expectations. This wave had been created especially by Brandt himself, who knew how to use it. He rode, if the image is fitting, his own wave.

His first policy statement was considered a coalition agreement. And it likely was one. It announced the will to make a totally new start. We've only just begun! We are just starting to press on with democracy!

We pricked up our critical ears. Brandt had just written in *Neue Gesellschaft*¹ [*New Society*] in May 1969 that “the CDU/CSU regards democracy as an organizational form of the state; the SPD regards democracy as a principle that must influence and permeate the entire social being of the people.”

That tore open fundamental rifts! “Democratization of all areas of life” – what is that supposed to mean? For the family, for the workplace, for science, for the media?

The new chancellor emphasized this sentence: “I view myself as chancellor, not of a defeated Germany, but a liberated one.” That marked the change in government with the “pathos of a new beginning”; Brandt's impact also came from his “brilliant diction of speech.” Some people thought that the “emergency founding” of the Federal Republic of Germany was now being followed – in a “second zero hour” – by its “refounding.”

¹ A political and cultural magazine published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of the SPD. – eds.

[. . .]

By now, we have become accustomed to democracy in Germany. Who can still recall the significance of the change from Adenauer to Erhard, from Kiesinger to Brandt, for our young democracy and for the image of a democratic Germany abroad, and what it meant for us too? A positive view of us abroad was the prerequisite for all hopes of reunification.

We felt like we were still carrying around the unsettling question on the road to democracy: Will we manage it this time, in contrast to Weimar's² attempt at democracy from [its capital in] Berlin? After twenty years of being governed by the [CDU/CSU] Union (!), the shift from Kiesinger to Brandt – from “right” to “left,” from “Christian” to “Socialist”, and whatever all the stickers pasted inside and outside proclaimed (albeit with stereotypes) – very many felt this was a fundamental change.

It was a time of major upheaval, of a new beginning. People asked, cautiously asked, how different would everything be? Especially when the new Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt stressed in his policy statement that now he wanted to dare more democracy; the democracy was only just beginning.

The experience of this change was eclipsed in the minds of many by the plain and normal fact that – from a parliamentary and pragmatic point of view – the foreign minister had advanced to federal chancellor, that the [coalition] partner party would now set the tone. But seen from a historical perspective, what was politically “normal” about Germany? The emotional state back then was not very “normal.” *That was the change*, brought about by the 1968 generation! Will the (feared) “other” republic come to pass? That became *the* question.

My companions from that time can no longer confirm what they experienced. One colleague, comrade, friend, who was determined to let this change appear and evolve to be as “normal” as possible, without any winners' victory shouts or losers' tension: *Parliamentary change as an indication of the attained and secured democracy!*

My moderate public statements on this change were noticed. No wonder: I had long been prepared for this development by Walter Scheel. Despite all that changed, the parliamentary leader of the Union³ was the same as before this “turnaround.” I tried, also as an individual, to provide evidence of a center and stability. In any case, the campaign slogan of the Union, “What matters is the chancellor!” did not have the intended and desired success. After governing for twenty years, we found ourselves – unprepared and unintentionally – back in the opposition. Many sulked.

Source: Rainer Barzel, *Ein gewagtes Leben. Erinnerungen. [An Adventurous Life. Recollections]*. Stuttgart and Leipzig, 2001, pp. 265-66 and 269-70.

Translation: Allison Brown

² Reference to the first attempt of establishing a democracy in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) – eds.

³ Reference to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) – eds.