

Angela Merkel and Helmut Kohl – An Ambivalent Relationship (July 1, 2017)

Abstract

The article explores the complicated relationship between Angela Merkel and Helmut Kohl from their first meeting in 1990 to their last in 2012. Under Helmut Kohl, Merkel had served as minister in different portfolios before she advanced to the top of the CDU and became chancellor herself. Merkel's role in criticizing Kohl's role in the CDU's financial scandal strained their rapport without shattering it.

Source

The power relationship

Helmut Kohl promoted Angela Merkel – in his way. Then she broke with him and became chancellor herself. On a thoroughly ambivalent relationship.

Some time ago, Angela Merkel recounted, in the presence of Kohl, the first time the two of them met. The occasion for the anecdote was an event on September 27, 2012, held by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to commemorate the constructive vote of no-confidence with which Kohl had become chancellor thirty years earlier. Merkel was the featured speaker in his honor. That evening, when she related their first meeting, was also the evening she met Helmut Kohl for the last time.

During the campaign in 1990, Kohl had summoned the East German candidate for the Bundestag. Prior to her visit to the chancellor's office in Bonn, Merkel skimmed the program of the CDU to avoid being wrong-footed by her own party chairman. But Kohl had only a single question: as a physicist she had worked a lot with men – how did she get along with women. A surprised Merkel responded: "Well, no problems." In January of 1991, the chancellor appointed her Federal Minister for Women and Youth.

It was the beginning of an unparalleled political success story – and a series of personal disappointments, hurts, and humiliations. Yet in the final analysis, the story of Kohl and Merkel is an object lesson about the disciplining force of power. It is no coincidence that this story takes place in the CDU: no other party sees itself to such a degree as the means to the end of maintaining power.

She owes him a good deal: as a citizen, German unity, as a politician, the first years of her career. She will never forget that. But when when slush-fund accounts and dubious payments became known in 1999, the then-general secretary of the CDU broke with her mentor because she feared damage to the party, for that would have hurt her career as well. As Kohl had once put it with respect to Richard von Weizsäcker: she bit the hand that had fed her. Kohl never forgave other Christian Democrats for doing so. But how was it with Merkel? [...]

After 2012 Merkel spoke repeatedly with Kohl by phone, afterwards only with his wife, because he was no longer able to speak. For the 25th anniversary of reunification, she wanted to invite him to Berlin. But it was no longer possible. Now the chancellor has spent several days on the speech she will deliver at the memorial service in Strasbourg this Saturday. What remains of this thoroughly ambivalent relationship? [...]

Merkel became Kohl's "girl." His paternalistic – one could also say: condescending – view of Merkel revealed itself not only in his word choice. [...]

But it was also this same Helmut Kohl who made her Minister of the Environment – a demonstration of trust, after he had dismissed her predecessor, Klaus Töpfer, on suspicion of disloyalty. Because this post was more to her liking, being a scientist, she was so delighted with the appointment, which she found out about shortly before boarding a flight, that she ordered two glasses of champagne for herself and a staffer on board the Lufthansa plane.

The Ministry of the Environment was a tough assignment for Merkel. [...] During the climate negotiations in Kyoto, however, Kohl called her repeatedly, inquired how things were going, and encouraged her. Excessive radioactivity during the transport of nuclear waste containers brought Merkel her first scandal and fierce attacks from an opposition politician by the name of Joschka Fischer. This time, too, Kohl stood by her. [...]

“Look, I learned everything from Helmut Kohl,” Merkel said shortly before his death. Then she corrected herself: “I learned a great deal.” Merkel can be unwavering, just like Kohl was. Like him, she is pragmatic, result-oriented, true to his motto: what matters is what comes out in the end. The close ties with the U.S., the understanding that Germany can be successful only in Europe, the solidarity with Israel. All of that was Kohl, too.

But for Merkel, learning from him also meant doing some things differently, sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally, sometimes by necessity. The notion that the CDU had to be modernized is something she shared with Kohl; Merkel never had his ability to give the conservatives in the party the feeling that he was considerate toward them. Social Democrats were always the opponent for Kohl, not so for Merkel. Nor did she have his unforgiving nature. Someone like Volker Kauder, who openly told Merkel in 2002 that he did not consider her the right candidate for the chancellorship, would have been finished under Kohl. And unlike Kohl in his final years in office, when he kept putting off unfinished business because there was no prospect of success, Merkel is able to free herself from hopeless undertakings and to endure criticism, anger, and mockery in response. That is why a Social Democrat is president today, that is why gay marriage will be legal soon. Chancellor Kohl had more heft than Merkel. But she has a thicker skin.

Exactly ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, on November 9, 1999, newspapers ran a quote from Kohl, that he had not “known anything,” and one by Merkel, which called for “complete clarification.” On December 22, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published her guest commentary, in which she called upon the CDU to break with Kohl: “We have no choice but to take our future into our own hands.” On April 10, 2000, she became leader of the CDU.

Someone who is certainly in a position to make that assessment has said that in the period after that there were no noticeable attempts from Oggersheim [Kohl’s hometown] to topple her. “Kohl’s position was: had he seen someone to replace her – [he had done so] immediately.” But there was no one. And endangering the good of the party for personal revenge is not something he could have risked. Not for a second time. Instead, in the hobby room of his house, Kohl, full of anger, dictated his memoirs, ranting about the European policy of Merkel the opposition politician: “She has no clue.”

Then she became chancellor. In February 2006, only a few months after Merkel’s election, she received him – one could also say: he visited her – at the chancellery. Together they went into the cabinet room, Kohl positioned himself behind the chancellor’s chair, Merkel behind that of the vice-chancellor. In a picture that was taken at the time they are smiling at each other, it looks genuinely heartfelt, the two seem downright cheerful. Kohl had the picture framed; he placed a hand-written dedication at the edge: “For Angela Merkel, with best wishes.” To this day the picture is in her office, at eye-level in the bookcase. It was his way of acknowledging the fact that Merkel had pushed the Social Democrats out of the chancellorship. She had delivered what one had to expect from the leader of the CDU: power. And in a certain way she had also repaired the damage he had done.

But the picture on Merkel's bookshelf is probably also merely a snapshot; this picture, too, tells only part of the truth. Only a few weeks ago, the chancellor described her relationship to Kohl this way: "We had a difficult time after the party funding scandal. After that, we simply tried to work well together in spite of it for the sake of the party, the CDU, which is home for both of us." That no longer sounded like the cheerfulness of February 2006. It sounded more like pragmatism, like a deal for mutual benefit, based on a balance of terror: Merkel could never entirely dispense with Kohl, because he still had many supporters within the CDU. Kohl never wanted to condemn the chancellor completely, because that would have meant a break with the party.

Merkel and Kohl – in the years of her chancellorship it was more like an alliance of convenience. The kind that Gerhard Schröder and Oskar Lafontaine had entered into on the other side in 1998. The Christian Democratic duo came back together once power had been won. But then they stuck together at least in a way that no longer threatened that power. It was the other way around with the Social Democrats: they stuck together until power had been won, and then the duo broke apart.

In the years of Merkel's chancellorship, Kohl initially restrained himself. [...]

Merkel once again calculated what was necessary in terms of power politics. That was never more evident than in the 2009 campaign. At that time, the chancellor visited her predecessor in Oggersheim. There was mozzarella, tomatoes, and cake. The pictures that were taken back then were the opposite of 2006: posed, stiff, joyless. Statements? None. Only a communiqué from the government spokesman: "For more than two hours, Kohl and Merkel spoke, in a private and harmonious atmosphere, primarily also about how they had personally experienced, in the entirely different circumstances of their lives, the crucial weeks and months after the fall of the wall."

He could have also said, they spoke about the only thing that was a true bond between them.

Source: Nico Fried, "Das Machtverhältnis," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 1, 2017.

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