

Harmed the Party (December 22, 1999)

Abstract

CDU general secretary Angela Merkel summarizes Helmut Kohl's merits but also criticizes his role in the CDU party donations scandal. Kohl had come under scrutiny for using donations totaling 1.5 to 2.0 million DM for party-related purposes – the problem being that the funds had been deposited into special accounts and had not been listed as donations on party account statements. He refused to name the donor. With this article, Merkel set the tone for her party, the CDU, and distanced herself from her political mentor. According to Merkel, the CDU had to reform itself; the Kohl era has come to an end.

Source

The Actions to which Helmut Kohl Admitted Have Harmed the Party

Many people have designated November 30, 1999, as the end of the Kohl era. That was the day when Helmut Kohl, in a statement to the party's executive committee and to the press, took political responsibility for a secret account that was kept in addition to the regular accounts of the [CDU] party treasury. And immediately people suggested that the end of the Kohl era might also represent a new opportunity.

But such rash words could only be spoken by those who don't allow themselves to grasp the full extent of the tragedy of this November 30, 1999 – the tragedy for Helmut Kohl, the tragedy for the CDU. This tragedy becomes clearer when one looks back at the previous year, at the previous fourteen months. What a defeat the party suffered on September 27, 1998. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, a chancellor and his administration were voted out of office by the electorate. But what incredible election victories followed in 1999: the CDU scored a landslide victory in the elections to the European Parliament; it remained firmly in power in Bremen and Berlin; it triumphed in the SPD bastions of Hesse, Saarland, and Brandenburg; it achieved absolute majorities in Thuringia and Saxony and sensational results in the local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia. What a comeback for Helmut Kohl – from defeated chancellor to honorary citizen of Europe, cheered in Germany's pedestrian shopping zones, and celebrated on the tenth anniversary of [the fall of the Berlin Wall on] November 9 [1989]. And then this: anonymous donations, secret bank accounts, repayments, Kohl's declaration on November 30, 1999, Kohl's statements on the ZDF[1] television broadcast, "What now, Mr. Kohl?"

The actions to which Helmut Kohl admitted have harmed the party. Not only did it lose the state subsidy of 50 Pfennig per donated Deutschmark (DM) for the 1.5 to 2 million donated Marks that were declared and received by Kohl but not listed in party account statements – that is, as much as 1 million DM in total. And not only is the party threatened with repayments in the millions. The party – and not Kohl alone – also has to explain how such a thing could have happened after the Flick affair.[2] Keeping one's word and placing that above the law might be understandable for a lawful action but not an unlawful one.[3] This is about Kohl's credibility, the CDU's credibility, and the credibility of political parties in general.

Kohl served the party. He was its chair for twenty-five years, which is half the CDU's history. He was able to win four Bundestag elections as the top candidate, but in 1998 it was no longer enough – not enough for Kohl and not enough for the CDU. By this point, at the latest, it had become clear that nothing would be as it had been. The era of Kohl's party chairmanship was gone forever. Never again would he lead the CDU as its chancellor candidate in a Bundestag election. Since then, people talk about his past achievements; there is talk of a monument: a monument to the chancellor of the NATO Dual-Track

Decision against the Soviet threat, to the chancellor of unification, to the chancellor of European integration.

People – especially those in the party – are attached to Helmut Kohl. The twenty-five years that Kohl served as party chair certainly cannot be adequately described by the issue of unlisted secret accounts alone. Perhaps it is adequate for the tax office or the Bundestag administration, but not for a member of the CDU community. Our experience with Helmut Kohl and our memories of him are very different. The party has a soul. Therefore, for us, it is not a matter of choosing between “clearing up errors” or “preserving the legacy.” When it is a matter of Helmut Kohl’s image and achievements and of the CDU, it is clear that the two belong together. For an accurate historical picture can emerge only on a foundation of truthfulness. We can only build a future on a foundation of truthfulness. Helmut Kohl must accept this realization; the CDU must accept this realization. Incidentally, only by doing so will the party manage to avoid exposing itself to attack every time another news item about alleged donations surfaces. Instead, it will step out of the line of fire of those who feign interest in clarification but in fact only want to take advantage of these events in order to destroy the CDU in Germany.

Perhaps after a political life as long as Helmut Kohl’s, it really is asking too much of him to demand that he relinquish all his offices from one day to the next, totally withdraw from politics, and quickly cede the stage to his successors, the younger generation. And therefore deciding how to begin the new era is less up to Helmut Kohl than to us, we who have assumed responsibility in the party. We cannot avoid taking the party’s future into our own hands. This year we did not win the elections because or in spite of Helmut Kohl. Instead, we won because of our resolve and our campaigns against the chaotic policies of Gerhard Schröder. The party must therefore learn to walk; it must dare to take up the struggle with political adversaries even without its old warhorse, as Helmut Kohl often liked to call himself. Like a pubescent youth, it must break away from the parental home and go its own way. Nevertheless, it will always remain true to the person who has made a lasting impression on it – maybe even more so in the future than now.

Such a process necessarily inflicts wounds and injuries. But how we in the party decide to deal with it – whether we demonize the seemingly inconceivable as a breach of trust or view it as part of a fluid and necessary development, not only since November 30, 1999 – will determine our prospects in the next state elections and in the 2002 federal elections. There is no way to sidestep this process anyway, and, incidentally, Helmut Kohl would certainly be the first person to understand this.

If we accept this process, then our party will change, yet its core will remain the same – magnificent basic values, self-assured members, a proud tradition, a mixture of older things worth preserving and of new experiences from the era after Helmut Kohl’s party chairmanship – and it will have a design for the future.

NOTES

[1] ZDF stands for *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* [Second German Television], a popular public television channel in Germany – eds.

[2] The Flick affair was a German political scandal in the early 1980s involving political contributions to political parties by the Flick company, a major German multinational corporation – trans.

[3] Kohl refused to name the source of the illegal donations, saying he had promised that he would not reveal the donor’s identity – trans.

Source: Angela Merkel, “Die von Helmut Kohl eingeräumten Vorgänge haben der Partei Schaden zugefügt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 22, 1999, p. 2.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Harmed the Party (December 22, 1999), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3793>> [April 30, 2024].