

The Agony of Choice (October 14, 1994)

Abstract

Days before the October 1994 Bundestag elections, Theo Sommer, publisher of the liberal weekly *Die Zeit*, analyzes the mood in Germany. Sommer notes that many citizens were having a hard time getting excited about either incumbent chancellor Helmut Kohl or SPD candidate Rudolf Scharping. Deciding on possible coalition partners also appeared to be a problem. But, as Sommer writes, the Federal Republic needed an effective government in order to tackle the problems ahead.

Source

Never Before Was There So Little Enthusiasm for a New Beginning

The agony of choice – was it ever greater? “Not voting is stupid! But voting isn’t much better either. Whom and what are we supposed to vote for?” These sentences come from a cryptically worded advertisement, but they echo the sentiments of many citizens.

Those who always vote the same way – out of family tradition, habit, or blind loyalty – are lucky. For others, marking their “x” on the ballot is a real burden. The best head of government? The best cabinet? The best government program? It’s hard to determine the best choices in the 1994 election year. There is no Nanga Parbat rising from the plains of German politics.

The massif that is the chancellor towers over everything else. Helmut Kohl seized the opportunity for unification with unerring certainty and unwavering resolve. After that, he did not succumb to a dim-witted national frenzy; rather, he remained truer than even before to the dream of a greater, unified Europe whose arch would extend over all the individual countries. These two things together have secured his place in history. No doubt, he made some errors in the unification process, and there were also some problems in the European integration process, but it would be illusory to think that the two things could be accomplished without any mistakes. It is concerning, however, that Kohl put a lot of things off, including much that is important for the future. The chancellor is enjoying the evening sun, but the shadows are getting longer. In the coming twilight, the unfinished business will take on a gloomy visibility.

Normally this would be the hour of the opposition. After twelve years, the creative power of any government is exhausted. Kohl, in the words of Willy Brandt, has “been milked dry.” His worn-out partner, the FDP, is faceless and weightless. Today, new issues demand a new start. That is exactly how two-thirds of the population felt six months ago. In February hardly anyone gave a damn about Helmut Kohl anymore. Rudolf Scharping, it seemed, had the election in the bag. But that isn’t how things turned out.

The loss in esteem suffered by the Social Democratic chancellor candidate within a period of six months is without precedent in the history of the Federal Republic. The reason for it is simple: The chancellor made all his mistakes much earlier on; the challenger, on the other hand, made all of his recently, concentrated within a few months, in the glistening light of the television spotlights, without getting any special dispensation for historic achievements.

The list of blunders is long: The sulking sourpuss reaction to the election of Roman Herzog as federal president; the lack of clarity on the income tax surcharge, which nourished the suspicion that Scharping

doesn't know how to distinguish between gross and net [income]; the formation of the Magdeburg government,^[1] which was a disastrous miscalculation; the two total duds: the introduction of the shadow cabinet (which definitely deserved its name) and the diverse mound of advisors; the creation of the troika,^[2] which strengthened the impression that Scharping wasn't tough enough to take on Kohl on his own; and, on top of that, the embarrassing campaign posters: Scharping, Lafontaine, and Schröder as wooden marionettes ("Strong!") with sparkling white teeth, but no bite; finally, Scharping's soporific town clerk manner. Nothing caught on.

And that is why, in the week before the election, the incumbent is once again ahead in the polls and the challenger is running behind him, panting with his tongue hanging out. Coincidences in election arithmetic and minor fluctuations in the vote for the FDP and the PDS might in the end decide the configuration of the government; therefore, everything is possible and nothing is certain. One thing can hardly be denied: The need for change is met by only minimal enthusiasm for change. The people are dissatisfied with Kohl but aren't convinced by Scharping.

Of course, one could argue that things aren't going all that badly down in the German lowlands! Despite all difficulties, the Federal Republic is faring better than most of its neighbors. On top of everything, the revved-up economy is creating a powerful tailwind. All of a sudden, the disillusionment with politics and the pessimism seem to have virtually blown away. Catastrophes are not looming on the horizon. We're lucky that we don't need heroes!

The reality is more complicated. To be sure, today we are more or less managing. At the same time, however, massive problems are piling up in reunited Germany.

The state of our federal finances – current debt: 2000 billion marks! – is alarming. What is the proper recipe: cut spending, raise taxes, increase the national debt – or a combination of all three?

Our system of social security is reaching the limits of its capacity. Society is aging; fewer and fewer young people are supposed to support more and more elderly. This makes it necessary to scrutinize all our previous assumptions and to prune benefits down to what is reasonable, honest, and financially feasible – to create a new foundation for the social welfare state.

And then there are *de facto* six million unemployed in Germany today. Even the economic upswing will not lower this figure significantly. Two factors complicate the situation. First, with the globalization of the economy, more and more countries with cheap labor are entering the game as competitors. Second, the modernization of production needed to improve our competitiveness means, for a start, getting rid of hundreds of thousands of old jobs. Government and society need to find solutions for the problems being created by the rationality of managerial thinking – otherwise these problems will gnaw at the foundations of our democracy.

All this requires a considerable investment of energy. Other tasks follow as well. The material and mental unification of the Germans awaits completion. Europe needs a boost on its way to an ever more integrated union. And a new social consensus needs to be formed: about the role of Germany on the world stage, about the proper relationship between ecology and economy, about the future coexistence of 75 million Germans and seven million foreigners on German soil. All of this requires brave thinking rather than a show of strength.

The new agenda demands a new approach. On Sunday voters will decide who should carry it out. For many, the decision will be difficult. What should a voter do if he supports the environmental policies of the Greens but rejects their call to abolish NATO and the German army? How should you mark your ballot if you don't think that Klaus Kinkel is the best person to direct foreign policy but you approve of Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen's^[3] policies on foreigners? Will the inexperience of the SPD candidate perhaps be

offset by the fact that, from this point on, Helmut Kohl would be a lame duck who would lose his reins (or have them taken away) in the middle of the legislative period – that is, of his end phase – at the latest.

The question remains which coalition would have the greatest ability to act. A newly extended Christian-liberal coalition, with its outdated fiefdom principle for assigning ministerial positions, the impending struggles and frustrations surrounding the Kohl succession? A red-green coalition, in which the romantics of both parties could easily outstrip the realist politicians? A red-yellow-green “traffic light” coalition,[4] in which economic liberals and environmental activists continually get into each other’s hair? Or a grand coalition, which, after years of having been forced to cooperate as Bundesrat majority and Bundestag majority,[5] honestly sets out for the purpose of refurbishing the social welfare state?

No one can relieve the voter of the agony of choice. It has grown because expanding specialization has changed our society into a niche society. Everyone sits alone in the corner, preoccupied with his own advantages and prejudices. Under those circumstances, no one party can cover the entire spectrum of interests and priorities. Every individual must set his own personal priorities and then mark an “x” on the ballot, at worst voting for the lesser evil. Hardly anyone will be able to do it without some teeth-gnashing.

The voters are the pieces of the puzzle on October 16. Politics will have to put them together. Whatever the outcome will be, half of the country will be left with a feeling of discomfort and dissatisfaction.

NOTES

[1] A so-called Magdeburg government is an SPD-led coalition government that depends on the support of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the Communist Socialist Unity Party in East Germany. Magdeburg is the capital of the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt – eds.

[2] Reference to the joint leadership of the SPD under Oskar Lafontaine, Rudolf Scharping, and Gerhard Schröder – eds.

[3] Klaus Kinkel and Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen both belong to the FPD – eds.

[4] Red symbolizes the SPD, green stands for the Greens, and yellow represents the liberal FDP, together the colors of a traffic light; black is the color for the CDU/CSU – eds.

[5] Up until the passing of the federalism reform in 2006, more than 50 percent of all bills required the consent of both houses of parliament, the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, to become law. In recent decades, those majorities were often divided between the two major parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, often forcing the parties to cooperate in the Bundesrat while opposing each other in the Bundestag – eds.

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