

The Beginnings of Parliamentary Work (January 17/24, 1997)

Abstract

During the first legislative session of the Brandenburg *Landtag* [state parliament], the newly elected deputies were confronted with considerable challenges. A wealth of laws and a new constitution had to be enacted – work often made more difficult by the contentious issue of the Stasi pasts of government members and *Landtag* deputies. The strict party discipline of West German parliamentary work had not yet been established.

Source

In the Beginning, a Constant Stream of Laws

The *Landtag* of Brandenburg has now outgrown its infancy. Initial euphoria, excitement, and also inadequacies have given way over time to placidity and professional routine. Superb work is being done in the 19 committees, and participants long ago reached Western standards in the verbal jousting that goes on in the plenary hall.

After the elections in October 1990, 88 deputies took their seats in parliament. With 36 deputies, the SPD was the strongest faction. The CDU faction had 27 deputies, while the PDS received 13 seats. They were joined back then by two smaller parties, the F.D.P. and Alliance 90, the latter of which had been created by civil rights activists during the *Wende*^[1]; each had six parliamentarians. Whereas no fewer than five of the ten ministers in the state government were “imported” from the West, all of the *Landtag* deputies hailed from Brandenburg.

Founding Years

During the founding years, the first order of business was to create, through hard work, the mechanism that was necessary for parliamentary democracy in the young federal state of Brandenburg: the necessary laws were drafted, debated, and passed virtually in a constant stream. Today, the work revolves mostly around amending these laws to adjust them to conditions in the *Land* [state]. During the first legislative session from 1990 to 1994, no fewer than 207 laws were passed, most of which replaced old GDR legislation. That was just over fifty laws a year, recalls the president of the parliament, Herbert Knoblich (SPD), who, after six years in office, is now considered an “old hand.” “That was an incredible achievement and burden at the same time,” he says. Knoblich: “Back then it was our duty to create the political structures of the old Federal Republic here in our state.”

Knoblich speaks of the “spirit of the round tables” that prevailed in parliament at the time. As he explains, an incredible dynamism characterized the developments in the East after the fall of the Wall, and this was also reflected in the *Landtag*’s decrees. At times, however, their wording was a little strange, since experience was still lacking in the beginning. Moreover, the boundaries between the parliamentary factions were not yet as rigidly drawn as they are today. During voting, “yes” or “no” votes were cast straight across party lines. “The statement in the state constitution of Brandenburg about the deputy who is obligated only to his conscience may sound rather formal to Western ears,” Knoblich emphasizes, “but in the East it was a real alternative to the toppled GDR dictatorship.” Although the initial colorfulness has been toned down considerably by now, what has remained is the deputies’ great closeness to the citizens and to their region. None of the parliamentary factions exclusively follows

directives from Bonn. Politics, he says, is being tailored entirely to the problems in the East, even if it goes against the directives from one's own party.

Constitutional Consensus

The separate state constitution that was created for Brandenburg has garnered much praise but also harsh criticism on account of its many plebiscitary elements. The right of citizens to work and housing was enshrined with a broad consensus spanning the boundaries of parliamentary factions. The population can initiate a popular initiative with 20,000 signatures, and a referendum with 80,000 signatures. The necessary local-level territorial reforms created an immense workload. At the end of 1993, 14 large districts and four cities constituting districts in their own right were created out of the 36 tiny administrative units that had existed previously.

The processing of the Stasi past ran like a red thread through the entire first legislative session. Two deputies – from the Alliance 90 parliamentary faction, of all things – resigned on account of proven dealings with the Ministry for State Security (MfS) and vacated their seats. Several other deputies from the other factions were considered borderline cases and remained in parliament. The Stasi past of Minister President Manfred Stolpe (SPD) occupied the parliament for nearly two-and-a-half years. The Stolpe Investigative Committee, established at the request of the CDU in February 1992, dominated – with a considerable media circus – the political life in Potsdam for nearly two-and-a-half years. Its work finally concluded in June 1994 with Stolpe's acquittal and a *Landtag* appeal for the use of humane criteria in the evaluation of the GDR past.

While the Committee was doing its work, the constant appearance of new files from the Gauck Agency^[2] in Berlin and many suspicions paralyzed the business of government and in March 1994 dealt a death blow to the traffic-light coalition of the SPD, the F.D.P., and Alliance 90.^[3] After then Alliance faction leader Günter Nooke accused Stolpe of being a liar, the traffic light – previously held together often only with great effort – broke apart for good. The SPD and the F.D.P. governed alone until the end of the legislative session half a year later.

[...]

NOTES

^[1] The German term *Wende* refers to the events that led to the downfall of the Communist regime in 1989/90 – eds.

^[2] Commonly used term for the federal agency with the unwieldy name “Federal Commissioner for the Records of the Ministry for State Security of the Former German Democratic Republic.” The agency was named after its first head, Joachim Gauck – eds.

^[3] In Germany, government coalitions among different parties are often named after the colors associated with the particular parties. A traffic-light coalition is a coalition between the SPD (red), the F.D.P. (yellow) and Alliance 90/The Greens (green) – eds.

Source: Klaus-Dieter Eule, “Zu Beginn Gesetze am laufenden Band”, *Das Parlament*, January 17/24, 1997, p. 5.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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