

The Kohl System (September 28, 1998)

Abstract

This journalist for the *Berliner Zeitung* agrees with the general consensus: Helmut Kohl's reputation as a modernizer of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is beyond dispute. The article explains, however, that over the course of time, Kohl increasingly exploited his position as party chairman and chancellor in order to maintain and expand his own power base. Therefore, as he points out, Kohl's defeat in the Bundestag elections left the CDU with a difficult legacy.

Source

The End of a Chancellorship

The Great Stature of "World Class" Politician Helmut Kohl Concealed the Weaknesses of the Union for too Long – Party Life Was Slowly Paralyzed

Some CDU party members sensed and feared the end of the chancellorship; others clearly saw it coming. But hardly anyone talked about it openly before election night. They bravely repressed their fears, shouting "Do it again, Helmut," and trusted the myth of his invincibility.

Didn't Helmut Kohl manage, time and again, to catch up with his political opponent in a furious final sprint and pass him at the finish line? Didn't the "battle elephant" triumph over his respective SPD challenger on every Bundestag election night since 1983? And didn't he put the timid and disheartened in his own party to shame? That's how it was up to now. But even the longest success story in history has to end someday.

Program Neglected

For a long time, far too long, the great stature of the "world class" politician concealed the weaknesses of the Union. Because Kohl secured power for himself and for them, many Christian Democrats ignored the creeping paralysis of party life. Because he embodied the majority sentiment of the people more than any other German politician, party committees failed to engage in internal discourse about the party's profile and platform. And because he managed to hold the mainstream Christian party, with all its factions and special-interest groups, together during his twenty-five years as party chair, the party's rank and file wasn't bothered that Kohl forced critical voices to the margins and declared calmness to be the noblest Christian Democratic duty.

When Kohl, then minister president of Rhineland-Palatinate, entered CDU headquarters in Bonn in 1973 as the new man of the house, the party was in a similar state. Under the regency of Konrad Adenauer, it had become the "chancellor election association," a loose association of interest groups held together by the aspiration to stay in power. The successors to the "Old Man,"^[1] Ludwig Erhard, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, and Rainer Barzel, hadn't done much to change that. It was Helmut Kohl, the "black giant" from Mainz, as he was called at the time, who finally recognized the weaknesses and set out to liberate the club of staid dignitaries from its incrustations and transform it into a modern mainstream party.

Kohl, the man from the provinces, embodied a new type of party leader. Pragmatic, flexible, and open to reform. He surrounded himself with smart and strong-willed people, such as Kurt Biedenkopf, Heiner Geißler, and Peter Radunski, and together they turned the dusty old Adenauer House^[2] inside out and made the CDU into a motivated, effective party.

The renewal did not confine itself to the organization alone. With his alert sense for social change, Kohl set out to tidy up the Union, programmatically speaking, and to open it up to new currents. The party congresses of the 1970s were filled with controversial, lively, and creative discussion. They debated co-determination and land reform, corporate law and the “new social question.” Spurred on by pioneer Heiner Geißler, the CDU used the “new social question” to address socially marginalized groups more directly.

Weight started shifting once the party took control of the government in 1982. Safeguarding power became more important to the party than adaptability. Uncomfortable personalities gradually disappeared from the scene. The Konrad Adenauer House’s reputation as an independent intellectual center declined continuously to the benefit of the chancellor’s office. And soon enough the CDU executive committees also saw themselves more as a cheering squad than as a critical corrective to the federal government.

People who know Kohl are convinced that he pursued the total renewal of the CDU for selfish reasons and that he viewed the hired reformers and modernizers as nothing more than “useful idiots”: a temporary in-house power base that he needed in order to assert himself against established forces in the party and the Bundestag faction and make his way into the chancellery.

“Renewing the CDU to gain power, avoiding experiments to hold on to it” – that would be the solution to the Kohl puzzle,” wrote journalist Warnfried Dettling, who worked for many years as leader of the planning group and head of the political department in the party’s national headquarters.

The events of 1989 show that he wasn’t wrong in his approach: in the lead-up to the national party congress, a group of reformers under the leadership of Heiner Geißler and Lothar Späth tried to oust the CDU party chair, but the “coup” failed miserably. And Kohl showed neither scruples nor emotion in degrading his critics and rivals to marginal figures.

From that moment on, the CDU was nothing but an appendage of the chancellery. The respective secretary generals [of the party] let themselves be bullied by Kohl. The public took little notice of the squad of deputies in the party’s executive committee because they had nothing groundbreaking to say. Innovation was largely confined to technical equipment. And the CDU rank and file marched dutifully behind the chancellor as long as he remained a successful campaigner.

In 1989, when it became apparent that Kohl was going to suffer defeat in the 1990 Bundestag elections, he was saved by the “revolutionary autumn” in the GDR and the willingness of Mikhail Gorbachev to permit German unification. It was a historic opportunity for Kohl and his assured political instinct helped him seize it with resolve. Consequently, the “Unification Chancellor” triumphed over the SPD in 1990 and the same nimbus carried him to victory again in 1994, albeit by a small margin.

But anyone who looked more closely had to notice that his numbers declined from one election to the next: from 48.8 percent in 1983 to 41.4 percent in 1994. Together with the liberals [the FDP], the CDU’s lead over the Bonn opposition was barely 0.3 percent, or 142,682 votes. The CDU’s loss of power was even more pronounced in the federal states.

When Kohl speaks of the CDU’s “unique success story” at anniversary celebrations and on other festive occasions, he generally fails to mention the downsides, such as the rapid decline in party membership. In 1992, the CDU had 713,000 members; by late August 1997 that number was down to 636,285. Furthermore, the CDU has aged along with Kohl. Almost two-thirds of its members are fifty or older.

To be sure, the party chair does not carry sole blame for the emaciation of the party. The milieus that stabilized the mainstream parties and society, too, are growing weaker or disbanding. Social cohesion is dwindling, not only in political parties, but also in churches, trade unions, and associations.

Kohl, with his outstanding ability to sense shifts and trends, definitely registered these changes. His more recent speeches are filled with reflective passages about moral decline, individualization, and the loss of tradition. But he neglected to draw conclusions from these reflections and to implement them in his party. As much as he spoke about the need for change and the challenges of the twenty-first century, he said very little about the future of his own party. Whether Kohl wanted it or not, the party increasingly defined itself solely in terms of its chair and chancellor. “Without him, nothing at all had been possible for a long time,” scoffed CDU heretics, “but with him, less and less is becoming possible.”

The Wild Youth

It’s not that he didn’t foster the younger generation. But when the “wild youth” at the head of the *Landtag* factions and state associations disrupted the consensus politics he pursued as government head with their demands for radical tax reform, debureaucratization, and cuts in the social welfare system, Kohl reprimanded them in an authoritarian manner.

Associations within the CDU that used to see themselves as “societal antennae” have largely lost their former influence. Whether the CDA,^[3] under which the employee and trade union group operates, or the Women’s Union, the Small and Medium-Sized Business Association (MIT), or the Senior Citizens’ Union – almost all of them have shrunk to nothing more than traditional clubs that continue their established rituals and persist in outdated ways of thinking. That also includes the Young Union (JU),^[4] which is so tame nowadays that former JU rebel Helmut Kohl is occasionally surprised by how tractable it has become.

None of Kohl’s predecessors succeeded in determining when they would step down as chancellor. They were either dropped by their party or forced out of all responsibility by changes in the governing coalition. When looking at their terms in office, it is clear that they lost all their strength after eight years at most. Even if the decline remained hidden for a while.

None of them failed due to voters but rather on account of unfinished business. Helmut Kohl, the “Record Chancellor,” is the first head of government in Bonn who both failed to achieve his election goal and left his party with a huge legacy of unsolved problems.

NOTES

[1] Konrad Adenauer became the first postwar chancellor at the age of 73; when he resigned in 1963, he was 87 years old. Thus, his nickname “Der Alte” [“The Old Man”] – eds.

[2] Reference to CDU party headquarters – eds.

[3] The *Christlich-Demokratische Arbeitnehmerschaft Deutschlands* (CDA) is the association within the CDU that represents the interests of employees – eds.

[4] The CDU/CSU youth organization – eds.

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