

August Bebel, Reichstag Speech (November 8, 1871)

Abstract

In the following Reichstag speech of November 8, 1871, the leading Social Democrat August Bebel (1840–1913) denounces the lack of constitutional and parliamentary rights in Germany and its federal states. He emphasizes the vague wording of the current motion (“every federal state must have a parliament based on general elections”) to justify his party’s opposition, instead of voicing qualms about infringements on the parochial politics of the German states by the central government.

Source

Gentlemen! Today I find myself in a position, together with gentlemen from both the right and the Center Party, to vote against the motion,

(Merriment.)

albeit for different reasons. This, of course, will not prevent the Reich Chancellor’s press organ, the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, from declaring in tomorrow’s political overview that today’s vote once again confirmed the cooperation of the “blacks” [Catholic clerics] and the “reds” [Socialists].

(Merriment.)

Gentlemen, substantial reservations have been voiced from that side of the House because passing the current motion would cause the jurisdiction of the Reich authority to be extended, and [therefore] they have prompted these gentlemen to speak against it. There was also a time when we took vigorous action against the extension of powers in the North German Confederation. We did so, however, not because we were particularly in favor of the small states—God forbid, Gentlemen!—but because, compared with Prussia’s absolutist-militarist cravings, constitutional life in the small states was better developed and generally allowed at least slightly freer movement to an opposition party—despite the Reich Chancellor’s remark that their liberalism still lagged far behind Prussia’s. Yet this difference, Gentlemen, has diminished considerably in recent years, especially last year. The founding of the North German Confederation meant that any independent action and independent work on the part of the small states had already been destroyed. So once the German Reich was established on [the basis of] “fear of God and pious conduct,” and once the south German states were also drawn into this state of impotence, their independent activities were over and done with. Today, Gentlemen, the small states—we, as Social Democrats, have experienced this quite often enough in the past years—do little more than play police bailiff for Prussia.

(Merriment.)

The persecution to which our party has been subjected in [the Kingdom of] Saxony—where laws that were already reactionary were used against us in the most arbitrary, reactionary way with respect to freedom of assembly, association, and the press—has shown us that all previous liberal impulses have completely vanished from the small states. Furthermore, it has shown that they are no longer able to resist the pressure on them from Berlin. Therefore, Gentlemen, today we don’t care the slightest if the existence of the small states is preserved for one more day. If Prince Bismarck seizes upon the idea of putting all of them in his pocket tomorrow, we won’t do anything to encourage it, but we also won’t oppose it.

(Great merriment.)

And we won't act in this way because we believe we'll find ourselves in a better situation under Prussian yoke—heavens no!—but for the simple reason that the powers of resistance, fragmented as they are right now against a dozen governments, will then be concentrated against one major adversary; because all of the hate and anger that grows daily among the people on account of our rotten political and social conditions will be concentrated against one enemy, thus creating an opportunity to make a clean sweep of it, too, one fine day.

(Laughter.)

Gentlemen, as you can see, I am very frank.

(Laughter.)

But this, Gentlemen, is what prompts me to drop all reservations about jurisdiction, both today and in the future.

So it is not concern about jurisdiction that moves me to vote against the current motion, but different reasons, Gentlemen—fundamental and material ones. The article as proposed here states “that every federal state must have a parliament based on general elections.” This motion is formulated so vaguely that it can be interpreted in all sorts of ways. There is no mention of the type of foundation upon which this constitution is supposed to be based; whether certain basic rights are to be included; according to which electoral law the parliament is to be convened; whether a First Chamber, a House of Lords, or whatever you wish to call such a reactionary assembly, shall exist or not. Gentlemen! Of course the latter is the most natural thing in the world, for in Germany such institutions exist everywhere. And provided your motion will really meet with approval in the Federal Council, which I rather doubt, you don't really believe that the government of Mecklenburg will lead the other governments to liberalism once the motion has passed. Gentlemen, should the Mecklenburgers actually get a so-called “modern” constitutional setup according to a genuine German, Prussian, small-state model, will they actually be brought that many steps further towards civilization? In my opinion, they will not have advanced even a hair. After all, Gentlemen, if you create a First Chamber; if you formulate an electoral law approximately resembling the three-class franchise in Prussia—which according to the Reich Chancellor's remark during the first session of the constituent Reichstag is “the most dreadful and wretched electoral law possible”—how, Gentlemen, will Mecklenburgers have been changed for the better? Who is being represented on the basis of such an electoral law? The bourgeoisie, the propertied class, yes; but the common people are being completely excluded from the elections. Back in the Reichstag, the Reich Chancellor used the expression “the most dreadful and wretched electoral law possible,” but he has already been operating with it for five years and has not introduced a new one; moreover, the gentlemen on the left, who co-sponsored the current bill, have also not thought of introducing in the Prussian parliament any motion for a law establishing universal, direct, and secret elections.

Bebel then calculates that under the Saxon census franchise only about 1/3 of the adult male population is eligible to vote, while only a few thousand can be elected. Therefore, voter turnout is low so that the Saxon parliament is elected by only four to five percent of the population.

These four to five percent make laws for the people and speak on its behalf—and that is supposed to be a representative body of the people? No, Gentlemen [...] it is fraud if the people are represented and laws are supposed to be made in this way.

(Great agitation and laughter.)

Gentlemen, so what is it about the actual power of this so-called people's representation? I have already

elaborated substantially on this in my last speech on the military budget, and I am quite pleased that during the first and second debate on the current motion Deputy [Heinrich] von Treitschke completely agreed with my words. [...] Among other things, he said, and I am paraphrasing, “Gentlemen, let’s persist in our conservative political stance, let’s not pass resolutions that we know will not be approved in the Federal Council.”^[1] So there you have the entire secret. Expressed more frankly, this means: “Let’s act as if we had God knows what kind of power vis-à-vis the people!” I am afraid that among the population there are millions who buy into the liberal press’ insinuations that such a parliamentary assembly is omnipotent, that it only has to decide on something and it’s done. And of course, Gentlemen, liberalism has a great interest in *not* destroying that belief in the omnipotence of parliamentarism, because otherwise it would quickly be the end of parliamentarism and the government system that liberalism is trying to uphold. So, according to Reichstag deputy [Heinrich] von Treitschke, it means: “Let’s not pass any resolutions that won’t meet with the approval of the Federal Council, let’s not embarrass ourselves, and let’s not, for God’s sake, show the people that we don’t have any power and that the power they believe us to have is an illusion.” That was the gist of his speech, and can it really be otherwise with respect to parliamentarism? With the exception of tiny Mecklenburg, we have had parliamentarism in all of Germany since 1848. Whatever power parliamentarism, constitutionalism, had in Germany was due only to the movement of 1848/49. And, indeed, until 1866 liberalism did, as far as could be expected given its nature, make honest efforts to expand the seed contained in the constitutions in a liberal way. Gentlemen, since 1866 this has ceased entirely. Since that time, liberalism has been maneuvered away from the initiative (which it had had before), away from the offensive (which it had frequently seized before 1866), and onto the defensive. Today, it is no longer concerned with securing new rights, but only with defending those rights it would seem to have. Why is that, Gentlemen? It’s because since 1866 the power of government, and particularly the Prussian one, which was already so great, has completely outgrown parliament. This is a new illustration of Mr. [Eduard] Lasker’s recent remark that a strong government need not be hostile to liberty and that liberty thrives best under a strong government. No, quite the contrary is true. If government is strong, liberty suffers from it; the interests of governments and the people oppose each other. Gentlemen, the people do not exist because of government; government exists for the sake of the people. Government is supposed to carry out the will of the people, and it ought to be nothing more than the executive power. But what is the reality? The governments have the power, the governments have the will, and parliament is simply compelled to say “yes” and obey, and if it fails to do so, it gets morally trodden as it has so often before. We experienced this in the last session, for instance, during the debate on the annexation of Alsace, when the Reich Chancellor behaved as brusquely as in the most confrontational of times. That brings to mind another example of the powerlessness of parliamentarism. The Reich Chancellor mentioned the other day that he believes he has become more of a constitutionalist after each war. Well, Gentlemen, at first glance that may indeed seem so; at least it is the deputies’ belief in the truth of this view that recently prompted Deputy Lasker to make his famous statement. But what about the reality, Gentlemen? It is not that the Reich Chancellor has become more constitutional since 1866, but that the liberal parties, the parliamentary assemblies, have become more compliant—this is what it’s all about.

(Great agitation.)

They are just not putting forth the demands they made in 1866. They have provided the Reich Chancellor with a constitution—the German Reich Constitution—that could not be any more reactionary.

(Laughter.)

Gentlemen, any minister can govern with such a constitution: this is not a constitution for the people; this is nothing more than pseudo-constitutionalism of the crudest kind; it’s sheer Caesarism. It’s a type of Caesarism that uses a parliamentary framework because public opinion deems the latter to be necessary, one that can seemingly govern constitutionally on the basis of such a constitution.

At this point and again during the course of his remarks the speaker is interrupted by the Speaker of the House and reminded that in this assembly he is not permitted to talk about the German Constitution in this way. Since the speaker insists upon his comments, his address is eventually cut short.

NOTES

[1] On November 2, 1871 [Sten. Ber. RT, vol. 22, p. 102], Treitschke declared: “I have always been opposed to the Reichstag passing thoughtless resolutions that neglect the fact that another chamber [the Federal Council] is in session opposite us: the reputation of the Reichstag may suffer from a repetition of such resolutions.” [Information provided in Hans Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, p. 63.]

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags*, 1st legislative period, 17th session, November 8, 1871. Berlin, 1871, vol. 22, pp. 183–85. Available online at: https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3_k1_bsb00018331_00207.html. Original German text reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 60–64 (with Fenske’s summaries of deleted portions of Bebel’s speech).

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