

Eduard Stephani to Rudolf von Bennigsen on the National Liberals' Motives for Supporting Bismarck (July 14, 1878)

Abstract

After two assassination attempts were made on Kaiser Wilhelm I in May and June 1878, Bismarck used (unfounded) allegations that Social Democracy was behind the plots to outmaneuver the liberals, who hesitated to approve his Anti-Socialist Law. He dissolved the Reichstag, called July elections that produced a more “resolute” majority, and pushed through a revised Anti-Socialist Law in October 1878. In this letter, the National Liberal deputy mayor of Leipzig, Eduard Stephani (1817–1885), appeals to his party leader, Rudolf von Bennigsen (1824–1902), to silence outright opposition to Bismarck in the press, even though he does not endorse Bismarck’s “wanton gamble.” Stephani’s fear that direct confrontation with the chancellor might lead to the breakup of his party was not unfounded, although the Secession of 1880 could not have been foreseen at this juncture. Stephani was also correct that Saxon voters seemed to favor a united front against the Socialists above all else.

Source

Forgive me for adding to your numerous election worries by approaching you with a reservation and a request. My reservation has arisen in regard to the biting, aggressive oppositional current that is now emerging in some announcements of our official party press in Berlin. I am specifically thinking of the three leaflets and several articles by the *Nationalliberale Korrespondenz*. The first draft of our election announcement that [Eduard] Lasker submitted to me in Berlin contained a similar oppositional tendency, albeit considerably less fierce. I implored Lasker to refrain from this; [Franz von] Stauffenberg agreed, and I understand that on the next day, when the text was finalized, this slant had completely disappeared, especially due to [Johannes] Miquel’s editing. Thus, the announcement assumed a form that I found very appealing. In my opinion, we should strictly adhere to this standpoint, but unfortunately the most recent press releases out of Berlin have increasingly taken a totally different direction. They don’t merely react defensively to attacks against us but have launched an aggressive opposition to the government and to Bismarck himself. I consider that a pernicious route, quite apt to break up our party and prompt powerful secessions. If our party, which will hold fewer seats in the new parliament in any case, also suffers from inner division, and may even be split externally into two parts, then Bismarck will have won his wanton gamble. We are strong only if we can hold all existing elements together just as tightly as before. You are the only one able to achieve that kind of cohesion—it will be lost, however, if people in Berlin continue to blow the opposition trumpet so resolutely in the name of the party. And therefore I have this urgent request for you to put a stop to it. I have also just written to Lasker with the same request, reminding him of a rather elegant turn of phrase he used in his Saalfeld speech, page 37: that only people of dubious character take advantage of misfortune to start a quarrel, etc., etc. This is quite a lovely motto for the current election campaign, and we should put it into practice. To all my people here [in Leipzig], I have been preaching that we should view the dissolution [of the Reichstag] and the election campaign merely as a common defense of all state-supporting parties against revolutionary Social Democracy, not as a conflict between the parties of order themselves or between the government and liberalism. Amidst the terrible disarray that Bismarck has caused with his frivolous dissolution of parliament, the nation would tear itself apart in a chaotic battle between parties if we do not focus its attention on a tangible, comprehensible goal: common defense against the Social Democrats. The cooperation of the government and the Reichstag is necessary to achieve this. We are offering our assistance, we are willing to compromise with the government, and we wish to support it as

before, adhering nonetheless to our previous political principles and our previous position as an independent supporter of the government. We are not making a fundamental change, an about-face, and, accordingly, we are not entering into open opposition—provided that the government does not force us into it by way of subsequent legislation. At the moment, we must not allow ourselves to be pushed into the Progressive Party’s camp of direct opposition; of course we have to seek some external contact with that party, but we absolutely must not identify with it. It is true, people are making it hard for us to maintain a level-headed stance, but what counts is that we withstand this difficult test: that we prove to be more level-headed than Bismarck. Indeed, some of the provocations we face from Bismarck and the Conservatives are almost unbearable; we have to fend them off, but not by switching over to aggressive opposition, as parts of the National Liberal press do now. The more frantic Bismarck is, the firmer and calmer we have to be. If we give the election campaign a personal slant—Lasker vs. Bismarck, the overtones of which can already be heard here and there—we will create a shameful fiasco. I can already sense this from the urgent complaints and admonitions I have received. At a meeting in Leipzig a few days ago, I faced bitter questions on this score. The staunchly conservative public mood in Leipzig, which had quieted somewhat, has been fuelled once again by the stance of our press. If this attitude continues, we will not only lose a few constituencies; we will also weaken our party’s internal cohesion and we may even precipitate a real separation. What a triumph for Bismarck that would be. In any case he has gained new strength because of his success at the Berlin Congress, even though in my view this whole success was rather dubious and may well be categorized as the momentary triumph of an incredible schemer (with the exception of his destruction of anti-German alliances, because he set the great powers fighting against each other like dogs over a bone, and also because he has now directed Austria even more firmly towards the East and away from Germany). Nevertheless, for the moment all this has enormously enhanced Bismarck’s authority and popularity, and if we tried, particularly right now, to give the election campaign such a markedly personal character against Bismarck, we would be met with nothing but scornful laughter; we would lose disgracefully and we would merely ensure that, for an indefinite period of time, the moderate parties at the political center would lose their leadership in Germany, allowing unknown luminaries to take turns at the rudder in perpetual vacillation and reversals of course. Therefore, please raise your voice and put a stop to the misconceived battle strategy that has now in part been adopted in Berlin.

Source: Hermann Oncken, ed., *Rudolf von Bennigsen. Ein deutscher liberaler Politiker. Nach seinen Briefen und hinterlassenen Papieren*, vol. 2, *Von 1867 bis 1902*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1910, pp. 378–80; original German text reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 194–96.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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