

Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx's Daughter on Social Democracy's Prospects after the Reichstag Elections (February 26, 1890)

Abstract

In the Reichstag elections of February 20, 1890, the Bismarckian “cartel” of pro-government parties lost its majority, while the SPD celebrated a major victory. Writing from his London exile to the daughter of his old comrade-in-arms, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels (1826–1895) joyfully predicts an end to the Bismarckian regime and the beginning of the German revolution.

Source

My dear Laura,

Since last Thursday evening, when a flood of telegrams with the news of victory arrived here, we have been in a constant state of euphoria, which reached its climax, at least for the time being, when word arrived this morning that we have received 1,341,500 votes: that is 587,000 more than three years ago. And still—the orgy might recommence Saturday, since the amazement surrounding our success is so enormous in all of Germany, the hatred against the fraud of the “Cartel”^[1] so powerful, and the time for reflection so short, that new successes, just as unexpected as the ones last Thursday, are certainly possible, though for my part I am not expecting as many.^[2]

February 20, 1890, is the day marking the start of the German Revolution. It may be a few years before we'll experience the decisive crisis, and it is not impossible that we'll suffer a temporary and serious defeat. But the old stability is gone forever. This stability rested on the superstition that the triumvirate of Bismarck, Moltke, and Wilhelm was invincible and absolutely all-knowing. Now Wilhelm is gone and has been replaced by a conceited lieutenant of the guard [Wilhelm II]; Moltke has retired; and Bismarck sits very precariously in the saddle. Right on the eve of the election, he and the young Wilhelm engaged in a confrontation on account of the latter's desires to act as a friend to workers. Bismarck had to yield and made sure to let the philistines know about it. Obviously, he himself desired “bad” elections in order to teach his master a lesson. Well, he got more than he bargained for, and the two have reconciled once again, for the time being. This will surely be short-lived, however. The “second Old Fritz,”^[3] only greater” cannot and will not tolerate being led by the chancellor's hand. “In Prussia the king must rule,” is something he takes seriously, and the more critical things get, the more the opinions of these two rivals will diverge. To the average philistine one thing is certain: the man he can believe in is losing his power; and the man who has the power is someone he cannot believe in. Confidence is gone, even within the bourgeoisie.

Let's take a look at the situation of the parties. The Cartel has lost one million votes; it had 2.5 million for and 4.5 million against it. This main support of Bismarck's parliamentary power is now shattered, and all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again.^[4] There are only two parties available to form a government majority: the Catholics (the Center) and the German Radical Party. Even though the latter have a fervent wish to form a new cartel, they cannot do this—at least for the time being—with the Conservatives, but only with the National Liberals, and that will not yield a majority. And what about the Center? Bismarck is counting on it, and the Catholic Junkers in this party are just burning with desire to join forces with the old Prussian Junkers. The only *raison d'être* of the

Center, however, is hatred of Prussia. Now you go and try to form a Prussian government party out of that! As soon as the Center shows even the slightest tendency in this direction, the Catholic farming community—the Center’s main strength—will break away, while we will have taken over the 100,000 votes that the Center lost in the Catholic cities, for example, in Munich, Cologne, Mainz, etc. (in comparison to 1887).

As a result, this Reichstag is not viable. But Bismarck’s last resort, dissolving the parliament, will hardly help him. Since confidence in the stability of the present order is gone, the decisive factor now is the dissatisfaction with heavy taxes and the steadily rising cost of living. This is a direct consequence of financial and economic policy over the last eleven years, and with it Bismarck has driven the people into our arms. And the German Michel is rising up against this policy. Thus the next Reichstag will probably look even worse.

This will happen, unless, of course, Bismarck and his master provoke unrest and fighting before we get too strong—on that score they will always agree—and crush us, and subsequently change the constitution. Apparently, they are drifting toward that solution, and this constitutes the main threat that has to be averted. Our people, as you have seen, are maintaining a wonderful discipline; but we may be forced to take up the fight before we are fully prepared for it—and therein lies the danger. If it comes to that, however, other factors will be favorable to us.

Nim’s dinner bell is sounding—so good-bye for today— [...].

En attendant, vive la révolution allemande!

Yours always, F.E.

NOTES

[1] Meaning the three “Bismarckian” parties that had dominated the Reichstag since 1887: the German Conservatives, the Imperial and Free Conservatives, and the National Liberals—ed.

[2] Engels refers here to the second round of balloting, the run-off elections—ed.

[3] “Old Fritz” (*der alte Fritz*): endearing nickname for Frederick (II) the Great of Prussia—trans.

[4] This phrase appeared in English in the original—ed.

Source: Friedrich Engels to Laura Lafargue, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 37. Berlin, 1967, pp. 359–61.

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