

Left-Liberal Hopes and Doubts (1881/84)

Abstract

In 1880, 28 Reichstag and Prussian Landtag deputies signed a declaration to split off from the National Liberal Party to form the Liberal Union [*Liberale Vereinigung*] (also known as the “Secession”), which won 46 seats in the Reichstag elections of 1881 with about 8% of the popular vote. It later fused with the German Progressive Party in March 1884 to form the German Radical Party [*Deutsche Freisinnige Partei*]. These four documents chronicle the efforts of the Liberal Union leaders to find a way forward toward liberal unity on a new basis during the years 1881–84, led by Franz August Schenk von Stauffenberg (1834–1901), Berlin’s mayor Max von Forckenbeck (1821–1892), Ludwig Bamberger (1823–1899), Eduard Lasker (1829–1884), Heinrich Rickert (1833–1902), and Karl Schrader (1834–1913). Optimism after the election victory of autumn 1881 gave way to a more pessimistic outlook by 1884, when hopes were fading that Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1831–1888) would, as the liberals hoped, succeed in reining in Bismarck’s considerable power.

Source

A. Franz von Stauffenberg to Eduard Lasker (4 November 1881)

Munich, November 4, 1881.

[...] What will we do now.^[1] In my opinion, a leftist union should be forged—existing of the National Liberals, ourselves, the Progress Party, and, perhaps, the People’s Party—that preserves the faction for the time being by having delegates negotiate in mutual agreement, sharing positions with each other, and simply acts in unison whenever possible. This is the least [we should do], and the National Liberals cannot avoid this. But the preparations and hearing of both sides must be done now. Confer with [Max von] Forckenbeck and write to [Albert] Hänel and [Rudolf von] Bennigsen. I will broach the subject soon in Erlangen, where it will be received well. I implore you to work emphatically to this end!

How [great] things will look with the presidential election! A wonderful Reichstag! ...

Source: Paul Wentzcke, ed., *Im Neuen Reich 1871–1890. Politische Briefe aus dem Nachlaß liberaler Parteiführer* (1926). Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1967. = *Deutscher Liberalismus im Zeitalter Bismarcks. Eine politische Briefsammlung*, ed. by Julius Heyderhoff und Paul Wentzcke, vol. 2 (*Deutsche Geschichtsquellen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by the Historischen Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 24), p. 386.

B. Eduard Lasker to an Unknown Recipient (perhaps Bennigsen or Miquel)^[2]

Berlin, November 8, 1881.

Given the changed circumstances that the election has now created, I appeal to you once more with the same aim, namely that the political manifestation of a large liberal party, or at least a common union encompassing all the factions, be prepared and not hindered by differences that have already been relegated to the historical past. This task is now somewhat more difficult than it was when we recently discussed it in another, now obsolete, situation, but it is still attainable. The elections have shown that those in liberal circles overwhelmingly want simultaneously decisive and moderate policies: the warding off of the reaction[aries], the preservation of liberal thought, no exclusionary tendencies. If any word was certain to generate applause from liberal audiences, it was the appeal for the unity of the liberal party

and its assumption of a decisive position. The election result shows—much more clearly than I had hoped—that with a unified, targeted effort, it is possible to win an absolute liberal majority for the Reichstag even under unfavorable circumstances. According to my discussions, the liberal groups together will have somewhere between 150 and 160 [seats], and the assumption is plausible that an efficient organization, methodical agitation, and peaceful collaboration would have led to 15 to 20 more liberal men having won, even considering a few locally contested cases. It is thus possible to conclude that we could reach a majority if we are able to form a union by the next election and do not make serious mistakes. I do not want to give up hope that you might offer a hand to such an arrangement in which all the shades of liberals could find a place. The larger the frame, the more restrictive the initial contents of this agreement must be, but Bismarck's policies will help us along, as soon as he has to abandon his calculation of having divided us from you. We must forget the memories of earlier disagreements between ourselves and other liberal groups along with the contentious experiences during the campaign. If we temporarily huddle together under a provisional roof, we will get used to each other, so that we can work together once the liberals have been called to the leading position. Practically speaking, I am thinking for now only of a governing committee in which such issues that allow for a common reaction should be discussed confidentially, like, for example, the election of the BUREAU (although I personally do not think the final decision is all that important in this case), the reaction to particulars of the election process, and the processing of important governmental proposals and petitions. In principle, I would make it a requirement that planned petitions be mutually disclosed. A substantive agreement in every single case is not feasible and should not be required; still less am I expecting that the party factions should be dissolved immediately. The main thing in my view is that the government and oppositional parties should be convinced that they stand facing a unified front which is capable, in many respects, of taking action rather than merely a fragmented liberal party.

The beginning of the session can easily determine the relationships between the liberal factions in the long term, and things are typically very crowded and rushed in the first days of a session, especially at the beginning of a new legislative period. I do not want to leave the internal structures of the liberal party to chance, which is why I am writing to you to request an indication of whether or not my efforts might prove fruitful if I include you in plans for such a combination as suggested. I would treat any such indication confidentially until it is necessary to make an announcement and you consent to this. I am writing only on my own behalf, but I believe that I am acting in keeping with the spirit of my political allies and the closest associates will certainly agree—in the case of [Franz] von Stauffenberg, I am certain.

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C. To Eduard Lasker^[3] (November 14, 1881)

Berlin, November 14, 1881

All of us who are aware of our incredibly difficult situation must be concerned that the liberals should not make any mistakes. I believe the Progress Party understands this, as well; [Albert] Hänel and [Rudolf] Virchow have enthusiastically agreed with me. It will be necessary to negotiate directly with [Eugen] Richter. His energy and success have given him a position that cannot be avoided within his faction, but I hope that he will not ignore the evident dangers and necessities, and I expect, if the need arises, that the predominance will be on the side of those who, like us, are striving for a coalition. We, too, could complain about the election procedures: we in no way consented to the procedural decisions for the run-off, and those of us in the central leadership rejected any settlement, although several seats were

thereby threatened and one presumably lost as a result. But I am sufficiently impartial to not let the unavoidable mistakes of the election cycle influence substantive policy. My correspondence was not intended to get you personally involved in any way, but I did want to inform you in a timely fashion. A friendship spanning years, the experiences gained in working together, and love for the cause inspire me to wish fervently that you are not absent when a general liberal coalition with a reasonable basis is forged. This is my hope. My own comrades within the party are, as I have become convinced in the meantime, very favorably inclined toward such a coalition and see it as a part of our vocation [*Beruf*]. If it should nevertheless fail, we will at least have profited from learning about the nature of obstacles and gained knowledge of whether and how these might be overcome. A unified party must be created that is capable of action; this alone would serve to end the unprecedented ambiguity that currently passes for governmental policy, and which often enough assumes the character of inappropriate jokes. Already some officials are approaching the “moderate liberals” with enticements, to which absurd side-show I would have paid no attention at all except that yesterday a representative of the Free Conservative faction in the parliament who is not unimportant suggested, as [Heinrich] Rickert reported to me with all appearance of seriousness, that the formation of a government of National Liberals and Free Conservatives has never been as attainable as at present. That is line with the ambiguities that the officials and even Bismarck himself spread daily in the world, but no one is deceived anymore except for the circle of those who want to be deceived. It is not only political morality that demands an end to these ambiguities.

I interpreted your letter to display an openness to the decision. If you are inclined to decline, I ask you to be candid in expressing this to me. If, however, you are considering joining, I ask that you give me an opportunity to discuss this further as soon after your arrival as possible. Rapid, discernible steps are necessary, and the constituting phase at the beginning and the election matters provide an irretrievable opportunity to take steps together.

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D. Karl Schrader to Franz von Stauffenberg (August 21, 1884)

Zoppot, August 21, 1884.

You want me to tell you something about the crown prince’s current political views? Unfortunately, I can say less about that than I would have been able to previously, for I have seen neither him nor the crown princess for some time. The crown prince’s court has become quite cautious about relationships to liberal individuals; apparently word was given there to avoid anything that might upset Bismarck. [Georg von] Bunsen had similar experiences. The royal household has changed; the new people [Hugo von] Radolin and [Moriz von] Lyncker—like [Gustav von] Sommerfeld before them—are conservative and seem to consider it their task to free their masters and mistresses from liberal influences. I fear, as well, that the prince has been made to fear our party due to its position regarding the military; he himself may not be free of the concern that we desire to become too radical, and more than anything we do not offer the future ruler that which he needs most of all, a strong party capable of governing that enjoys the people’s trust. We will become this, but we are not yet there, and though one must expect it in the near future, one cannot consider placing great hopes in something planned but not yet in existence. Bismarck’s overwhelming power over internal affairs is ever more evident; the Germans have been accustomed to political life for far too short a period to be able to calmly appraise political questions and measuredly pursue political aims. Our political education, like that of all other nations, must—and will—only be ended by experiences of the worst kind. Most of all, Bismarck has such significant standing

abroad that the future Kaiser will not be able think of dismissing him summarily but will have to try to live with him.

It was considerations of this nature which I presume have led to the changed behavior; I do not think the internal changes have been significant, as you will soon ascertain for yourself. It is quite human that the crown prince becomes more reserved the closer the moment comes in which he will assume responsibility for leading the state, in order to avoid acting in a counterproductive manner at a decisive moment. I notice thereby that our personal connections do not arouse any affection at all, but my political position is irksome and thus I am to be treated with caution.

Germany will learn the valuable lesson that all true—in other words, enduring—political accomplishments come as the result of work rather than as a gift from on high. The work and sacrifices which we made in the years 1866 to 1878 came too little from the entire nation to earn sufficient appreciation within the nation that it should be unwilling to give up what has been achieved.

You see from these observations that I do not have a very hopeful view of our party's situation. We see in the election preparations nearly every day how fearful and narrow-minded the middle classes are. They do not want to be involved in the election process, and, most of all, they provide no candidates for us. Most of the voters are good; I have no doubt that our chances are good if we campaign diligently and more than anything nominate good candidates. It is not only difficult, however, to find new ones, but our older members are also tired; Kapp, Stengel, Struve, Thomsen, for example, have all definitely declined [to run], and every such refusal probably costs us an electoral district. We are losing Friedberg[4] because Hahn did not receive the consent of his board of directors [*Verwaltungsrat*] after waiting four weeks for it; we have absolutely no one to replace him.[5] Everything is hidden behind a curtain of pretexts. One minute Richter's[6] character is used as an excuse for abandoning or refusing candidacy, the next it is business interests, an aversion to campaigning, etc.

But precisely because we should have a fairly good position, given that the Conservatives, the government, [and] the National Liberals can offer so little good and are proposing to harm so many areas, for example via the duties on grain, we can wage our campaign with quite tolerable success, in other words, without great losses, if we energetically use our advantages and work diligently for our cause. But we have had such unfortunate luck with our leaders! [Max von] Forckenbeck can probably not be persuaded to run; he will speak in his electoral district at the last minute and maybe even shirk adding his own signature to the campaign statement [*Wahlaufruf*]. Haenel has gone away for pleasure at the precise moment when the work is the most urgent. You are inhibited by your health treatment [*Kur*]. Who is left except for Rickert and Richter? Bamberger must repent bitterly for a few careless turns; he has enough to do to make people forget them and cannot exert the sort of influence that he would otherwise have. Richter might damage us more than he helps us with his overly strong presence, and Rickert's capacity for work is not infinite. It would be so very useful if you would just occasionally, perhaps in your vicinity, speak or write a letter to voters that might be available for publication. Yesterday the fervent wish was expressed that you might speak in Bamberger's electoral district.[7] That would be easy to do. Couldn't you do that?

Rickert and perhaps I myself will be coming there soon. Could you not meet with us there?

More than anything else, however, it is essential that you are involved in the formulation of the party's statement [*Wahlaufruf*], which should, in my opinion, take place as soon as possible. If we come forward with a powerful statement that is both energetically defensive against the government etc. and presents feasible positive goals, we will thereby force the National Liberals to show their true colors, and we thus take a good deal of their strength, which lies in the ambiguity of their political positions. Such an announcement is, however, only possible with your cooperation; otherwise we will be pushed much too far in Richter's direction. If his influence prevails, we will end up with an old progressive statement and

thus be placed on the same foundation as the old Progress Party. The statement has to be formulated in Berlin, otherwise Forckenbeck will not be there, and none of those who are aligned with us may be absent.

It is a great sacrifice for you to undertake such a lengthy journey, but I believe it must be made, for it not just the future of our party and the political reputation of those who entered the fusion that hangs in the balance, but the elections will determine over the long term the course of our entire domestic policies.

According to the newspapers, the decision about the date for the election will probably be made this week, and this will certainly be placed as soon as possible, perhaps for the second decade [i.e., between the 10th and 20th day] of October; we must, therefore, come forward with the election statement in the first half of September. Would you not be able to come to Berlin for a few days during that period?

Please send me a few lines soon to Berlin, to whence I will be returning on the 25th of this month—with Rickert, for we have a meeting of the general management committee—so that the convening of the central committee, which is charged with issuing the statement, might accommodate your intentions as well as possible.

NOTES

[1] After the election on October 27, in which the new Liberal Union received 47 seats, the National Liberals only 45 (versus 98 in 1878), the Progress Party 59 (versus 26 in 1878), and the People's Party 8 (versus 3) seats.

[2] Draft in an unknown hand, without a specified recipient.

[3] Without signature.

[4] The Reichstag electoral district of Friedberg-Büdingen, which had been represented up until this point by Dr. Bernhard Schroeder in Worms, who joined the Liberal Union on August 30, 1880.

[5] In Friedberg, Major a. D. Hinze from Berlin was nominated and defeated the National Liberals in a run-off after an extremely vigorous campaign.

[6] Eugen Richter

[7] Reichstag electoral district Bingen-Ulzen

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