

Ludwig Hahn, Memorandum Concerning New Reichstag Elections in 1878 (June 23, 1878)

Abstract

This memorandum was drafted by Ludwig Hahn (1820–1888), leader of Otto von Bismarck’s official publications office and privy counselor in the Prussian ministry of the interior. It was then edited twice by Bismarck: those revisions, captured here, indicate the extraordinary care Bismarck took to hone the precise wording of his onslaught against the left wing of the National Liberal Party and his effort to rally voters for a kind of plebiscite on his own domestic policy. The memorandum is also remarkable for its almost complete neglect of the Social Democratic Party, the two assassination attempts against Kaiser Wilhelm I, and the “threat” of revolution. The final version, which set the tone of the campaign leading to the Reichstag elections of July 31, 1878, was published as “The Purposes and Wishes of the Governments Concerning the Election” in the official *Provincial-Korrespondenz* on June 27, 1878.

Source

a. Draft.

The new elections are generally about ensuring that men are voted into the Reichstag who are determined to actively support the government in its fight against Social Democracy.

Therefore the government’s attitude towards the candidates put up by the various parties first of all depends on the position the respective party took during the debate on the recently rejected draft for a law for the defense against Social Democratic rioting and is likely to take during debates on similar draft laws in the next Reichstag session.^[1]

The candidates of the German-Conservative party group and the German Reich Party therefore are to be supported provided the further circumstances are appropriate in each case; the candidates of the Progressive Party, the Center Party and the Polish caucus are to be opposed.^[2]

The first two party groups, with the exception of two or three members of the German Reich Party, have voted for the government draft, and it is to be expected that they will take the same position even more expressly towards future drafts presented by the government. The latter parties have uniformly voted against the draft, and the systematic opposition they put up against the government does not suggest that they will take a different position in the future. It goes without saying that the Social Democratic candidates must be opposed.

The National Liberal party group, with a few exceptions, has voted against the earlier draft.^[3] This occurred mainly under the influence of its left wing. This part of the party group really belongs to the Progressive Party in character; like the latter, it values abstract principles that give freedom to the individual but constrain and paralyze the state above consideration for the common good. On previous occasions, especially during debates on the press law and criminal justice reform, experience has taught us that in critical moments this part of the National Liberal party group easily triumphs over the moderate elements of the party who are gifted with more practical-political sense. This weakens the party from within; it has lost in political relevance and statesmanship what it has gained in votes through those progressive doctrinaires hiding under the banner of National Liberalism. The more reasonable party members also feel this way since the terrible seriousness of the new assassination attempt has

exposed all arguments used against the earlier proposal in their full meaninglessness. Undoubtedly, many National Liberals, if reelected, will better appreciate the danger of the current situation under present circumstances and vote accordingly.

Therefore, the National Liberal candidates must not be treated^[4] offhand as hostile to the government. It is even desirable that the party's moderate elements (*which the government will also depend on in the future in order to have a majority in the Reichstag^[5]) are reelected. One has to avoid the misapprehension that the election campaign was directed against the National Liberal Party as such. We fight only against the misguided direction the party has taken due to the influence of its left wing.^[6] Those among the National Liberal candidates who can be expected to vote for the government's new proposals for the defense against threats to state and society are therefore not (*repeat not)^[7] to be opposed but to be supported absolutely^[8].

(*After the preceding remarks the government authorities will be able to gauge their legitimate influence on the course of the election. For public rallies it is advisable not to describe our relationship towards the various parties in the above-mentioned manner, but to frame our campaign slogan as simply as possible, roughly as sketched above, as strong support of the government in its fight against Social Democracy and to use this to probe whether a candidate can safely be considered to show a government-friendly stance based on his position within the party or his individual statements.^[9]

NOTES

[1] Handwritten in the margins next to the relative clause: economic questions!

[2] This sentence has been changed by strikethroughs and corrections to read: It must be assumed that the candidates of the German-Conservative party group and the German Reich Party usually support these goals while the current members of the Progressive Party and the Center Party oppose them.

[3] In the margins: (The National Liberal Party), while generally disposed to support the government, in fact hurts it in various regards: factionalism, the ambitions of individuals, a desire to make speeches, ignorance of practical life, phraseology, the intimidation of reason by phrase-mongering.

[4] Crossed out and replaced by: regarded.

[5] Crossed out from *

[6] In the margins: and due to intimidation of the reasonable ones by its eloquent declaimers.

[7] Crossed out.

[8] Crossed out.

[9] Crossed out from (*

Source: "Denkschrift, betreffend die Neuwahlen zum Reichstag," *Bismarck-Jahrbuch*, ed. Horst Kohl, vol. 1. Berlin: O. Häring, 1894, pp. 97–111

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