

The Appeal of the Conservative Party in One Federal State (1876–77)

Abstract

The veneer of doctrinal unity and national reliability expressed in the German Conservative Party's 1876 program was transparently thin to observers in non-Prussian territories. These reports from the Kingdom of Saxony in 1876–1877 show that political observers held widely divergent opinions about the character of the new party and its prospects. All three reports are penned by diplomatic envoys stationed in the Saxon capital, Dresden. The British envoy has little sympathy for what he describes as a doctrinaire and marginal party. The Bavarian envoy is more sympathetic, not least because Saxon Conservatives share his pro-church and anti-Prussian sentiments. The Prussian envoy offers three reports written during the Reichstag election campaign of January 1877—the first test of the new party. He is appalled that Saxon Conservatives are rebellious and particularist: they seem to detest liberals more than Social Democrats. This envoy worries that local support for August Bebel represents the wedge that will open up further socialist advances in Germany. We know from other evidence, however, that Bismarck in the 1880s, like Saxon Conservatives in 1877, was ready to regard socialist victories over left-liberal opponents as the lesser of two evils.

Source

I. The British Envoy Reports from Dresden (July 29, 1876)[1]

The appeal of the “German Conservatives” seems to have met with no response in Saxony except in a small High Protestant organ [the *Neue Reichszeitung*] and in a Dresden journal belonging to Herr [Ludwig] von Zehmen, the President of the First Chamber, and a knot of landowners. But although the “Reichszeitung” invites all loyal opponents of the prevalent political and economic anarchy to support the new party, neither Herr von Zehmen nor any of his more conspicuous friends have signed the Conservative Programme, which has a very obscure contingent of Saxon names.

The objectives of the old Conservatives of Saxony (where a Constitution was signed nearly twenty years before the King of Prussia allowed the “sheet of white paper to come between me and my people”)[2] are not quite identical with those of North German Junkerthum. The Saxon type may indulge in feudal regrets, but his active political passion is his Particularism, which is far too bitter to approve the compromise with centralisation apparently admitted in the Programme. Then he is not altogether an “Agrarian” in the new Prussian sense. The word has been used here, but industrial interests predominate so much that agricultural questions do not come to the front, the complaint of excessive and unusual taxation being besides a town rather than a country cry. The National Liberal papers have done little more than reproduce the Berlin criticisms of the movement, which the *Fortschrittspresse* [a Progressive Party newspaper] ridicules as a stillborn attempt to form the long announced party of “Bismarck avec phrase.”[3] If the Saxon Conservatives believe the statement that Prince Bismarck has approved the Programme, they will scarcely follow the call of the “Reichszeitung.” Their adhesion or indifference can be of no great importance, for although some [number illegible] of them sit in the First Chamber they have no existence as an effective political party.

Source: British envoy George Strachey, Dresden, to the British Foreign Office, London, report no. 34 (draft), 29 July 1876, in the National Archives, London (formerly Public Record Office, Kew), FO 215, no. 34.

II. The Bavarian Envoy Reports from Dresden (July 19, 1876)

In this state the [Conservative Party] appeal has met with considerable approval; it has been co-signed by Baron [Carl Christian Arthur] von Burgk of Roßthal near Dresden, a member of the First Chamber and owner of extensive coal mines in the area of Plauen, who is very well-liked and highly respected here; numerous Saxons have already sent in their approval of the program. As I have mentioned, the appeal is being assessed favorably. Considering that in any such compilation of principles there will always be some elements with which not everyone can immediately agree, it appears that on the basis of this program, with sufficient mutual loyalty and practical reason, Germany might indeed work its way up from the current situation.

Source: Bavarian Envoy Baron Rudolf von Gasser, Dresden, to the Bavarian Foreign Ministry, Munich, report no. 36, 19 July 1876, in Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Munich, Part II, Geheimes Staatsarchiv, MA III, Sachsen, Bd. 2848.

Translation: from German into English: Erwin Fink

III. The Prussian Envoy Reports from Dresden (January 1877)

The Prussian envoy offers three reports during the Reichstag elections of January 1877, the first of which is composed after the first round of balloting. A runoff election will be held in the constituency of Dresden-Old City between the Socialist candidate August Bebel and a National Liberal candidate. Since the founding of a national Conservative Party the previous year, the local Conservatives are much more active and better organized, he reports, although in the first round Bebel has been able to increase his total of votes over that in 1874.

January 11. [... Compared to three years ago, the election agitation was] far more lively,

[...] because this time the Conservative Party participated resolutely in the elections again, something it had failed to do back then on account of poor organization. Unfortunately, though, the Conservatives directed most of their activities toward battling the National Liberal candidate, Professor Mayhoff, a native of Mecklenburg employed for a number of years at the Vitzthum Gymnasium; Mayhoff gave an excellent election speech and definitely did not neglect to emphasize the Saxon point of view. Nevertheless, he did not manage to appease the Conservatives, who nominated Käuffer, a retired army captain and proprietor of an educational institute—incidentally a highly respected man around here—because he is Saxon and unequivocally offers all the guarantees deemed necessary from the particularistic standpoint. The latter, by the way, did not fail in his election speech to adequately stress loyalty to the emperor and the Reich.

January 17. [...] The growth of the Socialist Party in Dresden is very conspicuous. [...] The [Conservative] Party is being blamed for the fact that Bebel managed to achieve the runoff election, because many who have now joined the party would in the past have voted for the Progressive candidate [Heinrich Eduard] Minckwitz. At any rate, the assumption seems to be correct that the sorry state of economic affairs has prompted many people who would not otherwise be considered Social Democratic to favor Bebel. This phenomenon will recur even more noticeably, though for other reasons, in the runoff election [...]. [The Conservatives say openly that] they would rather give their votes to the Social Democrat Bebel than to the National Liberal Mayhoff. These Conservatives belong to the nobility—the court circles. As in the past, the members of these incorrigible social circles still do not admit that hostility against Prussia is the actual and exclusive foundation upon which all of their thinking and judgements rest; however, they have found an arena in which they are once again able to vent their passionate and long-suppressed anger under the guise of conservative convictions. It goes without saying that in all this, the ultramontane clique, including the Austrian and Bavarian envoy together with their devout Catholics, is acting in an anti-Prussian way. According to the Conservatives, liberal laws expanded the proletariat in

industrial centers, de-Christianized the masses, gave rise to the Founding Era frauds, ruined industry and commerce, and drove the impoverished populace towards Socialism. All of this is regarded as the doing of the National Liberals, who appear all the more despicable because, in the particularists' opinion, they are working toward the destruction and nationalization of Saxony, in which context the realization of the national railroad project is supposedly the first step. Their motto is: Saxony may only be represented in the Reichstag by real Saxons, because the idea that a German member of parliament might advocate German interests does not even occur to them. So after the Conservatives have foundered with their candidate Käuffer (whose rank of captain, by the way, did him a lot of harm), they face the question whether to vote for Mayhoff, a Mecklenburger, or for Bebel, or to abstain from the vote altogether.

It is worth noting how many of these gentlemen appear determined to vote for Bebel. Some of them seem to assume that a few more Social Democrats in the Reichstag will not pose much of a threat, that a strengthening of this party means damaging the National Liberals, and that, most importantly, all wheels are to be set in motion to topple the latter party.

Others argue that the faster the Socialist Party grows and the more unexpectedly the government is confronted with the danger the Socialists pose to the state, the more certain is the prospect of the government yielding and following a conservative line.

As a last resort—so the argument goes—the government would bring up cannon against the Social Democrats, but it would not dare to attack the National Liberals.

[According to the Progressives, Bebel is] actually a man of character whose honor is spotless; it is worth considering whether Bebel's election would be such a great calamity that the members of the Progressive Party ought to feel obliged to vote for Mayhoff against their own convictions. [The Progressive Party in Saxony has] only particularist tendencies; therefore it considers voting for the non-Saxon Mayhoff unpatriotic (this means un-Saxon).

By contrast, among the citizenry of Dresden a much healthier sentiment prevails, and in light of the great efforts and sacrifices of the German Imperial Party and the National Liberals—some members have donated very considerable sums for party activities—the hope is not at all unfounded that Professor Mayhoff may be helped to victory.

Bebel was elected in the runoff election in Dresden. The envoy writes that many Conservatives and Progressives from the upper classes who supported Käuffer on the first ballot abstained from voting in order not to vote for the hated National Liberal, even though the leader of the Conservative Party recognized the necessity of opposing Bebel. Saxony's government leader, Baron Richard von Friesen, appears to have taken Bebel's victory "very calmly."

January 27. [...] [Baron von Friesen] is of the opinion that if the National Liberals had nominated [...] a candidate other than the unknown Mecklenburger Mayhoff—that is, a Saxon—he would have beaten Bebel. Incidentally, I [Solms] agree with the view that, had the runoff election taken place between Käuffer and Bebel, the former would have been elected. As it stands, however, the small artisans and the bourgeoisie, without sympathizing in the slightest with Social Democratic ideas, preferred to vote for Bebel rather than cast their ballot for a non-Saxon National Liberal.

In my humble opinion, the danger of the election result in Dresden does not lie in the one seat by which the Socialist Party has been strengthened in the Reichstag, but in the fact that a victory in the capital of this state, already greatly undermined by socialism, will perhaps allow the revolutionary party to grow with undreamed-of intensity and breadth.

NOTES

[1] Common abbreviations used by the envoy have been expanded; otherwise, British spelling and syntax have been preserved—ed.

[2] The envoy refers here to the Saxon constitution of 1831 and the Prussian constitution of 1850; in 1848–49 Prussia’s King Friedrich Wilhelm IV refused to accept a constitution—a mere “scrap of paper”—from the Frankfurt Parliament—ed.

[3] The Progressives’ satirical allusion here is to the Free Conservative and Imperial Party, which was known as the “Bismarckian Party sans phrase” because of its consistent pro-governmental stance. —Ed.

Source: Prussian Envoy Count Eberhard zu Solms-Sonnenwalde, Dresden, to Prussian Foreign Minister Otto von Bismarck, Berlin, reports nos. 1, 3, and 5, dated January 11, 17, and 27, 1877, in Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Bonn (now Berlin), I.A.A.m. Sachsen (Königreich), No. 45, Bd. 4, no page numbers.

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