

# Theodor Barth on the Need for Left-Liberal Opposition to Bismarck (June 26, 1886)

## Abstract

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By the mid-1880s many German liberals felt betrayed by Bismarck's autocratic policies. They criticized the chancellor for riding "state-supporting" parties like post-horses, driving each one to exhaustion before switching to another. In June of 1886, Theodor Barth (1849–1909) expressed this viewpoint while also calling for more determined opposition to Bismarck. In this document Barth criticizes the chancellor's drift away from free trade, freedom of occupation, and freedom of expression, as well as his efforts to wind down the *Kulturkampf* against the Catholic Church. Besides offering a clear contrast to Julius Jolly's 1880 analysis of the necessary give-and-take between the government and political parties, Barth's statement reflects left-liberals' hope that a Bismarckian regime will soon be followed by the more liberal reign of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (who died, however, after only ninety-nine days on the throne in 1888).

## Source

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Two decades have now passed since the final confrontation between Prussia and Austria on the battlefields of Bohemia. In this interval the North German Confederation was founded, then the German Reich. The same statesman has managed the policies of Prussia and Germany over these two decades; therefore it would seem only natural for this period to have been dominated by the same political principles. Instead, there was a drastic change around the midpoint of this era, which brought these two decades into the most pronounced political contrast. This contrast is discernible in every realm: in the public mood, whose patriotic hopefulness has suddenly turned into sullen pessimism, and in party constellations, too. Today, for example, one finds the *Kreuzzeitung's* *Deklaranten*<sup>[1]</sup> among the core supporters of Prince Bismarck. On the other hand, the most industrious contributors to the legislation of the first decade find themselves forced to put up increasingly resolute opposition, and ultramontanism, the main enemy of the first decade, dictates to Bismarck the conditions of a peace requested from the Curia. This abrupt turn has taken place in almost all branches of domestic politics. Moderate free trade has been displaced by crass protectionism, individualism by socialism, and free development increasingly by paternalism. Emergency acts, mass expulsions, the most ruthless interest politics, capitulation before the pope, the reestablishment of guild restrictions, the colonial swindle, and similar achievements: these are the characteristic phenomena of the second half of a period whose first half was marked by the glorious founding of the German Reich and its consolidation on the basis of free economic principles—and reasonably free political ones.

Whoever remains constantly loyal to Prince Bismarck in the course of this fundamental change of systems will surely possess the degree of adaptability necessary to cope with any political challenge. It is not surprising, however, that such perfect suppleness is found only among a few politicians—excepting those who make a lack of character their profession—and that for several years now a general *chassez-croisez*<sup>[2]</sup> has been unfolding. Under these circumstances, entire parties have failed to regain a firm position. We members of the Radical Party have found such a place insofar as we have moved clearly into opposition. Apart from foreign policy, which is indeed removed from any serious public discussion in Germany at the moment—the skepticism regarding it being more private in nature—there is today really no single political question of significance upon which one can observe any agreement between the Radical Party and Prince Bismarck. The opposition of the Radicals is thus to be understood in the original meaning of the word as an opposition in principle, an opposition aimed not just against individual

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measures of the leading statesman but also against the objectives and methods that constitute the core of his politics.

In truly constitutional states, such an opposition in principle is the only kind admissible. Anyone not separated from the government by substantial differences of political principles supports the government without qualification. In Germany, politicians in general defend themselves against the suspicion of belonging to either a mere governmental party or a decidedly oppositional one. People chase after that droll ideal of a “purely objective consideration” of legislation. According to this method, the government is kept in the dark for as long as possible as to whether it can count on its proposals to be passed once they are introduced. The government, on the other hand, seems to believe that it would have something to lose if, while drawing up its proposals, it concerned itself with their fate in parliament. In the worst case, the statesman gets his “just desserts” for this approach; afterwards he has the reassuring feeling of having done his duty. Consequently, during every parliamentary session, we witness a curious spectacle: not only does the opposition challenge Prince Bismarck’s important and, often, his not-so-important legislation, but Bismarck is frequently abandoned by his most zealous admirers. It is well known that with the current Spirits Tax Bill, not a single voice in the entire Reichstag has expressed support for the principle behind the government’s draft legislation, let alone for the bill as a whole.

Such a state of affairs is just as demoralizing for the government as it is for the people’s parliament.

A parliament, especially one constituted on the basis of universal, direct suffrage, is not a political jury that can pass its verdict from case to case in ever-changing constellations; rather, it is a power in its own right that can only be won over through consideration of those points of view that have gained ascendancy within it. This truth cannot be conjured out of existence, but the fact that some people persist in trying to ignore it contributes substantially to the dismal state of political affairs in the empire.

In view of this situation, the formation of a fundamental opposition party as the starting point for a thorough reform of our eccentric party structures can only be viewed as welcome from every perspective. In Germany, however, such a party has a very special mission to fulfill at the moment. Prince Bismarck’s capacity for political consumption is so monstrous that everyone who collaborates with him in the business of politics ends up being put through the mill in turn. He is not one of those masters who leaves behind a school. He has only followers, no disciples. Independence of political character cannot develop under him, only against him. The opposition is therefore called upon to invest in a kind of savings fund of ideas and character for that time in the future when Prince Bismarck is gone or his political course has come to complete ruin.

Resistance to Bismarckian policies must be deepened and shaped in a more fundamental way; those ideas that one criticizes and opposes have to be set out in sharp relief to the ideas that the opposition wishes to see carried through.

The third decade now dawning will show whether the political principles of the first or the second half of the past 20 years possess greater vitality.

## NOTES

[1] After Bismarck attacked the Conservative Party’s leading newspaper, the *Neue Preußische (Kreuz-) Zeitung*, because it had claimed in 1875 that the government’s “Jewish policies” were ruining the economy, a group of Old Conservatives replied with a declaration of their own on February 26, 1876, defending their independence from the government. These men became known as the *Kreuzzeitung’s Deklaranten*—ed.

[2] A swapping of partners, or a back-and-forth movement—ed.

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Source: Theodor Barth, "Zwei Jahrzehnte deutscher Politik," in *Die Nation. Wochenschrift für Politik, Volkswirtschaft und Literatur*, vol. 3, 1885/86 (June 26, 1886), p. 565; reprinted in Wilfried Loth, *Das Kaiserreich. Obrigkeitsstaat und politische Mobilisierung*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996, pp. 184–86.

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