

Emil Schäfer on the Person and Tasks of the Federal Minister of Family Affairs (1953)

Abstract

Following the electoral victory of a CDU-led Christian-bourgeois coalition in 1953, a new Federal Ministry for Family, Youth, and Health was set up. The government wanted to strengthen the family as the core of West German society. In addition to pursuing various ideal goals, such as encouraging the establishment of families and replacing the trend toward state welfare with greater personal responsibility, the new ministry was supposed to advocate for concrete aid in the form of family equalization funds to support large families, affordable family housing, and other family-friendly measures.

Source

The “Federal Ministry for Family, Youth, and Health” in the second Adenauer government looks like a new creation. Its outlines, however, have become very clear over the past few years, namely during a period when CDU party conferences issued increasingly urgent demands for social life to revolve more closely around the family once again.

It is likely that the long-discussed establishment of family equalization funds [*Familienausgleichskassen*] will be among the first tasks of the ministry. Large families with many children are supposed to receive support from these funds. Also, under the influence of the family ministry, affordable housing construction in the future should be more attuned to the real needs of families. Housing, especially, should contribute to making the shared life [*das Zusammenleben*] more than a community of interest based on material concerns.

The new head of the federal agency is fifty-three year-old Franz Joseph Wuermeling, who has been state secretary in the Interior Ministry of Rhineland-Palatinate since 1947. As a member of the CDU parliamentary group, Wuermeling became known as a vigorous champion of the interests of the so-called 131ers.^[1] They say that he has long wished for the kind of job he now has. How this novel institution will develop remains to be seen. Wuermeling’s new agency treads disturbingly close to areas of general cultural interest, which is why, in Bavaria, the specter has already been raised that it will develop into a Federal Ministry of Culture – fears that are undoubtedly exaggerated. However, it is conceivable that the family ministry might one day address the problem of the very divergent [state] school systems in the Federal Republic, since this causes many a family considerable trouble when the head of the family is transferred to another federal state.

One can observe, not only in Germany, that the notion of greater self-responsibility on the part of families is replacing the penchant for state care. In France, family equalization funds have developed into an essential part of the social security system in the past few years. Employers pay a surcharge on the wages and salaries of company employees. These surcharges are paid into the family equalization funds, which are self-administrating. However, the family equalization funds in France have often been accused of wanting to form a “state within the state.” The World Congress of the International League of Family Associations in Lisbon recently addressed these questions.

Whatever specific objections may be raised, the mobilization of the diverse forces and talents slumbering in every worthy family is a promising path toward overcoming the dangers inherent in the push toward the welfare state. About fourteen million people in the Federal Republic receive social welfare benefits

and are thus tied to the state and its tutelage. It is likely that one of the tasks of the new ministry will be strengthening the acquisitive drive within the family, so that courage and activity take over in those instances when the desire for a pension results from personal weaknesses. Of course, it remains to be seen how far the effects of this would radiate into the respective larger communities, into municipalities, states, and the nation.

In a statement in the official bulletin of the federal government, Minister Wuermeling outlined the tasks of his ministry himself. "The reasons for the work of the new federal ministry," he explained, "can be seen in the following: over-aging and a low birth rate make an excess of deaths imminent within a few years. In addition, the coming generation is threatened by the growing burden of caring for the rising number of sixty-five year-olds. We are tasked with creating an inner willingness for every conceivable support mechanism for the idea of the family. On this foundation, then, measures will have to be implemented that serve the ethical and economic grounding of healthy and larger families. Of course, it cannot be the task of the state to create a family ideal." The chief issues, he maintained, are family equalization funds to secure family-appropriate wages, tax legislation that is fairer to families, family-centered housing, youth questions, but also relief for overburdened mothers in large families. In addition, there is concern for a marriage and family law that affirms and promotes the idea of family. The external size of the new ministry will be small. According to Wuermeling, it will thus be all the more important that the public weighs in on its tasks.

NOTES

[1] Former civil service personnel who were affected by Article 131 of the Basic Law, which regulated the status and pension benefits of individuals employed in the civil service on May 8, 1945, the day of Germany's surrender to the Allies – trans.

Source: Emil Schäfer, Der Familienminister. HSTA/Bestand Nachlaß Luders; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, pp. 117–19.

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