

Bundestag Debate on Nuclear Arms Build-Up (October 10, 1981)

Abstract

The Bundestag debate on the deployment of additional nuclear arms revealed, once again, the range of positions within the SPD. It compelled Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to vehemently defend his armaments policy in a direct appeal to demonstrators.

Source

Schmidt: The Youth should also take the Worries of our Generation Seriously Warnings about 'Dodgy' Demonstrators in Bonn / Kohl: Two Different Worlds within the SPD

In a largely impressive debate on Friday, the Bundestag dealt with the so-called peace demonstration scheduled to take place on Saturday in Bonn, where more than 200,000 people want to protest the NATO dual-track decision. A speech by the federal chancellor greatly influenced the discussion in parliament; with a resoluteness not seen from him in a long time he expressed his commitment to his political view, stressing that the Soviet arms build-up was the trigger for NATO to build up its arms in response. He directed a question to demonstrators, whose ranks include prominent Social Democrats, asking if they intended to hinder the continuation of his policies by letting his domestic policy foundation “crumble.” Schmidt condemned the coming together of Social Democrats and Communists, accusing them of having made themselves “willing tools” of another country. Federal foreign minister [Hans-Dietrich] Genscher thanked the chancellor for his speech and assured him of FDP support. The motion by the coalition parties was passed in the Bundestag with 271 yeas to 218 nays, with two abstentions. It regards the dual-track decision as valid, welcomes the commencement of arms control talks, and assures that peaceful demonstrators would be treated with respect.

Schmidt's speech stood in clear contrast to the comments made earlier by SPD chairman [Willy] Brandt. Brandt repeated his remark that he could not be worried about demonstrations for peace, because he had experienced far worse things in Germany than young people taking to the streets for peace. The SPD chairman confirmed both the ongoing validity of the resolution, declaring that party membership was incompatible with cooperation with communist groups [*Unvereinbarkeitsbeschluss*] and the SPD's rejection of “action units” with communists. He felt, however, that this should be distinguished from participating in a demonstration that also included “a few communists.” Brandt spoke out against the use of violence and welcomed the statement by Social Democrats and Christian groups participating in the demonstration that assured of their commitment to a peaceful course of events. “We cannot want to push that responsibility onto the backs of police officers,” said Brandt. He respects the demonstrators' desire for peace, he said, and the job of the SPD was to turn that desire for peace into policy.

Opposition leader [Helmut] Kohl started his speech by referring to differences in the political assessments coming from within the SPD leadership. The two speeches, Schmidt's and Brandt's, reflected two different worlds, according to Kohl. He said that Brandt has set out for a “new political shore” in German and international politics, which was the reason for the disquiet within the party. Kohl felt that a lot of what Schmidt said was no longer supported by a substantial segment of the SPD and that it was no coincidence that various passages in his speech were in fact applauded by the CDU. The tried-and-true among the in-party adversaries in the SPD party caucus, on the other hand, did not

applaud. What happened here was nothing less than evidence that Schmidt no longer had a majority behind him in decisive policy issues.

The opposition leader continued that he found it almost inconceivable that Brandt tried to give the impression in his speech that the incompatibility resolution, prohibiting cooperation between Social Democrats and communists, did not apply to the demonstration on Saturday, although presumably ten thousand or more SPD members or supporters would be participating. One had to keep in mind that SPD presidium member [Erhard] Eppler and FDP executive committee member [William] Borm would be speaking at the demonstration and that the policies they were demanding would lead to freezing the military superiority of the Soviet Union. If the Federal Republic retracted the NATO dual-track decision, as demonstration organizers demanded, this would essentially target the basis of the Federal Republic's membership in NATO and would question the very foundation of the Federal Republic that had been built up over the last thirty years. It would have been Brandt's duty, Kohl said, in the spirit of Kurt Schumacher, to offer clarity here instead of dismissing the participation of the communists, in contrast to the federal chancellor, who issued clear words of condemnation.

"Goodwill is unfortunately not enough to change the world. If that's what you want, then you have to bend over really far . . . , because the stones and obstacles that have to be moved in order to change the world are down there." That's how Schmidt quoted his deceased party colleague Carlo Schmid at the beginning of his talk. What Carlo Schmid said about the nuclear problem in 1956 was still just as valid as ever, said Schmidt. He understands many people's concern about peace and their search for "equations that divide exactly and leave no remainder."

Being worried about peace is justified. He, too, had been afraid when talks between the two superpowers were discontinued after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But just having fear, he said, is not enough; it was also necessary to tackle the reasons behind it. This has been done; and when Moscow and Washington resumed negotiations today, the federal government did—"God knows"—its share. If he is prepared to take the youth seriously, Schmidt said, then he also expects the youth to take seriously the worries of "our generation" and its experiences, which include the disaster of the war. Fear could paralyze the ability of the Federal Republic to act, which is more necessary today than in the past. The federal chancellor let it be understood that he sees the demonstrators and their organization as endangering his ability to act as head of the government, because their actions threaten to crumble the foundation of his government's domestic policy. "Is that the intention? Is that what the organizers want?" asked Schmidt. He said he had a hard time understanding that the demonstration's organizers and speakers did not want to acknowledge the efforts of his government to secure peace. Without his efforts, he did not think the talks on intermediate-range weapons starting on November 30 would have come about.

Schmidt sharply criticized the organizers of the demonstration, saying they were not willing to distance themselves from communist groups. With that, they had missed the chance "to use balanced language." The Germans' desire for peace is not helped if they let it be organized by communist groups. "We Germans cannot let decisions be made for us by those who have made themselves willing tools of another country." He added that the German communists who supported foreign political agendas through manipulation in the Federal Republic are "at best" mistaken. The law allows them to proceed but they should know, Schmidt continued amidst thundering applause throughout the entire house, that his political friends in the Soviet Union and the GDR were not allowed to demonstrate, and they should also know that there was no conscientious objector status there. Schmidt also received applause when he called upon demonstrators to let no one try to tell them that the Bundeswehr serves any other purpose than defending the Federal Republic.

It was striking how harshly Schmidt disapproved of the Soviet Union in his speech. He criticized the Soviet Union for "regrettably" not complying with the joint declaration of May 1978, whereby he and

[Soviet Premier Leonid] Brezhnev had committed themselves to a policy of “approximate equilibrium” in the military sphere. The fact that the Soviet Union had not kept to the agreement as regards intermediate-range weapons was the reason for NATO’s dual-track decision, which was the subject today, he said.

The talks beginning on November 30 should not be used to firm up existing—or create new—imbalances, but to negotiate stability at a lower level. Everyone was agreed, Schmidt said, that the ideal outcome of the talks would be a “mutually agreed upon” zero option, by eliminating the Soviets’ increased arms build-up. Neither side could determine what comprises equilibrium, but Schmidt said it would be easier to reach agreement if the Soviet Union offered some transparency in this difficult area of negotiations and stopped, right now, deploying a new SS-20 missile every week. Schmidt said that problematic would be an important topic at his upcoming meeting with Brezhnev. He assured that he was looking forward to the talks and would conduct them as “part of the Western alliance.”

Speaking to demonstrators, Schmidt said that he is not lumping them together with those who view violence as a means of policy. But he called upon them to consider that some “very dubious characters had grabbed onto their coattails.” They should not let themselves be exploited by them. “Speak to all those who possess nuclear weapons to reduce their nuclear armaments. Also speak to all those who increase their stockpiles,” said Schmidt, as he called upon demonstrators not to forget to direct their protest to the Soviet Union as well.

Source: “Schmidt: Die Jugend soll auch die Sorgen unserer Generation ernst nehmen / Warnung vor ‘zweilichtigen’ Demonstranten in Bonn / Kohl: Zwei verschiedene Welten in der SPD”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 10, 1981. © All rights reserved. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung GmbH, Frankfurt.

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