

Crisis in the Social Democratic Party (October 5, 1981)

Abstract

In speculating about a possible end to the social-liberal coalition, most observers assumed that the FDP would bring this situation about by leaving the coalition. The authors of this piece, however, argue that the end of the coalition could also be prompted by the leadership crisis within the SPD. The success of the Greens, the NATO Dual-Track Decision, and questions about economic and social policy created growing division among the Social Democrats and their three leaders (Helmut Schmidt, Willy Brandt, and Herbert Wehner), thereby weakening the chancellor's position vis-à-vis the party's coalition partner, the FDP.

Source

“The SPD Is Not Your Property”

[...]

All-out war has broken out within the top ranks of the Social Democrats. FDP chairman Hans-Dietrich Genscher's wish that the Bonn coalition not break up on account of the Liberals^[1] might soon come true.

The three [men] up at the top^[2] are hacking away at each other in complete disregard for the reputation of the party. All the anger and contentiousness that has built up is now coming out in open conflict.

“Chancellors come and go away, but the party chair will stay,” rhyme Brandt's staff members, and the SPD leader acts accordingly. For him, the party's survival takes precedence over Helmut Schmidt's chancellorship.

The party chair has been “looking beyond Schmidt to the future of the party” (a Brandt confidant) ever since the head of the government only managed a disappointing 42.9 percent for the SPD in the last Bundestag election, despite dream opponent Franz Josef Strauß.

Brandt knows that many SPD functionaries share his thoughts, including state party chairs Günther Jansen of Schleswig-Holstein and Oskar Lafontaine of Saarland, who see Bonn's government policies as being responsible for the party's decline at the state and local levels. Rhineland-Palatinate SPD chairman-designate Hugo Brandt commented on the situation: “Whoever wants to mobilize the party today has to do it against the government.”

Willy Brandt sees himself as challenged with saving his SPD from what he calls the “biological threat.” The party, Brandt says, cannot leave the younger generation to the protest movements; it must remain open to supporters of the peace movement, to people with alternative lifestyles, and to Greens.

The party chief is sitting, in the words of Hugo Brandt, “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” On the one hand, he feels obliged to remain loyal to the government; on the other hand, he can gain credibility among these new target groups only by abandoning the government with respect to peace policies, environmental protection, and energy policies.

His opponent Helmut Schmidt senses that his era is coming to an end. Many Social Democrats have the feeling that Schmidt, the former mover and shaker, has lost the reins to Hans-Dietrich Genscher—the

secret chancellor—in budgetary as well as security policy.

Schmidt notices that he is no longer a force to be reckoned with and that his governing artistry is now limited to administration.

He discovered rather late in the day that it was a mistake not to secure his government course within the party and that it was wrong never to have engaged intensively with the party program. Now Schmidt is facing the danger that his critics in the SPD might start rocking the government down to its foundations. “The chancellor,” one of his advisors says, “feels like the rug is being pulled out from under him.”

The culprits, as far as Schmidt can see, are not primarily the declared opponents of his policies, such as Eppler, Lafontaine, and Jansen. The very fact that his critics could become a serious threat at all, he believes, is attributable to Willy Brandt, who he says is loyal to the government outwardly, but who, in reality, stirs up the mood against the coalition and the chancellor through ambiguous statements.

[...]

But this time Brandt was on guard, having been caught unawares by the vehemence of the attacks a day earlier. In the 1960s, he said, coolly defending his integration course, he had not realized until very late that the youth rebellion was just a symptom of societal changes.

It was right for the SPD to open up to the protest generation, he said: “The party has not become more boring or weaker as a result.” If the Social Democrats were to abandon the youth in order not to unsettle their regular voters in the working class, then the SPD would have no future.

Brandt then made it clear that he was willing to face the confrontation with Schmidt. “I want to tell you honestly that you will not change me. There will only be change when you feel the time has come to decide who should be the [next] chairman of the Social Democratic party.”

For his part, Schmidt is trying to break the power of the functionaries and party bosses that he holds responsible for the SPD’s desperate state of affairs. [Helmut] Rohde, head of the SPD intra-party taskforce on employee matters (AfA), is supposed to help him in this.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Meaning the FDP—eds.

[2] Reference to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, SPD chairman Willy Brandt, and head of the SPD parliamentary caucus in the Bundestag, Herbert Wehner—eds.

Source: “Die SPD ist doch nicht euer Eigentum,” *Der Spiegel*, October 5, 1981, pp. 17–21.
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