# Ten Years of the SPD/FDP Coalition (October 19, 1979)

## Abstract

Chancellor Helmut Schmidt takes stock of the SPD/FDP coalition on its tenth anniversary. In this excerpt, he focuses on changes in society, offers a critical assessment of difficulties, and acknowledges areas where the coalition government had more work to do.

## Source

### Ten Years of Prudent Politics
### The Social-Liberal Coalition—An Alliance of Hope

I.
"We'll do it!" When Willy Brandt and Walter Scheel, on election night on September 28, 1969, made this promise to each other, they made a decision that was bold in two senses.

First: people in the Federal Republic had become used to large governing majorities; but the social-liberal coalition, without a dominant position in the Bundesrat [the second house of parliament], had only a twelve-seat lead over the CDU. The only other politician to begin on such a slim basis was Konrad Adenauer in 1949. But, with the exception of the Social Democrats, he dealt with a splintered opposition, which, in the wake of his policies, increasingly fell into disintegration.

Second: for the first time in the Federal Republic, a democratic change of government was to be carried through against the conservatives, who, in this country, always tend to see themselves as the only "pillars of the state." Since the middle of the previous century, Social Democracy and Liberalism have been the political forces where the new social and intellectual currents of the times gathered. But any time their participation in political power was imminent in Germany, attempts were made to prevent it by defaming and dividing, diverting or breaking up the progressive forces. That is what happened to the bourgeois liberal movement in 1848, to the Liberals in the run-up to the establishment of the Reich during the Prussian constitutional conflict. Afterwards, Social Democracy was ostracized and persecuted. In 1879, Bismarck called the National Liberal political goals of "undermining the existence of the Reich every bit as good as the Social Democratic undermining." In the Weimar Republic, anti-liberalism and the struggle against Social Democracy provided the common denominator for the reaction and for all other forces fighting against the Republic, as disparate as they may have been in other ways.

Many citizens were aware of this historical legacy in 1969. They saw it as a great step forward that a democratic change of government was not merely attempted, only to remain an episode, but rather had succeeded.

Incidentally, the decision to form the social-liberal coalition would hardly have been taken if the SPD and the FDP had not, a few months earlier, teamed up for the first time in a federal-level coalition: at the election of Gustav Heinemann as federal president. Heinemann was a citizen in the best sense: as a professed Christian, as a man of unflinching opposition to National Socialism, hoping for a new beginning with the CDU and being deeply disappointed, fighting with his All-German People's Party [*Gesamtdeutsche Volkspartei*] for the cohesion of the Fatherland and failing, and finally as a Social Democrat—in this way he combined commitment and sobriety, the will for reform and a sense of tradition, social obligation, and liberality.

For many, the social-liberal coalition was an alliance of hope. The Federal Republic was just then twenty years old. During that time, breathless and economically successful work had been performed in the name of reconstruction. A respectable republic had arisen out of the political, moral, and economic chaos that existed after the end of the war. But there were still many “old habits,” as the FDP put it in its election campaign. In the sixties, it was obvious that the newly won self-confidence of the Germans, combined with pent-up problems, called for a republic that was willing to change. To be sure, the Grand Coalition of 1966 had accommodated that desire; but in the face of the immobility of the CDU/CSU, the Grand Coalition was unable to adequately fulfill its reform tasks, especially with respect to foreign affairs and *its Deutschlandpolitik* [policies dealing with the GDR]. In addition, the parliamentary opposition of the FDP had been too weak in the late sixties—the result was extra-parliamentary opposition.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the rebellion of the young generation at that time, especially among university students, as a radical-leftist derailment. The emerging unrest signaled the willingness to make a democratic commitment; it showed a sensitivity to the need for change and reform in our country. One might advise German conservatives, who had always denied such necessities, to read their own classic works. Edmund Burke already wrote back in 1790: “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. Without such means it might even risk the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve.”

II.
Consequently, internal reforms were at the center of Willy Brandt’s first government address on October 28, 1969. But the new *Ostpolitik* became the real battlefield.

The stages of that policy need not be recounted here. Its difficulty lay not only—or even primarily—in patiently and judiciously building bridges to neighbors in the East across the chasms of difference and mutual distrust. Instead, major impediments to the realization of that policy came from the CDU/CSU opposition, which sought to undo the treaties by all possible means. This was only ostensibly about the allegedly reckless way in which the negotiations were conducted or the claim that legal positions were being given away. At the core, in the battle for lost governmental power, the issue was the enemy image of the Soviet Union and of communism, and its inner functioning. Incidentally, that is still the issue for the opposition today.

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The Federal Government and the coalition have pursued four interrelated goals with their *Ost- and Deutschlandpolitik*: to consolidate peace, to secure Berlin, to initiate reconciliation with those nations that suffered especially grievously under Hitler’s aggression, and to ease the coexistence of the people of divided Germany and thereby contribute to the cohesion of the nation. The treaties with Eastern European countries contain the option for the unification of Germany. At the same time, they are aimed against the division of Europe.

The *Ostpolitik* of the social-liberal coalition was always embedded in the politics of the Western alliance, which links the task of military security with the goal of willingness to achieve political understanding. The United States and our other Western allies have supported this policy—otherwise, it could not have been carried out. The danger looming in the sixties, that the Federal Republic would find itself isolated in foreign affairs, was averted. Our foreign policy, which was concerned with maintaining a balance, even became the decisive precondition for the entire process of European détente: Helsinki, Vienna (MBFR: Mutual Balanced Force Reduction), and so on.

As a result, our country has gained new trust and a growing reputation in the world, though this has also entailed greater and more far-reaching political responsibility. […]

III.
The effort to consolidate external peace had its counterpart in a policy to secure the internal social peace. The domestic reforms of the social-liberal coalition served and serve that goal.

[…]

It means much for social peace in our country that the coalition has been able to shape our economic system in an exemplary fashion. For me, the Works Constitution Act [*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*] of 1972 and the Law on Co-Determination in Large Enterprises [*Gesetz über die Mitbestimmung in den Großbetrieben*] of 1976 are milestones in that development. They mark the real reason for our relative economic edge over other democratic industrialized societies: the far-reaching participation of workers and of their autonomous unions—more far-reaching than in any other country in the world. The ability of the social partners [unions and management] to solve their conflicts through compromise and cooperatively—meaning: to conclude agreements by way of compromise—requires support from the state to prevent that ability from getting choked off. This calls for a welfare and social policy[1] aimed at "social symmetry."

[…]

V.
The Basic Law has decided in favor of an open society, one that must give room to the diversity of convictions and opinions, ways of life and lifestyles. This intentional plurality—also with respect to ethical norms and values—was surely not given its due during the first twenty years of the Federal Republic, on account of postwar hardship, reconstruction, and a conservative social policy. One of the most important accomplishments of the social-liberal coalition is having enhanced, over the last ten years, the possibilities for greater social, intellectual, and political diversity. There is less narrowness, more willingness for tolerance.

I would like to use the example of criminal law reform to illustrate how legislation has contributed to this development. In concordance with the Basic Law, jurisprudence had already realized for some time that it could not be the task of criminal law to make the moral views of specific groups binding for society as a whole. Instead, the purpose of criminal law is to ward off dangers from the individual or society, that is, things that are socially harmful.

The plurality of our democratic system demands from all groups that they refrain from imposing their views on those who do not share them, especially through the means of criminal law. That was the goal of our reform. This does not mean giving up values as such in our legal system; but it does mean restricting them to those ethical norms that the Basic Law declares as given to the state a priori, or which enjoy a general agreement within society.

[…]

The successes and accomplishments of the social-liberal coalition carry weight for the future of our country. Were there no mistakes and shortfalls? One can't claim there weren't.

I know that there are also disappointed hopes among many citizens. In 1969, there were high expectations that, after two decades of conservative politics in the Federal Republic, new horizons would open up. Among some, enthusiasm came before the sobriety and the steadfastness that make a reform policy possible in the first place. Day-to-day political life has led us back to this sobriety, without which there can be no political progress in a democratic society. But—and here I come back to my remarks about peace policy—the many obstacles to reforms could not have been overcome without that impulse that hopes and expectations carry with them. I note self-critically that in recent years the balance between sobriety and steadfastness, on the one hand, and hope and expectations inspired by the

imagination, on the other hand, has shifted in favor of the former.

However, many have underestimated the resistance to the new political approaches of the social-liberal coalition. They were considerable: for nearly ten years, the coalition has been fighting to implement its political goals against a majority in the Bundesrat, which is dominated by the CSU and the CDU, and which seeks to block or dilute the many laws passed by the Bundestag.

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I am not talking about resistance from the opposition in order to deflect attention away from our own mistakes and shortcomings. I would like to touch on two areas in which the adaptability of our politics is especially important if we want to secure our future in the eighties: I am referring to the problem of integrating guest workers and to the mutual difficulties in the relationship between the state, society, and the young generation.

Our society availed itself of the help of guest workers because we needed their labor for the successful development of our economy and to meet the growing demand for labor and services. So far, we have done too little to advance their integration. The resulting problems for individual persons and for the internal peace of our society are becoming more urgent. By now, their children have grown up; many were actually born here, they speak German better than their parents' native language, and many of them do not wish to return to the land of their fathers. To me it is clear that, if we wish to live up to our responsibility, they must be given the chance to become German citizens not only in formal terms.

Among the young generation, a single instance has cost the political leaders in the Federal Republic a lot of trust: I am talking about the Radicals Decree of 1972. When the federal chancellor and the heads of the *Länder* [German federal states] enacted this decree, they intended to achieve—on the basis of the existing and only affirmed law—a standardization of the way in which candidates for the civil service were screened and hired. This goal was not accomplished. Instead, many places saw bureaucratic excesses in the screening apparatus that hardly anyone had imagined at the outset. This gave rise to fears among the younger generation, far beyond the very limited circle of those who actually had a reason to be concerned about a screening.

[…]

If we are talking about corrections, one must also mention the pension debate of 1976. The projections about the financing of pensions proved too optimistic. To be sure, this had nothing to do with "fraud" (the words of F. J. Strauß). But we accepted as realistic sober economic forecasts which were superseded by subsequent developments and new economic projections. It was bitter to acknowledge such mistakes and to have to admit to them publicly. Still, I did just that in December of 1976.

[…]

There are three preconditions for the coalition's ability to engage in joint political action: first, a fundamental programmatic closeness, one that concerns many political areas and the historical dimension of which I briefly explained at the outset; second, the political will and the capacity for compromise, that is to say: to create time and again a commonality for the day-to-day political work if problems and developments demand it; and third, the fact that Social Democrats and Free Democrats respect each other as autonomous political forces.

The willingness to engage in discussion and the capacity for compromise have nothing to do with political disunity or an inability to act, something the opposition is wont to accuse the government of. Anyone who denies conflicts and rejects compromise is useless at building a democracy and internal peace. […]

In the eighties, we Germans will need that capacity more than ever before. We will find ourselves confronted with serious problems. Arms race *or* arms limitation, North-South conflict *or* partnership, economic growth and full employment in the face of the challenges of energy shortages and environmental protection, the integration of young people, the realization of equal rights for women: these are only a few keywords. None of this can be easily achieved or decided, and we will have to bid farewell to many a comfortable habit.

[…]

The historical dimension of Europe encompasses diversity and commonality. This capital must be put to use for Europe. Social Democrats and Free Democrats have created the preconditions for doing so. They have the ability to build upon this capital: the coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals has a future in Germany.

**NOTES**

[1] In German usage, social policy is the term commonly used for welfare policy. We deviate here to distinguish between welfare policy as it is commonly understood outside of Germany and social policies in the broader sense [*Sozial- und Gesellschaftspolitik*]—eds.

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