

1969: No Ordinary Change in Government (Retrospective Account, 2001)

Abstract

In this retrospective account, Rainer Barzel, a former parliamentary leader and Christian Democratic candidate for chancellor, describes how the change of government in 1969 was perceived as a dramatic turning point in West Germany's still-young democracy. He emphasizes his moderating role within the CDU, which was ill-prepared for life on the opposition benches.

Source

[...]

With almost youthful élan and unwavering determination, the otherwise rather cautious and hesitant Willy Brandt took control. He took the helm on election night! Those who experienced him at that time report that he “carried them away.” Walter Scheel had a similar effect. He was said to have acted like a “man of conviction.”

We heard phrases like “historic caesura,” “change in power,” “turning point in German history.” Emotions filled the Bundeshaus^[1], visions and high expectations filled many newspapers. This wave had been created especially by Brandt himself, and he knew how to use it. He rode, if I may use this image, his own wave.

His first policy statement was considered a coalition agreement. And it likely was one. It proclaimed a readiness to make a completely new start. We're just getting started! Democracy is just getting started!

We listened with critical ears. Brandt had just written in *Neue Gesellschaft*^[2] in May 1969 that “the CDU/CSU regards democracy as an organizational form of the state; the SPD regards democracy as a principle that must influence and permeate the entire social being of the people.”

That tore open fundamental divides! “Democratization of all areas of life”—what is that supposed to mean? For the family, for the workplace, for academia, for the media?

The new chancellor emphasized this phrase: “I see myself as chancellor, not of a defeated Germany, but a liberated one.” That marked the change in government with the “pathos of a new beginning”; Brandt's impact also came from his “brilliant diction of speech.” Some people thought that the “emergency founding” of the Federal Republic of Germany was now being followed—in a “second zero hour”—by its “refounding.”

[...]

By now, we have become accustomed to democracy in Germany. Who can still recall the significance of the change from Adenauer to Erhard, from Kiesinger to Brandt, for our young democracy and for the image of a democratic Germany abroad, and what it meant for us, too? A positive view of us abroad was the prerequisite for all hopes of reunification.

We felt like we were still carrying around the unsettling question on the road to democracy: Will we manage it this time, in contrast to Weimar's^[3] attempt at democracy from Berlin? After twenty years of

being governed by the [CDU/CSU] Union (!), the shift from Kiesinger to Brandt—from “right” to “left,” from “Christian” to “socialist”, and whatever all the stickers pasted inside and outside proclaimed (albeit with stereotypes)—very many felt this was a fundamental change.

It was a time of major upheaval, of a new beginning. People asked, cautiously asked: how different would everything be? Especially when the new Chancellor Willy Brandt stressed in his policy statement that now he wanted to dare more democracy, that democracy was only just beginning.

The experience of this change was eclipsed in the minds of many by the plain and normal fact that—from a parliamentary and pragmatic point of view—the foreign minister had become federal chancellor, that the partner party in the coalition would now set the tone. But seen from a historical perspective, what was politically “normal” about Germany? The emotional situation back then was not very “normal.” *That was the change*, also brought about by the 1968 generation! Will the (feared) “other” republic come to pass? That became *the* question.

My companions from that time can no longer confirm what they experienced: a colleague, comrade, friend, who was determined to let this change appear and evolve to be as “normal” as possible, without any winners’ victory shouts or losers’ tension: *Parliamentary change as proof of democracy won and secured!*

My measured public statements on this change were noted. No wonder: I had long been prepared for this development by Walter Scheel. Despite all that changed, the parliamentary leader of the Union^[4] was the same as before this “turnaround.” I tried, also as a person, to provide evidence of a center and stability. In any case, the campaign slogan of the Union, “What matters is the chancellor!” did not have the intended and desired success. After governing for twenty years, we found ourselves—unprepared and unintentionally—back in the opposition. Many sulked.

NOTES

[1] The Bundeshaus (literally: Federal House) in Bonn was the seat of the Bundestag and Bundesrat from the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949 to 1999—eds.

[2] A political and cultural magazine published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of the SPD—eds.

[3] Reference to the first attempt to establish a democracy in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1919–1933)—eds.

[4] Reference to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)—eds.

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