

The Day-to-Day Problems of Governing (September 19, 1972)

Abstract

Incumbent chancellor Willy Brandt offers a self-critical take on his first three years in office. Conceding that the great expectations placed upon him could not always be met, Brandt points to problems “in his own camp” and an occasional lack of team spirit.

Source

Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Background Conversations for *Die Zeit*

Question: Mr. Chancellor, looking back after three years, is it a look back in anger for you?

Answer: No, it isn’t that, even if I must admit that I am smarter today. But among other things, that’s what life is for, to continue learning new things. If the experiences of these past three years had already been had back in 1969, then presumably one thing or another might have worked out better.

Question: What are you thinking of in particular?

Answer: It has more to do with the methodology than with the substance of the policies, and also with the way of making oneself understood as regards the things that this government did differently than previous governments. It also has to do with the sort of teamwork that could not be developed sufficiently, especially in the first two years. To that extent, the next four years will be much easier, since one proceeds on the basis of the first two years’ experiences, both in policy statements and in practical implementation.

Question: Could one say that, to some extent, you would start the next four years with a certain dampened euphoria? Is it possible to say that your methodology might perhaps be more systematic or planned, also more cautious; that maybe the mountain that has to be climbed should be surveyed more thoroughly beforehand? Or how would you describe this methodology, this changed methodology or your experience with the methodology?

Answer: Since you mentioned euphoria—I think that I myself was free of euphoria, after all, who wants to be able to control one’s feelings entirely. Some things that go on around you also influence you, since no one is totally isolated from what’s going on. Nonetheless, what I mean to say is this: At the start of this administration—and it worked far into this legislative period—there was a huge discrepancy between what the government had put down in black and white about its intentions and how others interpreted it. The government, however, was not without blame in this regard. First, some people in the government offered extensive explanations of what had been laid down as the declaration of common policies, which I subjectively cannot hold against these individuals. Everyone wants to expound. But sometimes it also strayed too far from what was actually in the policy statement. If you look at it again today, then it does not justify the critics who claim we took on too much. Please, an exception: In domestic policy, in contrast to foreign policy, it was not made clear enough to everyone which things we thought we could really finish up in these four years and which points just offered an approach to new areas, in which we did preliminary work. Now we’re back to the methodology. That is not something that one should hold against oneself; one should learn from it. I just said that that was made clearer as regards foreign policy, even as early as 1969. And that is true. But there, too, experience shows that it is not only about whether

one knows for oneself how something should be done, how it has to be done so that it is solid enough, so all the bases are covered. If it is not possible to convey this to enough other people, then it doesn't matter whether it really is well thought out with all the bases covered. And there we also learned that for a long time virtually all interest was focused on certain aspects of foreign policy and almost nothing else was given much attention. People often got the impression that the government was improvising or even just letting itself be carried along by things that came to us from the outside. In reality, that was not the case. But let me say again: It is important to know better than we knew then that that kind of impression can emerge, especially when entering uncharted waters, and that it is necessary to deal with these false impressions more systematically and also more patiently.

Question: Mr. Chancellor, wasn't it basically two things that collided with each other somewhere? On the one hand, your government was under great pressure due to people's high expectations, which I would view as a great compliment, since if a lot is expected of someone, it means that people actually have a high opinion of him. And on the other hand, didn't this high level of expectations keep colliding with the fact that perhaps the public was insufficiently prepared psychologically for what then had to be done, both in foreign and domestic policy?

Answer: Yes, that's true. The ways of making yourself sufficiently understood, to explain not only what you are doing from one month to the next, but also what you have planned for a longer period of time, what is possible and what isn't—all of this was not adequately explained. This has to do, I think, with the political structure in our country. Recently, someone said that for twenty years or almost [that long], in the Federal Republic we believed, or it was believed, that a consensus had been found slightly right of center. And that person went on to say that we are now in the process of finding a consensus slightly left of center. Neither one is all that terribly far from the center. But it necessarily creates strong tensions, or such a transition from one side of center to the other triggers a strong defensive reaction, also emotional defenses, by those who were set on the old consensus; and it creates exaggerated, often unrealistic, expectations by those who feel like they are fully participating in the consensus for the first time, so to speak.

Question: Mr. Chancellor, in the last three years and especially in the last few months, did you ever experience moments when you were resigned or even tired or reluctant, because maybe you had been bombarded with too much that, whether subjectively or objectively, you didn't deserve?

Answer: Not in the last few months, I don't think. But otherwise over the course of time there were always situations now and then that I reacted to with a strong feeling of reluctance.

Question: Like what, for instance?

Answer: It was largely not situations that had to do with domestic policy adversaries but with shortcomings in our own camp.

[...]

Source: Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt's Background Conversations for *Die Zeit* (September 19, 1972), *Archiv der sozialen Demokratie*, WBA, A 9, 26; reprinted in Willy Brandt, *Berliner Ausgabe*, vol. 7: *Mehr Demokratie wagen. Innen- und Gesellschaftspolitik 1966–1974*, edited by Wolther von Kieseritzky. Bonn, 2001, pp. 354f. Available online at: <https://willy-brandt.de/en/willy-brandt/publikationen/mehr-demokratie-wagen-1966-1974/>

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: The Day-to-Day Problems of Governing (September 19, 1972), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-905>> [March 11, 2026].