The FDP Tips the Scales (October 2-3, 1982)

Abstract

When the Free Democrats abandoned the Social Democrats in favor of a coalition with the CDU/CSU, many accused the party of backstabbing a former coalition partner. This triggered a crisis within the party. In this document, Wolfgang Mischnick, the parliamentary leader of the FDP, explains the decision of the party's leaders in an address to the Bundestag.

Source

Declaration by Wolfgang Mischnick, FDP, on the End of the Social-Liberal Coalition (October 1, 1982)

This is a grave hour; I am convinced it is a grave hour for the state, because we know—no matter where we stand—that the stability of the Federal Republic of Germany, self-evident for over thirty-five years, is no longer as certain as it once was. Elections in the federal states have confirmed this. It is a grave hour for this parliament because I know (I feel the same way) that many representatives, across all party lines, are torn between what was seen as the basis of the decision in the 1980 election campaign and the job the constitution gives the representatives once they are elected.

It is a grave hour for my party because it is here more than anywhere that what develops is reflected—this discrepancy, this tension, these tense relations. And I openly admit that it is a grave hour for me personally. I deliberately created this coalition thirteen years ago, and I stood by it up to the last minute. Too long, some say. These critics might be right. Mr. Chancellor, on September 17, you made it clear in a conversation with me before you gave your speech here that this coalition was coming to an end. I asked you if that would be included in your speech. You answered yes. I asked you if you expected the Free Democratic ministers to resign, and you answered affirmatively. I asked you what would happen if they didn't: Would you dismiss them? You confirmed that too. From your perspective, that is the consequence of your speech: Cooperation could no longer reasonably be expected. Mr. Chancellor, I would like to add one thing: If you then allow this to be characterized as betrayal, I am deeply disappointed.

I know that what was meant—and you don't need to worry that I will fail to mention even a single reason that I consider important to name—, I know that this development, which you said could no longer be stopped, was also impaired by the fact that different opinions could be found within my party. But it is not as if they came only from the FDP; because they also came from the SPD—on the question of whether it still made any sense. And if the postulate "dignity" (and for me it is not just a postulate, but an inner conviction) is emphasized to such an extent, then, Mr. Chancellor and my colleagues from the SPD, please [emphasize it] also at the moment when it becomes clear that it is no longer possible to continue the common basis, when it is determined with dignity that there is objectively no more common ground on many issues. I think this is necessary.

I would also like to add here that it varies, that there are areas in which I am absolutely convinced that we could still work together tomorrow. But right now the focus is on the problem of economic, social, financial, and tax policies. And I would like to add: We must also consider the question from a different perspective than the one sometimes spoken of here, namely, whether this parliament is prepared in such a difficult situation to take action and be reprimanded for not turning directly to the voters.

It is all the easier for me to say that, because even back on September 9, Mr. Chancellor, when you first mentioned new elections, I was the only one here who expressed a different opinion. In our conversation, we were both fully aware that the Basic Law allows for a number of different options. But I will repeat what I told you. I am profoundly convinced—and this is my own personal opinion—that the Basic Law first and foremost calls upon the parliament to act, and only when it can no longer act are new elections envisioned as a last resort.

This understanding of the constitution might stand in contrast to the general sentiment—more so today than in the early 1970s. I don't deny that. And making this visible and clear in sharp debates will be part of a common task. I will immediately add, to avoid any misunderstanding: The coalition made an agreement. I have learned to respect majorities. I expect my friends to respect majorities. I also respect majorities when they are laid down for the future in a coalition agreement. I would request, then, that my basic stance, which I still hold, not be regarded as an attempt to slip out of an agreement. But I see it as an obligation to express basic views at this moment with the same clarity that I had a few days ago, because that also belongs to the credibility that has repeatedly been emphasized.

Ladies and gentlemen, this obligation to take action does not contradict the stance that has already been expressed in this house. Mr. Chancellor, as chairman of the SPD party caucus you had responded to the speech that I gave at the time of the government declaration of the Grand Coalition with these exact words: "It was the parliament that created the new government of its own accord—evidence of the ability of the German Bundestag to function." I agree with you entirely. Today, the circumstances are not the same, but they are similar. And Helmut Schmidt continued back then to say that a government must be formed according to the options of a functioning majority. This should happen.

Or when someone—in agreement with then Chancellor Kiesinger—cited that the new government, literally, emerged not from a brilliant election victory, but from a crisis that our people followed with profound concern. Look, ladies and gentlemen, if we speak of credibility, then I also ask you not to doubt the credibility of that past statement when it applies just as well to a different situation.

I would like to repeat that interests in such situations can change. I do not reproach anyone if, based on his own interests, he makes different decisions. But when I get the feeling that suddenly someone's own interests are veiled by his accusing the other side that its interests or its willingness to make a decision is contrary to law and customs, then I have to say that law and customs, as laid down in the Basic Law, absolutely legitimize the planned route. And anyone who doubts that should have the courage to say that on this point he thinks the Basic Law is wrong or should be changed.

In this hour, I also do not intend to assess (as I have always done before) thirteen years of governance, which has received a good deal of criticism. There were decisive steps, new steps in foreign policy and policy regarding the East [*Ostpolitik*]; there were also decisive steps in domestic policy, in social policy, whose foundations I assess as positively today as I did in the past. I do not deny that mistakes were made. Wherever people are at work, mistakes will be made. That was the case in the CDU/FDP government coalition; that was the case in the Grand Coalition; that was the case in the present coalition. And it will be the same for any future coalition. What is important is that once it has been recognized that a mistake was made here or there, that people have the courage to learn from these mistakes. And this is easier if the situation is not viewed ideologically but if decisions are made based on reason. We are trying to make a decision based on reason.

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to make two personal remarks in closing: Mr. Chancellor, we have worked together very closely over many years. I value this work and I respect all you did. I stand by our collaboration, and I am grateful to you for it. That we now have to go our separate ways is part of democracy. I would like to ask you not to forget that you and I and everyone in this house are here to serve this country, the people. So, actions that are decided in one way or another should be viewed from

this perspective and not from another. My heartfelt thanks for our work together!

Colleague Wehner, we have had to make very difficult decisions over the last thirteen years. We sometimes stood alone before decisions, from absolutely divergent standpoints. When I think of the co-determination, of the treaties in which we had a common basis. Our personal conduct was always fair. Thank you for that. Amidst the most difficult conflicts of interest, we found solutions and advanced them together, with compromises whose workability was also eventually proven. I got to know you as a fair partner, as a person who is often misrepresented in public. I am truly hurt that this is the manner in which we have to go our separate ways. Colleague Wehner, my high esteem remains! Colleague Kohl! If the election goes the way we hope—and I am convinced that it will—you will have a fair partner, because I see fair partnership as a decisive aspect of the credibility of this democracy.

Source: Declaration by Wolfgang Mischnick, FDP, on the End of the Social-Liberal Coalition (October 1, 1982); reprinted in Irmgard Wilharm, ed., *Deutsche Geschichte 1962–1983. Dokumente in zwei Bänden*, vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, pp. 268–71. Available online at: https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/09/09118.pdf (*Deutscher Bundestag — 9. Wahlperiode — 118. Sitzung*. Bonn, Friday, October 1, 1982, pp. 7181–85).

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Recommended Citation: The FDP Tips the Scales (October 2-3, 1982), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1142> [November 19, 2026].