The Schism in the Coalition as Reflected by Political Commentators (September 18, 1982)

Abstract

Political commentators agreed that the end of the social-liberal coalition was inevitable, but they viewed the situation differently according to their own political orientation. The three editorials excerpted below demonstrate that. Whereas the *Tagesspiegel* piece focuses on mistakes in economic and social policy, the essay from the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* additionally emphasizes the role played by ideological erosion. The author of the piece in the left-leaning *Frankfurter Rundschau* pays tribute to the SPD-FDP coalition as an important and groundbreaking experiment, arguing that both national and international factors played a role in its deterioration.

Source

I. "End and New Beginning" (*Der Tagesspiegel*, September 18, 1982)

J.B. The end of the social-liberal coalition in Bonn is certainly a historic date. The only problem is that it [the date] has not been fixed exactly. When the four FDP ministers resigned—thereby preempting their pending dismissal, which had been announced by the Federal Chancellor—it was merely the notarial certification of the dissolution of the political-parliamentary marriage. But the common ground they used to share had broken apart earlier. This process is thus also proof that so-called historic events seldom take place in time-lapse mode, nor do they often erupt dramatically. Instead, the coalition approached its end in a series of small steps. […]

It nevertheless deserves mention that the end of the coalition marks a new, significant break in postwar political developments. This coalition has left behind many indelible traces. With its *Ostpolitik*, its policies toward the East, this coalition gave German politics a direction that would be just as hard to reverse as Adenauer's successful integration of the Federal Republic into the western alliance [NATO] and the European Community, which was built upon by his successors. Under Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, skillful foreign policy and an apparently unendangered economic potential were happily united for a moment, and the Federal Republic could in fact boast of having become a determining force within the circle of the middle powers. But then the change started coming, precisely in the area of economic policy.

It will always remain hard to explain why a coalition that had experienced the profound effects of the shock of the first oil crisis had so little radar for the changes on the horizon in the global economic system, and why it paid so little attention to the warnings that economic growth was reaching its limits. It continued its policies of redistribution and reform even after the pie started getting progressively smaller—only the reforms no longer burdened the state coffers exclusively but came at the expense of others. That doesn't change the macroeconomic consequences at all. When the state financial crisis then became visible and the scope for political action diminished, the two parties started moving apart. Domestically, the turning point came when the FDP was forced to realize that the loss of confidence that was starting to spread among voters—which could be observed over the course of several state elections—would lead the SPD at worst into the opposition but could snuff out the FDP entirely.

II. "The End of an Era" (Fritz Ullrich Fack, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September

18, 1982)

[…] Only historians will be able to pass just judgment on this second major cohesive period of postwar German politics. Contemporaries have the legitimacy only to account for the causes of the decline—a truly dramatic one in the end. And more than a few will seek the blame primarily in the economic sphere: in the entire deterioration resulting from oil crises, budget disasters, and economic depletion; in the decline of innovative strength; in bankruptcies and growing unemployment figures; in restructuring dead-ends and distribution disputes.

All this surely played a role; still, as we know from the crises of the first German Republic, there is always something to be said for seeing political and economic developments in close connection. From the outset, however, there was something else as well: The legacy of the past era was an overarching ideological pressure, a sometimes highly successful change in consciousness among wide segments of the population. It was a kind of delirium of progress, encouraged by a huge personnel turnover in all institutions of socialization—from kindergarten to the university—that saturated the country with mostly socialist ideas.

This is where expectations actually collapsed, and that was long before the political crises announced themselves. The "change in trends"[1] that was much discussed in the late 1970s never really happened. The undoing of this republic was not a conservative counterrevolution but a process of erosion that was political, intellectual, and, in the end, also moral—just think of the scandals over major trade union companies. Ideals and reality started drifting farther and farther apart, and the result was that the younger generation in particular, experienced a rapid radicalization. Of course, progressive education had prepared the ground by depicting the conflict as socially normative and by portraying tolerance as a kind of weakness in the face of the reaction. […]

III. "The End of an Epoch?" (Werner Holzer, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, September 18, 1982)

[…] The attempt by two parties to come together, not only for tactical and strategic reasons, but to create new majorities by merging two theories of social policy, was a major and necessary experiment. The slow and sometimes embarrassing failure cannot change that. If a large Social Democratic party was prepared to let a smaller partner drive it away from its basic conviction that state tax mechanisms are halfway to solving the problem, then the Liberals' willingness no longer to rely exclusively in the future on the ability of the stronger and more active partner to assert itself was just as decisive a step. This was the historic significance of the coalition between the SPD and FDP in 1969. […]

No one should be surprised that thirteen years later the veneer on this fundamental approach had cracked in places. Nothing that has to do with people can avoid signs of wear and tear. This certainly also applies to politicians and parliamentary coalitions. The crisis-laden development of the global economy and the chilling of the international climate could not pass over the coalition and this country without a trace. Some mistakes in their own ranks then accelerated the process of attrition. But if the early momentum slowed down, if crude reality got the better of the coalition in the end, then this does nothing to change the fact that the political idea of this coalition was not only correct in 1969, but still is today. […]

NOTES

[1] The *Tendenzwende* referred to a shift in focus, reflecting a preference for personal over activist politics—trans.

Source: All three editiorials were reprinted together in Hans Hermann Hartwich, “Der Bruch der sozialliberalen Koalition im September 1982,” *Gegenwartskunde*. Heft 4, 1982, pp. 491–502.

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