

Bernhard von Bülow on Conservatism and Liberalism in German Politics (November 30, 1907)

Abstract

Initially a career diplomat, Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929) entered politics 1897 and quickly rose to the highest office when he was appointed Chancellor by Wilhelm II in 1900, a position he held until his forced resignation in 1909. His tenure is mainly associated with an imperialist foreign policy after 1900 aimed at securing Germany “a place in the sun” among European colonial powers. In this recording from February 1918, Bülow reads a short excerpt from a domestic policy speech he gave as Chancellor in the Reichstag on November 30, 1907. The recording was made for the collection of the Prussian State Library, which began recording the voices of leading German politicians and other prominent figures in 1917. In the sentimental anecdote he recounts here, he evokes Bismarck’s policy of working with both conservatives and liberals to achieve his goals. His invocation of the poet Ludwig Uhland (poet and member of the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848) under the aegis of Bismarck seems to seek to combine German parliamentary and authoritarian traditions.

The excerpt is from a speech in which Bülow addressed the criticism leveled at the so-called “Bülow Bloc,” an electoral alliance of conservatives, national liberals, and left-wing liberals that had secured Bülow a majority in the early Reichstag elections of January 1907. The bloc, whose common goal was to contain the opposition Center Party and, above all, the SPD, supported government policy until 1909, when it broke apart over the issue of national financial reform. This political fracturing also sealed the end of Bülow’s political career; he resigned that same year and was replaced by Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg.

Source

A decade ago, on November 30, 1907, I said the following in the German Reichstag at the end of a speech on the domestic political situation:

As I stood in Prince Bismarck's death chamber, that simple and unadorned room in the Sachsenwald, my gaze fell on a picture hanging on the wall. It was a woodcut, a picture of Ludwig Uhland. The singer of the good old law, the man who had said in Frankfurt's Paulskirche: ‘No head shall shine over Germany that has not been anointed with a generous drop of democratic oil’ – looked over to the bed where the great man of action had passed away, the man who had fulfilled the dream of centuries for the German people. The whole of German history spoke from this juxtaposition, for only the combination of old Prussian conservative energy and discipline with the German spirit of broad-mindedness and liberalism can shape a happy future for the nation.

Source: Bernhard von Bülow, Reichstag speech, November 30, 1907. Recording date: February 4, 1918. Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv

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