

Bethmann Hollweg on Constitutional Reform (March 1917)

Abstract

By March of 1917, the growing turmoil on the Left had convinced the Chancellor that some gesture toward reform was essential. In this spirit, he embraced the idea of a “new orientation” in German domestic politics. In this speech delivered in the Prussian parliament, Bethmann Hollweg (1856–1921) revisits the most crucial topics in domestic political reform: amending the suffrage system and integrating organized labor into the political system. However serious he was in his proposals, the chancellor encountered formidable obstacles in implementing this “new orientation”.

Source

Berlin, March 14, 1917

Such are the reproaches that are being made against me: the Chancellor speaks about a “new orientation,” he speaks about his ideas and plans for the future, but these are empty words. He makes no concrete promises. These criticisms are terribly cheap and without substance, if one thinks the matter through to the end.

About the spirit with which I will approach later reforms – and I am so immodest that I ascribe a certain significance to the spirit as well as the paragraphs – I have expressed myself repeatedly, clearly, and unmistakably. The central point for me – I wish to use the simple words that enter my mouth at the moment – is the following: After the war we shall face the most immense challenges that have ever been set before a nation (quite right!), challenges that are so immense that the whole German people – people of every station, every single man among us – must help if we are to work our way out at all (quite right!). And a *resolute and effective foreign policy* will also be necessary for us after the peace (quite right!). We will be surrounded by enemies, whom we shall not want to face boasting and bragging, *pounding our chests*, but rather with the inner strength of our people (bravo!). We can only conduct such a policy of strength if civic consciousness, patriotic consciousness, which has in quite new and unprecedented forms become a wonderful reality, is kept pure and strengthened (bravo!). We can only conduct such a policy of strength at home and abroad if the political rights of the whole people – people of every station, even the broad masses – make possible equal and enthusiastic participation in the work of the state.

Gentlemen, our future requires this not for the sake of solving theoretical problems, but so we can exist (quite right!). I do not want to differentiate. In this war, every son of the people has given his best and his ultimate in fearless competition – rich and poor, high and low. No one can claim that he has done something more or something better than the other. However, when a member of the whole fails, can we win the war? (assent) And can we live after this war if a member of the body of our people fails in peacetime? To this, too, I say no. Before the war, the interests of the working class were often alleged to be in irreconcilable antagonism with the interests of the state and the employers. I hope that the war has finally cured us of this insanity (bravo!); for if it has not, if we were not willing resolutely to draw all the consequences that the experiences of this war have prescribed for all questions of our political life, in the regulation of employee rights, in the regulation of the Prussian suffrage, in the organization of the Prussian parliament as a whole – the gentlemen speak of the House Lords – (very good!) – if we are not committed to draw these consequences, and to draw them without reservation, I say for myself: with the trust that has grown within me in all sons of our people during this war (lively applause on the left) – if we

do not do this, we face internal shocks, the implications of which no human being can grasp. (bravo! on the left.)

Some time ago, a “woe” was called out from the right side of this house to the statesman who failed to secure a strong peace for Germany after this war. Now, gentlemen, is there a single German who would not give the last drop of his blood to secure peace for our children and grandchildren after these colossal sacrifices – a German peace, a strong and secure peace? (lively applause from all sides) That simply goes without saying (repeated strong applause). And, gentlemen, I would like to add: woe to the statesman who fails to recognize the signs of the time (bravo on the left), woe to the statesman who believes that after such a catastrophe, the likes of which the world has never seen before, the extent of which those of us who have lived through it and participated in it cannot yet understand (quite right on the right!), whoever believes that after such a catastrophe he could simply pick up where he had left off (bravo!), that he could pour new wine into old skins without bursting them? Woe to that statesman! (bravo on the left!)

Source: “Rede Bethmann Hollwegs vor dem preußischen Abgeordnetenhaus”, *Verhandlung des preußischen Abgeordnetenhauses*, 1916/17, vol. 5, pp. 5255–58; reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 258–59.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering

Recommended Citation: Bethmann Hollweg on Constitutional Reform (March 1917), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-977>> [September 26, 2025].