

Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg on Germany's Political Future (February 27, 1917)

Abstract

Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921), who came from a noble family of Brandenburg estate owners and government officials, was appointed by Wilhelm II in 1909 as Chancellor, Prussian Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister. Although he was politically conservative, he sought to pursue a “diagonal policy” that considered political interests across the spectrum, including those of the Social Democrats, who became the strongest party in the Reichstag in 1912. He made a first attempt to reform the Prussian three-class suffrage system in 1910, which failed due to conservative opposition. When the First World War broke out, he again held out the prospect of electoral and parliamentary reforms once the war had ended. In the spring of 1917, while Germany was in the grip of a war-induced famine and the “political truce” [*Burgfrieden*] began to crumble due to a split within the SPD and increasing industrial strikes, Bethmann Hollweg made another attempt to persuade Wilhelm II to reform the electoral system, which he was to announce in his “Easter message” in April. However, this attempt fell short due to resistance from conservatives and the Supreme Army Command (OHL), who had essentially taken charge of domestic politics by this point. They forced Bethmann Hollweg’s resignation shortly thereafter, in July 1917.

This recording features a short excerpt from a speech given by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg in the Reichstag on February 27, 1917. It was not recorded in the Reichstag, however, but Bethmann Hollweg, now ex-chancellor, re-read it in October 1918 for a studio recording made for the audio collection of the Preußische Staatsbibliothek. After addressing the war situation at the beginning of his speech, Bethmann Hollweg turns to domestic policy: in this part of his speech, Bethmann Hollweg responds to the growing demands for a democratization of Germany’s political system by talking not of political reform as some sort of reward, but instead as the inevitable consequence of a “renewed people” and their “collective strength” demonstrated in the war effort. Given the unprecedented mobilization of the populace, and the enormous sacrifices on the battlefield, political leaders in Germany realized that demands for greater political participation would have to be met after the war. When Bethmann Hollweg, a conservative monarchist, states that the “appropriate political and governmental expression” had to be found for postwar German society, he envisioned some democratic concessions within the framework of a constitutional monarchy.

Source

A new era with a renewed people has arrived. The great war has brought it about.

A generation that has been shaken to the core of its being by such extraordinary experiences, a people about whom a moving poem by a soldier poet said that its poorest son was also its most loyal, a nation that has learned a thousand times over every day that only collective strength can withstand and overcome external dangers—gentlemen, these are living forces that cannot be constrained or thrown off course by any party program, neither from the right nor from the left.

Wherever political rights are to be reorganized, it is not a question of rewarding the people for what they have given.

This idea has always seemed to me downright degrading, because it is solely a matter of finding the

appropriate political and governmental expression for what this people is.

Enormous political, intellectual, economic, and social tasks await us after the war. We can only solve them if the collective strength that enables us to prevail in this war continues to work in peacetime, if avenues are created in which it can operate freely and joyfully.

This cannot be regulated by party templates; it is a demand of our state's inner strength, and this demand will prevail!

Source: Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, Reichstag speech, February 27, 1917. Recording date: August 26, 1918. Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv

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