

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

A small chance for Chancellor Kohl

The expected failure of Lambsdorff and Genscher's FDP in the Euro-elections might develop into a full-scale government crisis.

The day of the European elections, June 17, marks a watershed for Chancellor Helmut Kohl in many ways: It is generally expected that his fragile three-party coalition government will get into new trouble if the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) of Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher fail to surpass the 5% threshold to obtain a seat in the European Parliament.

Should the FDP prove able to compensate for the loss of confidence its party chairman Genscher caused for the liberals when he walked out of the coalition with ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt in October 1982, it will only be due to "leased votes" provided by the Christian Democrats (CDU) of Chancellor Kohl.

But if the CDU transfers votes to the FDP, the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) will tally more votes than the Christian Democrats, because the CDU has lost confidence among the voters, too, because of the government's austerity policy. If the SPD gains more votes than the CDU in the European elections, public pressure on Chancellor Kohl will increase significantly, because he is facing several severe problems at one time.

First, there is the political deadlock his government has been moved into by siding with industry against the metal workers in the ongoing strike for the 35-hour work week. Especially the provocative talk of the minister of economics, Count Otto von Lambsdorff, who has threatened to discipline labor by an anti-strike law modeled on the British example, has contributed a

lot to the current confrontationist mood of labor.

But the count is a prime target for public attacks also for other reasons: He will be on trial for suspected bribery and illegal funding of his party (FDP) soon, and public pressure has already forced him to state that as soon as this trial was opened against him, he would definitely resign from the Ministry of Economics.

Leaks to the national press that his trial might be opened immediately after election day indicate that Chancellor Kohl will have to look for a new minister starting now. The chairmen of the three coalition parties—Kohl, Genscher, and Franz-Josef Strauss, who heads the Christian Social Union—convened for an emergency meeting on June 14, in order to examine the prospects.

It seems that Kohl will have to reshuffle more than just one ministerial post because pressure has been building up also against Genscher to such an extent that he felt compelled to declare that he will resign from the FDP chairmanship by no later than the spring of 1986.

His re-election as chairman at the June 1 national FDP convention was based on only 61% of the vote, and a failure in the European balloting would widen the front of his party opponents. The talk of the town in Bonn is, therefore, that Genscher won't even hold on to the chairman's post until spring 1986, and this means that Kohl will have to look for a new foreign minister too. Once Genscher is forced out of

the chairmanship, he won't be able to hold on to his post in the government either.

There are reasons enough for Chancellor Kohl to accelerate this process: Faced with a growing loss of popularity at home, but also abroad because of growing American dissatisfaction with Genscher's policy of decoupling from the United States, the chancellor might prefer to live on without Genscher, rather than to get toppled with him.

For the sake of political stability in Bonn, one can only encourage the German chancellor to not only sacrifice his economics minister, Count Lambsdorff, but also Foreign Minister Genscher. This wouldn't solve the basic problems facing the country, but it would pave the way for improvements and enable the chancellor to keep control of the situation.

Should Kohl fail to act, the leverage would be passed over to the opposition Social Democrats, who have already sided with labor against the government and are waiting for a good pretext to topple Chancellor Kohl by a political general strike. Social Democratic parliamentary leader Hans-Jochen Vogel is publicly predicting a split of the FDP.

The SPD has stated its solidarity with labor in case of a general strike. While the current metalworkers strike has so far been limited in scope, the public-sector workers are scheduled to walk out just before the Euro-parliament elections, and observers are speculating that the metal workers may expand their own strike activity at that time.

The people who would gain most from such a confrontation don't even sit in Bonn, but in Moscow; it is from there, as Kohl should realize, that most of the recent endorsements of the SPD's policies have come.