

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### A debacle in Schleswig-Holstein

*The Chancellor's party, after bad losses in the state's elections, talks of changing candidates, but not policies.*

Despite two severe 1985 election defeats in the industrial states of Saarland and North Rhine-Westphalia, the Christian Democrats of Chancellor Helmut Kohl were confident they would beat the opposition Social Democrats in all five elections scheduled in 1986, and that this would cement the chancellor's victory in national elections in January 1987.

On March 2, 1986, these hopes collapsed. The first test run, the municipal elections in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, was a debacle for the Christian Democrats. In the last elections of 1982, they had won a majority of 50.1%, leaving the Social Democrats far behind with 34.6%. Now, four years later, the Christian Democrats came out with only 44.2%, the Social Democrats close behind with 40.5%. Kohl's coalition partners, the Free Democrats, were kept out of all but one of the state's municipal parliaments, falling from 6.8% in 1982 to 2.4% this year. The Green Party, which ran in three different groups in 1982 and tallied 6.1% then, came in with 7.4%.

In sum, most of the Schleswig-Holstein municipalities will be run by "red-green" coalitions of Social Democrats and Greens.

The Christian Democratic loss of an average 6% state-wide included up to 10% in the bigger cities and regions populated by poor farmers. These were also the districts where voter abstention was the highest. In Kiel, the capital of the state, voter participation fell 12% below the 1982 level.

"The CDU should have known beforehand, that the people would not buy this idiotic talk of the recovery any longer," said a leading spokesman for the Social Democrats in Kiel. "This was an economic vote against the policy of the Bonn coalition government. Kohl is the best campaign manager for the Social Democrats, actually. We just harvest the protest votes."

He was correct in reporting that farmers are up in arms over the income losses they have suffered under Chancellor Kohl's agricultural austerity policy. Whole constituency blocs of Kohl's party have turned their backs on the Christian Democrats.

The CDU's worker base is also up in arms, because the employment situation (a jobless rate of 13% in the state) has not improved despite all the talk of "economic recovery," and because the government plans to change strike laws.

Medium-sized businessmen and craftsmen are enraged, because the Bonn policy of high interest rates and budgetary austerity deprives them of vital credit-lines. Medical doctors, another strong traditional constituency of the Christian Democrats, are enraged because of the deep cuts in the medicare budgets. The government has encouraged the insurance companies in a cost-limiting policy for medicare.

Public opinion pollsters and econometricians, when asked for comments on the Schleswig-Holstein elections, were agreed, in spite of all analytic differences, on that one point:

"The air is out of the balloon in Bonn. Three years ago, the people believed this Kohl government would turn things around. Today, no one believes that anymore."

The vote in Schleswig-Holstein is, actually, a firm voter rejection of Kohl's coalition partner, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher's Free Democratic Party. They lost 40% of their vote in the municipal elections. It has not escaped the attention of voters that all of the austerity policies in Bonn have been conceived by the Free Democrats; the policies have, however, been sold as "coalition proposals."

If any Christian Democrat could be held responsible, it is not really Chancellor Kohl, who knows no more about economics than President Ronald Reagan; it is Finance Minister Gerhard Stoltenberg, the "pope of fiscal conservatism" in the Bonn government.

Irony has it that after the election debacle in Schleswig-Holstein, the sentiment is growing among the Christian Democrats to have Kohl replaced as chancellor candidate by Stoltenberg—as if replacing a person, instead of replacing a policy, were the lesson to be learned. This is the more ironic in that Schleswig-Holstein is Stoltenberg's home-state! The election defeat there is, in that sense, his personal debacle.

It is only because Kohl stood out on the frontline in the election campaign, that Stoltenberg was spared from becoming a target of public rage. Were Kohl removed from the scene, Stoltenberg might quickly prove even less popular than the chancellor.

The remedy is not simply a new candidate for chancellor, but a new policy. But there is no indication that anyone in Bonn will learn this lesson in time for the national elections of January 1987.