

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Policy shake-up after Brandt fall

West German political elites are regrouping after Willy Brandt stepped down from the chairmanship of the Social Democracy.

On Monday morning, March 23, Willy Brandt resigned from the chairmanship of the German Social Democrats (SPD). His demise ends a period of 23 years, during which he shaped SPD policy. In these 23 years since 1964, Willy Brandt transformed the traditional workers' party into a transmission belt for the "post-industrialist society." He also transformed the party from the clearly anti-communist organization it was during the 1940s and 1950s, into a mouthpiece of Moscow's views on Germany, NATO, and the future of U.S.-German relations.

Brandt's demise may not shift the SPD party organization to a pro-NATO orientation, nor bring it back to its traditional labor-oriented policy, but it shuffles the cards of the internal SPD games anew. More than that, Brandt's resignation coincides with a debate beginning in West Germany about the shaky future of the current government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Bonn. In view of the mounting economic, the Kohl cabinet's overt incompetence to handle this crisis, there is a lot of talk in West Germany now about another "Grand Coalition government," modeled on the Grand Coalition between Social and Christian Democrats, which was formed in January 1967 at the peak of the economic recession of 1966-67.

At that time, policy-making elites in the labor unions and industry, in the banks, and in the parties came to the conclusion that the country urgently needed a new, stable government in

Bonn. The only way to have such a government was an alliance of the Social Democrats and the labor movement with the Christian Democrats. As "détente" was the new slogan of the day at that time, the elites also looked for politicians to fit with the "new phase in East-West relations." Once the decision was made sometime in mid-1966, with the required and indispensable consent of the U.S. Eastern Establishment, it was a mere question of time when the government of Chancellor Ludwig Erhard would have to go.

Many in West Germany's elites today are drawing comparisons between the current Bonn chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and Chancellor Erhard shortly before his demise in December 1966. Seen against this background, two developments deserve special attention. First is the resurfacing of ex-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, ousted in October 1982 and replaced by the current chancellor, Helmut Kohl, in the country's public debate on economics, monetary matters, military affairs and other essentials of policy-making. Much attention is paid these days to what Schmidt, a politician with some economic and military expertise, has to say. Some predict a comeback of Schmidt into official Bonn politics.

The second development to be noticed is mounting opposition among industrialists against the Kohl government's economic policy. The most important statement of critique came on March 23, from Dieter Spethmann,

director at Thyssen Steel Corporation and one of the most influential industry spokesmen of the country. Referring to remarks made on March 20, by Martin Bangemann, the federal minister of economics, that further state subsidies would not be given to "such obsolete industry branches as steel and coal," Spethmann issued a harsh attack which has no precedent in post-war politics in West Germany. He denounced Minister Bangemann's remarks as "absolutely detrimental to the prospects of the steel sector. . . and an "outright menace to our democracy."

"If steel collapses," Spethmann said, "there will be a real economic depression . . . Bangemann brings a touch of 'Weimar' to Bonn." He referred to the collapse of the economy and of parliamentary democracy in the Weimar Republic of Germany (1919-33).

Spethmann's statement threw the gauntlet at the feet of Chancellor Kohl, at a time when his government is facing an eventual nationwide strike of the 142,000 steel workers, of more than 2.4 million organized workers in the metal-working branches, and more than 2.1 million workers in the public service and transport sectors. With a major currency speculation scandal just hitting Volkswagen Corporation, the country's largest auto manufacturer, with a loss of \$250 million, with further disarray in the European Community's monetary and agricultural system to be certain over the coming weeks, Chancellor Kohl's government is facing problems nobody expects it to be able to solve.

Thus, Kohl has arrived where Chancellor Ludwig Erhard was, shortly before his ouster in December 1966. And, to come back to Willy Brandt: His sudden demise removes one of the main obstacles to an eventual new Grand Coalition in Bonn.

social,