

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

The plot for grand coalition

Chancellor Kohl may be ousted soon, as rumors fly of a Social Democratic-Christian Democratic coalition led by Lothar Späth.

Hardly had Bonn's Chancellor Helmut Kohl been re-elected on Jan. 25, when rumors began spreading that he would not last for long, but be replaced by mid-term. Sometime between the spring and the end of 1988, he would be ousted and his coalition government with the liberal Free Democrats be replaced, it was said, by a "grand coalition" with the Social Democrats. A grand coalition option would definitely shape up in view of the deepening of the economic crisis.

In January 1987, Kohl was still in a position to cover up the economic crisis. At the end of July, the facts spoke for themselves: National unemployment soared to almost 2.2 million (the level of 1984), and all the key sectors of German industry reported bad prospects for sales and investments. The machine-tool sector, the prime "conjunctural locomotive," reported a drop in foreign orders by 23% and in domestic orders by 42% over the first half of 1987—as compared to the first half of 1986.

The same picture was presented for agro-machines, steel, electrotechnics, construction machines. The best sector was the stagnating auto industry, and the second-best, chemical production, with a drop by "only" 2% over the same six months. Most industries filed extended short-work, reducing their plans for investments.

Thus, Chancellor Kohl is back to where he started in late 1982, when he overthrew Chancellor Helmut Schmidt with the promise to save the deteriorating economy. There is not much left of that promise, and there is not much need for a Chancellor Kohl,

either. This is what many in Bonn say openly these days, and the number of those who predict that Kohl may be ousted even before mid-term, is growing. Their number will grow more rapidly after the expected defeat of Kohl's Christian Democrats (CDU) in the Sept. 13 elections in the states of Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein.

Momentum is building against Kohl in his own party and in the Christian Social Union of Franz-Josef Strauss. In an interview with *Bildzeitung*, Germany's largest-circulation daily, on Aug. 11, Strauss attacked the general indecision and incompetence of Kohl in unequivocal terms, and called for an emergency "party leadership summit" to discuss the disarray of the government and "real problems such as tax reform, pension system reforms, and industrial unemployment."

Christoph Böhr, head of the CDU youth organization, warned: "The party can't be a mere election front for the chancellor, but must discuss broader programmatic outlooks. On its current course, the party is drying up." In reaction to Böhr and others, general agreement was reached by the CDU leaders—except Kohl himself, who was vacationing in Austria—to have a "programmatic convention" after the Sept. 13 state elections in Schleswig-Holstein and Bremen. It is almost certain that this convention will not only debate programs, but also the future of Chancellor Kohl.

But who would replace him? For some time, the name of Lothar Späth, currently the state governor of Baden-Württemberg, has been mentioned as

the most likely replacement for Kohl. Besides his function as national vice-chairman of the CDU (Kohl is chairman), which gives him significant backing inside the party, Späth has the one advantage that makes him the ideal candidate not only for replacing Kohl, but also for being chancellor of a grand coalition in Bonn. He is liked by many members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

It came as no big surprise, therefore, when Lothar Späth issued a statement on July 31 that a grand coalition "made most sense, as views on economic and financial affairs are closest between Christian and Social Democrats."

About the same time, signals were flying back and forth between the liberal wing of the CDU and the conservative wing of the SPD, that "cross-party cooperation was desirable in view of the great economic and social problems."

At the beginning of August, a new biography on Späth reached the bookstores in Germany, whose authors stated bluntly: "He could even be imagined to be a crisis chancellor, or head of a grand coalition in Bonn." It was also reported that the two prominent Social Democrats Johannes Rau and Oskar Lafontaine, who contributed to this book on Späth, "count on him" for the future.

Späth has the profile of a post-industrializing, so-called "modern Christian Democrat," but he is also said to be on good terms with most of the leading high-tech firms of the aerospace sector. He is courted by the Soviets and the U.S. Eastern Establishment alike.

Thus, the preconditions are met to make Späth Bonn's next chancellor. It just takes a pretext to give Kohl the boot, and this pretext may well be there after mid-September.