

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Everybody is jumping ship

Support for Chancellor Kohl is eroding, as the captains of industry refer disparagingly to his "non-government."

Chancellor Helmut Kohl seems to be desperately committed to ignoring the fact that support for him is rapidly eroding. He is disregarding all economic data, if they suggest that his policy is a disaster. He wants to be re-elected in September 1998; he also wants the Maastricht-Amsterdam accords for the European Monetary Union to proceed exactly on schedule, on Jan. 1, 1999, although more and more experts, among them central bank governor Hans Tietmeyer, have begun to warn against "dogmatism" on this project.

By repeatedly announcing that unemployment will be reduced by 50% by the year 2000, while doing nothing, Kohl is mistaking proclamations for reality. Jobless figures have increased in spite of Kohl's proclamations, even during the summer months, which has never happened before.

Kohl's response to the outbreak of an open brawl over tax issues and the European Monetary Union project, inside his three-party coalition government in mid-August, was to state that all of this was "not real" and "superfluous," and to issue a decree (*Machtwort*), demanding that all such talk stop instantly.

Naturally, the controversy did not stop, but intensified. Prominent members of Kohl's Christian Democratic Union told the media that they had not the slightest intention of stopping the debate, just because Kohl wanted to keep them quiet. Richard von Weizsäcker, the former President of Germany, in an interview published by the *Der Spiegel* weekly on Sept. 8, said that the nation needed ideas and debates, not "machtwords." Kohl, whose

name was not mentioned by Weizsäcker, knew that the attack was directed against him, and reportedly exploded at a meeting of his CDU party leadership, calling Weizsäcker "a gentleman who no longer belongs to us."

The next day, it became known that Weizsäcker, a senior member of the CDU since 1954, had secretly been expelled from the party. Officially, it was said that this was not at all connected to Weizsäcker's attack on Kohl, that it had to do with the fact that when Weizsäcker became President in 1984, he suspended his active membership in order to avoid a "conflict of interest." It was said that he had never renewed his active membership after his second term as President; but Weizsäcker, who was asked by the media about the affair, replied that he never even thought of renewing his membership: In other words, he wanted to have nothing to do with Kohl's CDU.

A political verdict on Kohl also came from Georg Leber, a senior Social Democrat who had been minister of defense between 1972 and 1978. In an interview published on Sept. 15, by the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in summarized form, Leber said that his own memory of how things developed at the end of 1966, shortly before Chancellor Ludwig Erhard (CDU) was toppled, and at the end of 1982, shortly before Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD) was toppled, told him that Kohl's situation looked just as precarious.

Apart from Kohl's flaws, Leber assessed a much deeper crisis in the entire political establishment: "This state is no longer functioning," Leber said,

and the paralysis could only be overcome by "strong majorities" that would replace Kohl's incompetent cabinet by a new Grand Coalition of CDU and SPD. The first Grand Coalition was formed in late 1966, after the fall of Erhard.

Leber warned the elites that arrogance comes before the fall: Attacking the campaign by neo-liberal currents in industry to replace the social welfare state in Germany with an "old-fashioned capitalism," at the expense of the lower income strata of the population, Leber singled out the role of Hans-Olaf Henkel, chairman of the BDI (German Industry Association). Henkel is like the Austrian Empire's Duke Metternich (in 1848): "He who wants restoration, will get revolution, in the end."

This remark by Leber was read by many as actually referring to Kohl, who is known for listening to Henkel's bad advice. But also in industry, more and more members of the crew are jumping Captain Kohl's ship. Already in late July, senior leaders of German industry and banking began speaking in public, in a rather nasty way, about the "present non-government in Bonn."

Attacks on such a scale on a chancellor in office have not occurred since the year 1982, when big business delivered to Chancellor Schmidt the unmistakable message that his time was up. A typical such recent attack came from Porsche chairman Wendelin Wiedeking, in the weekly *Die Woche* on July 31: "For me and many of my manager colleagues, this government has become very questionable. Chancellor Kohl lacks any understanding of the economy. This is not the way one must lead a state." Attacking, in particular, Kohl's method of proclaiming jobs without proposing concrete programs, Wiedeking endorsed the idea of a Grand Coalition.