

Josef Joffe on the German leader who celebrates his tenth year at the helm this week

Bear who runs faster than any of his rivals

PORTRAIT

Helmut Kohl

PEOPLE underestimate me and this is how I make a living". The dictum is Helmut Kohl's and it is one worth repeating as the first Chancellor of a reunited Germany celebrates his tenth anniversary in power this week.

Lots of people have underrated Herr Kohl and they have lived to regret it. Do you remember Franz-Josef Strauss, the Bavarian strongman and leader of the Bavarian wing of Kohl's conservatives?

He thought he had finally got the better of his northern rival when, in 1980, he beat him for the chancellor candidacy in the upcoming electoral battle against Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt. Strauss fought and lost, and then slunk back to Munich where he was reduced to sniping and barking at Kohl, his life-long intra-party nemesis.

Strauss was the most famous of the lot. But Kohl's path is littered with the political corpses of party rivals who dared to underrate him. A certain Heiner Geissler, once the secretary-general of the Christian Democrats (CDU), is a case in point. In 1989, at the party congress in Bremen, he tried to engineer a behind-the-scenes rebellion against Kohl. He was, metaphorically speaking, decapitated on stage right there and then, as was a co-conspirator by the name of Lothar Späth, the prime minister of federal state Baden-Württemberg. Today Herr Späth is running an optical company in Jena, in former East Germany.

The most recent victim of Kohl's infallible snuff for the Brutusses in his own party was Wolfgang Schäuble, the CDU's parliamentary leader. The story is the most instructive of the lot. It is not clear whether Schäuble, hitherto Helmut Kohl's "crown prince", was scheming to unseat the chancellor and to form a grand coalition with the opposition Social Democrats.

But for Kohl it was enough that Schäuble might have been plotting during the dark days of mid-September. In a charged meeting of the CDU parliamentary group, Kohl stared down his would-be rival and then, in a pointed reference to the downfall of Geissler, simply recalled "Bremen '89". According to a witness the chancellor continued ominously: "Whoever wants another Bremen can have it". Wolfgang Schäuble, yesterday's great hope of the party, is no longer mentioned as a Kohl successor.

Helmut Kohl has been the youngest everything. Born in 1930, he became a deputy in his native state of Rhineland Palatinate at 29. He was elected prime minister of the state at 39, the youngest chief executive ever. In 1982, after an unsuccessful bid for the chancellorship in 1976,

Kohl finally reached the top.

When Helmut Schmidt's coalition collapsed, Kohl cobbled together a centre-right alliance that propelled him into the chancellor's office on 1 October 1982. True to form, the 52-year-old was the youngest chancellor in the history of the Federal Republic.

And he might, just might, beat all his predecessors when it comes to longevity in office. After ten years at the helm, Kohl already holds the number two spot. His term runs until 1994 which will make it 12 years. If he wins and stays on just two years after that, he will have surpassed his idol, Konrad Adenauer, the founding father of the Federal Republic of Germany.

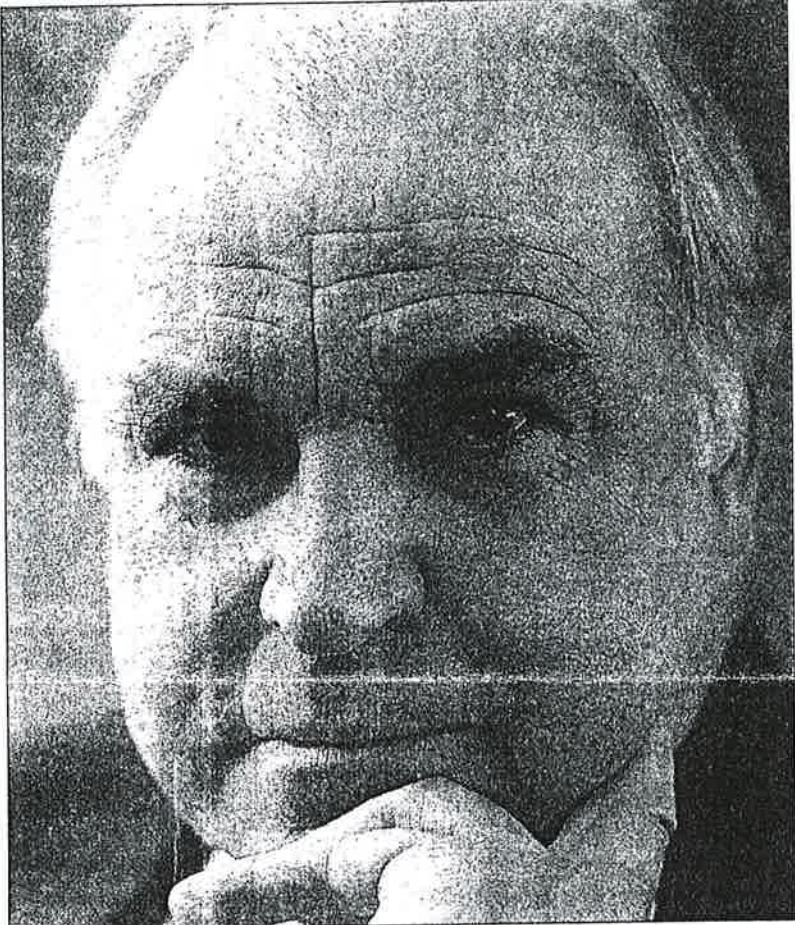
HOW does he do it? Remember point number one. He makes a living out of being underestimated. On television or on the hustings, Kohl hardly seems the most powerful man in Europe. He presents a blend of oaf and bear, of huge girth and bumbling performance. He is always fighting his weight, and losing, just as he is always fighting with the German language and fumbling.

But then observe him in private and you will see a different animal. Suddenly his language becomes precise and erudite; he displays the mien and demeanor of an intellectual. He will sprinkle the conversation with historical minutiae and needle-sharp academic references. His memory is infallible, as his enemies have discovered more than once.

There is just one problem: he loves to talk and to hear himself talking, which drives his party comrades into convulsions. Kohl, you hear more and more frequently, has stopped listening, except to a tight coterie of trusted advisers who tend to date from his political youth in the state of the Rhineland Palatinate.

It is Kohl's greatest weakness. So finely tuned are his antennae for challengers that he has easily eliminated them one by one. But that has rarefied the atmosphere around him: the CDU is Kohl, and Kohl is the CDU. Like all leaders who have been in power for years on end, he might well believe in political immortality. Hence his fabled political strategy, *aussitzen*, or "sitting it out". Compare the gathering crisis that has enveloped Germany since last summer with Kohl's finest hour in the period between the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and reunification in 1990.

While much of the West German political class was



KONRAD MÜLLER

furrowing its collective brow, debating whether East Germany could or should be saved, whether reunification should go fast or slow, Helmut Kohl grabbed the ball and ran.

Sooner than most he understood that the playing field was wide open. Within eight months, from November 1989 to June 1990, he had stitched a reunification package together (albeit with a good deal of US support).

By July, Kohl had exacted Mikhail Gorbachev's consent, and in October Germany was formally unified. So far, so good. But in 1991 the bright skies over Germany began to darken, and today the thunderstorms are everywhere.

With hindsight, it is clear that Kohl, the brilliant tactician, had committed a first-rate strategic blunder. Instead of preaching "blood, sweat and tears" on reunification day (when the electorate was presumably still willing to listen), he proclaimed that "none shall be worse off", as if reunification could be paid for

out of petty cash.

The petty cash account now runs to about Dm200bn a year (Ecu100bn), and those billions are not coming out of taxes but out of the capital markets. Two weeks ago the chickens came home to roost. Under the horrible strain of sky-high German interest rates (pushing the deutschmark up and everybody else's currency down), the European Monetary System simply collapsed.

A common European currency, and possibly, indeed, a united Europe, are now further away than ever.

Nor is the German economy in good shape. Like all European economies, it is on a downward slide, as is the mood of the electorate in Germany - east and west. Economic reunification is still a distant dream, and with rioting and racism in eastern Germany, the country's fabled political stability seems to be on the ropes as well.

Much of the blame cannot be laid at Kohl's doorstep. The entire industrial world is in the grips of recession, while racism and xenophobia are hardly German specialities in these troubled times.

But it is the ordained fate of leaders that blame will always attach itself to those who are at the helm. Is Kohl still the right man? "Sitting it out" hardly looks like the proper course when crisis after crisis batters the ship.

There is a yearning for a firm hand in Germany these days which Kohl seems incapable of supplying. If there were an election today, the polls say that Kohl would win just 37 per cent of the vote - not enough to form a government.

But the next election is still two years off, and the Social Democratic opposition is hardly in better shape. Its leader, Bjorn Engholm, is a thoroughly attractive character but he and his party are just as adrift in the policy seas as Kohl.

So Helmut Kohl might just still go on making a living out of being underrated. He has bested his enemies and confounded his critics at each and every turn. Watch his oaf-and-bear act carefully, and remember that bears can outrun almost everybody else in the forest.

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