

The close result in the German election will clip Kohl's political wings, says Josef Joffe

Everyone a winner — and a loser

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MUNICH — Germany's election on Sunday was a historical first: it produced nothing but winners. This is how Chancellor Helmut Kohl might have mulled over the outcome: "How extraordinary. Six months ago, I looked set for early retirement. And now, God willing, I will govern for another four years, which, at a total of 16 years, will make me the longest-ruling chancellor in German history since Bismarck, who put in 19 years under Kaiser Bill."

Now listen to Rudolf Scharping, the Social Democratic contender: "Well done, Rudolf. A few weeks ago, my intra-party rivals, Oskar Lafontaine of the Saarland and Gerhard Schröder of Lower-Saxony, were poised to push me aside for the next contest in 1998. Now it is back to the provinces for them. I polled three percentage points more than Lafontaine did in 1990. I am young, and I am in control. Watch me win in 1998."

And where is Klaus Kinkel, the lacklustre leader of the Free Democrats, Mr Kohl's junior coalition partners? His party has not won a regional election since the beginning of the year: seven in a row, and three more on Sunday. Under his aegis, the FDP failed to clear the 5 per cent hurdle needed for parliamentary representation in nine state legislatures. And for weeks, the opinion polls had been predicting the same fate at federal level.

Yet now you can hear his undisguised relief: "I did it! Now, my good Liberal (FDP) friends won't be able to chop my head off. I get to keep my place as Foreign Minister, and I'll be sitting next to Helmut Kohl as his Vice-Chancellor. To be sure, my party's share was almost halved, from 11 per cent, when Hans-Dietrich Genscher ran it, to 6.6 per cent now. But to have scraped in is better than to have been edged out."

The Greens? They won, too, though their dream of a red-and-green coalition with Scharping is *kaput* for now. Still, what a comeback! In the post-reunification election of 1990 they couldn't make it past the 5 per cent cut-off. Now, they are back in parliament with 49 MPs. Even better, they are the third strongest party, having pushed Mr Kinkel's Liberals out of their perennial third placing.

Ah yes, the biggest winners of them all: the post-, neo- or palco-Communists (depending on your taste), who have sailed into parliament under the



Helmut Kohl and Rudolf Scharping: heading for de facto coalition? Photograph: Martin Gerten

banner of the PDS, the "Party of Democratic Socialism". These successors to the East German Communist Party are going to field 30 members in the new Bundestag, not bad for the heirs of those who built the Berlin Wall and generally made life miserable for their compatriots in the "Worker and Peasant State".

There are some losers. Germany's answer to Jean-Marie Le Pen's rightists in France and the neo-fascists in Italy comes under the cynical label "Republikaner". These right-wingers were practically obliterated on Sunday: down to 1.8 per cent from 2.1.

But if we take a second look at all this, what do we see? Nothing but losers, which is also a historical first.

Mr Kohl lost two points and 25

Bundestag members. The Social Democrats, with their Green cohorts in tow, were unable to end the longest winning streak in German history. The Kinkel Liberals only just squeezed in. The former Communists are in, but they will be shunned by all the other parties. Mr Kohl can govern for four more years, but his is a paper-thin majority that will exact enormous party discipline from his colleagues and coalition partners.

The outcome looks even bleaker for Mr Kohl in the light of one peculiarity of the German federal system. There are two houses, but unlike the House of Lords, the Bundesrat (federal council), representing the *Länder*, has real clout. And it is under the control of the opposition Social Demo-

crats, thanks to their success in recent state elections.

In other words, Germany is really in the hands of a *de facto* grand coalition run by Mr Kohl and his leftish rival Rudolf Scharping. Key laws passed in the lower house will require the consent of the federal chamber. So in that respect Mr Kohl has truly lost, and Mr Scharping has won much more than the arithmetic suggests.

This is not good news if you are a dyed-in-the-wool democrat who prefers clear majorities British- or American-style. The last time that (West) Germany had a formal grand coalition, from 1966 to 1969, things quickly slid from a promising beginning into stalemate. And with the political parties locked in recriminations, extra-parliamentary extremism flourished, especially on the far right.

At best, the current outcome will lead to tortuous compromise, at worst to stalemate and out-of-turn elections. And given the fearfully long list of things German politics has to do over the next four years, such a combination of circumstances does not lend itself to decisive government.

Germany's competitiveness does not look brilliant. Wages are too high, and so is unemployment. Productivity is slipping. The current upturn is not reflected in the creation of more jobs. The tax burden is gargantuan: the government now takes 52 per cent of GDP.

How might a grand coalition affect foreign policy, which was debated in this campaign with as much relish as birth control in the College of Cardinals? When and how to integrate Germany's eastern neighbours into the EU and Nato, where and whether to dispatch the army "out of area", what to do about post-Maastricht Europe? The rest of the world wants answers from Germany on these questions, but they will not be forthcoming with a weak government that, on important issues, must defer to the red and green opposition.

Maybe Britain is luckier after all. Mr Major may not be a popular prime minister, but he has a clear majority. And unlike Mr Kohl he can still govern decisively for as long as there are no removal vans outside No 10.

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