

# Don't Count Kohl Out

By JOSEF JOFFE

MUNICH—Germany's twenty- and thirty-somethings will be hard put to recall a time without Chancellor Helmut Kohl. No democratically elected German leader before him ever served for 16 years in one stretch. And if Mr. Kohl wins re-election on Sunday, he might even have a chance to beat Prince Otto Von Bismarck, who logged 19 years at the helm of the Second Reich.

Will he? The polls say no. His party, the Christian Democrats, seems to be frozen at 38% support. Mr. Kohl's Social Democratic rival, Gerhard Schroeder, he of the toothy smile and the vague message, hovers above 40%. If this were America or Britain, then the world would have to get used to the idea of Mr. Schroeder running Germany single-handedly after Sunday. But Germany is neither. Germany, like every other Continental nation, is stuck with a proportional-representation system that never delivers absolute majorities. The Continent is coalition or "cohabitation" country.

## Twofold Handicap

This is where all bets turn wobbly. Mr. Schroeder's handicap is twofold. First, there is his logical coalition partner, the Green Party, which he is carrying like an albatross. The Greens are a motley bunch: 1960s radicals, dreamy-eyed ecologists and hard-nosed realists thrown together in one party. Somehow these baby boomers, though a bit long in the tooth, have never grown up.

The Greens' agenda is a grab bag of radical ideas:

Some would like to push the price of gasoline to \$10 a gallon in order to herd people out of their cars and into collective modes of transport. Others pine for a 100-kilometer-an-hour (60 mph) speed limit on the Autobahn, which does not go over well in a country that regards speed limits the way the National Rifle Association does gun control. The party says *nein* to nuclear power. And it likes neither NATO nor the involvement of German troops in Bosnia.

So Mr. Schroeder comes with an unpalatable partner in tow. Ergo, those who would love to get rid of Mr. Kohl might have some last-minute second thoughts, as their pens hover over the ballot sheet.

Mr. Schroeder's second handicap is Mr. Schroeder. Those Germans who will vote for his party do not really know whom they

might be heaving into the chancellor's office on Sunday.

In one way, he perfectly fits the post-modern mold designed by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. He is youngish, almost hip; he wears Hermes ties and smokes Havana cigars. He exudes the kind of dynamism and freshness that Messrs. Clinton and Blair did when they made George Bush and John Major look like yesterday's men. And he carefully sidesteps the tired shibboleths of his Social Democratic brethren, who remain fondly attached to Big Welfare, Big Government and Big Taxes.

But Tony and Bill did not preside over

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the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Margaret Thatcher, having crushed Britain's all-powerful labor unions, had already done Mr. Blair's dirty work for him. When he took over Labor, he could effectively muzzle its cowed left wing. Ditto Bill Clinton. After 12 years in the wilderness, the Democrats were willing and eager to wrap themselves in centrist garb.

Doggedly, Mr. Schroeder has tried to emulate his Anglo-American role models. Like Messrs. Clinton and Blair, he has tried to plant his flag in the middle, and even slightly to the right. Trouble is, this is not where his party's heart beats.

The SPD soul is best embodied by its chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, also known as "Red Oskar." The SPD, in its platform, has vowed to turn back even those modest reforms—a bit more labor-market flexibility, a bit less social largess—instituted by the Kohl coalition.

Germans would dearly like to dispatch the 68-year-old Mr. Kohl into forced retirement. But plain old boredom after 16 years of Kohlism may not be a compelling enough reason to cast their lot with Gerhard Schroeder. The front-runner from Hanover, where he has been serving as not-so-reformist governor of the state of Lower Saxony, tries to straddle too many issues and cover too many bases—precisely because he is not in charge of his party.

Since Germany's voters are faced with a choice between no change and too much of it, the polls this time may be unreliable. Anywhere between a third and half of the electorate is still undecided, and so the

best bet is not on Mr. Kohl or Mr. Schroeder, but on a weak German government residing in Berlin after Sunday.

Red-and-Green, unless it contains an overwhelmingly strong SPD component, is a very shaky contraption. Mr. Kohl and his Free Democrat junior partners might—just might—squeeze by against the odds on Sunday. But then, Germany's chancellor-in-perpetuity would have to rule with a razor-thin majority—and against a Social Democratic opposition firmly in control of the Bundesrat, the legislature's upper house.

Which leaves the nasty no-no of democracy: a grand coalition harnessing the Christian Democrats on the right and the Social Democrats on the left. Such an 80% monster has a deadly flaw: It has the opposition built right into it. The two parties might pull in the same direction for a while, but the longer they stay in yoke, the more they will kick and bite each other into immobility. So a weak government is likely there too.

## No Reagan Need Apply

Who then will run Europe's No. 1 economy for the next four years? The good news is, it doesn't matter. In foreign policy, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats are as far apart as Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Both support all

the good things of German life: NATO, the European Union, the common currency and discretion over valor when it comes to using Germany's military muscle abroad.



Gerhard Schroeder

What about domestic and economic policy? In their hearts, both the left and the right, as everywhere on the Continent, are statist and welfarist. No Margaret Thatcher and no Ronald Reagan need apply, though the Kohlistas are a bit more willing than the Schroederites to slice into taxes, regulations and non-wage payments. Yet both will face the same problems and come out with the same solutions. To cut down Germany's double-digit unemployment, they will have to tackle microeconomic reform. They will have to curb the state and put the market on a longer leash.

Would they want to? Globalization says they will—perhaps when a giant like Daimler-Chrysler tells Chancellor (fill in the blank): "Either you help us stay competitive or we move to Detroit."

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Helmut Kohl