

A Weak Government, Whoever Wins

By JOSEF JOFFE

MUNICH—Germany's twenty and thirty somethings will be hard-put to recall a time without Chancellor Helmut Kohl. No German democratically elected leader has ever served for 16 years in one stretch before. And if Mr. Kohl wins on Sunday, he might even have a chance to beat Prince Otto Von Bismarck, who logged in 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 which never delivers absolute majorities. The Continent is coalition or "cohabitation" country.

An Unpalatable Partner

This is where all bets turn wobbly. Mr. Schroeder's handicap is two-fold. First, there is his logical coalition partner, the Green Party, which he is carrying like an albatross around his neck. For the Greens are a motley bunch: 60s radicals, dreamy-eyed ecologists, and hard-nosed realists all thrown together in one party. Somehow, these baby boomers, though now a bit long in the tooth, have never grown up.

Some of them would like to push the price of gas up to \$10 per gallon so as to herd people out of their cars and into collective modes of transport. Others pine for a 60-mile-per-hour (100 kph) speed limit on the Autobahn, which does not go over particularly well in a country that regards speed limits with the same degree of affection as America's National Rifle Association does gun control.

The party says strictly *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 pen hovers over the ballot sheet. If they buy Mr. Schroeder, they might also get the Greens, more than they had bargained for.

Mr. Schroeder's second handicap is Mr. Schroeder. Those Germans who will



Gerhard Schroeder

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, wears Hermes ties and smokes Havana cigars. He exudes the kind of dynamism and freshness that made George Bush and John Major look like yesterday's men when matched against Messrs. Clinton and Blair. 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 & Bill did not preside over the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Having crushed Britain's all-powerful labor unions, Margaret Thatcher had already done Mr. Blair's dirty work for him. When he took over Labour, he could effec-

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tively muzzle its cowed left wing. Ditto Bill Clinton and the "New Democrats." After 12 years in the wilderness, the Democrats were willing and eager to wrap themselves in a 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 SDP soul is best embodied by Oskar Lafontaine, a.k.a. "Red Oskar," the party's chairman. Hence, the SDP, in its platform, has vowed to turn back even those modest reforms—a bit more labor-market flexibility, a bit less social largesse—instituted by the Kohl coalition.

The upshot is this: Germans would dearly like to dispatch the 68-year-old Mr. Kohl into forced retirement. But that reason—plain old boredom after 16 years of Kohlism—may not be compelling enough to cast their lot with Gerhard Schroeder. The front runner from Hanover, where he has been serving as not-so-reformist prime minister of Lower Saxony, tries to straddle too many issues and to cover too many bases—precisely because he is not in charge of his party. If he does not get a grip on his comrades, the man who would be king might end up like a Bill Clinton seen off to bed every night by Jesse Jackson and Richard Gephardt, the standard-bearers of the Democrats' left flank.

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a Hobson's choice between no change and too much of it, the polls this time are unreliable soothsayers. Anywhere between one-third to one-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 SDP component, is a very shaky contraption, indeed. 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 upper house, the Bundesrat.

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 there too.

Who then will run Europe's No. 1 economy for the next four years? The good news is: It does not 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.

No Thatcher or Reagan

What about domestic and economic policy? In their hearts, both the left and the right, as everywhere on the Continent, are statist and welfareist. 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—at the latest, 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