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VIEWPOINT

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After King Kohl

Gerhard Schröder is tied to continuity abroad and economic reform at home

ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE, A SHIFT OF 5% OR 6% FROM ONE party to the other is interesting, but not necessarily momentous. In Germany, though, it was a landslide. Helmut Kohl, Germany's chancellor-in-perpetuity, fell after 16 consecutive years in power. Indeed this was the first time in postwar history that a German government was actually ousted at the polls; in the past, that was done only *between* elections—by resignation or coalition-busting.

Another first: Now that Gerhard Schröder, 54, is chancellor, the rest of the world will have to get used to handling the o-umlaut, that exotic German letter with two dots on top. Will the world also have to confront a strange new Germany?

Don't hold your breath. In foreign policy, the choice between Helmut Kohl, the Conservative, and Gerhard Schröder, the Social Democrat, was between Tweedledee and Tweedledum. This was not so in the past, when the left fought everything Konrad Adenauer and his Christian Democratic heirs stood for: rearmament, NATO membership, Euro-missiles, German troops in Bosnia—in short, the country's integration into the West.

Today, the foreign policy hatchets are buried deeply in the rocky sands of the Rhine. Gerhard Schröder's SPD has come around on every single point, even on the euro, Helmut Kohl's pet project. Even if Schröder's allies, the Greens, were to flex their pacifist muscles, they would not be able to breach the bipartisan wall of SPD and CDU that controls 80% of seats in the Bundestag and has "continuity" written all over it.

Will Schröder be more Anglophile and less Francophile? Don't count on it, even though he hails from Hanover, which once furnished England with a slew of royals. As in the past, Germany will carefully balance its commitments to the French and to the Anglo-Saxons, making sure that its Continental engagement does not fray its Atlantic tie.

German soldiers will continue to tread softly abroad. Whether in Bosnia in the past or perhaps Kosovo in the future, German Tornados will only fly in tight formation with NATO, preferably with a U.N. mandate as an additional proof of multilateralist virtue. Berlin will favor free trade over French "Fortress Europe" designs, and the eastward extension of the E.U. over "Little Europe" nationalism.

The truly critical question marks hover elsewhere—in domestic and economic policy. Only one thing is clear: A majority of Germans has cast its ballots for the parties of the left: Social Democrats, Greens and the post-communist PDS. It is a very different Germany they want as the parliament prepares to move to the refurbished Reichstag in Berlin.

But different how? "Red" today no longer means "revolutionary"—a new dawn, a bold plunge into uncharted wa-

ters and all that. It is almost the opposite. The PDS, the successor of the East German communists, has hawked the politics of nostalgia: Weren't we better off with the all-powerful, all-caring state of the Honecker days? The Social Democrats have attacked Kohl's timid labor market and social security reforms as capitalist conspiracy and "social coldness." The Greens have written "social justice" across their banners, a shibboleth that hardly promises a lower burden of taxes and regulations.

So a majority of the German electorate has voted for parties advocating *less* change—indeed, that vowed to preserve Germany's towering welfare state with its redistributionist features and job-killing regulations. Germany has cast its lot with those who promise not "blood, sweat and tears" to make a sluggish economy more competitive tomorrow, but who offer more of yesteryear's goodies Germany can no longer afford.

This will not do, and Gerhard Schröder, the "new centrist," knows it. His problem in the next four years will be how to transform the country in the face of an electorate wedded to two articles of faith: one, there must be no change; two, if change is unavoidable, losers must be compensated. But change *is* unavoidable, and Germany's sorry public finances no longer allow giving to Peter without taking from Paul.

Can he do it? Perhaps. Schröder can pull off in domestic politics what de Gaulle, Nixon and Begin played out so masterfully in foreign policy. The rule established by this trio is that only the right can make peace, in their case with Algeria, China and Egypt. The reason is simple enough: If the right cozies up to the enemy, who on the left will scream bloody treason?

And so perhaps in domestic policy. Helmut Kohl and his conservative minions foundered against the veto of Schröder's left when they tried to edge Germany into the global market. If Schröder goes the same route, as he must, he will have nothing to fear but the applause of the right. History has played this trick in foreign policy more than once. Schröder might just pull it off at home, especially since there is no other choice. ■

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