

VIEWPOINT  
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# Kohl's Code of Silence

As Helmut Kohl hurtles toward disgrace history will be the final judge

**L**ORD ACTON, THE GREAT BRITISH POLITICAL THINKER, acquired fame with this iron law of politics: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Watching the slow, torturous fall of Helmut Kohl, we might amend the law thus: "... and an eternity in power corrupts even more."

Here is Kohl as we knew him. Larger than life, he towered over all other leaders who populated Europe's political stage in his time—excepting, perhaps, Margaret Thatcher. With 16 years at the helm, he ruled three years longer than Franklin D. Roosevelt and just three years fewer than the all-time record holder, Prince Bismarck. But unlike the "Blood and Iron" Chancellor, Kohl unified Germany without a single shot—not against, but with Europe. And then he dragged Europe and a reluctant Germany forward into monetary union, the grandest unification venture of them all.

That is enough for *two* history books. And yet, tucked away in that monumental mantle, there was a standard-size pol afflicted with the most banal of flaws: a petty greed for power. If the allegations that have already forced him from the honorary chairmanship of his Christian Democratic Party are true, Kohl was hardly different from Britain's sleaze boys during the Major era or Italy's crime-and-corruption czars in 50 years of Democrazia Cristiana rule.

Kohl's looks to be the familiar tale of money accepted and influence sold. It is the story of slush funds that bought loyalty in his own party and, in turn, helped to lay low the Chancellor's internal enemies. Nor is this all. As we watch in awe and bewilderment, there is Kohl of the smoke-filled room, who elevates the code of cronyism above the law of the land. No, he won't divulge the identity of his party's benefactors because he was sworn to give them anonymity. That adds insolence to injury, for German campaign finance law is quite harsh on this point. Anything above 20,000 deutsche marks, a bit more than \$10,000, must come with the donor's name attached, or else.

It is a trite story, endlessly told. And there is just as tired a reason: longevity in power. This strand unites Britain's Tories (down and almost out) with Italy's Christian Democrats (down and gone) and Germany's Kohlistas (sinking fast). Margaret Thatcher and John Major governed Britain for 18 years. The Democrazia Cristiana practically *owned* Italy for half a century. And Kohl was king for 16 years.

Tenure creates its own iron law: the law of inflating arrogance. Those who win election after election succumb to fantasies of eternal power. The Helmut Kohls who manage to beat off any intraparty rival begin to think of themselves as being like Achilles without the heel—invulnerable. Helmut Kohl was beaten for the chancellorship in 1976, slipped into office in 1982 and then proceeded to win in 1983, 1987, 1990 and 1994. Why, then, would he conceive of himself as an ordinary politico—especially since he had always come from behind to overtake whoever the Social

Democrats had fielded? Adversity builds character first and cockiness after.

So what is a little extra cash among giants? After all, that \$1 million he is accused of accepting did not go into schnitzels and *saumagen*, the German version of haggis (Kohl's calorific favorite), but into funds that helped history's chosen servant to prevail against the chatter of small minds. Indeed, Kohl must be thinking, let history be my judge.

The legal verdict is not in; the process of discovery is still

in motion. But the contours of history's judgment are visible already. It might read like this: You, Helmut, have achieved greatness. But since 1215, when Magna Carta was signed, rulers have been supposed to live beneath, not above the law. You risk history's judgment that you have violated not only the law, but also the public trust, the most precious gift a democratic people can bestow on its leaders.

Of course, Helmut Kohl might still avert so cruel a ruling by naming those he is hiding, by apologizing and

atonement. But what might come naturally to a child does not seem to be given to leaders who have triumphed over calamity so often. Richard Nixon, the original comeback artist, had to be forced from office in 1974. Bill Clinton fibbed all the way to his impeachment. And Kohl will do what he knows best: *aussitzen*, sitting it out.

In the meantime, his Christian Democrats will continue to sink, especially since so many of their leaders, including the current chairman, Wolfgang Schäuble, who has the allegations hanging round his neck of illegal contributions totalling \$17 million. History suggests what will happen next. To dodge the fate of Italy's Christian Democrats, their German brethren will look for a scapegoat. And given the size of the scandal, the sacrifice will have to be just as substantial.

Forcing Kohl from the party's honorary chairmanship was the first step. Observe the drama as it unfolds—and watch a great man being felled blow by blow. This tragedy will not inspire fear and pity, as the ancients had it. It will be all pulp and no catharsis. ■

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