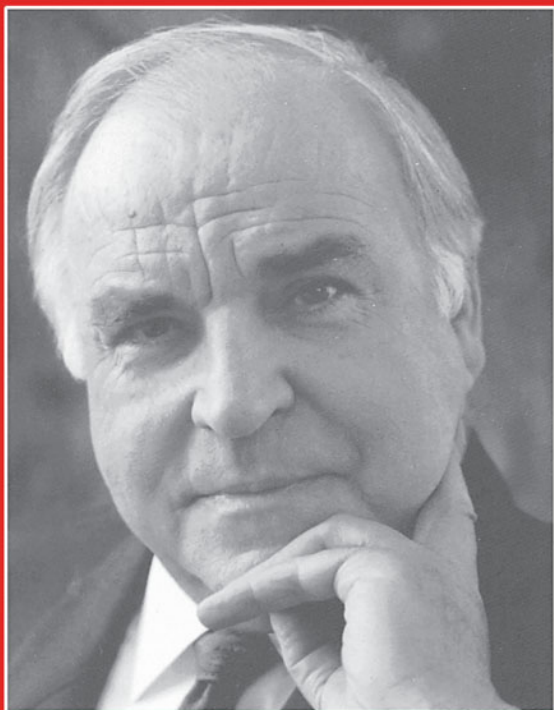


The Kohl Chancellorship



Edited by
CLAY CLEMENS
and
WILLIAM E. PATERSON

THE KOHL CHANCELLORSHIP

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Preface

The idea for this volume, and to some extent its contents, originated with the 1997 conference of the United Kingdom Association for the Study of German Politics, held in conjunction with the Institute for German Studies at the University of Birmingham. That session was devoted entirely to an assessment of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's leadership and legacy. Several papers presented there appear in this collection.

The editors would therefore like to express their sincere gratitude to participants at the conference, but above all to two individuals who played a key role in planning it: Dr Charlie Jeffery, Deputy Director of the Institute for German Studies at the University of Birmingham, and Professor Karl Koch, Chairman of the United Kingdom Association for the Study of German Politics.

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Introduction: Assessing the Kohl Legacy

CLAY CLEMENS¹

When Helmut Kohl first became chancellor in late 1982, not even ardent supporters imagined that he would still hold the office more than 15 years later. Yet Germany's 1998 federal election saw him once again running as an incumbent. This very longevity has hampered efforts to evaluate his record: unless clearly stamped 'provisional', such assessments – especially those from the 1980s that belittled his impact and confidently foresaw an imminent succession – soon looked ludicrously premature. Moreover, many early appraisals of Kohl call to mind the old fable about six blind men identifying an elephant: many dismissed him as slow, even lumbering, albeit – when impatient or panicked by a tiny pest – prone to trumpet angrily, charge blindly and wreak havoc, while others stood in awe of his massive power, thick skin, great endurance, shrewd instincts and uncanny sense of direction.

Putting together this volume has thus required caution. Enough of the 'Kohl era' has passed to permit some fairly firm assessments of its record, but we have also carefully considered how any conclusions might appear several years hence. Likewise, while each contributor addresses a specific aspect of Kohl's style or impact, all have observed him from various angles over many years and thus avoid the mistake of judging this entire political animal based on just one quality.

The following, brief overview suggests key elements of Kohl's leadership style that help explain his longevity and success; several later articles examine each of these elements in greater detail. An effort is also made here to outline Kohl's record, both in the politics of his time and in a more lasting legacy – his impact on Germany.

Clay Clemens, College of William and Mary.

VISIONARY OR VIRTUOSO OF POWER PRESERVATION?

It might appear that Helmut Kohl 'grew' in office. The party politician who in 1982 narrowly unseated his popular predecessor through Bonn's first successful no-confidence vote and became a target of jokes about 'sitting out' decisions seemed a far cry from the colossus who thereafter bestrode German politics – routinely receiving near-unanimous confirmation as CDU chair, bringing his coalition four straight federal election wins, and masterminding national unity while pressing for European Union. Yet appraisals of Kohl changed more dramatically than did his leadership style, which – despite fluctuating fortunes – remained strikingly constant.

Early on, even few loyal allies considered him a visionary. While in opposition, he had promised Germans a 'moral-spiritual' renewal, but it never took concrete form – his immersion in party politics seemed to expose such lofty pledges as empty rhetoric. Kohl did trust in the eternal verities – family, *Heimat*, hard work, solidarity – but could rarely galvanise others behind them. For years, as Karl Korte shows, a pragmatic focus on the 'doable' shaped his operational approach to 'the German question'; thus, despite genuinely seeing his nation's right to unity as just, he did not offer a vision for achieving it until circumstances created an unexpected, dramatic opportunity in late 1989 (and even then his Ten Point Plan aimed more to restrain events than propel them).

As William Paterson emphasises, Kohl's true dream was broader: gaining political consciousness amid the ruins of war gave him an unshakeable belief in a need to contain nationalism within an over-arching sense of common European values. This youthful idealism, fed by Adenauer's integration policies, never faded. As chancellor, Kohl pressed, chided and cajoled fellow heads of government to set aside differences and gradually strengthen the Community's complex decision-making institutions. He needed partners, and long had one in Francois Mitterrand, but pushed on largely alone in the 1990s, becoming so closely vital to movement toward political union and – as Kenneth Dyson emphasises – a common currency, that mere rumours of his ill-health could rattle financial markets around Europe.

Yet taking the desirability of integration, and his country's traditional support for it, as givens, Kohl could rarely articulate this

case in ways that made the EU alphabet soup of programmes – and their price – appetising to taxpayers, especially those of a more nationally oriented mindset. As Paterson points out, lack of rhetorical and public relations skill potentially handicapped him in ‘selling’ ideas or winning over converts. Kohl addressed that problem in part by hiring good speechwriters, but had this European vision been his sole leadership asset, he might not have lasted.

Fortunately for him, this chancellor also mastered what Korte labels the art of power preservation. Rather than immerse himself in detail, Kohl delegated planning to his ministers and sponsored broad consultations among government leaders. By monitoring these talks, or holding one-on-one conversations and telephone calls, he tried to divine when colleagues were nearing a ‘politically sustainable’ policy compromise, one with which all could live, or when an issue was growing potentially valuable – or risky – to him. Until then, Kohl could be patient with quibbling and quarrels, even if they hurt his image and undercut ministers or Bundestag allies. But when instinct told him movement had become possible or vital, the chancellor could press them for rapid approval, arguing that coalition harmony required carrying through on pre-packaged deals.

Since his first days in the CDU, Kohl had grown convinced that most Germans wanted broad, stable, centrist government – free from pressure by any force that could be labelled extreme. However appealing, an absolute Union majority would, he feared, be seen as unduly influenced by conservatives, and thus remain either out of reach or at best temporary and fragile. By contrast a CDU/CSU–SPD ‘Grand Coalition’ could *always* be had, but at the cost of letting more radical splinter parties dominate the opposition to it, feeding and growing on any dissatisfaction. To him, Adenauer’s Christian–Liberal alliance represented the nation’s natural majority, whatever polls showed. So long as the Union integrated right-wing voters, balanced these with the CDU’s own progressive commitment to ‘social solidarity’ and kept both in accord with mainstream liberalism, it would prove unbeatable – especially if voters were reminded that any left-wing coalition would remain vulnerable to pressure for radical experiments from SPD militants, later the Greens, and then the heirs of east German

Communism. An ability to perceive both his foes' weaknesses and the themes that would appeal to (or unnerve) undecided voters, even many Social Democrats, remained among his talents.

Following this formula, as an ambitious young provincial politician Kohl had tried to revive a CDU–FDP alliance in Rhineland-Palatinate, then in Bonn itself. His 1969 talks with Hans-Dietrich Genscher failed, but he persisted for over a decade before finally succeeding in 1982. Thereafter, the chancellor spent 15 years assuring colleagues that this government served them better than any alternative and always observed one rule: no decision should jeopardise the survival or even partisan interests of any partner. That meant allowing the FDP a generous portion of ministries, influence over policy beyond what its size warranted, and chances to display a distinct 'profile', even if that clashed with stances favoured by Union colleagues. At times Kohl could chide the Liberals and declare that coalitions were not eternal, but he seemed to know what might push them too far – and stopped. Good personal relations also helped. While irked at Genscher's carefully cultivated image as mastermind of Bonn's foreign policy, which reinforced the chancellor's own penchant for high-level diplomacy, he never let this rivalry endanger their vital political alliance of convenience.

As FDP fortunes grew ever more dependent on coalition with the Union after 1990, eroding the credibility of its periodic threats to defect, Kohl became less patient and treated Genscher's heir, Klaus Kinkel, more as a junior partner than a peer. Yet still the chancellor prevented vengeful Union colleagues from pushing the fragile FDP into a corner. Even when pollsters' predictions about odds on its survival sparked rumours – or, among some in his Union, hope – that they might shed their small partner and govern with the SPD, he remained confident that, as always, voters would save his Liberal ally and thus keep a balanced centre-right government.

Kohl's vision and mastery of coalition politics helped to rally his own Union – but only to a certain extent. Indeed, often he came under fire from colleagues for failing to give policy clear direction, or for taking it towards a Europe that some mistrusted, while his coalition diplomacy also frequently frustrated them: how long, many demanded, would he let the 'tail wag the dog' by allowing so small a partner as the Liberals to have equal status?

Few took more umbrage than his CSU allies, who demanded more conservative policies, even – or especially – if it meant angering the FDP. Kohl put up with its sniping at the Liberals and CDU, for his strategy required their combined strength. Having cultivated Bavarian friends while a young regional leader, as head of the joint Union Bundestag Fraktion, and as chancellor, he counted on them – despite hostility from long-time chair, Franz Josef Strauss. Kohl assured the CSU a stake in remaining part of their Union ‘sisterhood’, even granting it a veto on some major issues, yet also at times bluntly warning that any idea of breaking away to become a separate nation-wide conservative party would be suicide.

Even – or especially – Kohl’s CDU colleagues could also voice unhappiness with his leadership: his failure to articulate a clear vision on anything except Europe, and above all his appeasement of both junior coalition members, could anger various components of his own broad, diverse, loosely organised party. But as a member since just after the war, a long-time district functionary, a former Land ‘baron’, and federal chair for more than a quarter of a century, he knew the CDU better than any man alive. Kohl had steered, but also restrained, the party’s development, preferring to govern it in a highly personal way through his network of elite allies, mediation among internal factions, and continual contact with functionaries. Above all he proved a robust energetic, tireless campaigner. This author’s chapter on party management analyses that vital leadership resource in more detail. Until 1998, the chancellor consistently enjoyed support among loyal CDU voters well beyond what rivals in *any* party could command.

ROLL-CALL OF THE FALLEN

Perhaps nothing better indicates Kohl’s success than the long list of his vanquished rivals. At the outset, he took them on as an underdog; later, he endured both sniping from mutineers in his own camp and stiff fire from enemy lines. Yet, despite taking some hits, Kohl outlasted them all. By the 1990s, he could dispatch most foes without needing much effort, dismissing one would-be putschist scornfully, saying: ‘Before he can say *Wurst*, I’ve eaten mine.’

Having lost his first bid for the CDU chairmanship to Rainer

Barzel in 1971, Kohl concealed his bitterness and had his revenge two years later. When their party regained power in 1982 he nominated this old rival for a high ceremonial post but withdrew support when charges of financial impropriety made him politically inconvenient. A more formidable potential adversary emerged in the form of Gerhard Stoltenberg, but, despite broad public approval, this cool, competent north German lacked political ambition or grit, passing up often promising chances to mount a challenge at least four times between 1976 and 1986. Kohl also played upon his own closer ties with the Union's southerners to isolate him – an asset that also headed off any threat from Lower Saxony's Ernst Albrecht.

Closer friends and former proteges launched the only real coups, but failed as well. After friction had led his first CDU general secretary to resign, Kurt Biedenkopf tried to oust Kohl as chair of the party and joint Union Fraktion in 1978. But his former boss rallied allies in a whirlwind of telephone calls. Biedenkopf would again show interest in higher office during the 1990s, but Kohl could still fend off the brilliant little professor, whose maverick challenges to Union orthodoxy went down better with voters outside their party than with its own loyal functionaries. Kohl's second general secretary, Heiner Geissler, an even older friend, initially used his organisational and polemical skill on behalf of the chairman, but soon balked at sacrificing their party's profile on the alter of coalition compromise. After long friction and warnings against disloyalty, the chancellor did not re-nominate him. Geissler tried to exploit initial anger at this move by planning to replace Kohl with Baden-Württemberg's Lothar Späth as chair at the 1989 Bremen congress. But CDU progressives who backed this mutiny soon found themselves isolated by conservatives and punished by unity-minded functionaries. Though wounded, the chairman held on.

Although Kohl had also given Richard von Weizsäcker his political start, their styles plainly clashed. Only reluctantly did the chancellor back this urbane aristocrat for federal president, a post for which he seemed born. Von Weizsäcker's speeches emphasising German moral responsibility for Nazi crimes, his sharp criticisms of party politics and his positive press made him Kohl's antithesis. Constrained in responding, the chancellor endured these sermons and took satisfaction in 1989–90 at isolating this nemesis, whom

his memoirs chided for refusing to talk of reunification while making ‘anything but helpful’ remarks, even after the Wall fell.²

No one showed more contempt for Kohl than long-time CSU chief Strauss, who declared him totally ill-equipped for the chancellery. Kohl outmanoeuvred him for the Union’s candidacy in 1976, then thwarted his effort to split the sister parties, and, when Strauss wrestled that nomination away in 1980, campaigned for his rival, seeing it as hopeless yet denying him grounds for recrimination. Thus when Schmidt’s government fell in 1982, a frustrated CSU chief found that even his own party would not join a belated effort to block Kohl’s accession. The new chancellor then used FDP demands on top portfolios to deny Strauss the one he coveted, foreign affairs. For five years, Kohl tolerated his rival’s attacks, letting ‘the lion roar’, conceding him a few minor victories, and capitalising on his diplomatic aspirations by luring him into high-profile but pre-arranged talks with East Germany – thus deflecting conservative attacks on appeasement of Communism from the chancellor. Strauss died in 1988, still refusing to accept that he had been out-foxed.

A protege who inherited his post as minister-president became Kohl’s top critic in the 1990s. Though lacking Strauss’s vast experience, robust personality and tub-thumping style, Edmund Stoiber latched onto reliable populist themes that could work Bavarians into a lather: the Bonn coalition’s penchant for watery compromises, its submission to Liberal demands, and Kohl’s support for an EU that would compromise national – as well as regional – identity and interests. Stoiber would pledge solidarity at each face-to-face encounter, only to resume sniping once safe in Munich. While Strauss had aspired to oust Kohl, his heir’s immediate aim – control of the CSU – was more modest. He knew his chance for anything more lay in a post-Kohl era. Stoiber thus became the first colleague to urge that the chancellor run again in 1998, timely accommodation that also pre-empted any other rival’s own early bid.

As for SPD adversaries, Helmut Schmidt for years scornfully shrugged off Kohl’s attacks on his ‘amoral’ pragmatism, but in the end proved less adept at managing coalition and party politics. Even in 1982, the popular Social Democrat still seemed unable to believe that he would be replaced with an untried provincial. It was

little solace that for years polls credited Schmidt with being an ideal chancellor: he quit rather than head Kohl's opposition. Hastily filling the breach, Hans-Jochen Vogel also dismissed Bonn's new CDU government chief as ill qualified. But this stern ex-minister also struggled to keep his SPD united, including over the issue of rebuilding a majority coalition. As head of its Fraktion for two more terms he would spar with, but not best, his Union rival.

Especially after a first term marked by mishaps and scandal, Kohl seemed to compare poorly with 1987 SPD foe Johannes Rau. But this jocular father-figure of Germany's most populous Land could not channel his popularity – he led the incumbent in most polls for months – into an SPD majority and would not ally with the Greens. Kohl played upon this split within the opposition, while holding his own team together. Another slide in approval at the decade's end gave a new SPD rival hope of unseating him. But, despite leading in the polls right through early 1990, loquacious Oskar Lafontaine let voters sense his open scepticism of German unity and could not unify the opposition behind a credible response to Kohl's strategy. As its *next* candidate, in 1994 the SPD settled on Rudolf Scharping, a young minister-president of Rhineland-Palatinate who seemed to be following in the chancellor's footsteps. But he soon proved less able at keeping a party together, ruined his own initial reputation as an economics expert and proved a bland, uninspiring campaigner. Kohl, long mocked by most Social Democrats – with the notable exception of Willy Brandt, who warned against under-estimating him – had helped to assure constant turnover in the opposition leadership. As a result, in 1998 he would face perhaps his most formidable rival yet in the competent, charismatic and moderate Gerhard Schröder.

IF YOU SEEK HIS MONUMENT, GAZE AROUND

What has Helmut Kohl changed? What, if anything, is different – ideally better – as a result of his seemingly eternal reign?

His major legacy is plainly evident on any map of Europe: a unified Germany. Others made it possible, from Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush to those refugees whose thirst for a new life brought down regimes throughout eastern Europe. The force of events beyond anyone's control widened cracks in the Wall and eventually crumbled it altogether. But, after first carefully testing

the mood among eastern Germans and probing fellow world leaders for signs of support, Kohl was the one who made it happen. In November 1989 he unabashedly confirmed reunification's place on the agenda of world politics and, where needed to help avert violence, supported reformers in the crumbling GDR. However, confident of sensing the public mood better, he fostered no effort to salvage a separate state, instead favouring rapid economic union and absorption of the east. Kohl also wooed allies, from a fireside chat in Strasbourg with European partners and a walk by the stormy Bay of Biscay with Mitterrand, to his *tête-à-tête* with George Bush on a winter weekend at Camp David. Only Margaret Thatcher held out, and he carefully isolated her.

More surprising was his success with Communist leaders. Massive credits helped induce Budapest to let East German refugees transit Hungary *en route* to the West, an exodus that triggered revolution and later softened Gorbachev's opposition to letting go of Moscow's prize possession. Such economic largesse and other carrots – from 'politicising' NATO to scaling down the Bundeswehr – required Kohl's personal lobbying. Having set back Bonn–Moscow relations for a year by comparing Gorbachev to Nazi propaganda chief Josef Göbbels, the chancellor more than made up for it. In telephone calls and long face-to-face talks, in late-night strolls by the Rhine and a creek in the Caucasus, he cultivated his Kremlin counterpart's trust.

To be sure, the chancellor rode roughshod over East German leaders, and his bluff certitude about the justice of unity failed to win over all fellow-Europeans. Delaying a decision on the final settlement of a border with Poland gave narrow domestic political interests precedence over the sensitivities of a key partner. A similar sense of priorities also caused his most lasting misstep *en route* to unity – the push for a currency exchange on terms that delighted eastern voters and at first demanded little sacrifice of westerners, but at huge long-term costs. Unable to compete, the region's economy collapsed, producing demoralisation and division long after unity took formal effect, and sending up interest rates at the expense of European partners. And yet, at the time, few critics in his own party, the opposition or Germany's financial community offered credible alternatives. Denying easterners equal purchasing power would have assured a continuing refugee exodus, while