

# Rod Currie — German state vote threatens Schmidt base

BONN — "The trouble with poor Helmut," mused a bearded economics student, "is that really he should have been born a Christian Democrat."

Given the recent gradual swing to the right of West German politics, this assessment is one with which many Germans agree. For while Chancellor Helmut Schmidt is handsome, dynamic and personally popular, he has so far been unable to transfer his popularity to his troubled Social Democratic Party (SDP).

Some German commentators even suggest that because of what they consider his somewhat moderate views on social legislation and economic policy Schmidt might feel more at home in the left wing of the more conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Ironically, the CDU now is shopping around for just such a leader in the Schmidt mould for the next general election in which they confidently predict they will recapture the chancellorship.

## Blame government

But Schmidt is a Social Democrat and, as with voters everywhere, Germans tend to

blame the government of the day for inflation and rising unemployment.

Then there is the recent tinge of political scandal and the spate of street demonstrations, rising crime statistics and even terrorist activity — a new feature of post-war German life.

But Germans generally delight in Schmidt's performance on the international stage, flitting as he did recently to Washington, London, Paris and Brussels, displaying his blend of North German straight-talk and easy charm, when the situation demanded.

## No economic miracle

Still, the fact remains that he heads a coalition with a hair's-breath majority in the Bundestag.

Although the general election isn't until 1976 — a long time in politics — it is argued that there is no new economic miracle in Schmidt's future to bring inflation under rein and thus brighten his political chances.

Of immediate concern are the approaching elections in the important state of North Rhine-Westphalia where a widely-predicted

CDU gain would whittle Schmidt's slim power base. Life with his coalition partner, the small, liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), already difficult, would become near intolerable, since the liberals, are thorny on such issues as Schmidt's strong pro-Common Market stance.

Among supporters he has earned the nickname "Charles de Schmidt" for the manner in which he is increasingly dominating the community, although never to the extent of the late French president de Gaulle.

But despite his personal status, built since his predecessor Willy Brandt resigned under a cloud last spring, one hears mumblings of discontent with the government and accusations of indiscipline, bickering and permissiveness.

## Support CDU

The CDU, after five frustrating years in opposition to the left-of-centre Socialists, are finding their fortunes on the upswing. The German electorate, disenchanted over the economic situation and somewhat uncomfortable with the government's policy of accommodation with the Soviet Union, has been giving heavy support to the CDU in state and municipal

elections.

Of particular embarrassment to Schmidt and his party just now is the so-called Baader-Meinhof case, involving the self-proclaimed leaders of the **Red Army Faction**, an anarchist band whose alleged goal is the destruction of the establishment.

Ulrike Meinhof has been sentenced to eight years in jail for conspiracy to murder and she and Andreas Baader and their followers are accused by police of murder, bank robberies and bombings. The day after one of the group, on a hunger strike, died in his cell, West Berlin's chief justice was murdered in what police call retaliation.

## Bungled affair

To outraged German public opinion, the government has waffled and mismanaged the whole affair in, for instance, permitting French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, amid great publicity, to visit Baader in prison.

As with the case of the relatively mild economic upheaval, it seems to some outsiders that the Germans are over-reacting to the Baader episode.

"But what you don't understand is that for 30 years the right has been telling the German people that the anarchist or the terrorist is just around the corner," said a widely-travelled, Hamburg-based journalist. "And then Baader-Meinhof comes along and everyone says, 'Ah, see, they were right all along,' and everyone moves to the right for protection."

## Durable Strauss

In this political atmosphere it is not surprising that once again there emerges the name of Franz-Josef Strauss, 59, one of the most durable figures in German politics and long ambitious to be chancellor.

His flamboyant advocacy of German nationalism, anti-Communism and firm law-and-order suddenly seems more in tune with German public opinion than at any time in recent years. In recent Bavarian state elections his Christian Social Union (CSU), which federally is aligned with the CDU, won 62 per cent of the vote, the largest margin in Bavaria's post-war history.

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