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Farewell to Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (October 15, 1963)

Eighty-seven year-old Konrad Adenauer, who had resigned only under pressure, is honored by Bundestag President Eugen Gerstenmaier in the following address. Gerstenmaier not only emphasizes the former chancellor's achievements in domestic and foreign policy but also discusses his leadership style, which had often been criticized as too autocratic.

Why there is Talk of Gratitude in this Hour.

The text of the speech honoring Konrad Adenauer by Bundestag President Dr. Eugen Gerstenmaier

The Federal President sent me the following message: "The Federal Chancellor, Dr. Konrad Adenauer, announced his resignation to me in a letter of October 10, 1963. I have accepted his resignation, and this afternoon I will present the Chancellor with a document declaring that his term will end on October 15, 1963."

Honorable Mr. Chancellor,

This house and you yourself are well aware that in a parliamentary democracy it is not usual for a head of government to leave his office and return to his seat as a member of parliament. With this session, the German Bundestag does not necessarily intend to set a precedent that will absolutely become the rule. But this house and all its component parts are so struck by the extraordinary and significant nature of what is taking place today that no one objected to this session.

As always, it is not only your friends, companions, and admirers who have come together here today, but also your critics and political adversaries. I know there are still several unhealed wounds in this house that were inflicted in the years of your chancellorship. All the more momentous, however, is this hour, in which the highest representatives of the German people have come together for the sole purpose of thanking the first Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, who, although advanced in age, faithfully and vigorously carried the burden of the most difficult office that Germany has to offer for fourteen years.

The historical importance of this hour becomes clear just by virtue of the fact that you, Mr. Chancellor, are the only person in the last hundred tumultuous years of German history who can

leave your incomparable position, undefeated and in peace, after a long term in office, and calmly return to the position from which you rose on September 15, 1949.

[. . .]

His political style

Yes, you have not only enjoyed the benefit of the Basic Law, with the strong position it grants the Federal Chancellor and the protection of the constructive vote of no confidence. Of even greater importance, however, was the fact that, from the very beginning, you had many very exceptional staff members in your cabinets and offices, and that you succeeded in personally befriending high-ranking foreign statesmen. Your political style has often been criticized. Meanwhile, these fourteen years of German parliamentary democracy have come to show that unlike a presidential democracy, not to mention Bismarck's Reich Constitution [*Bismarcksche Reichsverfassung*], the head of the government in our democracy must always be backed by an adequate level of parliamentary support. It goes without saying that he will therefore always try to keep at least his own parliamentary group and his own coalition united behind him as much as possible. That, of course, has the consequence that an essential, often decisive part of the dialogue between government and parliament does not take place in the plenary sessions but within the parliamentary groups, which practically excludes the public. One might regret that, one can also criticize that, but one ignores reality when he concludes from this that the parliament in our state or the parliamentary groups of the government coalition receive orders from the government, or, to be more precise, from the man who determines the policy guidelines.

It was not only your constitutional right to do this, Mr. Chancellor, it was your duty! In our state, one is even less able to base an accusation of authoritarian rule on this, since the government is always ultimately dependent on a parliamentary majority to implement its policies. Whoever appreciates this fact will understand when you, Mr. Chancellor, say that you constantly went to great lengths to persuade as many as possible. Because in our state even a federal chancellor remains relentlessly dependent on that [parliamentary majority], which is why every Bundestag election is also a referendum for or against his policies.

[. . .]

Source: Bundestag President Dr. Eugen Gerstenmaier, "Warum in dieser Stunde vom Dank die Rede ist. Der Wortlaut der Laudatio auf Konrad Adenauer. 15 Oktober 1963" ["Why there is Talk of Gratitude in this Hour. The Text of the Speech honoring Konrad Adenauer, October 15, 1963"], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 16, 1963, p. 11.

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