German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Max Weber Reflects on Cooperation between the National Liberals and Bismarck during the 1860s and 1870s (May 1918)

Unified liberal hostility to Bismarck's autocratic policies during the "constitutional conflict" of the early 1860s ended when the National Liberal Party was founded in 1867 as a means to overcome what its leaders regarded as the "sterile" opposition of the Progressive Party. From 1867 onward the "national" and the "left" liberals competed for the political allegiance of Germany's Protestant middle strata. The National Liberals subsequently became Bismarck's main supporters in the unification era. But in 1878 Bismarck decided, for several reasons, to turn away from the National Liberals and cultivate conservative alliances. In this document, the famed sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) – a keen observer of his contemporary world – is highly critical of Bismarck's Pyrrhic victory over the National Liberals. In fact, however, Bismarck was more interested in dividing and taming this party than in destroying it. By the late 1880s the National Liberals again played a central role in Bismarck's "cartel of state-supporting parties."

Never has a statesman who was not put at the helm by the trust of a parliament had as his partner a political party so easy to deal with and yet so full of political talents as Bismarck enjoyed between 1867 and 1878. One may reject the political views of the National Liberal leadership at that time. Of course one must not measure them by the standard of Bismarck himself in the area of high politics or in terms of sovereign intellectual energy, for even the best of them seem only mediocre in comparison; after all, this is even more true of all other domestic politicians and most foreign ones too. If one is lucky, a genius appears just once every few hundred years. But we might thank fate if the politicians into whose hands it had placed the present and future leadership of the country proved to be as able on average as those in the National Liberal party in those days. It is indeed a most impertinent distortion of the truth for political littérateurs here nevertheless to try to persuade the nation that 'Parliament in Germany has failed so far to produce great political talents.' It is deplorable that the subaltern fashion among today's littérateurs should deny that representatives of parliamentarism like Bennigsen, Stauffenberg, Völk, or of democracy, like the Prussian patriot Waldeck, possessed the quality demanded of representatives of '*the German spirit*', for that spirit was at least as alive in the Paulskirche as it is amongst the bureaucracy, and more so than in the inkwells of these gentlemen. The great merit of those politicians from the heyday of the Reichstag was, firstly, the fact that they knew their own limitations and past errors and acknowledged Bismarck's vast intellectual superiority. Nowhere did he have more passionate and quite personal admirers than in their ranks, and in particular amongst those who subsequently seceded from the party. One thing above all attests to their personal distinction, namely their complete lack of feelings of

ressentiment about his superior stature. Everyone who knew these men would completely absolve all the significant figures amongst them of any such thing. Anyone familiar with the events would have to regard it as bordering on paranoia if Bismarck seriously entertained the idea that *these* particular politicians had ever considered 'overthrowing' him. I have heard their leaders say on numerous occasions that 'Caesarism', the governmental form of genius, would be the accepted political arrangement in Germany if there were the slightest chance of some new Bismarck always emerging to fill the highest position. That was their sincerely held conviction. It is true that they had crossed swords fiercely with him in the past. For this very reason they were also aware of *his limitations* and were certainly not inclined to make any unmanly *sacrificium intellectus*, although they were always prepared, even to the point of self-abnegation, to go a long way to meet him in order to avoid a break with him – much further, indeed, then was permissible in view of the mood of the voters, who then threatened to withdraw their support. The National Liberal politicians avoided a fight for formal parliamentary rights with the creator of the Reich, not only because they foresaw that, in party political terms, any such contest would only help the *Centre Party* to gain power, but also because they knew that it would paralyze Bismarck's own policies as well as the substantive (*sachlich*) work of parliament for a long time to come: 'Nothing is successful any more'[*] was the well-known watchword of the eighties. Their innermost intention, often expressed in their own circles, was to steer safely through the period when this grandiose personality ruled the Reich those institutions which would ensure continuity of Reich policy once the time had come to adjust once more to politicians of normal stature. Admittedly, these institutions included, in their view, a *parliament* which would have a positive share in decision-making and therefore be capable of attracting great political talents – and strong parties.

They were perfectly aware that the achievement of this goal absolutely *did not depend on them alone*. On the occasion of the great change of direction in 1878, I very often heard people from their ranks say, 'No great political skill is needed to destroy a party in such an utterly precarious position as ours or to make its continued existence impossible. If this happens, however, it will not be possible to create another great party which collaborates in a purely objective way. Instead it will be necessary to have recourse to the politics of interest groups and the system of petty patronage, and it will be necessary nevertheless to accept the most severe political upheavals into the bargain.' As I have said, one may judge particular positions taken by the party as one will. After all, it was ultimately on their initiative that the office of the Reichskanzler received its constitutional definition (Benningsen's motion), that civil law was unified (motion by Lasker), that the Reichsbank was created (motion by Bamberger), indeed that the majority of the great institutions of the Reich still in effective operation today were introduced. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to criticize their tactics, but these constantly had to take account of the party's difficult position in relation to Bismarck. In part the decline of the party's position can be blamed on the natural difficulties of a party which was so purely political in its orientation and yet burdened with antiquated economic dogmas when faced with problems of the economy and

[*] Title of an article dated April 28, 1889 in *Germania*, the Catholic Center Party's main organ. (Footnote adapted from Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch* [*The German Kaiserreich 1871-1914. A Historical Reader*], 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, p. 230.)

social policy, although the position of the conservative parties on all these issues was certainly no better. The opposition between Bismarck's aims and the constitution they wanted to see after 1866 did not arise, as some would have it, from their 'shortsightedness', but from their *unitarist* ideals (in the manner of Treitschke) at that time (which we have abandoned in the meantime, partly for reasons of foreign policy). Subsequent developments have proved the fundamental political premises of their conduct to have been *entirely correct*.

They were unable to achieve their chosen political objective and fell apart, not ultimately for reasons of substance, but because Bismarck was unable to tolerate *any* kind of at all independent power alongside himself, that is to say one that acted on its own responsibility.

Source of English translation: *Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order: Towards a Political Critique of Officialdom and the Party System*, in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 130-271, here pp. 137-40.

Source of original German text: Max Weber, *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* [*Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order*] (May 1918) in *Gesammelte politische Schriften* [*Collected Political Writings*], ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 2nd rev. ed. Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1958, pp. 301-03.

Original German text also reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch* [*The German Kaiserreich 1871-1914. A Historical Reader*]. 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 229-31.