

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

It's open season on Helmut Kohl

The chancellor's policies have sparked a rebellion among voters and the rank and file of his Christian Democratic party.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is in the throes of an identity crisis. The party's former Christian profile has been replaced by liberalist views that have invaded the CDU ever since party chairman Kohl took over the government in Bonn in October 1982.

To a considerable degree, Kohl's government policy consists of policy concessions to the liberal Free Democrats (FDP), his minor coalition partner—to their radical secular views, their pro-Soviet outlook, and their pro-austerity economic theorems. Because of this pact with the anti-clerical FDP, the CDU party organization has degenerated into a mere transmission belt for this liberalist government policy among voters, and itself is about to become a liberal party.

There is a revolt against this paradigm shift, however. Among voters, an increasing percentage has turned their backs on the CDU in all elections over the past two or three years; among the party membership, there is growing unrest and disgust against the government in Bonn.

The dual role of Kohl as party chairman and head of government has made him the prime target of this revolt, and this became most visible at the CDU party convention which took place in Wiesbaden June 12-15. Never before has Kohl, who has led the party for 15 years, been attacked so strongly by party members. Two days before the convention even opened, a manifesto by anonymous "party dissidents," calling for Kohl's resignation from the chairmanship because he "ruined the party," was circulated in

the media. And at the convention, especially the younger delegates repudiated their designated role as mules for relaying governmental views to the population at-large, a role which Kohl had given the party organization.

Kohl's tax policy reform, which largely consists of tax increases on consumer goods, was attacked as "un-social," as were the government's plans for budget cuts in the public health sector. Kohl was even accused of "selling out to the FDP on policy fundamentals." Kohl's failure since 1982 to bring Christian-conservative values back into politics, after the 13 years of socialist-liberal governments in Bonn before him, was especially harshly criticized.

The "policy of change," Kohl's main slogan when he took over the post of chancellor at the end of 1982, has not occurred. The CDU has not changed the politics of the country; what has changed instead, is the Christian Democrats.

Kohl got very angry at this critique from the conservative camp inside the CDU, which dominated the first hours of the party convention. Assisted by the rest of the party executive, especially party manager Heiner Geissler (an eloquent and demagogic politician trained by the Jesuits), Kohl came out in defense of his policy, emphasizing the need for economic austerity as "the dictate of the hour," and calling his critics "relics of anti-democratic currents."

Lacking an eloquent prominent spokesman on their side, conservatives took their revenge on the second day of the convention, when the question of liberalizing the abortion

laws was on the agenda. From noon until midnight, the convention heatedly debated the controversial subject. The party leadership's views in favor of liberalization were attacked as "un-Christian" and an "anti-human ideology betraying the principles of a Christian party like the CDU."

While the debate had a certain usefulness, it also showed up the programmatic weakness of the conservative opposition, since they focused the issue narrowly, and did not take up the related issues of euthanasia and austerity, nor the question of genocide in the Third World as a result of the economic policies of the "developed" countries and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The conservatives, especially those with a strong religious background, could have brought up the very important May 16 statements of the two main churches, the Catholics and the Lutherans, against the IMF policy. Using these issues, the conservatives could have moved out of their generally defensive position, and opened up a programmatic offensive challenging the liberal current of the party.

But the conservatives missed this chance, and that is why they lost on the issues of austerity, tax reform, and abortion.

Kohl's programmatic victory, which shaped the third day of the CDU convention, may soon turn out to be a Pyrrhic one, however. More and more conservatives may leave the party now. Since 1983, five percent of the party membership has quit. The CDU section in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, for example, has lost 10% of its members since October 1987. The same section lost 10% of the vote in the elections for state parliament on May 8. It is such election defeats that will lead to Kohl's fall—as party chairman, and chancellor, too.