

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### Election poker obscures real issues

*The reelection of Chancellor Kohl is not at all secured, as Germany's economic crisis is ignored by the politicians.*

**I**t's a "super-election year" in Germany, with a total of 18 campaigns for state, municipal, and federal parliaments—the most decisive being the election for national parliament on Oct. 16. The closer that date comes, the more confused the picture gets. Most of the policy issues addressed by the established political parties do not reflect the reality of an economy that is in a deepening world depression.

Instead, a "virtual reality" has taken control of the election campaign, centering on absurd issues such as whether Chancellor Helmut Kohl is "too old" for the job (a key argument of his younger challenger, Social Democrat Rudolf Scharping), or how German industrial society can be transformed into an "ecology-compatible" society (prominent in the programs of the three opposition parties SPD, PDS, and Greens).

Kohl even has a special campaign: His eagle eye has spotted an "economic upswing" that nobody else can recognize, and he is confident that his reelection is the only logical consequence. More and more segments of the electorate are turning their backs on politics. In the two elections for state parliament in the eastern states of Brandenburg and Saxony, 45% of the voters shunned the polls. In some precincts with very high jobless rates, voter abstention rose to 80%.

The next lesson from these two state elections is that the liberal Free Democrats, whose existence is based on borrowed votes from other parties, have serious problems at a time when all parties are battling the erosion of constituencies. In eight elections in a

row, the FDP fell below the mandatory 5% threshold and was catapulted out of the parliaments. What makes this decline of the FDP dramatic for Chancellor Kohl is that they are his minor partner in the ruling coalition, and all the other parties have officially refused to join a coalition with him.

The only way out of this gloomy constellation would be for Kohl to do what Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (who had his own problems with the FDP) did in 1957, when he aimed at the absolute majority of votes—and won.

For Kohl, the challenge would be to push economic topics into the forefront in a serious way that could win voter confidence and stop the erosion of his Christian Democrats' voter base, absorb vagabond vote potentials of the FDP and conservative Social Democratic Party (SPD) currents, and above all address the future of the high-tech industrial sectors barely touched by the established political parties amid all the talk about the "need for more ecology."

Kohl has also neglected the huge political potential of the two state visits, Russian President Boris Yeltsin's in May, and U.S. President Bill Clinton's in July. Both described Germany as at the center of future cooperation between Europe's West and East. Yeltsin's call for a trans-European, high-speed rail link from Berlin through Warsaw to Moscow, as well as Clinton's call for a new strategic partnership between the United States and Germany in the economic, social, and political development of the former Soviet bloc, would be ideal points

of departure for a campaign that would offer a positive perspective, especially for 2 million jobless in Germany's East, traditionally the main trading partner for eastern Europe and Russia.

Kohl prefers arrangements that appeal to "sound-bytes," and populist noises that the mass media favor. The timing of events in Berlin during the week of Sept. 4-11, is typical of Kohl's approach to pose as the "successful world statesman" who can only be loved by Germany's voters: The "Berlin Week" included meetings of numerous European Union cabinet ministers, the official farewell ceremony for the western Allied troops after a 49-year presence in Berlin, summit meetings among western heads of state, the formation of a new American Academy in Berlin (with Henry Kissinger as an honorary co-president), and nuclear talks between Americans and North Koreans.

As the media were covering the Berlin events, less attention was paid by them to the Sept. 10-11 emergency session of the 12 European Union finance ministers held far away in Germany's south, in Lindau. The call for a new round of fiscal austerity that went out from there wouldn't have pleased the German voters, had they been told about it.

Because of these economic realities, Kohl's reelection is not secure. One big corporate failure, or more hectic days in the stock markets could easily destroy the "aura of the upswing and of an unmatched success story" that Kohl has built. High voter abstention, new losses for Kohl's CDU, and the exit of the FDP from the parliament may then help the radical ecologist opposition parties, SPD, Greens, and PDS (the post-communist party of East Germany) to sneak in as an anti-Kohl majority on Oct. 16.