The crisis of the German CDU and its consequences

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The financial scandals enveloping the German CDU have long since assumed a form that goes far beyond a mere matter of corruption. What is breaking up is the very framework of the German Bundesrepublik as it has existed since the Second World War.

In this respect Helmut Kohl's descent from his pedestal as honorary chairman of the CDU is symbolic. The man who led the German government for 16 years and just a short time ago was celebrated as the "Chancellor of German reunification" and a great European statesman has been exposed as a dishonourable money launderer—a man more attached to his word of honour, given to anonymous financial donors, than to his oath of office and the rule of law.

The CDU constituted a fundamental pillar of the post-war German state in two respects. For the first time in German history the CDU, as a *party of the bourgeois centre*, was able to unite under one roof the estranged wings of the German bourgeoisie. Previously, political life had been characterised by vehement feuds between the various conservative parties, which had their roots far back in the period of German particularism. In the days of the German Reich (1870-1918) a clash of cultures raged between Bismarck and the Catholic parties, and during the Weimar Republic the entire spectrum of bourgeois parties was in disarray—a state of affairs which facilitated the rise of the Nazis.

In its role as *Volks* or *People's Party*, the CDU embodied, to a greater extent even than the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the essence of a form of corporatism known as "Rhineland capitalism". It united the most varied social groups and interests under one roof: employers, craftsmen, peasants, officials and workers, Catholics and Protestants, social reformists and advocates of free-market liberalism. Conflicting interests were resolved not on the open political stage, but inside the party itself—through a complex mechanism of inter-dependencies, relationships, arrangements and fiddles.

Should the CDU break up—and the prospect becomes more likely with each new revelation—the political mechanisms which up until now have ensured the relative stability of post-war Germany will also collapse. Many commentators therefore speak of the affair as a crisis of the state, and not merely a party crisis. They fear that the political centre-ground in Germany could fall apart and precipitate a return to the disarray which predominated in the period of the Weimar Republic. The weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* writes: "The material which forms the substance of the conflict threatens to tear apart not just the CDU, but the bourgeois centre itself."

As a consequence, the SPD would also be affected, and not only because the party has its own skeletons in the closet and fears being drawn into the web of revelations. The interplay of the two big "people's parties"—the CDU and the SPD—constitutes the axis of political life in the Bundesrepublik. Should the CDU collapse, the SPD would inevitably be gripped by the same centrifugal forces that are rending the CDU. This is the reason for the SPD's restrained reaction to the CDU crisis.

The CDU leadership under current party head Wolfgang Schäuble, as well as the SPD and the Greens, strive to present the abyss of corruption as the product of individual mistakes. This is the purpose of the daily confessions and excuses which seek to shift the political scandal to the sphere of personal morals.

In reality, what has come to be known as the "Kohl system" is intimately connected to the political role of the CDU. The complex network of inter-dependencies and relationships which determined the party's internal life required an incontestable referee. This role was assumed by Kohl, a master of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring who led, and came to dominate, the party in an unchallenged fashion for 25 years. Hypocrisy, cronyism, intrigues—these characterised the internal life of the party, together with influence peddling in relation to personnel decisions and political resolutions, oiled with discreet transfers of money.

When Kohl today speaks of a witch-hunt and angrily denies having committed, from a legal standpoint, any transgressions, from his own point of view he is merely

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being consistent. In the final analysis his behaviour was aimed at preserving the party, while the party itself was critical to preserving the state. According to Kohl's logic, the party by definition could not have acted in contradiction to the laws enacted by the state.

Rather than representing the interests of the people against the state, the CDU, in common with the other main political parties in Germany, operated as a vehicle for state interests against the people. This is stipulated by the strange German constitution, which officially accords the parties the responsibility of shaping public opinion in the interest of the state, and in return rewards them generously.

The attempt on the part of numerous politicians and media commentators to portray the uncovering of the CDU's financial malpractice as a process of democratic self-purification is misleading and wrong. There never was a “democratic culture” in the CDU. The prerequisite for the consolidation of the party after the Second World War was to abort the process of coming to grips with the former Nazi regime—a process which had never really gotten off the ground in the first place.

Under the first CDU Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, former Nazis were already filling the highest state and party posts. In 1966 Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former member of the Nazi Party, assumed the post of Chancellor. Kohl's own political career was sponsored by a patron who made his fortune from Aryanized Jewish companies and the exploitation of forced labour in concentration camps. For 18 years the Frankenthaler industrialist Fritz Ries supported the young CDU politician financially and personally.

The putrid smell of corruption, high-handedness, nepotism and anti-Semitism which accompanies the current affair is no mere aberration in an otherwise healthy democratic institution. As is so often the case, the collapse of the building reveals how precarious were the foundations upon which it was built. The real reasons for the collapse lies elsewhere: in the break-up of the political preconditions which made the rise of the CDU possible.

It is an irony of history that Kohl's greatest political triumph, the reunification of Germany, removed the ideological bond which had held the party together up until then. The period of the Cold War and anticommunism provided the ideological basis for uniting the extremely diverse elements of the party. With the end of the GDR (East Germany) the policy of anticommunism lost its sting. For some time the CDU tried to keep it going with its “red socks” campaign against the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—successor party to the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany—the Socialist Unity Party—SED). But when it became clear that the PDS was winning sympathy as the victim of CDU attacks, the CDU party centre put an end to the campaign.

The material basis for the rise of the CDU was the economic upturn in the post-war period. It created the necessary fundament for the party's policy of social equilibrium. For some time such a policy, with its accompanying ponderous, corporatist mechanisms, has been a hindrance to the transnational concerns and financial institutions that dominate modern economic life. It is therefore no accident that the arch conservative newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the ideological flagship of finance capital, has emerged as the most energetic and aggressive opponent of the Kohl system.

It is already clear that the political consequences of the CDU financial scandal will be a further move to the right. As the scandal rages, the ruling coalition of the SPD and the Greens has been able to pursue unhindered the job of putting their right-wing course into practice, despite having come under fire from the electorate last summer for their programme of budget cuts.

Inside the CDU a new generation is coming to the forefront which, on social and economic issues, stands far to the right of the generation of Kohl and Schäuble. It cannot be excluded that, as has been the case in Austria, right-wing demagogues will be able to profit from popular anger at political corruption.

A real opposition to the corruption and social injustice which have come to the surface in the course of the CDU scandal must be directed against the foundations of the capitalist system itself, and not just against individual manifestations. Today's business concerns, carrying out transactions in the hundreds of billions, possess a power and leverage for influencing politics which make the money-filled envelopes of arms dealer Schreiber or the Flick representative von Brauchitsch look like relics from the political Stone Age.

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