

**Dr Jürgen Frölich outlines the role of the Free Democratic Party in German Federal politics.**

No other established party in the Federal Republic of Germany has had as contentious an image as the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Its imminent death, in terms of political significance, has been predicted many times and it has been declared superfluous on the grounds that the Federal Republic is no longer in need of a Liberal party. On the other hand, even though it is currently the smallest party in the German Bundestag, elected with a 7.4% share of the vote in September 2002 – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) both gained 38.5% and the Greens 8.8% – it can boast more than forty years of participation in the government.

# THE GERMAN BETWEEN THIRD FO



Party logo from 1953

**T**hat makes it the longest-serving party in the federal government, as compared with the CDU's thirty-six years, the SPD's twenty-one years

and the Green Party's five years. Furthermore, looking back on German contemporary history, it becomes evident that the decisive changes of 1948–49, 1955, 1969, 1982 and 1989–90 were brought

# GERMAN LIBERALS POWER AND MARGINAL FORCE

about only with the support of the FDP. But how can this not-unimportant role of the Liberals be explained in the face of the level of criticism of the party in both journalism and historiography?

Looking back at the German national electoral system and at the party political system as they crystallised in the first decade after 1949, one could gain the superficial impression that there were only two parties at work. In 1949 eight political parties entered the Federal Parliament, but with the introduction of the 'Five Percent Clause' in 1953, the ban on the Communist Party in 1956 and the rise of Chancellor Adenauer and the CDU as a leading political force, the number of parties represented in the Bundestag was reduced to three, with the CDU and SPD as the so-called 'big' or 'people's' parties. Only one of the smaller parties, the FDP, survived the first decade of the Federal Republic.

It managed this because the founders of the Republic had decided in favour of a system of proportional representation and against a majority vote system. Half of the parliamentary seats are filled by representatives directly elected by their constituents; however, the so-called 'Second Vote' is also decisive for the composition of Parliament since every political party that wins more than 5%, or at least three constituencies, gets a proportional

share of the mandates. The FDP could always claim a share of the vote of between 5.8% and 12.8% (see table). Since no party, with the exception of the CDU in 1957, has ever managed to gain an absolute majority of mandates or votes, it was always necessary to form a coalition of two or more parties. Until the Green Party entered Parliament in 1983, the FDP therefore had the power to select one of the two major parties with whom to form a working coalition. The exception was from 1966 to 1969, when the CDU and SPD formed a 'Great Coalition'. Consequently, for many years the FDP played a crucial role in parliament, several times preventing a change in electoral system from proportional to majority voting, which was a particular goal of the CDU in the mid fifties and the late sixties.

Because the Liberals were known for 'tipping the balance', they were unable to establish firm public support, as the party in opposition would always try to isolate itself from the FDP, particularly in the case of the CDU after 1969 and of the SPD from 1982 to the present. Furthermore, because many journalists and contemporary historians have sympathised with one of the two major parties, and still do so, it is not surprising that the FDP has been given little credit for its political achievements. The change of

coalition in 1982 – when a new grouping of CDU and FDP led to the replacing of the SPD Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, with the leader of the CDU, Helmut Kohl – was an occasion that particularly produced much long-lasting anger and aggression against the FDP on the part of the left of German politics and public opinion, who forgot that the SPD had performed a similar manoeuvre in 1966 by joining the Great Coalition and sending the FDP into the ranks of the opposition.

But the blame for the controversial image of the FDP cannot solely be laid at the door of anti-Liberal political commentators and political scientists. There are – at first sight – some inconsistencies in the development of the party since its inception. So it is useful to outline a brief history of the FDP.

Even at its founding on 11 December 1948 in the South Hessian town of Heppenheim, it was not clear what the political aims of the party would be. The regional parties that formed the FDP, nine months before the Federal Republic was born, had varying ideas as to what the party would represent. Two main movements prevailed: on the one hand were the so-called 'Old Liberals' of Southern Germany and the Hanseatic cities, who strove to revive the left Liberal movement of the Weimar Republic and wanted to place the

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## THE GERMAN LIBERALS

| Election | FDP       | CDU/CSU    | SPD        | Greens    | PDS       | Others    |
|----------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|          | % / seats | % / seats  | % / seats  | % / seats | % / seats | % / seats |
| 1949     | 11.9 / 52 | 31.0 / 139 | 29.2 / 131 | –         | –         | 27.9 / 76 |
| 1953     | 9.5 / 48  | 45.2 / 243 | 28.8 / 151 | –         | –         | 15.5 / 45 |
| 1957     | 7.7 / 41  | 50.2 / 270 | 31.8 / 161 | –         | –         | 10.3 / 17 |
| 1961     | 12.8 / 67 | 45.4 / 242 | 36.2 / 190 | –         | –         | 5.6 / –   |
| 1965     | 9.5 / 49  | 47.6 / 245 | 39.3 / 202 | –         | –         | 3.6 / –   |
| 1969     | 5.8 / 30  | 46.1 / 242 | 42.7 / 224 | –         | –         | 5.4 / –   |
| 1972     | 8.4 / 41  | 44.9 / 225 | 45.8 / 230 | –         | –         | 0.9 / –   |
| 1976     | 7.9 / 39  | 48.6 / 243 | 42.6 / 214 | –         | –         | 0.9 / –   |
| 1980     | 10.6 / 53 | 44.3 / 226 | 42.9 / 218 | 1.5 / –   | –         | 0.4 / –   |
| 1983     | 7.0 / 34  | 48.8 / 244 | 38.2 / 193 | 5.6 / 27  | –         | 0.4 / –   |
| 1987     | 9.1 / 46  | 44.3 / 223 | 37.0 / 186 | 8.3 / 42  | –         | 1.3 / –   |
| 1990     | 11.0 / 79 | 43.8 / 319 | 33.5 / 239 | 5.0 / 8   | 2.4 / 17  | 4.3 / –   |
| 1994     | 6.9 / 47  | 41.5 / 294 | 36.4 / 252 | 7.3 / 49  | 4.4 / 30  | 3.5 / –   |
| 1998     | 6.2 / 43  | 35.1 / 245 | 40.9 / 298 | 6.9 / 47  | 5.1 / 36  | 5.8 / –   |
| 2002     | 7.4 / 47  | 38.5 / 248 | 38.5 / 251 | 8.8 / 55  | 4.0 / 2   | 2.8 / –   |

FDP at the centre of the political spectrum with good relations with both sides; opposing them were the Free Democrats of North Rhine–Westphalia, Hesse and Lower Saxony, who identified themselves with the *national Liberal* tradition, and saw the FDP as a party for the bourgeoisie, reformed National Socialists and former soldiers from World War II. Both tendencies shared a disapproval of any economic *dirigisme* or political influence on the part of the churches, as well as the hope of a reunified Germany. Despite the presence of well-known ‘Old Liberals’ Theodor Heuss and Thomas Dehler, who were the leading figures in the Southern German parties, the ‘national’ side at first seemed the stronger force. It was soon suspected, though, that they condoned the infiltration of the FDP by former National Socialists, and as a result the ‘Old Liberals’ gained more and more influence until the middle of the 1950s.

This is not to imply that the early FDP was indiscriminating about who it was willing to form a coalition with. On the contrary, whilst representing a bourgeois body of voters, it was without doubt on the same side as the CDU, with whom it shared more in the way of economic policies than the SPD. The FDP formed

**General elections 1949–2002 (up to 1987 Federal Republic; since 1990, United Germany)**

a coalition with the CDU from 1949 to 1956, and then again from 1961 to 1966, under the chancellorship first of Konrad Adenauer and then, from 1963, of Ludwig Erhard. The latter, although a member of the CDU, was considered a genuine Liberal because of his economic policy convictions.

The main problem of the Adenauer era revolved around the question of national reunification. The Free Democrats suspected that, in supporting their goal of Western integration, Adenauer would neglect their other aim of reunification with East Germany and the Saar region. In 1956 the coalition fell apart, leaving the FDP as an opposition party for the first time. After the triumph of the 1961 elections under the slogan ‘With the CDU, but without Adenauer’ – who by that time was 85 years old – the FDP/CDU coalition returned, albeit with Adenauer still as chancellor. At least he was replaced within two years by the ‘father of the economic miracle’, Ludwig Erhard. But since differences remained surrounding the question of Ostpolitik, the coalition failed once again in 1966. Contributing to this failure were the increasing differences in opinion on the matter of fiscal policy. Yet again, the FDP found itself in

opposition – a position that lasted three years. During that period it found itself threatened by the possibility of electoral reform, just as it had been in 1956.

New similarities with the SPD were found on the topic of Ostpolitik. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 changed all consideration of the possibility of a reunified Germany. With reunification hopes pushed to the distant future, the FDP thought it more important to improve relationships with the Eastern block and between the two German nations. In 1969, Willy Brandt headed an SPD/FDP coalition for which Ostpolitik was the main basis. During this period the FDP changed its stance towards the centre-left and, particularly amongst the younger, more left-leaning party members, it was social-Liberal concepts that temporarily gained more influence. The highpoint of this trend was the so-called ‘Freiburg Programme’ of 1971, which placed greater emphasis on reforms in the areas of education, civil rights and social welfare. But, with the onset of the oil crisis and the changing economic framework of the mid 1970s, the FDP began to focus once again on its Liberal economic principles, which lead to increasing tensions within the SPD/FDP coalition. The

coalition eventually failed because of further differences over NATO rearmament, which reflected the coalition partners' more general disagreements in the areas of security and foreign policy. In 1969 the FDP provided Walter Scheel as Foreign Minister, followed in 1974 by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, both of whom sought to bring the Western partners together and to create understanding with the East, forming a foreign policy that would become a trademark of the FDP.

In the autumn of 1982 the FDP effected a change in government, abandoning the coalition with the SPD in order to create a coalition with the CDU. This was reflected in the change of chancellors from Helmut Schmidt to Helmut Kohl and meant a fundamental alteration in both foreign and economic policy. Within this context, the Federal Republic was able to act upon the changes that Gorbachev was undertaking in the East, and this culminated in the extraordinary success of 1989–90. Although it is Kohl who is generally credited with this feat, it was only with the help of the Liberal Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who worked alongside him as Foreign Minister, that the unification process was accomplished. In the first elections of the reunified Germany in 1990, the FDP was able to win 11% of the vote and continue a coalition with the CDU, as many of the leading politicians of the Liberals were originally from the DDR and had long supported reunification.

Within the unified Germany, however, the FDP slowly began to lose electoral support as a result of problems deriving from the unification process itself. Furthermore, at the same time the FDP began to adopt the ideals of Anglo-American 'neo-liberalism'. This new orientation, which was in some regards a return to the FDP politics of the fifties and early sixties, was finally evident in the 'Guidelines to the Liberal Civic Society', which was passed

as a resolution during the party conference in Wiesbaden in 1997 and in which a general reform of German economic and social policies was demanded. Nevertheless, in 1998 and 2002 the majority of the Germans placed their trust in more traditional German social policies – as exemplified, for instance, by the debate about the 'German Way' during the last election campaign – leaving the FDP, for the first time in its history, in opposition for two consecutive terms. However, the FDP is currently represented in five of the sixteen state governments.

The party's political changes meant changes in the nature of its supporters, which can only briefly be outlined here. In the beginning the FDP was mainly supported by the so-called 'old middle classes' ('Alter Mittelstand') of protestant master craftsmen, merchants and farmers and by former soldiers. During the period of the social-Liberal coalition the 'new middle classes' – employees and senior staff – became more important amongst the party organisation and mem-

bership, but since the split-up of the social-Liberal coalition the FDP has focused its efforts on the more self-supporting parts of the new middle classes to get support from independent retailers, the self-employed, doctors, lawyers and so on. Naturally these changes of pressure groups within the party have left some traces on the party's policies, but they have not changed its general attitude.

This brief historical sketch demonstrates that the FDP has had a much greater influence on Federal German history than the votes and the historiography would lead one to expect. It was the FDP that has facilitated all the important, fundamental decisions and changes of the last half century, because it was Federal German Liberalism that secured majority support for these changes in both Parliament and public life. The Liberals were the most determined advocates for a model of society that was based on private ownership and not socialist concepts. They passed laws on this basis, with the help of the larger CDU and even before

**Party Leaders of the FDP**

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| 1948–49    | Theodor Heuss<br>(MP Reichstag 1924–32, Federal President 1949–59)  |
| 1949–54    | Franz Blücher<br>(Minister of the Marshall Plan and Vice Chancellor 1949–57)  |
| 1954–57    | Thomas Dehler<br>(Justice Minister 1949–53, Head of Parliamentary Party 1953–57)  |
| 1957–60    | Reinhold Maier<br>(Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg 1945–53)   |
| 1960–68    | Erich Mende<br>(Head of Parliamentary Party 1957–63, Minister for Domestic German Relations and Vice Chancellor 1963–66)  |
| 1968–74    | Walter Scheel<br>(Minister for Economic Cooperation 1961–66, Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor 1969–74, Vice-president of Parliament, Federal President 1974–79) |
| 1974–85    | Hans-Dietrich Genscher<br>(Minister of the Interior 1969–74, Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor 1974–92)  |
| 1985–88    | Martin Bangemann<br>(General Secretary of FDP 1973–75, Economic Minister 1984–88, EU Commissioner 1989–99)  |
| 1988–93    | Otto Graf Lambsdorff<br>(Economic Minister 1977–84)   |
| 1993–95    | Klaus Kinkel<br>(Justice Minister 1991–92, Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor 1992–1998)  |
| 1995–2001  | Wolfgang Gerhardt<br>(Hessian State Minister 1987–1991, Head of Parliamentary Party since 1998)   |
| since 2001 | Guido Westerwelle<br>(General Secretary of FDP 1994–2001)   |



the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, in the Economic Council and the Parliamentary Council, the predecessors of the Federal Parliament. They supported Adenauer and his policy of Western integration and entrance into NATO, both of which were strongly opposed by the SPD. They criticised from early on the unshakable attitude of the first chancellor over his policies towards the East and always created new approaches that finally led to a policy of *détente*, although this could only be made effective through a change in political camps by the FDP. Through the swap in coalition partners, as a result of which they made many enemies, the FDP secured a successful shift in economic policies during the 1980s. It was also the FDP who secured – together with the CDU – the majority in favour of unification, against strong counteracting forces amongst the Social Democrats and the Greens. Even Berlin would not have become German capital without the votes of the Liberals – together with the East German Greens and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) – because a majority of the two main parties supported the ‘old’ capital, Bonn.

In addition to serving as a catalyst for political change, the FDP has also served to steer politics away from either extreme. This was particularly apparent in the 1970s and 1980s, when it first blocked the left wing of the SPD from gaining too much influence

Party logo from 2002

over economic policy, and later blocked the anti-communist hardliners in the CDU who wanted to break off communication with the East. Throughout these political manoeuvres, the strong man within the FDP was Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who was Minister of the Interior from 1969 to 1974, later Foreign Minister from 1974 to 1992, and also Vice Chancellor under both Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl. Both change and continuity are therefore firmly linked with the FDP, as the two political camps to left and right could seldom hold a majority of their own before 1998.

The increasing paralysis within the domestic policy of the Federal Republic since the 1990s (the ‘German Disease’) might be explained by the decreasing strength of the FDP within Parliament, and the party’s weak opposition to the extension of West Germany’s welfare system to the East and the resulting transformation of that system, despite the fact that the party held the Federal Ministry for the Economy for many years. However, one should not overlook the fact that, since 1972, this ministry has had much less political weight and influence in comparison with the Ministry of Finance, which has always been filled by a member of one of the two ‘big’ parties.

In retrospect, the official retirement of Hans-Dietrich Genscher in 1992 has been as much a loss for the FDP as the crises of the 1950s, and changes of coalition in 1969 and 1982, as Genscher, even after his withdrawal as party leader in 1985, had been the ‘strong man’ of the party. Under Genscher’s leadership, the party had always been able to recover from such critical events within a few years, but his exit from the political stage has led to a number of smaller crises that have evolved into a lasting crisis. This is evident in the sudden changes of party leader: Klaus Kinkel from 1993 to 1995, Wolfgang Gerhardt from 1995 to 2001 and, since 2001, Guido Westerwelle. Nevertheless, there has been a reassessment of

its programme that has transformed the FDP in the eyes of the public into the ‘most Western party in Germany’. However, this new programme and leader, supported mostly by young voters, were probably not the main reason for the outcome of the 2002 elections, in which the party gained far more votes than was generally expected. Nevertheless, the FDP remains in opposition.

In terms of the constants of Liberal politics over the history of the Federal Republic, two main points should be mentioned. First, economic and social policies have always followed a decisively Liberal bent, hostile to state intervention, but not excluding support for welfare state measures, especially during the social-Liberal coalition. However, for most of its history the FDP has had much less sympathies for the welfare state than – in my opinion – for example the Liberal Democrats in Britain.

Second, on the matter of the national question, the FDP has always supported the self-determination of Germans in both the West and the East. In the 1960s the national question, for the FDP, went hand in hand with a concept of foreign policy that was founded on *détente* and reliability without abandoning the aim of a peaceful reunification. While this was in harmony with the main elements of traditional nineteenth-century Liberalism, the third aim of that previous period – a constitutional state – is no longer reflected in Liberal programmes and policies. This is primarily due to the fact that the Federal Republic already corresponds to Liberal concepts of a constitutional state and that all the other important parties conform to this, with the possible exception of the successor to the SED, the PDS, which is represented in the Bundestag by only two MPs.

Since 1990 the ‘National Question’ has naturally lost any meaning. It has been replaced by issues like reliability in German foreign policy and the restructuring of the social system towards

more freedom and responsibility for the individual. If one believes that the best thing to have happened to the German nation during its strange development over the last century is the so called 'Arrival in the West' of a unified Germany, it can only be hoped that the FDP will be able to continue its role as a 'Third Force' and to make an important, if not decisive, contribution to the Federal Republic of Germany.

That the FDP as a 'Third Force' has contributed much is without question for the author. Germany needs a party with a clear orientation towards the Western world, including the whole North Atlantic area, both in respect of a common policy and common values. And maybe some day such a political entity can become the second or even first force, even if it does not look so at the moment or in the near future. However,

the history of Liberal parties in other parts of the world, especially in Great Britain, teaches us that this is not impossible.

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# SDP CARTOONS

July at Gallery 33, near London Bridge, saw an extensive exhibition of cartoons from the *Social Democrat* newspaper, many of which were reproduced, with commentary, in *Journal of Liberal History* 39. Liberal Democrat History Group resources ben-

efited from a donation made to the Group for each cartoon sold. Not all the cartoons were sold, however, and Gallery 33 (33 Swan Street, London SE1) is still holding a stock of originals. Whenever they gather a dozen enquiries they invite people

**Chris Radley (cartoonist), left; Maria Linforth-Hall, Gallery Administrator, bottom right, with a character from many of the cartoons!**

to come and browse. Anyone interested should contact Maria Linforth-Hall on 020 7407 8668 or [marvasol@btconnect.com](mailto:marvasol@btconnect.com). A 25% donation to History Group funds will be made on sales from those who identify themselves as *Journal* readers.

