

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

The farm depression goes to a vote

The fate of Chancellor Kohl's Christian Democratic government could be decided on Germany's farms.

Traditionally, farmers have probably been the most conservative constituency in all of Germany. There were times when Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Christian Democrats could count on 80% or more of the farm vote in any election. But times change. More and more farmers aren't voting for those whose policy has produced desperation in the farm sector; more and more farmers aren't voting at all.

The main reason is the bitter feeling among farmers that their hopes that Chancellor Kohl would improve their bad income situation have been betrayed. Although the farm crisis has been building over the past 10 years, especially worsening since the end of 1979 when interest rates started rising, the political blame for the current disaster is being placed on the Kohl government, in power since October 1982. Farmers have realized that there was no change from the anti-farming outlook of the Social Democratic governments of the period 1969-82. There has been as much talk of alleged "overproduction of food," and "damage to the natural environment by intensive farming," in Bonn since Kohl became chancellor as before.

German farmers have repeatedly called for state subsidies, to help bridge the annual gap between income and costs, now running at 20%. A farmer in Lower Saxony, one of the northern states of Germany, told *EIR* in mid-March: "Some years ago, I was able to put all the money on the counter whenever I wanted to buy a new machine for my farm. Today, I can't, and

I don't even get credit for necessary repair work. Imagine what happens if one of the machines breaks down."

The farmer said that most of the agricultural vote has gone to the Christian Democrats in previous years, but this time, farmers were in no mood to vote for any of "these politicians." He said that at least 30%, perhaps 50%, of farmers would abstain in the next elections.

The next elections in Lower Saxony are on June 15, for the state assembly. There are 135,000 farms in the state, many of them on the verge of bankruptcy. If the threat of abstention is real, it could mean losses of at least 5% for the Christian Democrats, which would suffice to produce an election victory for the opposition Social Democrats. That would be the prelude to an even bigger defeat for the Christian Democrats in the Jan. 25, 1987 elections for the national assembly.

After a defeat in the March 2 municipal elections in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, the Christian Democrats made a ridiculous effort to buy off the rage of the farmers. On March 3, the Christian Democratic leadership passed an "emergency farm program" promising additional funds for farmers. The farmers didn't buy it. The current president of the Lower Saxony Farm Association, Mr. Harms, characterized the new program with the words: "Fine, but we can't wait for the money to arrive a few years from now. What we need is something to put into our purses right now."

The state government of Lower Saxony hurriedly promised "special funds" for the poorer farmers, in order to secure their vote on June 15. However, as one of these poorer farmers told *EIR*: "There will be some money, sure, because there are elections. We will take that money, naturally, when it comes, but that doesn't mean we vote. This is the money we should have gotten long ago actually."

Public opinion polls and private probing into this pre-election mood have alarmed Christian Democratic leaders. The CDU's national party manager, Heiner Geissler, expressed this on March 23, when he admitted that the farm vote was "in jeopardy." Geissler appealed to the farmer's sense of a "citizen's responsibility," and called on farmers to "bear in mind what the elections on June 15 mean for the national political landscape."

The problem for the CDU and Geissler is that their appeals don't reach many of the farmers anymore. What has been reaching the farmers of Lower Saxony in large numbers is a pamphlet on agricultural policy, put out by Patriots for Germany, a non-partisan citizens' initiative. It calls for a moratorium on farm foreclosures, parity prices, and cheap credit. The CDU will either adopt the same program, or it won't be able to crack the mistrust among many farmers.

Talking to *EIR*, a whole group of farmers in the south of Lower Saxony laid down the verdict: "The candidate they [the CDU] put up in our district may be a good man, personally, but his party is no good. They promise us everything now, but after election day, we will have the same policy as before."

Thus, the fate of Chancellor Kohl could be decided on Germany's farms. It will take politicians very different from the Christian Democratic kind to win their vote.