

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Germany prepares for post-Kohl era

The new year is beginning with political turbulence, as voters protest austerity.

When Russian politician Aleksandr Lebed and Bavarian Gov. Edmund Stoiber met in Munich on Jan. 17, many observers interpreted this as a meeting between the future leaders of the two nations. Indeed, Stoiber is named among those who may become the next German chancellor.

But Lebed also met with the other potential new chancellor, Wolfgang Schäuble, a longtime ally of Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), who currently is the influential chairman of the CDU caucus in the parliament, the second most powerful position in the party, after Kohl's.

Kohl and his Bonn coalition government, comprised of the two Christian Democratic parties (CDU and Christian Socialist Union) plus the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), can be glad there are no national elections this year: The latest opinion polls among the electorate show that he would not receive enough votes to get re-elected. Voters are in an uproar over Kohl's austerity policy, especially over Finance Minister Theo Waigel's budget-cutting mania, which has just come up with the idea of taxing pensions, to help balance the budget.

That a wave of nationwide labor strikes has successfully undone the Kohl-Waigel project that passed a law in late September 1996 imposing a 20% cut in workers' sick pay, has hastened the erosion of support for this government. The irony is that those people in the banks and in industry who talked Kohl and Waigel into this provocation of labor interests, are now placing the blame for the political mess created by the sick-pay debacle

on the government. Not only labor, but also the neo-conservatives want to get rid of a government that they now consider expendable.

This has awakened sleeping dogs inside the CDU and CSU, who have their own reasons to call for a new chancellor and a new government, and who think that the next scheduled national elections, in autumn 1998, should not see the re-election of Kohl. There are also more and more politicians in the CDU and CSU who are convinced that important economic challenges, such as the fight against mass unemployment, and big projects, such as a long-overdue tax and banking structure reform, cannot be solved by this coalition with the neo-liberal FDP, but only in a Grand Coalition that would include the opposition Social Democrats (SPD).

The last Grand Coalition was formed at the peak of an economic recession, in late 1966. Those who are for a new Grand Coalition are also convinced that such a coalition should be formed before the end of this year, to make sure it can begin work before the election year of 1998. The other alternative would be to have early elections, also before the end of this year, which would prepare the ground for the formation of a new, Grand Coalition government.

All these scenarios for a change of government face one big problem, however: The German Constitution allows a change outside of regular elections only through the procedure of a "constructive" no-confidence vote—which means that an alternative candidate to the incumbent chancellor must announce himself, before the no-

confidence vote can be held. At this moment, there are only two candidates inside the Christian Democracy who have enough political backing to replace Chancellor Kohl: Schäuble (CDU) and Stoiber (CSU)—both of whom are keeping in close contact with influential currents in the SPD.

Developments in the first weeks of the new year show, indeed, that active preparations for a post-Kohl solution have begun in earnest.

Having consulted with Kohl, and apparently having received a green light, Schäuble brought the "succession question" into the public domain in an interview with the weekly *Stern*, on Jan. 8. He said that he "probably would not withstand the temptation" of becoming chancellor, were circumstances to arise in which the succession question were raised. He identified Stoiber as his main rival, adding that the question of Kohl's future would not materialize before 1998, anyway. However, by addressing the question, Schäuble "let the cat out of the bag."

The other development is that there is now an open revolt inside the CDU against Finance Minister Waigel—the one Bonn cabinet member who is held largely responsible for the growing disaster of financial, budget, and taxation policies. On Jan. 17, Christian Wulff, chairman of the CDU in the state of Lower Saxony, began the debate about replacing Waigel, and within three days, several other regional CDU leaders joined in. Ousting Waigel in Bonn, would also end his role as CSU chairman, however, and this, again, would benefit Stoiber, Waigel's main rival inside the CSU.

Schäuble, an old fox, sensed where this was heading: "They hit Waigel, but mean Kohl and myself," he said about Wulff's move.

The "post-Kohl era" has definitely begun.