

## Helmut Schmidt: Smoke and fire

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HE WAS so clever, and so rude with it, that his listeners sometimes realised too late that they had been outwitted and insulted. Helmut Schmidt did not just find fools tiresome. He obliterated them. The facts were clear and the logic impeccable. So disagreement was a sign of idiocy.

He was impatient, too, with his own party, which failed to realise the constraints and dilemmas of power. It wanted him to spend money West Germany did not have, and to compromise with terrorists who belonged in jail. He was impatient with the anti-nuclear left, who failed to realise that nuclear-power stations were safe, and that the Soviet empire thrived on allies' weakness. And he was impatient with post-Watergate America, which seemed to have lost its will to lead.

In good causes and in bad he was imperious. His addiction to nicotine trumped convention and courtesy. He smoked whenever and wherever he felt like it, even in non-smoking compartments of railway carriages. "Can you ask Mr Schmidt to put his cigarette out?" a passenger asked the conductor. "Would you mind telling him yourself?" came the timid reply.

Yet his brains, eloquence and willpower were unmatched in German politics. They brought him through the Nazi period, thrown out of the Hitler Youth for disloyalty but with an Iron Cross for bravery. He was one-quarter Jewish, which he concealed when he married his wife Loki and needed to prove his Aryan background. Only late in his career did an army document emerge which described him as ideologically sound.

In post-war West Germany he flourished, making a successful career in Hamburg's city government. By commandeering army units to deal with the floods of 1962 he broke a taboo, and the law, but gaining a deserved reputation as a doer.

He replaced Willy Brandt (the victim of an East German espionage operation) in 1974, at a time when the West was reeling from the oil-price shock, terrorism and America's humiliation in Vietnam. With his friend Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (another fluent English-speaker), he launched the idea of summit governance to deal with the world's economic woes. G7 meetings in those days were brief, informal affairs with real conversations and real decisions, not the micromanaged showpieces of today. Agreements made then laid the foundations for the modern European Union.

Other leaders did not find him easy to deal with. He detested the weakness of Jimmy Carter's administration, and the two men got on badly. His foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, recalled that "Schmidt was of the opinion that the world would be fairer if he was president of the United States and Carter the German chancellor." The Israeli leader Menachem Begin called him "unprincipled, avaricious, heartless and lacking in human feeling" after he said that Germans living in a divided nation should feel sympathy for Palestinian self-determination.

### **Fairness, not fads**

His toughness towards the nihilist terrorists of the Red Army Faction outraged many liberal-minded Germans, who felt that extensive snooping, interrogations and quasi-military justice had dreadful echoes of the Nazi period. They flinched when he urged America to beef up its nuclear presence in Europe in response to the Soviet Union's growing stockpile of medium-range missiles. But for him social democracy was based on fairness, not fads. He had no time for greenery, feminism or culture wars. Anyone with a vision should go and see a doctor, he once said. Far more important was bolstering the welfare system, building more houses and making Germany safe at home and abroad.

Unfortunately his Social Democratic party thought differently, as did, increasingly, his liberal coalition partner, the FDP. Flexibility and charm were not Mr Schmidt's strong points. A bit more of both might have saved him.

His nemesis was Helmut Kohl, the beefy Christian Democrat leader. Mr Schmidt underestimated his rival, mocking his mumbled provincial diction. He himself was an accomplished music and art critic, as elegant a wordsmith in prose as in speech. Mr Kohl's main interest outside politics was food. But the conservative leader's willingness to listen and do deals made Mr Schmidt look arrogant and out of touch. As his coalition disintegrated, the chancellor, in government since 1969, suddenly found himself in the political wilderness. His party (like many in Europe spooked by Ronald Reagan's unabashed anti-communism) veered leftwards.

Mr Schmidt, still puffing away on his beloved menthols (stockpiled in case of a ban) and playing the piano (of which he had a near-professional mastery), varied his views hardly an iota. As publisher of *Die Zeit*, Germany's most heavyweight weekly, he became its leading commentator—more influential there in shaping opinion, perhaps, than as an embattled chancellor. He deplored worries about climate change: population growth was a far bigger problem. Intervention in other countries' affairs was a mistake (though he made an exception for Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine: that was a justified response to Western meddling). Unpopular views—but the facts and logic were clear. Anyone who disagreed was stupid.