

BWB-15  
Voters Initiative:  
A Plus for Student Protest

Im Rosental 96  
53 Bonn  
West Germany  
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In the aftermath of West Germany's fierce election campaign, while Social and Free Democrats were still dickering over the guidelines for a mini-coalition of the left, Willy Brandt and other Socialists did not forget to thank a small group of intellectuals, churchmen, journalists and students who helped to tip West Germany's balance away from conservatism for the first time since the Federal Republic was formed twenty years ago.

"Brandt called us the day after the election," said former Sozialdemokratische Hochschulbund leader Erdmann Linde, one of the student founders of Guenter Grass' "Sozialdemokratische Waehler-initiative," the first German equivalent of an American-style "Citizens for ..." independent voters' organization. "And I think he had something to thank us for," he added proudly. "In the cities where we had a strong local voters' initiative group, the SPD percentage of vote increase was way beyond the 3.4 percent national average. In Muenster (where Catholic and Protestant theologians stumped for SPD, breaking the tabu many German Christians had followed since the Adenauer era of voting only for the Christian Democratic Union or its Bavarian wing, the Christian Social Union) the SPD had a 9.9 percent increase. In Flensburg, an SPD candidate unseated the CDU incumbent and raised the vote increase to 6.7 percent; in Oldenburg the SPD got 7.1 percent; in Hamburg 6.8 percent, and in Duesseldorf, the voters gave an SPD man a direct mandate instead of sending Gerhard Schroeder (the current defense minister) back to the parliament."

Novelist Guenter Grass' five-month tour of the hustings obviously had the hoped-for effect on German voters, but the fact that an independent voters' campaign found fertile ground at all is rooted in the years of student protest that separate the 1965 and 1969

elections. Four years ago when Grass first stepped into the political spotlight, as much to defend his friend Willy Brandt from the whisper campaign about Brandt's illegitimate birth and his one-time Norwegian citizenship as to plead for an SPD victory, the declamatory style of political meetings was still in vogue. German voters turned out to hear a political speech--or a sermon in varying degrees of fire and brimstone--but it seldom occurred to the listeners to pose questions themselves. Or if they did, the questions were written out and handed up to the speaker's table where they could be sifted through before the politician answered.

But student protest politicized the German Mr. Everyman. During the weeks before the passage of the controversial emergency laws in the spring of 1968, housewives going shopping and music lovers attending a concert were involved in political discussions almost against their will. On the streetcorners of every major city students passed out pamphlets and provoked their fellow citizens with questions, first about university reforms and then about reforming society. Sit-ins and teach-ins attracted more than just a student audience. And the average citizen, if he did or didn't agree with student protests against the Vietnam war or the campaign to stop circulation of Axel Springer's conservative newspapers, found himself arguing about the rights and wrongs of German society, articulating opinions that he possibly didn't know he had.

"The time is over when politicians can have a Kundgebung, a declaratory meeting," said Friedhelm Drautzburg, another former SHB leader and the 31-year-old law graduate who acted as Grass' driver while he criss-crossed Germany before the September elections. "There has to be a discussion now, and sometimes this puts a real strain on the older politicians. But this is certainly the contribution of the students."

Before this election, everybody was asking questions. "The young people ask more political questions, about the tendencies toward fascism in the Western world," explained Drautzburg, "the older generation asks questions about rent and the price of groceries. But I think that is probably true all over--the young people are likelier to forego the daily problems; they're more interested in the big picture."

Novelist Grass agrees that "the average citizen's demand for information and factual discussion is definitely stronger" in 1969 than four years earlier, "and the student protest has contributed much to that. The voter's unconditional loyalty to a certain party no longer exists."

Grass planned his campaign speeches accordingly, and politicians of all parties were virtually forced by the citizenry to do likewise--setting aside some time for discussion at the end of every rally.

At 110 major rallies, and dozens more impromptu sidewalk and factory and beer-hall gatherings in the final weeks of the campaign, Grass spoke as an independent urging his fellow citizens to "vote SPD--it's time for a change." At the evening rallies the novelist spoke about forty minutes, and then answered questions from the audience for another forty to sixty minutes, even longer if there were still eager participants. The sidewalk and factory politicking were straight question and answer sessions.

Recognition of East Germany, co-determination for industrial workers, the Oder-Neisse line, the emergency laws, capitalism versus fascism, a ban for the NPD, the wildcat strikes--"Grass shies away from no question," as a roly-poly young public administration student, Karl Heinz Bentele, 22, of the University of Constance, announced over the loudspeaker system of the VW campaign bus. "You're all heartily invited to come and discuss with him tonight at the Sartory Hall in Cologne."

Some two thousand accepted the invitation that night in Cologne, contributing fifty cents each to help pay the independent voters' group expenses, and about 1800 attended the rally the previous night in Bad Godesberg.

At Bad Godesberg, the bedroom of Bonn where many diplomats and government officials live, the crowd filled the hall to standing room only ten minutes before the rally was to begin at 8 p.m. A sense of excitement pervaded the room, an anticipation linked as much with waiting for West Germany's most famous post-war novelist as with the expected political discussion. A polling institute which did a sample questioning of the audience at several Grass rallies discovered that two-thirds came to the meetings "more because they wanted to hear Grass than because



A high school student listens intently to Guenter Grass' question and answer session on the New Market Square in Cologne. The poster behind him pictures Willy Brandt and the slogan, "That you may also live tomorrow in peace--SPD."

they wanted to hear about the SPD." Grass attracts a broad audience--high school and university students, civil servants and white collar workers, some laborers. The survey established that a third were young people under 20, almost two-thirds were 21 to 50, and only ten percent were above 50. Although the SPD is the Federal Republic's largest party (750,585 members), only one in four was an SPD member and one in three was an "already convinced SPD voter."

When Grass appeared, a man of medium height with rumpled dark hair, a droopy walrus mustache and uneven, nicotine-stained teeth, businessmen, housewives and students crowded to the front, bringing up their books or pamphlets for autographs.

After a short introduction and speech by the local SPD candidate, Grass took the podium, speaking in low, almost monotonous tones, losing some of his best lines by lack of dramatic emphasis. Manfred Luetgenhorst of the Abendzeitung described a rally in Munich, and it fits the scene at Bad Godesberg as well: "As an election campaigner, Guenter Grass offers nothing more than his political arguments. If one expected the descriptive effects of a poet, he meets instead a man who makes a particular effort to play down emotions and attitudes."

"I try to speak plainly," Grass told me the next day in Cologne as I toured with him from street corner to beer-hall to the evening rally in the Sartory Hall. "I never shout, but that doesn't mean I can't talk tough with a soft voice."

He didn't have to talk tough in Bad Godesberg, where his most provocative questioner was an innocent-looking blond high school student in blue turtleneck, a member of the CDU-supported Junge Union (Youth Union). When the audience began to laugh as the youngster fumbled for words, Grass scolded them: "Please be quiet, it's so good when the Youth Union present themselves." Nor did he take a pompous attitude when an old man, probably drunk, shouted questions at him about "Germany's lost territories."

"I know what I lost in Danzig," replied Grass, whose birthplace is now called Gdansk in Poland, "but I also know how the CDU refugee politics has hampered the refugees in putting down roots here."



Left: Grass and a Cologne SPD candidate atop the VW bus he used for his five-months' campaign tour.

Above: "Why not forbid the NPD?" asked this young apprentice salesman. "Because it would just cover up the problems, not solve them democratically," replied Grass.



But in Cologne on the following evening, Grass expected trouble from the younger generation. His "Es-Pe-De" campaign, as he spelled it out, had been anathema to the radical left among German students, and in the first months his rallies were occasionally disturbed by demonstrations and provocative chants. His student helpers from the SHB, the student group of the Social Democrats, are from the "right wing," admitted Drautzburg, Bentele and Wilhelm Vollmann, the three young men who handled the microphones and loudspeakers during the day in Cologne. Vollmann, 30, a psychology graduate and currently a member of the SHB governing council, explained that the moderates of SHB are "not anti-parliamentary, but we work outside and inside the parliamentary system. We have to orient our politics to the conscience of the public. We can't go beyond that or we're isolated."

Grass, who is not a member of the SPD, improved his reputation with some SHB left-wingers earlier this spring by helping to persuade the party not to terminate its financial support for the rebellious and outspoken student organization. Still, the left faction of the SHB, which generally follows the radical SDS philosophy, considers Grass a liberaler scheisser, someone who talks a lot of liberal bull.

"For a long time Grass put all the leftist students in one pot," explained Bentele. "But after he signed a denunciation of Franz Josef Strauss (for cabling the minister president of Bavaria that "the members of the extra-parliamentary opposition act like animals, for whom the application of laws that are made for humans is not possible"), the leftists are now more ready to work with him."

Grass claims to understand why the far left considers him an opponent, but he finds the reasons flimsy. "The student complaints against the SPD (for example, their chant 'Wer hat uns verraten, Sozialdemokraten'--who betrayed us, the Social Democrats) came because they expected more reforms from the SPD," said Grass. "I get impatient when the APO (the extra-parliamentary opposition) says the Social Democrats betrayed them. When a minority acts like a majority, then I'm hard against it. Thanks to Strauss, now they've learned where their real enemies are."

Adding that he does not consider himself a liberaler



Above: Grass and his student helper Karl Heinz Bentele dashing off to the next stop--I was dashing too and didn't focus.

Below: Young workers hear Grass explain why he's not an SPD member: "The important thing is involvement, not a party card."





scheisser, Grass said that his contribution, "as someone who is beyond 40, is to keep the discussion between the generations reasonable." Student protests won't cure all of society's ills, he averred. "It won't prevent going bald."

Although Grass is no friend of the far left, he told me as we bounced to the evening rally in the back of his VW bus that he hopes the protesting students "can put their work into constructive form...protest is not the only form of political discussion." He strongly objects to such leftist stock phrases as "capitalism leads to fascism," and he had a spirited retort when a student asked him that night, "Why have you talked about fascism and not mentioned capitalism? Do you think you can have adequate reforms within the class society?"

"Some of you say capitalism leads to fascism," said Grass. "But you can make conclusions in both directions. Mussolini started as a radical socialist but when he hit against anarchism it became fascism." He does not believe in revolution, the novelist continued. "I say we must try to expand parliamentary democracy through evolutionary methods. We can bring the dangerous things in capitalism under control through evolutionary reforms--Sweden is an example. But I shy away from the victims of revolution, and after the revolution, the counter-revolution sets in. After the French Revolution came Napoleon, and after the Bolshevik Revolution came Stalin."

Unfortunately, Grass fell victim to the same disease of shorthand terminology at the Cologne rally that night in a frustrating discussion with an attractive young leftist girl whose arguments were too muddled to make her point clear. Although she did not condone the invasion of Czechoslovakia, she called Grass to task for labeling the new German Communist Party as "neo-Stalinist" because it had. "You would have to call the SPD a neo-imperialist party because it has not denounced the U. S. war in Vietnam," she argued. But as Vollmann, one of Grass' SHB helpers, explained to me, Grass' choice of words was ill-advised. "The label doesn't fit because you can't equate neo-Stalinist with whether a Communist party condoned the invasion or not. The Rumanian Communist party is certainly Stalinist within the country, but they didn't participate in the invasion."

Such pitfalls may be unavoidable in a mass meeting, we agreed, but Vollmann added that Grass is nonetheless that rare German



At a sidewalk stop, this woman asked Grass about inflation, if the SPD would boost wages to meet rising costs. Grass commented later: "Older women were always CDU voters, but they're switching to SPD. After they're widowed, they experience a second maidenhood. Away from the pressure of a husband, they want to vote SPD."

intellectual who can speak to the masses, and gain the attention of middle, left and right. "He is one of the few novelists who can speak to uneducated people; he doesn't have the literary arrogance that others have."

Many politically-active students, unfortunately, still don't have that knack. "When people hear the complicated, theoretical speech of students in an election rally," Bentele said, "the curtains go down immediately in the minds of some young workers and the older generation. That's not the way to make politics. At some of the first rallies, the APO would holler 'why this dumb question?' when an older man asked about increased old-age pensions. That turns the crowd against them. Some students are not willing to discuss anything but what they think are the important problems. And most people still are not ready to question the system."

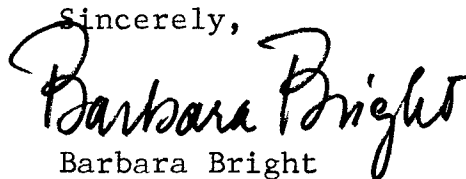
Getting the chance to put in your two cents' worth during a political discussion has become, nonetheless, a contagious idea for the German population...and that's what Grass had in mind when he initiated the "Waehlerinitiative."

"I want to help the SPD," he told me, "but I also want to open up the opportunity for a discussion among the voters." Indeed, the voters' organization is remaining active now that the elections are over. Eventually, Grass and his associates

hope to work toward some kind of election primary system for West Germany similar to what we know in the United States...so that the choice of political candidates is not determined by the party big-wigs but by the voters themselves.

"If we put through the election reforms," explained Bentele, "then we want the voters to nominate their candidates, not the parties. The important thing about the voters' initiative is that people are working for a party without being members of it, and that they demand some response from the party afterwards."

Such ideas for democratization of the German political system may be half-steps in the radical leftist student view, but at least it's in the right direction. Said Bentele, "the big win for student protest is that, slowly, we're getting rid of the idea that politics is such a dirty business, and we're learning that politics is the direct responsibility of the people."

Sincerely,  
  
Barbara Bright

Received in New York on October 16, 1969.