



The Last Invincible has gone to walk the Path with the Giants **Obituary of Helmut Schmidt 1918 - 2015**

The news of his death has brought a long pause around the world. Helmut Schmidt, the former German Chancellor and an iconic figure of European Social Democracy passed away. At the age of 96 he, the Last Invincible of a generation that restored the progressive movement after the tragedy of the Second World War, has now joined his Comrades walking away on the Path of Giants of our history.



Helmut Schmidt was born in Hamburg in 1918 to a family of teachers. While active politically already in the 1930s, he also signed up to the army ahead of the break of war. His bravery, among others on the Eastern Front and during the Siege of Leningrad, was recognised with the Iron Cross. The second half of the war saw him serving in the Ministry of Aviation and being captured as war prisoner by the British army. Noticeably in his later years, much was reported

about his origins in the press, however the media never actually accomplished to create the desired sensation, mainly because he remained open and direct about that. This personal integrity regarding all the chapters of his life made him command popular respect and thus understanding, being of an invaluable example for reconciliation among so many in the proceeding times of divided Germany.

The year 1946 saw Helmut Schmidt returning to his city and resume his studies. He did not follow the originally intended path of becoming an architect, but instead pursued political sciences and economy. He completed these swiftly, succeeding also in an exam to become a teacher. In parallel to entering the University, he joined the SPD – which in *Der Kleine Geschichte der SPD* is noted as a moment of reunification of many activists from different streams of the left, all cruelly experienced within the war: Willy Brandt, Fritz Erler, Willy Eichler, Carlo Schmid, Adolf Andt, Herbert Wehner. One can only imagine how hard it must have been to recover hope, to set a new agenda and to deal with pain and ruin around those days. Hence the task these Giants took upon themselves was monumental indeed. Schmidt's motivation is said to be double-folded at this point. He wanted to act, to find ways to bring relief to the population of his beloved Hamburg – whilst also invest energy in rejuvenating the students movement. The following years saw him therefore a founding member and subsequently a leader of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, as also as an advisor at the Hamburg's Minis-

try for Economy and Transport. His contemporaries remember him as ambitious, knowledgeable and extremely efficient – which qualities would characterise him in all the posts he ever served in.

In 1953 he stood as a candidate and joined the SPD delegation in the Bundestag. These were challenging times, with the CDU gaining unprecedented power under the leadership of Konrad Adenauer – and hence the SPD seeking both encouragement to thrive and ideas to look forward. Helmut Schmidt became one of the key figures of this process – being an outspoken critic of the government. His rhetorical talent gained him the nickname *Schmidt-Schnauze* (Schmidt – The Lip) and helped pave his way onto the national board of the SPD.

While the subsequent elections did not break Adenauer's rule, Schmidt withdrew from the Bundestag and became a member of the Senate for Hamburg. There, once again he proved himself as a man of action – rebuilding the region and providing the relief to numerous victims of the 1962 flood. While facing this disaster, he didn't hesitate to resort himself to all available resources – even if using the army for “internal purpose” was forbidden at that time in the Constitution. Commenting on the fact that he effectively broke the law to help people in need, he simply replied that “*he wasn't in charge – he took charge!*” Beyond any doubt, he was a man who saw beyond schemes and made the impossible achievable.

In 1965 he returned to the national political stage and upon returning to the Bundestag, he became a leader of the Parliamentary Delegation in the SPD and then also Deputy Chairperson of the party. Unlike other SPD Chancellors, however he never actually presided the party. In 1969 he became Minister for Defence, on which post he set to reform the army. He ensured shortening of the period of military service duty and a better education for military personnel (establishing two military academies). Following these years, he also served as Minister for Economy and later Finances.

On 16th May 1974 Helmut Schmidt became Chancellor, following on this post Willy Brandt – who had resigned in the midst of the espionage scandal. He assumed the position aware of all the hopes entrusted in him – introducing, among others, rules of transparency and numerous policies enabling more efficient use of the state budget. In his years the Keynesian paradigm was put into practice which led to a reduction in the unemployment rate, an increase of pensions and modernisation through vast public investments. He safeguarded the economy and the country against the storm of the financial crisis of the 1970s, enabling it to prosper with just small cuts towards the end of the period. While his internal proceedings serve until today as an example of discipline governance, effectively these years have seen him active internationally. For the neighbourhood policies - he was the one to open together with Valery Giscard-d'Estaing a new chapter of Franco-German relationships, which he continued later with Francois Mitterrand. In parallel Schmidt assisted the crisis-consumed Poland. Schmidt was one of the founding fathers of the world economic forum and signatory of the Helsinki Act, leading to the establishment of OECD. He was a convinced European and Internationalist.

After the years in government and regardless of the bitter end of it, Helmut Schmidt remained politically active. In 1982 together with Gerald Ford he established the AEI World Forum, and later he was one of the founding members of a committee supporting the creation of European Monetary Union

and the European Central Bank. In his work through all these years he was able to combine bravery in looking forward, pragmatism in taking action and consequence in ensuring a desired conclusion.

Till his last days Helmut Schmidt also continued working as a publisher of the German Weekly 'Die Zeit'. Every article he wrote and published was a piece of clear guidance, of political and economic analysis, which will be dearly missed.

The last time FEPS came into contact with Helmut Schmidt was 4 years ago. It was during the annual SPD Congress in Berlin in 2011, when he delivered the most inspiring and impelling speech entitled "[Germany for, with and in Europe](#)". He set as always a clear, uncompromised agenda for social democrats to regain their political primacy over the historical peace project and ensure the future of the troubled, disintegrating Union. While he articulated his last sentence was spoken, with a smile of accomplishment he lit his cigarette. It was more than a habit – it was his attribute, something that for so many years remained as a symbol of his non-conformism and independence. It was something that against all he refused to give-up. And in the grey smoke he exited the stage, accompanied by the applause of delegates and friends, who remained silent for a while and only minutes after he had finished were able to break out of the trance. So also today, we take a moment to stop – with all that is ordinary - to reflect and to commemorate. We pay tribute and respect to Helmut Schmidt, the man of big ideas, conviction and action. The last Invincible – who together with the late Egon Bahr - joined his Comrades on the walk away through the Path of Giants...

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