

Parliamentary Politics in a Multinational Setting: Late Imperial Austria

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Es ist alles sehr kompliziert.

—Fred Sinowatz, amateur-philosopher, 1985.

Though this be madness, yet there's method in't.

—William Shakespeare, four centuries earlier.

Austrian Chancellor Sinowatz found politics very complicated indeed when faced with a political system that consisted of three parties only, practically all of which were ethnically German. What indeed would he have made of the *Reichsrat* that used to meet in the very same building on the Ring a century before? That unruly gathering (even after the *Ausgleich* had converted the Hungarians into distinguished foreigners) consisted of representatives of no less than nine different ethnic groups that between them easily accounted for at least two or three dozen “parties.” No wonder historians have echoed (or rather: forestalled) Sinowatz’s dictum and turned away from that chaos with obvious disgust. Most of them have not chosen to follow the convoluted patterns of Austria’s domestic politics after the turn of the century. Conventional wisdom has it that parliamentary politics after the Badeni crisis does not belong to the news that is fit to print. Thus, rather fortunately for a new generation of backward-looking prophets, there are quite a number of nooks and crannies that are still unexplored even in terms of a fairly conventional political narrative. This is what, under different headings, I have been doing for the past few years. The following pages offer a few preliminary conclusions.¹

I. Cleavages: Left and Right, Liberal vs. Clerical

The best prospect of making any sense of old Austrian parliamentary politics seems to lie in the concept of “cleavages”; The political history of the first few decades could almost be summed as both a combination and a trade-off between the two dominant cleavages, i.e., the national question and the question of “clerical” vs. “anti-clerical” (=liberal). A superficial reading of the evidence might lead us to conclude that national conflicts got worse as time went by, i.e., that they increasingly dominated political life in the late Habsburg Monarchy. As a matter of fact, though, national battle lines tended to be drawn much firmer at the *beginning* of our period. Deviations from that voting pattern were more frequent and substantial later on. The reason for this is, of course, the multiplication of cleavages towards the end of the monarchy that tended to dilute the pull of national solidarity as other issues increasingly divided MPs. The very existence of an increasingly lively party conflict within ethnic groupings provides an explanation for the possibly greater shrillness and/or showmanship that was so much in evidence in the later decades.

The opening period may be dated from 1861 to 1873, with the introduction of direct elections to the *Reichsrat* that crowned the German Liberals successful defense against the federalist experiment of Count Hohenwart. In this period the one national contingent that did not conform to national impulses were the Germans (and the Italians). Of course, the electoral system also played its part in enjoining strict observance of national solidarity. Dissidents could already be weeded out at a lower level. Under the system established in 1861 MPs were elected by the provincial diets. On the face of it that might have meant that the majority could monopolize the slate of MPs in its province. That was prevented by the curial system, however. The three or four different curiae (great landowners; towns—including, for that purpose, the Chambers of Commerce; country districts) had to be represented in the *Reichsrat* delegation of each province. In the case of the bigger crownlands even certain regional groups of constituencies had to be individually represented.² Thus it proved impossible to deny the minority group its representation totally. The system certainly made for greater conformity amongst the MPs from the same province, though. The famed hold of Herbst on the Bohemian deputies, for instance, was resented not only by the Czechs but also by many of the Germans.) One of the reasons why the Italians found it difficult to agree on a common policy was that even though few in number they came from no less than five different provinces. Amongst the Slavs even big national groups, like the Czechs or the Poles, derived their whole representation such as it was from one or at the most two crownlands.

The other reason why the Germans and Italians split whereas other national groups did not was an ideological one. Only in the case of these two most “Westernized” groups did the cleavage between clericals and anti-clericals actually surpass the national cleavage. In both their cases from the very beginning the urban anti-clericals held the upper hand, at least among the select voters of the 1861 constitution that comprised something like the upper fifth of the male adult population (even though there were lots of local inconsistencies to that rule of thumb).³ However, the almost entirely rural clericals fiercely resisted the arrogant hegemony of the Liberals. On the other hand, in the case of the Slavs, conservatives of a clerical hue were still dominant. The urban liberal minority, however, perhaps because of the primacy it accorded to national grievances was content to go along with the majority and only make its ideological dissent felt in minor cases. Obviously, too, one could expect that for the underdogs national solidarity would be much more of an imperative than for the *beati possidentes*. (Besides, the very same German Liberal elite that denied the Slav anti-clericals their equal rights also served to effectively shield them from the adverse effects of their collaboration with the clericals.

Put another way: For the sake of national unity they could safely vote for the most hidebound measures their “reactionary” allies proposed, knowing that they would not be passed anyway.)

Thus, from 1861 to 1879 the Right in Parliament meant all the Slavs (except for the Ukrainians) plus the German Clericals; the Left meant German and Italian Liberals only (plus the very few Ukrainians). This split among the Germans, not yet paralleled by a similar split amongst the Slavs, formed the basis of Count Taaffe’s so-called Iron Ring from 1879 to 1891.⁴ As soon as the German Liberals (and their few allies) lost their overall majority during the elections of 1879, the Right commanded a majority which they quickly used to ensure against any possible backlash by the Electoral Reform Bill of 1882. It was only in 1891, when the selfsame cleavage that had afflicted the Germans also started to appear amongst the Czechs, that Taaffe lost his hold on Parliament. The result, after two years of ceaseless maneuvering, was a Great Coalition made up of all the traditional parties—both Left and Right—whose purpose was to build a dam against what they saw as a dangerous tide of “radicals” of all hues.

II. Middle-class Radicalism and Government above Party

The rise of middle-class radicalism during the 1880’s meant another cleavage opening, this time one founded on socio-economic grievances that pitted the proverbial *petit bourgeois* outsiders against the “upper crust” of the Establishment. In many cases these new groups were anti-semitic. Their position on the clerical vs. anti-clerical axis was ambivalent (just as, significantly enough, was their position on the rural vs. urban axis). Even though the most famous of these middle-class radicals, Lueger, ended up as a firm believer in the rights of the Church, the same was not true of many of his former comrades-in-arms. They all claimed to be the “true” national party, not just the play-thing of an effete elite. Yet by their very existence they further weakened the national solidarity they claimed to represent. Middle-class radicalism, by its very nature, was more important for the Germans. The Young Czech party combined the characteristics both of a belated version of the old style Liberals and a precocious one of the middle-class radicals. Among the Poles one might perhaps regard the Endeks (“NDs”= National Democrats) and some of the Peasant Parties as (considerable) variations on the same theme.⁵ The rise of these parties threatened to make parliamentary government a complicated process coalition building. More importantly, it led to a new conceptual framework for government in a multi-national getting. Up to then, all the authoritarian elements of the Constitution notwithstanding, the formation of governments had more or less followed standard

parliamentary procedure. The cabinet was entrusted to the man who was either drawn from or at least was able to command a reliable parliamentary majority. That at least formally meant domination of one ethnic group by representatives of another. In the first two decades this often led to an exodus (a boycott) of parliament by minority groups who opposed the constitutional foundations of the *Reichsrat*. The Czechs had continuously boycotted parliament for no less than 16 years, from 1863 to 1870. The threat of a similar German strike had twice, in 1867 and in 1871, helped to swing the Emperor round to their point of view.⁶

One of the leaders of the middle-class radicals, Otto Steinwender, the founder of the German People's Party, took his cue from problematic. In a multi-national state, he claimed, parliamentary government on a British model "that ignored doctrine" could and would not work because no nation would for long suffer to be ruled by others. His alternative was an impartial government-above-party (and nation!) that would have to work with changing majorities. This theory re-emphasized the separation of powers. It was bound to put a stop to the gradual conversion of constitutional monarchies into parliamentary systems where the executive branch of government was subordinated to the will of the majority. That appealed to the powers-that-be. On one hand, Steinwender's doctrine, with hindsight, smacked of a certain naiveté. Flushed by his own success in uncovering a lot of shady dealings by ministers of the day, he certainly overestimated the power of parliamentary scrutiny when faced with bureaucratic obstruction. On the other hand, as far as the national balance of powers was concerned, the independence of the administration from party interference could only work to the benefit of the German Liberals since the bulk of the civil service (especially the academically trained higher grades) was drawn from their ranks.

The first two years of Badeni's government provided a working example of Steinwender's theory. The legislative achievements of 1896 were impressive indeed. It included the experimental introduction of universal suffrage by the creation of a fifth curia of general voters and the introduction of a progressive income tax—albeit with the heavenly top rate of no more than 5%. (Some of the wicked radicals had advocated a semi-communist 10%.) Badeni succeeded in keeping all sides guessing. The budget of 1897 was still passed by a huge margin. Only a motley collection of heterogeneous elements voted against it. Ominously enough, these included the two strongest groups from Bohemia, i.e., both the Young Czechs and the German Progressives who had just broken loose from the old style Liberals.

However, as far as Bohemia was concerned, Badeni had a few tricks up his sleeve. His aim was to produce a lasting reconciliation between German and Czech liberals

that would provide a more permanent foundation for his government. There can hardly be a more fitting illustration of Karl Kraus' adage that "well-meaning is the opposite of good." Badeni's Language Ordinances proved to be pure dynamite. Far from being seen as impartial, the Polish count started to be the universal bugbear of Germans all over the Empire. Mayhem broke loose.

Even if the Badeni crisis did not produce the end of worthwhile parliamentary politics in Austria, as is sometimes implied, it certainly changed the terms of fighting. Conventional warfare (i.e., standard parliamentary politics) was at an end. Up to now the weapon of last resort of every fundamentalist opposition had been the boycott. It was the weapon of choice for groups like the Bohemian Tories who above all wanted to appeal to the Emperor. After 1897 fundamentalist opposition chose to resort to obstruction even if that meant further antagonizing the monarch. Obstructionist antics became famous for the rowdy scenes it sparked in the Lower House (in the USA, Mark Twain lovingly described some of the extravaganzas he had witnessed while in Vienna). Those really were extravaganzas. The extremely loose Standing Orders of 1875 enabled so-called "technical obstruction" to prevent any legislative business from being conducted without having to bother anybody's lungs with an actual filibuster (though there were a few famous filibusters, to be sure).⁷ Fifty MPs were enough to call for a roll-call that lasted for several hours, even on minor technicalities. Twenty MPs could ask for an emergency debate. Only the Standing Orders themselves could not be amended that way.

Thus, parties that acted against the spirit of the constitution could not be defeated without violating the letter of it. Something had to give. The government wanted its supporters in parliament to shoulder the blame for cutting the Gordian knot by somehow denying the minority its rights. The majority of the Right in its turn wanted the government to use its powers of decree against the obstructing Germans—in effect staging a coup d'état. In the end, in the fall of 1897, the majority lost its nerve first. With no regard for the Standing Orders it pushed through the so-called "Lex Falkenhayn" that gave emergency powers to the Speaker of the House. Street fighting now spread to the House itself. Fisticuffs took place and even daggers were drawn. Schonerer and all the Social Democrats had to be dragged out of the House by the police. At the last moment, the Emperor intervened and dismissed Badeni. Still, the crisis dragged on as the Language Ordinances were not withdrawn for another two years.

The impasse was perfect. The German parties (once again, with the exception of the Clericals but including the first few Social Democrats who had been elected to the House in 1897) had sworn an oath not to stop obstructing before the offending Ordinances had been abolished. The Czechs just as obviously were bent on exacting their revenge by the

very same means if the government bowed to German pressure. This is what happened when the Emperor finally relented in the fall of 1899. Logically, there was no way out of the impasse. Whatever any government did or proposed it would fall foul of one side or the other. It fell to Ernest von Koerber, who took over as Prime minister in the first few days of the new century, to square the circle.

III. Breaking the Deadlock: Koerber's Strategy of Working with the Radicals

Koerber indeed produced the miracle demanded of him. After direct negotiations between the warring national parties had broken down, he called snap elections around Christmas 1900. After three years of exacerbated strife no one expected any moderates to win. The elections produced the expected lurch to the left—Schonerer's brand of Pan-Germans became the biggest party in the German part of Bohemia, even defeating the Social Democrats in all but one of their seats in the curia of general voters. On the Czech side, too, a new breed of states rights Radicals straddled the gulf between the Young Czechs and the Socialists. Previous governments had tried to rely on what they saw as the moderates. In the end, however, those moderates had almost always proved unreliable and caved in before the onslaught of the radicals. The key to Koerber's success was that he realized that he had to work with the Radicals. Once he had won them over, the moderates had no choice but to follow suit. Those middle-class radicals were such more unashamedly committed to advancing the interests of their clientele. They prided themselves on their hard-headed "realpolitik." The way to win them over was Koerber's Investment Bill. Within a few months of the life of the new parliament the impasse had indeed been broken. Not only did the Pan-Germans support the bill, but also the Young Czechs—who were the aggrieved party, technically speaking, after the rescinding of the Language Ordinances—decided to call off their obstruction. The budget for 1902 was the first (as well as the last) for a number of years to pass the *Reichsrat* (rather than having to be pushed through by decree).

Koerber's achievement has recently been given high marks by an expert on underdevelopment, Alexander Gerschenkron, who contrasted the stale politics of national conflict with the benefits of economic largesse (and, for Keynesians, with the added charms of anti-cyclical policies). It is true that the Bill provided funds for some long needed infrastructure projects like the *Tauernbahn*, the Alpine railway that was to connect Salzburg and Villach. Most of it was simply pork-barrel politics on a massive scale, though. The supposed core of the project was to be a canal that would link the Danube with one of the rivers running north to either the Baltic or the North Sea, i.e. the Oder or

the Elbe. That canal was never built. Even the few miles still extant south of Vienna date from the peace-time years of the Third Reich. All the first part of the bill did was allocate money to begin on those upper stretches of the river Elbe that conveniently ran through some of the strongholds of both the German and the Czech Radicals. (To get the support of the Poles a few fragments of earthworks or studies had to be incorporated for another network of canals to do no less than link the Vistula and the Black Sea!) In fact, there was even some sort of an inverse relationship between the real economic benefits of the bill and the political dividend it paid. As long as the exact location of the proposed canal was still open to debate, lots of hopefuls might still vote for the appropriations in the hope that their constituency would be among those to be selected. Once a final trace had been decided upon, the number of disappointed would swell. Thus, even another strong injection of funds to hasten the pace of construction (or rather, to start in earnest) could not have re-created the conditions that brought about the initial success of Koerber's strategy, as Gerschenkron seems to believe.⁸

What Koerber's experiment did was to break the deadlock that had threatened to subvert parliamentary politics once and for all in western half of the Habsburg Monarchy. Even when obstruction started again with unparalleled effectiveness in 1903, the parties who started it could no longer claim to act in defense of inalienable national rights if indeed they had just been conveniently forgotten for two years. Obstructionism was not defeated. It had only been converted from a seizure that threatened to be fatal into a chronic illness of periodic bouts of high fever. The patient might pass out but could always be resuscitated. Or, to change the metaphor, obstruction had ceased to be a weapon of last resort and been integrated into the arsenal of conventional warfare. (Koerber himself winked at it, if not encouraged it, in the case of the Bohemian diet where for once it was the German minority who made life impossible for the Czech and Federalist majority.)

With this change the whole structure of politics underwent a profound transformation. Austrian politics moved even further away from the mainstream of European, i.e. "Western" parliamentary customs. The reputation of parliamentary institutions as a whole certainly suffered grievously on account of this, with unfortunate longterm effects. The immediate result, however, wasn't all "absolutism and anarchy." Whenever obstruction raised its head, the business of government would be carried on by means of the famous Clause 14 of the 1867 Constitution, i.e. by emergency decree. No Prime Minister, however, could hope to survive in office for very long unless he managed to find a way to get parliament afloat again. (That was the big difference as compared to the First Republic, say the situation after 1933, when there was no Emperor any longer

who would open a new page once the “cooling-off period” had run its course.) Moreover, there was a tacit understanding that no big changes would be effected by means of Clause 14. Most of the emergency decrees had the character of continuing resolutions and dealt with fairly noncontroversial matters. (Sometimes people would even carry on as before without any specific legal basis - the so-called “Ex-Lex-Zustand”!) Once the “cooling-off period” was over and parliamentary committees started to scrutinize the accumulated executive legacy, very few decrees were actually lifted or rescinded.

One of the changes that was never effected by decree was an increase in the take-in of recruits for the black-and-yellow regiments.⁹ In fact, one of the reasons why Austria-Hungary was falling behind in the arms race was precisely that: From the mid-nineties until shortly before World War I there never was a period when both the Austrian and the Hungarian parliaments functioned simultaneously. Military questions figured prominently on the list of Imperial priorities, however. The arms race could thus be regarded as a sort of guarantee that the monarch would not stop trying to get back to proper constitutional channels. (Stürgkh probably owed his unassailable position in the eyes of the old Emperor to his achievement in finally procuring a massive rise in army numbers in 1912.)

IV. The Dynamics of Obstruction and the Concurrent Majority

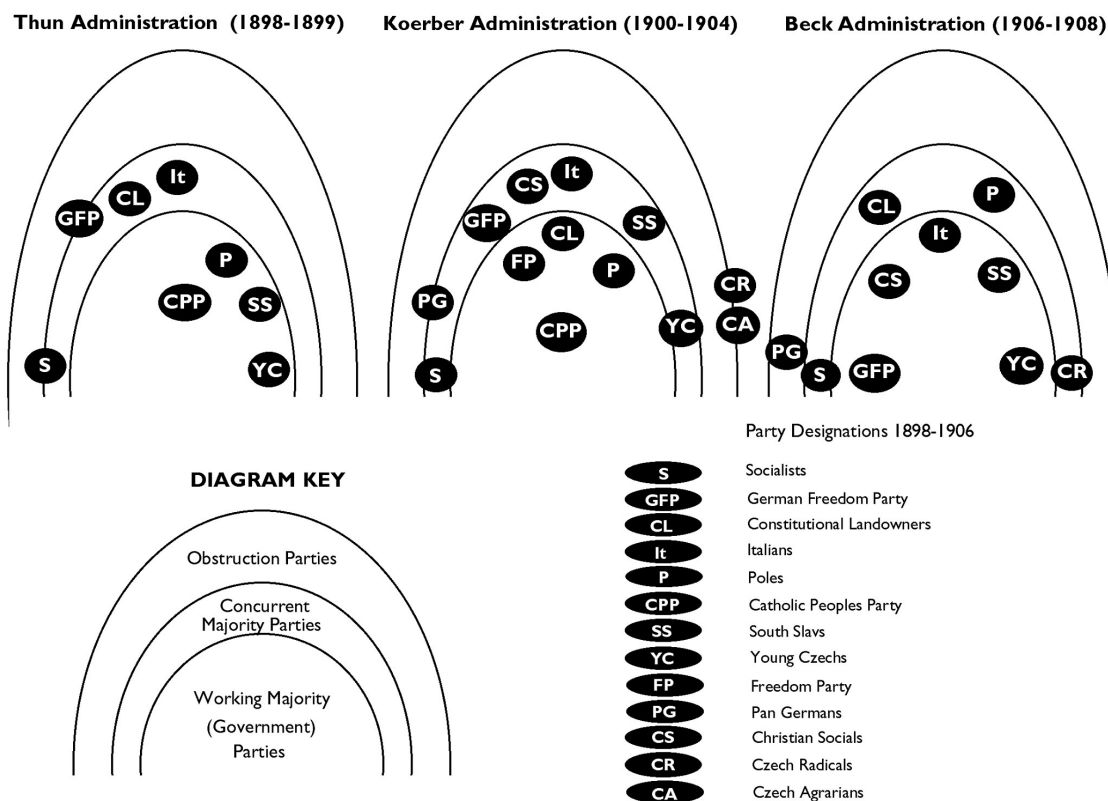
In fact, the impact of obstruction gave a completely different meaning to the Austrian constitution. For a generation it had pretended to follow the conventional pattern with a parliamentary government of the Left being followed by a parliamentary government of the Right, and so on. (The only difference being that the government always took a much more active part in getting the election results it wanted than would be tolerated in, say, Britain, though no more so than in Italy, or probably, France.) Then Steinwender’s ideal of the impartial government, one that avoided any impression of national favoritism, had found favor. This ideal was now forcibly buttressed by obstruction as the preferred tactic of minorities who felt their fundamental interests threatened. The result came close to what John Calhoun in the USA had earlier termed the principle of the Concurrent Majority. Of course, Calhoun’s purpose had been to protect a regional minority, not an ethnic one. In order to ensure the passage of a bill, the government not only had to bargain for a majority in the House, but above all it had to ensure that voting could actually take place by buying off all sizeable factions of potential obstructionists. Only groups with less than twenty MPs could safely be ignored; those with more than fifty (i.e., Germans, Czechs and Poles) had to be accommodated as a matter of course,

One of the unavoidable consequences of this escalation was that opposition as such lost all credibility. If you were really trying to prevent something from being passed, your constituents might expect you to try and go “nuclear,” i.e., persuade forty-nine fellow members to start demanding useless roll-calls rather than just pontificate against that measure for the benefit of the stenographers, (Noise levels were fairly high in the House and microphones not yet in use, so you had to have a fairly booming voice to actually make yourself heard in the *Reichsrat*.) A voting-record of “Nays” alone was no longer enough for your credentials as a doughty fighter against all possible governmental evils.

Parliamentary debates had thus developed into a three cornered contest. Not just a trial of strength between the “pros” and the “cons,” they now also involved dealing adequately with the “outs.” Like most *menages à trois*, these were not without their ironies. A government might easily fall between two stools trying to accommodate the obstructionists while at the same time keeping its own supporters in line. (This is what happened to Koerber in late 1904 when in a famous scene one of his former German national adherents inveighed against him. The opposition Czech leader Kramar jovially suggested: “So chuck him out, then; we won’t stop you!”) In situations like that it might be best for the obstruction to relent, allow an actual vote to take place and let the cabinet go down to defeat at the hands of its dissident former supporters. An even earlier example of that strategy was the trap the German parties set for Prime Minister Count Thun in 1898, during the later part of the Badeni crisis. Thun at that time was charged with ramming a renewal of the unpopular *Ausgleich* down the throat of his supporters. The terms of that compromise with the other half of the Monarchy had worsened and some of the agrarian MPs who belonged to the Right had recently been quoted that all those who voted in its favor deserved to be lined up in front of their voters and shot. The idea was, after all, either to discredit these people by making them vote with the government, or to split the majority and defeat the government. On that occasion, however, the more bloody-minded members of the opposition prevented this well-thought out strategy from succeeding. They continued with their obstruction, giving Thun a convenient pretext to resort to emergency decrees thus letting his supporters off the hook.

If this worked, however, the reverse side of the coin made just as much sense. Any Prime Minister who felt his grasp of the House slipping might be quite grateful for a dose of obstruction that prevented a few uncomfortable motions from being carried and gave him a good excuse to send parliament home for a cooling-off period. Obviously, behind-the-scenes collusion like that is notoriously difficult to corroborate beyond reasonable doubt. There are a number of instances though where the allegations

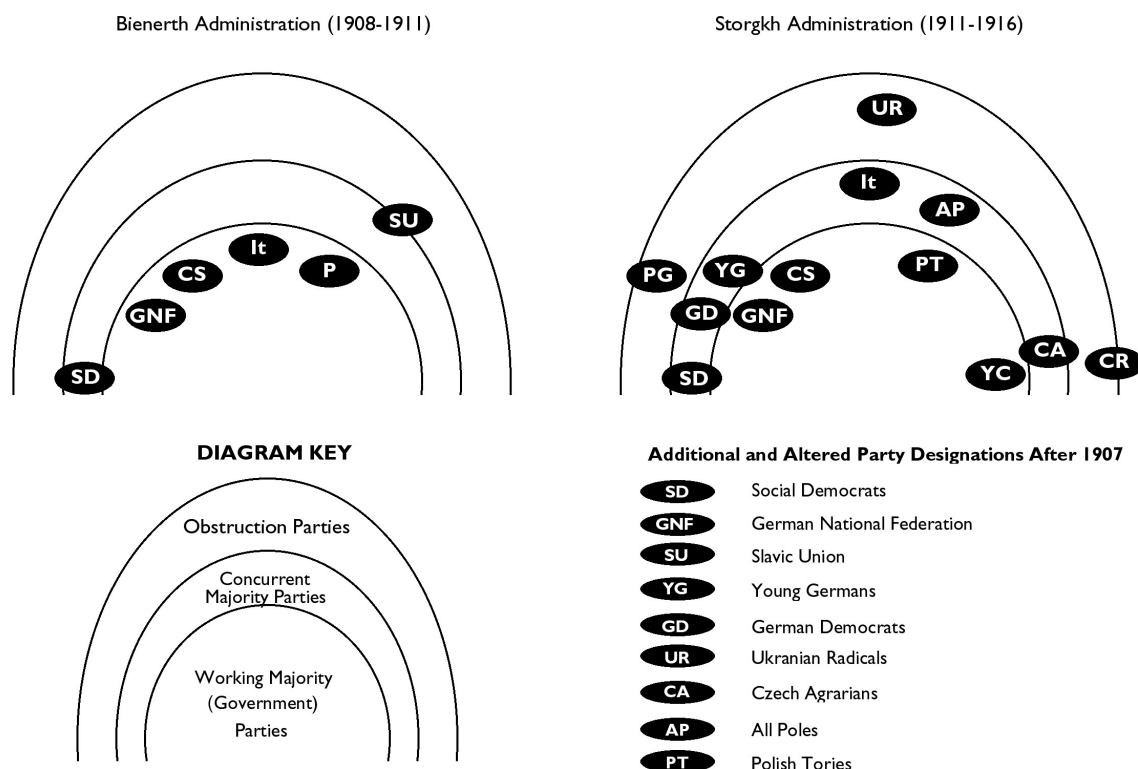
Figure 1. Parliamentary Configuration, 1898-1906



look plausible enough. Many of them concerned Stürgkh's cabinet that governed from 1911 onwards.

By then the odds had been slightly changed. The Standing Orders of 1875 had been amended, after all. The way this was achieved bears testimony to the surprising flexibility of Austrian Constitutional Law. In December 1909 as government supporters were again preparing to face down a threat of obstruction by the Slavic Union (of Czechs and Slovenes), Kramar all of a sudden called for an emergency debate to amend the Standing Orders. (His proposal empowered the speaker to deal with all calls for emergency debates only at the end of the day.) The Germans who did not know when they might not have to rely on obstruction themselves to ward off some new Badeni, were unenthusiastic, to say the least, but had to go along if they did not want to be seen leaving the government in the lurch—which is of course what Kramar had intended. His proposal was a bid to switch the government round from relying on the Germans rather than the Slavs. The tactical bid failed, but the motion was passed despite the fact that, strictly speaking, the Standing Orders did not count as a law and could not be changed that way. No one raised the point though and the next day the Emperor signed it into law. Afterwards it was

Figure 2. Parliamentary Configuration, 1908-1916



annually renewed. Obstruction had become more difficult in the House; it now moved to the committee stage. This was where force of lungs was actually decisive and the smaller fry also got their chance. Their filibuster could sometimes be worn down but that would hardly ever be attempted. The Reform of 1909 provided the crowning achievement—or the final step on the slippery slope, whichever way you look at it. To all intents and purposes the Concurrent majority had now been enlarged to include even smaller groups like Slovenes or Ukrainians. As far as their parliamentary nuisance value was concerned, bigger “historic” nations and smaller ones were, by dint of institutional rules, on something like an equal footing.

It must be emphasized that the Great Electoral Reform Bill of 1906/07 as such, did not make much of a difference to these calculations, apart from enlarging the House from 425 to 516 seats which made it even easier for smaller groups to attain the status of fully-fledged potential obstructionists. Oddly enough, even though a lot of the members stood to lose by the reform, no one dared use obstructionist tactics against it. It was seen as unavoidable and MPs feared the retribution of voters. Only Schonerer might have been prepared to go to such lengths, but he no longer mustered even twenty followers. The aristocratic great-landowners “just said no,” and even that cost them dearly in the eyes of

the Court. Incidentally, there is still some debate as to why the Emperor turned out to be so keen on Electoral Reform from 1905 onwards. One of the ingenious explanations reads that he actually wanted the Social Democrats to win because at least they were a centripetal force. There seems to be just enough evidence to discount that. More likely he was persuaded to cast Lueger's Christian Socials in that part. In general, however, the idea behind the introduction of universal suffrage seems to have been to give the spurs to the quarrelsome middle-class parties, i.e. actually force them to co-operate more effectively once faced with a sizeable minority of "Reds." The Social Democrats were not expected to provide a prop for the Empire themselves, but to act as a sobering threat to the others to behave themselves.

It is interesting to note that of the three Prime Ministers who governed Austria from the passing of the Great Reform Bill until the outbreak of WW I (Beck 1906-08, Bienerth 1908-11, Stürgkh 1911-16), each adopted a different strategy to walk the tightrope between his supporters, i.e. the "working majority" and the "concurrent majority" he needed to let the working majority do its work.

- Beck formed an All Party Government, i.e., tried to convert the concurrent majority into his working majority, too. At least partly that was the result of the special situation created by the process of electoral reform itself. No one wanted to be left behind once it came to "re-districting". When that was over and done with, tension within government ranks increased and finally blew up in late 1908 - not without some of the fuses being lit in the palace of the Heir Apparent.

- Bienerth rallied a fairly coherent working majority behind his government. The German middle-class parties, the Poles and the Italians. The drawback was that a fairly coherent working majority also meant a fairly homogenous opposition that might find it easy (and be tempted) at any moment to cross the threshold into obstruction. It was no coincidence that within one year - 1909—just before the amendment of the Standing Orders—Bienerth had to give up and close the parliamentary session twice in the face of Czech and Slovene obstruction.

- Stürgkh (who could be described as a disciple of Koerber) worked with a more subtle combination of parties drawn from all the different nationalities and tried to manipulate party competition within ethnic groups to his best advantage. Ideally, this left the opposition too heterogeneous and disunited to make much of an impact. It also required a talent for duplicity that was almost legendary, promising all things to all people and still being believed. Despite rising criticism by all the "Great & Good," this was a stunning achievement by the myopic Styrian count. He deserves better than just to be remembered for being shot in 1916.¹⁰

V. “Radicals” and “Moderates”? Party Rivalry and National Conflict

The pioneers of this new game of politics obviously were the German and Czech nationalist parties whose warring factions have usually been classified in terms of “moderates” and “radicals.” Those are the most commonly used descriptors and indeed often seem unavoidable in the context of Habsburg politics. More often than not, though, this is an impression gained from just looking at (or rather recoiling from) their rhetoric—and even that usually at one remove. It is true that there were some parties—like the aristocratic *Verfassungstreue* (constitutionally correct)—who never stooped to conquer by way of obstruction. Nor did the black-and-yellow German Catholic parties feel comfortable with it. Even the Social Democrats—always fearful of providing a welcome excuse for a coup d’état from above—usually refrained from obstruction on their own.

The Radicals did not always act true to form, though (nor did the moderates). At the turn of the century, indeed, it seemed to many observers that the Barbarians were at the gates. When the Young Czechs annihilated the Old, the Emperor remarked that “A strange sort of people are coming to the fore these days !”. And when Schonerer’s legions swept the Bohemian home-towns, even the *Neue Freie Presse* lost hope. But as Koerber found out, one could deal with the middle-class radicals. Koerber’s game, of course, was to appeal to their economic instincts. This worked for a time with the urban constituencies. It worked even better with the Agrarians. On both the Czech and the German side an Agrarian party was about to split away from the main nationalist groups. One of their first actions in 1904/05 was to start a petition campaign against the Czech obstruction in the *Reichsrat* viz. the German one in the Bohemian Diet that prevented some of their demands from being met. If this provides us with a classic example of the virtuous cultivators of the soil, the *pays real*, turning on the *pays legal* of the radical lawyer-intellectuals and their frivolous pursuit of legal small-print with righteous indignation, that idyllic situation did not last.

Only a few years later, it was the Agrarian leader Simitsch von Hohenblum (probably the most effective lobbyist in old Austria) who threatened obstruction when he wanted to prevent the passing of the new trade agreements with the Balkan states. At the time this was doubly welcome to the Czech Agrarians for both economic and national reasons. In 1914, again, it was to be the Czech Agrarians who helped to close Parliament down, while the Young Czechs continued to support the government.

On the German side, too, the century had started with the Radicals swamping the Progressives. (Here Wolf’s party that had split away from Schonerer’s Pan-Germans quite literally called itself German Radical Party.) Even by 1905, the distinction was no longer

so clear cut. When asked whether to continue obstruction in the Prague diet, even though Czech obstruction in the Vienna parliament had for the time being ceased, members of both the Progressives and the Radicals were to be found voting “pro” and “con.” By the 1910s the wheel had turned full circle. The Radicals now had a much bigger incentive to conclude the Bohemian Compromise because it entailed electoral reform for the diet, too, quite apart from being a step in the direction of national autonomy. (During the war years indeed—and this was one of the crowning ironies of Austrian politics—it was the supposed Radicals, Schonerer’s heirs, who almost alone never wavered in their loyalty to the Stürgkh regime only to find themselves duped when the national autonomy they had been promised was once again shelved in 1917.)

It was the cosmopolitan Progressives—and even more so the black-and-yellow great landowners—who stood to lose both politically and in terms of their clientele if the Compromise was finally enacted. The principle of national autonomy along territorial lines would leave no room for the German (and/or Jewish) bourgeoisie in places like Prague or Pilsen. Electoral reform was likely to do away with the pivotal position of the aristocracy as well as the privileged position of the Chambers of Commerce. On the Czech side, too, the Young Czechs clung to their privileged position in the diet as they could feel the now larger Agrarian party breathing down their necks.

Bohemian politics bred another specialty, the accorded *octroi*. Because of German obstruction the diet elected in 1908 had never got off the ground. Because taxes could not be raised, the provincial administration faced bankruptcy (which hit the teachers—both German and Czech—hardest). In the summer of 1913 Stürgkh and the central government stepped in, dissolved the provincial administration and instead appointed a caretaker committee that promptly raised taxes by decree. Representatives of both nations only attacked this show of bureaucratic absolutism—the Germans because it deprived them of their weapon, the Czechs because it went against their States’ Rights convictions. Privately though, leading politicians from both sides reassured the Prime Minister that that was just for public consumption and that they were glad not to be saddled with the blame for making hard choices themselves.

If there are any general observations to be drawn from the way this merry-go-round was played—apart from the obvious situational considerations—they might read like this: The distinction between “radicals” and “moderates” had become increasingly meaningless. Instead the dominant party within one ethnic group was usually content with the given level of national conflict whereas the opposition group tried to outflank its competitors one way or the other. If the *beati possidentes* held fast to obstruction, they would step on the bandwagon of pragmatic economic expediency. If the dominant group engaged in a

show of statesmanlike moderation, the rising stars would raise the cry of national treason and try and cash in on it. There is good reason, for example, to think that when the Czech Agrarians started obstruction again in March 1914, what they really had in mind was to move in for the kill of the Young Czechs.

Of course, thinking about *longue duree* one might justly be contemptuous of the moves of run-of-the-mill politicians in a rundown Empire. Many people who live by writing about it confess to a hearty disdain for the base motives and superficial nature of politics. And yet party competition, with all its seamy aspects, brought flexibility to the system. It may have heated the atmosphere up but it also provided an antidote to polarization only along national lines.

ENDNOTES

1. At the moment, I am charged with writing a more detailed—and more numerate—account of parliamentary politics for volume VII of *Die Geschichte der Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918*, Adam Wandruszka and Peter Urbanitsch, eds., which will probably be published around 1994.
2. This indirect system of voting further increased the importance of the great land-owners whose curia was not carved up into constituencies. Their bloc vote thus held the balance in most diets, in particular in the crucial ones of Bohemia and Moravia. For the numbers see my article: “The Great Landowners’ Curia and the Reichsrat Elections during the Formative Years of Austrian Constitutionalism 1867-1873” in: Lothar Höbelt, *Parlaments, Estates and Representation* 5 (1985) 175-183.
3. After 1873 there was a uniform Austria-wide census of 10, later 5 florins of direct taxes. However, all voters who were allowed to vote in elections to the diet, were also included. Those qualifications in turn often depended upon local factors. A host of this information has to be gleaned from contemporary accounts like Leo Wittmayer *Unser Reichsratswahlrecht und die Taaffe’sche Wahlvorlage* (Vienna 1901).
4. See: William Jenks, *Austria under the Iron Ring* (Charlottesville 1965).
5. There are two excellent accounts: John Boyer, *The Rise of Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna. Origins of the Christian Social Movement 1848-1897* (Chicago 1981; vol. 2 forthcoming); Bruce Garver, *The Young Czech Party 1874-1901 and the Emergence of a Multi-Party System* (Hew Haven 1978). My own study of the German National parties: Lothar Höbelt, *Kornblume und Kaiseradler. Die deutschfreiheitlichen Parteien Altosterreichs 1882- 1918* will be published by Verlag für Geschichte und Politik in Vienna later this year.
6. In both cases the Germans claimed administrative chicanery for falsified election results.
7. The most famous filibuster was Otto Lecher’s fourteen-hour speech against the *Ausgleich* in 1897 that made him a hero overnight. Later on, people like the Pan-German ex-officer Malik would accept wagers like the following: One case of champagne for each hour above six... For a detailed history of the Standing Orders and their interpretation, see: Karl & Otto Heisser, *Die Geschäftsordnung des Abgeordnetenhauses des Reichsrates. Ihre Geschichte und praktische Handhabung von 1861 bis 1909*, 2 vols. (Vienna 1909).
8. Alexander Gerschenkron, *An Economic Spurt That Failed* (Princeton 1977).
9. The number of recruits was usually fixed for ten years at the time which is why it counted as a change of the constitution! See the recent study by a constitutional historian: Gernot Hasiba, *Das Notverordnungsrecht in Österreich (1848-1917). Notwendigkeit und Mißbrauch eines ‘Staatserhaltenden Instruments* (Vienna 1985).

10. There is an excellent biography of Beck by one of his descendants: Johann Christoph Allmayer-Beck, *Ministerpräsident Baron Beck* (Vienna 1956); on Stürgkh see Frank E. Norgate, *The Internal Policies of the Stürgkh Government, November 1911 - March 1914* (PhD Thesis, New York 1978).

11. See Gary Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague 1861-1914* (Princeton 1981) on the *Verfassungstreue* (up to 1904). Two massive collections of political correspondence, *Briefe und Dokumente zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie*, have recently been edited by Ernst von Rutkowski (Munich 1983 & 1991). A volume of correspondence with Aehrenthal (who also belonged to that group) will shortly be published by Solomon Wank.