

The Members of the German Bundestag from its Inception to the Present

Biographisches Handbuch der Mitglieder des Deutschen Bundestages 1949–2002
Vols 1–3. Edited by Rudolf Vierhaus et al. Munich, K.G. Saur, 2002.
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Reviewer: R.L. Cope*

‘That biography is primitive can scarcely be denied.’ These words by Professor Ben Pimlott, himself a significant author and analyser of political biography, are then expanded to the observation: ‘Whether or not biography is identical with history (and politics) it is often the best entry route to both — as well as an essential building block.’¹ Biographical dictionaries are one of those routes, but there is a hierarchy among these dictionaries, making some of them far more useful and essential than others. The more a biographical dictionary offers entries going beyond the bland, self-evident recital of routine facts and gives the reader ‘piercing glances into the life of things’ (Marianne Moore), the greater its value and utility. In such cases, entries may tend towards interpretative essays. An examination of recent examples of parliamentary biographical handbooks and dictionaries shows, in fact, that there is a wide scope for different approaches to compiling such works which justifies the assertion above that there is a hierarchy among them.² The *Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate* (2000) might, for example, be cited as an exemplary work showing the effectiveness of what is, in Australia at least, a novel approach in this genre.

It is instructive to review, in the light of these remarks, a recent major publication in the field: *The Biographical Handbook of the Members of the German Bundestag 1949–2002 (BHMB)*, just issued in three sturdy and handsomely bound volumes.³ It offers ample scope to consider points raised by Professor Pimlott. Because of its comprehensive nature, *BHMB* will be, in any case, of immediate reference value to anyone interested in the history of the Federal German Republic (Bundesrepublik) and, more broadly, the course of German politics and government from the Weimar Republic until present times. The text is, however, wholly in German.

The Foreword to volume one states:

* Parliamentary Librarian, Parliament of New South Wales, 1962–1991. Dr Cope is grateful to the publisher, K.G. Saur, and Frau S. Sütterlin, for assistance in preparation of this review and for provision of the review copy.

¹ *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, ed. by Duncan Brack and others. London, Politico’s Publishing, 1998. See Foreword by Ben Pimlott. p x.

² See ‘Biographical Dictionaries of Parliamentarians: Considerations and Examples’, by R.L. Cope in *Papers on Parliament*, No. 33 (May 1999): 171–83.

³ Volume 1: Articles, A–M, pages 1–592; volume 2: Articles, N–Z, and Supplement, pages 593–1177; volume 3: Chronological Table, Indices, Committees, Bibliography, pages 1–639. Volume 3 is available separately (ISBN 3 598 23783 9, Euro 148.00). The full set costs Euro 538.00.

The present Handbook lists all members of the Bundestag from its founding in 1949 until 2002 . . . The biographical data are not limited to the time and activity of the individuals as members of the Bundestag: entries also give information about the family background (Herkunft), career and education, professional and political activities in industry and commerce (Wirtschaft), in school and university service, in associations, unions and parties . . . Not only membership of the Bundestag is documented, but also service in the State legislatures of the Federal Republic. Particular attention is given to the work of members in the committees of the Bundestag, an aspect of their work often overlooked by the public. (viii, reviewer's translation).

Information on electorates represented (Wahlkreise), or on the Party lists from which members gained a seat is given as well as data about the periods members sat in the Bundestag. The editors are careful to state that in view of the great range of members and of their varying career paths, there is necessarily a measure of difference in the scope of individual articles. Exhaustive biographical information was not aimed at, but a full list of all members was the principal criterion for *BHMB*. The Foreword alerts the reader to the various appendices and tables that supplement and even amplify the text. Volume three is wholly concerned with this type of tabular information. Volume two has important lists (995–1058) as well. Since some members were also members of the Weimar Republic's parliament and some were members in the East German Volkskammer, information stretches over wider areas than might be expected.

BHMB is made more complex and interesting by the fact that for major political figures entries are written by prominent scholars and some politicians (e.g. Rita Süssmuth, Hans-Jochen Vogel, Gerhard Stoltenberg). These entries are signed, whereas the myriad of other entries are unsigned and presumably are the work of the editorial panel headed by Bruno Jahn (see p. iv). The unsigned entries are fairly uniform in their scope and treatment whereas the signed entries vary in some surprising ways as explained below. Entries in the *Handbook* are in strict alphabetical order, remembering that in German the umlaut accent is alphabetised as incorporating an 'e' (i.e., 'ä' is alphabetised as 'ae'). Although the authors of signed entries are listed at the beginning of volume one, there is very little information provided about these people. Perhaps their names are all household words in Germany, but the reviewer could recognise only some of them and wonders for what reasons some of them were chosen. This is a deficiency, which might be easily corrected, in any new edition.

Whilst it is not the object of *BHMB* to provide exhaustive personal information about members, there is obviously an issue at stake in deciding how to treat sensitive personal information for persons who may well still be alive or whose relatives will be alive. References to membership of the National Socialist Party in the Third Reich are made, but are rather low-key. As in other parliaments, there have been well-documented scandals about a number of German politicians, ranging from sexual behaviour to spying and corruption and, most recently, illegal

collection of undeclared party funds amounting to many millions of marks. This scandal went as high as the Federal Chancellor, Helmut Kohl. These remarks raise the tricky problem of what one expects from a parliamentary dictionary of this kind. Generally, the lion's share of interest is in the political and party aspects of members' careers rather than the biographical as such. This is entirely understandable, but the surprising dearth of attention to the contributions by members to the development of the, for Germany, innovative parliamentary institution itself requires comment. Even with the attention given to membership of parliamentary committees, entries convey very little directly to the reader about the life of the legislature. It has to be inferred. One notable exception to this general observation is the article on Carlo Schmid by Petra Weber. Schmid's great concern for the development of parliamentary traditions by the Bundestag is clearly explained, and this article is one of the most memorable in *BHMB*.

One area where the thinness of the personal, biographical material emerges is in the entries for members who come from the former East Germany. Obviously the compilers had very little to work from in this regard. Some entries are at best schematic and it is clear that some effort might be required to probe any deeper. But such entries are not great in number and the individuals concerned seem not of very high importance.

Volume three lists the membership of each parliamentary committee (normal and alternate members), grouped under parties. The editors express a strong belief that the work and importance of parliamentary committees tend to be overlooked by the public. This may well be the case and some may recall Woodrow Wilson's dictum that the Congressional committees show the Congress at work. The same applies to the Bundestag. Since Bundestag committees may have up to forty members on them, the tabulations of names is rather dense (Vol. 3, 467–587). Welcome as it may be to have an exhaustive record of everyone who sat on a committee, there is surprisingly scant attention given to the work of committees and no differentiation made about their relative importance in the life of the Bundestag. The reader would welcome information on the major reports of committees and some indication whether the committee was significant or merely of a routine, perhaps house-keeping nature. Since it is customary in some parliaments for committees to pay attendance fees to their members, it would be worth a note on such details where they exist in the Bundestag. The wide membership of committees might be explained in these circumstances.

Without wishing to lay too much emphasis on this aspect of *BHMB*, it might have been advisable for the editors to mention that detailed information about the numerous committees with their sometimes confusing changes of name can be found in the excellent and exhaustive *Datenhandbuch* (Data Handbook) published by the Bundestag in updated volumes covering 1949–1999.⁴ Indeed readers of

⁴ *Datenhandbuch zur Geschichte des Deutschen Bundestages 1949–1999*. [Handbook of Data on the History of the German Bundestag], vols. 1–3, compiled by Peter Schindler. The 1983–1991 edn was

BHMB would benefit greatly by having this latter work at hand whenever consulting *BHMB*.

Before dealing with the biographical entries themselves in volumes 1–2, a few more words on volume three are needed. This volume comprises some 639 pages of statistical and tabular material. Comprehensive statistical data such as election returns from 1949–1998 cover pages 3–10 (a summary only), and pages 101–466 (details by seats and for those elected on the state party lists). Psephologists would find this material with its minute breakdowns and tabulations of considerable value. Lists of winning candidates with percentage results are given throughout, and of course the success of parties is amply documented. Strangely enough, the reviewer could find no information on the failures of parties, that is, the cases where seats were lost. Nor is it possible to determine how many seats were contested in each election by the various parties. In these instances there is an unfortunate limitation in the statistics offered.

There is a useful bibliography (637–39) giving published sources for biographical and other parliamentary information. It would be helpful if annotations indicated the nature of some of the works listed. It is not easy to distinguish the important from what may be less important. But the compilers have missed a good opportunity to list the autobiographical works published by members themselves. Reading through the entries in the first two volumes it is striking how often there is mention of an autobiography by the person dealt with: this seems much more common in Germany than it is in Australia or the United States. In a work specialising in a legislature, it seems reasonable to list as a separate entry the accounts by its members of their parliamentary and political life.

It may seem pernickety to raise these points in view of the wide range of valuable information in the index volume, but to suggest improvements does not denigrate the value of what is offered. Libraries unable to afford the full set could well acquire just the index volume that is available separately. The election statistics are not easily available in this compact form for the years 1949–1998, and they will always remain of high reference and research value.

For most readers of *BHMB*, the chief focus of interest will certainly be the individual entries in volumes one (A–M) and two (N–Z and tables). As already pointed out, the editors disclaim any attempt at biographical fullness, but there are accepted norms in biographical reference works that cannot be ignored. The unevenness in the coverage of entries may in fact be explained by the different interpretations of ‘biographical’ by contributors. It would seem that for some contributors the term refers to the public, political life and only in part to the private life of *BHMB*’s subjects. Is this why the unsigned entry for Anton Donhauser (Member, 1949–1957) does not tell us what happened to this man who was revealed in 1959 to be a spy for East Germany? This seems an unduly restrictive example of

what is meant by ‘biographical’. By contrast, the entry for another spy, Alfred Frenzel (Member, 1953–1960) gives information on his fate after being unmasked in 1960. Another example where the treatment is unduly narrow is that of Karlfranz Schmidt-Wittmack (Member, 1953–1955). This man defected to East Germany in 1954 where he played a prominent role in public affairs. He became a member of the Christian Democratic Union (East) in 1962 and died in East Berlin in 1987. This is certainly a remarkable career which is only partially illuminated in *BHMB*.

Details seem complete for members’ careers in local, state and federal legislatures. Where members held important party posts, this is also listed. Since all this information is given within a text, it is sometimes not easy to find one’s way through some tangled careers. The habit of German politicians of switching between state and federal parliaments makes for complex detail. The practice adopted by Martin Schumacher in the parliamentary biographical handbook for 1946–1961, showing the dates of parliamentary membership, was regrettably not followed by *BHMB*.⁵ All entries have, where appropriate, a list of the individual member’s publications, followed by details of literature on the member, and details of where the member’s papers and records may have been deposited in some archive. The reviewer has been able to check some of these bibliographies and finds them of a high standard. Very often the archive in question is maintained by the party foundation to which the member belonged. For some members lists of the boards, foundations, clubs and associations to which they belonged are given. Awards and honours (including foreign awards) are also supplied.

There are many examples in *BHMB* where we are given quite full details of the family circumstances (father’s profession, but less often mother’s name) and the educational path of the subject. In every entry, place and date of birth and of death, where relevant, are given. Religion is often given or lack of religion (konfessionslos). In many entries we are even given the full title of the subject’s university dissertation. Just how valuable this item of information might be is a matter of opinion. The compilers may certainly have found it hard in some instances to get more than what the bald public record indicates about personal matters, especially for members who were from the former East Germany. The frequent lack of any reference to spouse or children is, however, puzzling.

The most interesting and rewarding articles are those in volumes one and two which are signed. These are longer entries for persons who have been prominent as federal chancellor or federal president, ministers or leading opposition figures, and notabilities such as Petra Kelly, Lothar de Mazière, Wilhelm Hoegner, and Gregor Gysi. Former Speakers (Präsidenten) are all included. There are in all 131 signed articles, produced by 72 authors. These articles vary considerably in treatment and importance, but at their best they are excellent summations of the subject’s

⁵ See *M.d.B.: Volksvertretung im Wiederaufbau 1946–1961*, ed. by Martin Schumacher. Düsseldorf, Droste Verlag, 2000. Reviewed in *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 16.2 (Spring 2001): 198–202.

personality and political and parliamentary importance. All entries are in double columns per page and longer entries may extend to four columns.

The degree to which personal details, sometimes of a sensitive nature, deserve inclusion may require fine judgment, but the reputation and career of, for example, Willy Brandt cannot be completely understood unless the reader has details of sensitive personal relationships. It might be noted that the German media went into details about these matters, so the material is not hard to locate. Personal behaviour that influences public perceptions and, more crucially, party attitudes towards winning the next election are real considerations in political life. Standards of morality do, it is true, change with the times: would a modern Kitty O'Shea cause the havoc the original did to Parnell's parliamentary career? should a Clinton biography fail to mention Monica Lewinsky?

It is nevertheless surprising that the entry on the present Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, does not mention his three marriages. On the other hand, the entry for Konrad Adenauer, whose private life and personal behaviour seem to have been exemplary, tells us the name of his first wife (1880–1916), the names of the children of this marriage, and the name of his second wife (1895–1948), and the names of the children of that union. With regard to Willy Brandt it is instructive to compare the entry by Professor Helga Grebing with the one she also did for the *Dictionary of German Biography* (English version, vol. 2, 76–7). In this second biographical entry she writes:

After 23 years B. stepped down as leader of the SPD in June 1987, following his support for the appointment as SPD press officer of a young Greek female journalist who was not a party member, an appointment which was misunderstood by larger sections within the party.

This event had great bearing on the course of Brandt's later life in politics and is obviously less than a passing episode of little historical or political significance. The entry by Helga Grebing in *BHMB* reads for the same period:

In June 1987 B. relinquished the chairmanship of the SPD. B. was the last party leader who was moulded by the old workers' movement and was a man who, whilst not holding government office, had gained a world-wide prestige as 'an enlightening force from Germany'. (reviewer's translation)

The former entry is certainly more valuable than the latter when details are compared, although both entries are generally very close. Professor Grebing, who specialises in writing on the SPD, is one of the editors of the Berlin edition of Brandt's works. Her article on the SPD leader Schumacher (1895–1952) who was Adenauer's great opponent, is an excellent piece on his political career, but quite reticent about his personal life. She does not mention his power as a speaker, a topic to which Carlo Schmid devoted a noteworthy essay in 1953.⁶ She also chooses

⁶ Carlo Schmid: 'Kurt Schumacher als Redner', pp. 93–108 in his *Politik als Geistige Aufgabe*. Berne,

not to mention Annemarie Renger, later Speaker of the Bundestag, who was, in the early years of the Bundesrepublik, important as his secretary and close associate. The article on Renger by Daniela Münkel (volume 2, 580–682) is much fuller in dealing with this connexion.

The entry on Rudolf Scharping, whose turbulent career in the SPD recently provided much copy for the media, gives a good summary of the highpoints, but fails to reveal much of the substance behind appearances. It does not mention the reasons for his unprecedented dismissal by Schröder as Defence Minister in July 2002. The article on Kurt Biedenkopf, also recently suffering severe political buffets as Prime Minister of the State of Saxony, occasioned in part by his misuse of his official position to get private benefits, refers to this circumstance with a cryptic allusion to his ‘mixing of official and private interests’. The wave of outrage led him to step down in April 2002.

Those with an interest in the Bundestag as a parliamentary institution will find scattered among the entries little explicit information and only occasional pointers to institutional questions. Unlike the *Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate*, *BHMB* has no entries and indeed no information about the parliamentary officials and the services they provide. Whilst this is admittedly not the primary focus of this biographical work, it can be equally argued that the way in which the parliamentary institution is organised and staffed is of direct importance, in varying degrees, to all members of the Bundestag. For this reason it seems a pity that a few entries for major figures in the administration are not also included, perhaps in an appendix. There are few traces to be found of the much publicised vagaries of the building of adequate quarters for the Bundestag. This saga culminated in the removal of the Bundestag from Bonn to Berlin, where it now occupies the restored former Reichstag building and new ancillary quarters nearby. *BHMB* contains brief references to all this in the entries for Speaker Rita Süßmuth and for Peter Conradi, a member with architectural expertise who served on the committee to oversee the Reichstag project on behalf of the Bundestag. Once again this orientation indicates that the institution was of minor interest to the compilers. Perhaps too much should not be made of the fact apart from noting its existence.

Volume two contains an unusual and potentially very enlightening chronological table (995–1025) in which the birth dates of members are listed: the first entry is for Paul Löbe, born in 1875. He was thus the oldest member of the Bundestag at his election in 1949. The last entry is for Carsten Schneider, born in 1976, who was the youngest member of the Bundestag at his election in 1998. He is a SPD member and a leader of the Jungsozialisten.

Other lists in volume two are for members of the former East German Volkskammer who later became members of the Bundestag (from 1990), lists of the officers of the various parliamentary parties (Fraktionen and Gruppen), and lists of

the place names mentioned in the biographical entries. Sydney has two names listed under it. A final list (1059–1093) is of the names that occur in entries. This is very thorough and seems close to exhaustive. All these lists, together with the mainly statistical lists in volume three, greatly enrich the value of *BHMB*.

Conclusion

This three-volume work will be welcomed for its many virtues, including its very detailed statistics, good bibliographies and its literature lists. It is obviously an essential work for research collections where German and European studies are carried out. It is also a credit to the printing and binding skills of the Saur organisation and is a pleasure to use. Reading through the range of entries, one gets a strong sense of the diversity of German political life and of the strength and importance of the local environment. Whilst this is probably true for any legislative body, in Germany the regional party organisations and local interests play a larger role than those unfamiliar with the country might suspect. *BHMB* is a good first step in documenting basic materials about the members of the Bundestag. Some discrepancies have been noted above and some limitations have been commented on. These are points that might be picked up when a second edition of this work becomes necessary. It is in the meantime a necessary reference work for major parliamentary libraries and for research library collections.

