



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report July 2011 (Germany) – Bonn 20 years after losing capital status

On 20 June 1991 the Bundestag voted on the issue whether to transfer the capital to Berlin, or if the functions of the federal capital should be retained in Bonn. It was a hotly contested issue and split not only the large parties, but also embodied existing tensions within Germany. Promoters of Berlin reminded everyone that even the Basic Law which was meant to be a provisional measure before a new constitution for a united Germany could be written again had decreed Berlin to be the capital of Germany, with Bonn only being the provisional seat of government. However what had been developed by the 'Bonn Republic' over 40 years in democratic traditions was also regarded as worth preserving and developing, and needless to say the upheaval and cost of transferring government to a new location, was a concern, while at the same time the loss of many jobs would weigh heavy on Bonn. What finally was decided by a not very great margin on the day of the vote was a compromise to transfer parliament and government to Berlin, but divide the administration between the two seats, and to compensate Bonn for losses.

338 against 320 votes finally decided the move to Berlin in principle. In the 'Berlin-Bonn Law' of 1994, the particulars of the division between the two cities were established – namely that the machinery of government would be located in both cities, with all ministries maintaining a presence in both, and the region around Bonn (not only the city itself, but also the surrounding areas) would receive 1.4 billion Euros between 1995 and 2004, which included connecting the airport to the high-speed rail network and attract UN and other international organisations to Bonn. Apart from the moving costs which were accounted for separately, Berlin would also receive subsidies of 700 million Euros. Based on these agreements, Berlin has been able to accommodate the necessary new infrastructure, and Bonn has worked hard at re-inventing itself.

True to the law, there are six federal ministries which have maintained their main offices in Bonn, while the other eight have a secondary office, which means that there are still about 9000 government employees in Bonn – not counting those of other federal institutions, such as the Federal Audit Office (*Bundesrechnungshof*) and Federal Cartel Office (*Bundeskartellamt*) which are also headquartered in Bonn.

The main move of parliament (Bundestag), federal chamber (*Bundesrat*) and federal president to Berlin took place from 1999 onwards, while Bonn got on with the business of attracting other companies and institutions. Meanwhile, it headquarters the Deutsche Telekom and Deutsche Post, both formerly state-owned communication service providers, whose move to Bonn was included in the Bonn-Berlin Law.

The area previously occupied by the federal parliament and nearby office buildings are meanwhile being developed into an UN-campus – in total 18 UN organisations are already there, of which the most important is perhaps the Climate Change Secretariat. Currently there are approximately 850 UN personnel located in Bonn. Many other organisations in the field of international development as well as research institutions have relocated to the city, which always had a big academic presence through the university. 28,000 students and more than 4,000 academic personnel have always been a huge factor in academic, but also economic and cultural terms.

Bonn now counts 320,000 inhabitants, about 20,000 more than 20 years previously, which means that there is a continuing need for development and re-development. Many people credit the long-time mayor of the city, Bärbel Dieckmann (1994 to 2009) with astute management of the process – the only hiccup in the smooth process of re-development and re-invention is a long-running saga concerning a large-scale conference centre which has run into trouble and cost overruns.

Also, the social balance has shifted within the city. While the southern suburb of Bad Godesheim used to be an upscale location where most foreign diplomats had their homes, after the exodus of the embassies and their staff, the social mix in this neighbourhood has shifted and there is more joblessness and anti-social behaviour.

However, overall the city has done quite well to negotiate the transition, although it will have to content in the foreseeable future with regular demands to shift all government functions to Berlin, in order to cut down on the costs of maintaining two locations for ministries and the travel bill.

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