

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Electoral college to vote new head of state in May Federal Republic of West Germany

BONN — The election of the sixth head of state of the Federal Republic of Germany, to be held on 23 May at the Beethovenhalle in Bonn, is unlikely to spring any surprises. Richard von Weizsäcker, 64, who recently resigned as Governing Mayor of Berlin, can be sure of a comfortable majority in the electoral college.

Christian Democrat von Weizsäcker is highly respected by the German public and the established political parties. He may well be returned unopposed, in which case he seems sure to do better than any of his predecessors as Bonn President.

In 1949 the Parliamentary Council ruled that the head of state was not to be directly elected. Voting was to be by an electoral college consisting of Bundestag MPs and state assemblymen. This precaution was taken with the Weimar Republic in mind, the aim

being to ensure that political ability rather than popularity or demagogic skill decided the outcome.

The election will be followed by the media and the diplomatic corps in Bonn. The President is not just the country's highest-ranking officer-holder; he also represents it under international law, signing treaties with other countries negotiated by the Federal government and welcoming foreign ambassadors.

The Bonn head of state has strictly limited powers, unlike his counterpart in France, say, or the United States. All regulations or decrees he issues must be countersigned by the Chancellor or Cabinet Minister concerned.

He is elected for a five-year term and may be re-elected for a second and final one. He can refuse to sign legislation he considers un-

constitutional. He also has the right of pardon and other constitutional rights and duties.

But the President owes his authority to his personal reputation, and despite the limited powers all past Presidents have succeeded in ensuring that the head of state's job is held in high esteem in political life and by public opinion.

Theodor Heuss, Heinrich Lübke, Gustav Heinemann, Walter Scheel and Karl Carstens have each made their personal mark on the Presidency, ensuring that the head of state is more than a mere figurehead who does no more than go through constitutional motions whenever the need arises.

No-one doubts that Richard von Weizsäcker will be an equally effective and well-loved head of state.



Past, present and future: ex-President Walter Scheel (left), President Karl Carstens (centre) and President-to-be Richard von Weizsäcker in Stuttgart in January for the ceremony at which von Weizsäcker was awarded the Theodor Heuss Prize.