



TRANSITION OR CURTAIN? MERKEL 2 AND ITS EUROPEAN POLICY

2009 was a year of anniversaries for German history: the assembly of Weimar in 1919, the beginning of World War II in 1939, the new German Constitution of 1949. But undoubtedly the period 1989-2009 is what stirs most memories and emotions: not just because it is fresher in the memory, but because of its symbolic overtones (for nearly thirty years, from summer 1961 to November 1989, the Berlin Wall sundered the German capital, Germany herself, Europe and the whole northern hemisphere. This anniversary saw German foreign policy at a tricky moment for the new CDU/CSU-Liberal government led by Angela Merkel. A crisis of confidence in the Bavarian model (fuelled by a grave financial scandal) came at a point when a delicate balance was being sought inside the federal government by chancellor Merkel, dynamic young defence minister Von Guttenberg and the fledgling foreign minister Westerwelle, leader of the Liberals. Tension inside the coalition is due to the Afghan situation which German public opinion is finding it increasingly hard to digest and which sees the parties taking opposite stands. This has only partly overshadowed the debate on Europe, which has retained its intensity on some scores.

1. Towards a Lisbon-based EU

More than any member country, Germany has thrashed through the constitutional status of the Lisbon Treaty, following the Karlsruhe Court ruling in June 2009. The embers of that debate have died down but will flare at the next enlargement pains of united Europe (1). Arguments have been fiercer over canvassing for the new offices introduced by the Treaty. Fresh from electoral defeat, the left-wing newspapers thundered against the discussion hinging on personalities for the new jobs: the egoism of member countries is one of the main EU stumbling blocks (2). The German press divided over Blair: some half-heartedly backed Juncker, partly because he gets on so badly with Sarkozy, while others blamed chancellor Merkel for her passive line in the candidacy debate. This seems due to the fact that two promising names (Fischer and Steinmeier, both former foreign ministers) were not running since they belong to the alliance that lost the last German election. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was

especially vehement about the Blair candidacy, a bid by “anti-integrationists bent on weakening the Franco-German tandem. But thanks to the Swedish presidency (and the Poles and British) this could be the hour of the anti-integrationists” (3). The British role in the game was seen as emblematic, summing up member states’ resistance to any ceding of power. The Berlin daily in its turn thought Blair’s position ambiguous: part European, part anti-European (4). The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* took another line, eschewing candidate-backing: it hoped able persons would be appointed who could tackle the weighty issue of European leadership in a future where the EU will need a new injection of strength to counter the rise of bodies like the G20 (5).

2. The reception for Van Rompuy and Ashton

The hopes of the entire German press of all denominations were dashed by the new top EU appointments. The names of Van Rompuy and Ashton brought a wave of criticism in Germany. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* spoke of an “uninspiring start”, ushered in by two names that are virtually unknown in international politics. A low-profile choice was the inevitable result of member countries hanging on to their own power (6). A few days after the summit the *FAZ*, again, repeated the view that leadership of Europe will not be solved by institutional personalities or changes to the constitution, but only through a process of learning in which Lisbon is but a way-stage (7). The conservative daily was not alone in expressing nostalgia for someone like Solana, into whose shoes at the head of European diplomacy there now steps Baroness Ashton (8).

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was equally outspoken in its censure. It regretted that a figure like Juncker should be ousted by a Van Rompuy, and maintained that choosing an Englishwoman for High Representative was a dangerous signal: a reward to the biggest dead-weight in European integration (9), as well as a leading post going to an unqualified person (10). Another swingeing judgment came from that other bastion of German Europeanism, the weekly *Die Zeit* (11), and from the pro-SPD daily, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* which likened celebrations for the new Lisbon-based Europe to “an invitation to dinner from a friend with an empty fridge, a wife down with the migraine, and no phone to call the caterers” (12). The *Rundschau* was frankly shocked by the two new European leaders’ lack of appeal, let alone the appalling state of European social-democracy which failed to field any convincing persons of any standing

throughout 2009, from the European elections to the appointment of commissioners (13). The Berlin *Tagesspiegel* traced the choice of Van Rompuy and Ashton to the fact that “Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy, Gordon Brown and other premiers take all the real decisions about matters European, and want things to stay that way” (14).

But the most alarming signals for Germany were to come a few days later when the new European Commission appointments were announced. Germany was to receive a second-rate post (commissioner for energy, though without portfolio for climate or “foreign energy policy”), as compared with France and Great Britain which had made off with the plum jobs on the new Commission. This result unleashed a torrent of attacks on chancellor Merkel’s European policy: after a brilliant term of EU presidency in 2007, her international allure has sadly waned in the subsequent two years. The Munich daily accused her of coming back from Brussels literally empty-handed: a second-rate job for Germany, going to a second-rater, to boot: the former governor of Baden-Württemberg, Oettinger (15). This fanned the flames of an ongoing discussion over German foreign policy.

3. Liberals at the helm of foreign policy after a decade of black-red-green

The anniversary of the Wall coincided with the ensconcing of a new black-yellow (CDU/CSU-Liberal) government, and above all with liberal leader Westerwelle’s debut at the foreign office. Westerwelle has not yet given any hint of the direction German foreign policy is to take, especially on certain crucial issues: the geopolitical role of post-Soviet Russia in the new world line-up whose centre of gravity is shifting Pacific-wards (16); relations with France where Berlin has been playing second-fiddle these last two years to Sarkozy’s thrusting lead (17); a new understanding of how essential the Franco-German relationship is now that Europe risks being put offside by the emerging powers of Asia (18). France has continued to attract attention in Germany where distrust of Sarkozy’s personality goes beyond all ideological differences. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has remained outspoken in its criticism of Sarko-ism and its implications for Europe, but recognizes the need for France to redress her own national feeling – an effort that it thinks would be beyond Germany’s powers (19).

On a general note, Westerwelle's moves so far have been dominated by the Afghan issue, a running battle with CDU foreign minister Von Guttenberg, but his attitude of caution – as far as that goes – has been appreciated (20). Various writers have pointed out the risks of German foreign policy being timid and uncertain, from the Afghan issue on. Germany is in danger of being out on a limb; a sense of unreliability is being instilled into her EU and NATO allies (21).

The Afghan question has here proved a way of testing the flimsy historical/cultural/diplomatic compactness of foreign policy in present-day Germany. The tragic loss of civilian lives in Afghanistan caused by German forces in September led to months of tension and acrimony, a run of resignations and above all a breach in the political forces. Interestingly, the change of guard in Washington has not lessened many Germans' sensation that the Americans are lumbering them with a war which Berlin finds it hard to handle politically. The Munich daily sounded a clear alarm: the risk is of Vietnamization, a war entered into with irresponsible lightness by the Germans. It raised the prospect of withdrawing German troops (22).

Uncertainty as to the outward repercussions of foreign policy again coloured reactions to the first serious financial crisis to beset a Euro-zone member, Greece. The financial daily *Die Welt* came out with some drastic alternatives, clearly voicing German impatience with the EU's "problem child" (23). There was more enthusiasm for the coming term of Hungarian presidency (in early 2011) which will give Germany scope for expanding her influence over the Danube area and the Balkans (24). Opinions have divided more over letting Serbia join: the right are for a period of waiting before any enlargement; the left are pressing for Serbia to be absorbed forthwith (26). The feature article by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the state of health of East European democracies twenty years on from 1989 expressed marked German disappointment at the showing of post-communist Europe. There is also alarm at the state of democracy in countries like Italy, Greece and Belgium (27). One can hardly separate the issue of Union enlargement from the problems of certain founder members.

(1) Reinhard Müller, *Wenn Karlsruhe weh tut*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 13-11-2009.

(2) Daniela Weingärtner, *Das Personal macht's*, Die Tageszeitung, 02-11-2009; Werner Balsen, *Nächste Ausfahrt Europa*, Frankfurter Rundschau, 04-11-2009.

- (3) Martin Winter, *Union der Zwerge*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 11-11-2009.
- (4) Albrecht Meier, *Europa sucht guten Rat*, Der Tagesspiegel, 16-11-2009.
- (5) Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, *Führen oder präsidieren?*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 19-11-2009.
- (6) Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, *An der Hand*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 21-11-2009.
- (7) Günther Nonnenmacher, *Der europäische Lernprozess*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 01-12-2009 .
- (8) Horst Bacia, *Das Gesicht Europas*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 01-12-2009;
Martin Winter, *Europas Mann für die Welt*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 02-12-2009.
- (9) Martin Winter, *Verpasste Chance*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 21-11-2009.
- (10) Martin Winter, *Schützt Brüssel vor Brüssel*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 02-12-2009.
- (11) Jochen Bittner, *Herman wer? Catherine wie?*, Die Zeit, 26-11-2009.
- (12) Michael Bergius, *Keine Feier für Europa*, Frankfurter Rundschau, 01-12-2009.
- (13) Thorsten Knuf, *Graue Novizen der Macht*, Frankfurter Rundschau, 21-11-2009.
- (14) Albrecht Meier, *Gesichter eines Kontinents*, Der Tagesspiegel, 20-11-2009.
- (15) Martin Winter, *Merkels leere Hände*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 28-11-2009.
- (16) Stefan Kornelius, *Aus der neuen Welt*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 09-11-2009.
- (17) Michaela Wiegel, *Frankreichs Drängen*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 12-11-2009.
- (18) Stefan Ulrich, *Triumph der Freundschaft*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 12-11-2009.
- (19) Stefan Ulrich, *Französische Selbstsuche*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 02-11-2009.
- (20) Albrecht Meier, *Europa lebt!*, Der Tagesspiegel, 04-11-2009.
- (21) Martin Winter, *Nabelschau-Nation*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 30-12-2009.
- (22) Martin Winter, *Amerikas Alleingang*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 05-12-2009;
Martin Winter, *Europäer ohne Einfluss*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10-12-2009.
- (23) Jörg Eigendorf, *Danke, Griechenland*, Die Welt, 11-12-2009.
- (24) Carola Kaps, *Die Donauregion fest im Blick*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 18-12-2009.
- (25) Günther Nonnenmacher, *Serbien vor der Tür*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 23-12-2009.
- (26) Norbert Mappes-Niediek, *Serbien hat EU-Reife*, Frankfurter Rundschau, 23-12-2009.
- (27) Klaus Brill, *Der demokratische Mangel*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 28-12-2009.