

**Presentation by Alan Posener, a leading columnist for Die Welt newspaper, about the outlook for “Germany after Angela Merkel”, at an AEJ UK meeting on May 18
(Text edited by William Horsley)**

It's easy to underestimate how deeply Angela Merkel has changed Germany for the better. Over the past 16 years it has become more like a normal Western European country and a more pleasant place to live. When she was first elected as Chancellor in 2005 Germany was in some ways more like Hungary today than like Britain was then, especially as far as immigration is concerned. While Hamburg, Frankfurt, Munich and the western half of Berlin were multicultural, the official line of the CDU/CSU was that Germany is not „a country of immigration“. There was talk of a dominant Christian „leitkultur“. As for sexual mores, Merkel's predecessor in office Gerhard Schroeder and his Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer were both criticised for their multiple marriages, and when the Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit came out as homosexual in 2001 it was seen as a real scandal. That is impossible to imagine now. Germany has embraced multiculturalism, immigration, women in the workforce, men in the kitchen, even gay marriage. Merkel's health minister is a gay married man. And Germany has become more of a consumer and services economy. It leads the way as one of start-up centres of Europe. Partly as a reaction to the shift in the balance of power in the EU caused by Brexit, Germany has reluctantly committed to common European debt and an expansive monetary policy by the European Central Bank, so accommodating the wishes of the southern „Club Med“ countries like Italy France and Greece. So in many ways, Merkel has continued the work of Konrad Adenauer and Helmut to overcome German exceptionalism: the so-called „Sonderweg“. Those leaders worked for Germany's integration into the west by co-founding and funding the EU, joining NATO, and later giving up D-mark to join the euro. And like those predecessors, Angela Merkel has done this without calling too much attention to the fact.

However, while Adenauer and Kohl were willing in their actions to pander to conservative and even reactionary elements at home while keeping their eyes fixed on Western integration, Merkel has publicly alienated those elements, and that has led to the rise of the populist AfD, the Alternative for Germany. You can argue whether this was inevitable considering that Merkel, unlike Kohl, was forced into a coalition with the SPD for all but four years of her chancellorship. But she went further than that. Although she campaigned in 2005 as a free marketeer and friend of George W Bush, she marginalised the Social Democrats and the Greens by adopting many of their energy and nuclear policies. She abandoned the more radical bits of Schroeder's „Agenda 2010“ economic reforms, adopted a greenish energy and climate policy, and avoided confrontation with Russia and China. This has led to widespread cynicisms and conspiracies theories, especially on the extreme right. At the same time, Merkel, though she is seen as a great European, has very little understanding of the fears of our neighbours. In that sense Merkel is much more like Schroeder, who couldn't care less what the rest of Europe thought about him than she is like Kohl and Adenauer. In fact she has often pursued a nationalist course at the expense of Western solidarity.

Angela Merkel's pursuit of „Germany-first“ policies

The most obvious example of Merkel's „Germany-first“ approach is the so-called German „Energiewende“. Merkel's populist decision to abandon nuclear power and

coal at the same time has led to a dangerous dependency on Russian gas. This has angered not just the United States but Poland, the Baltic states and Ukraine, not to mention the European Commission. And there are others examples. Germany's initial reaction to the Greek sovereign debt crisis was to impose a counterproductive austerity regime on the country, which forced the Greek government into selling the harbour of Piraeus to the Chinese. Merkel has actually visited China 12 times in the past 16 years, and she will make a 13th visit to say goodbye this summer. She was the main driver of the investment agreement with China. The signing of that agreement in the hiatus between the US election and the swearing in of Joe Biden provoked not just the anger of the then sitting president Donald Trump but also serious concerns in Biden's camp, which quite rightly wanted a multilateral approach to the rising superpower. Merkel brushed all American protests aside, and if the Chinese had not reacted so stupidly to very limited European sanctions on Chinese party officials responsible for the genocide on the Uigurs, the agreement would have been finalised by now. In fact the European Parliament vetoed the ratification process in a signal victory for the European idea.

The list of examples goes on. Her much-lauded open-border policy at the height of the refugee crisis was unilateral and unsustainable, and it probably contributed to the pro-Brexit vote in the UK a year later. Her attempt to impose refugee quotas on all EU countries by a majority vote in the European Council not only alienated the so-called Visegrad group, of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but has proved unenforceable, and thus underlined the powerlessness of the European Council. She has subsidised the German automobile industry in order to protect the German industry. And probably her worst sin has been to torpedo the proposed merger of Airbus and British Aerospace for the same reason.

Her initial reaction to the Covid crisis was to prohibit the export of desperately needed ICU equipment to Italy. And there was Germany's decision to abstain when the Security Council voted to approve the use of force against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. At the time, Kohl quite rightly said that Germany had shown itself to be an unreliable NATO partner and had „lost its compass“. This is true and dangerous.

The German paradox: too small to manage Europe but too large to be trusted

Since Bismarck united two thirds of Germany (leaving out Austria and its Balkan Empire), the German conundrum has been this: Germany is too weak to dominate the continent alone, but so strong that it cannot help intimidating its neighbours. With Britain's departure from the EU, that problem has been exacerbated. But nobody seems to know what to do about it. Emmanuel Macron's futile attempts to restart the Franco-German „motor“, and thus ensure France a leading role in Europe and by extension the world, testify to a dangerous deafness in the German Foreign Office and Chancellery. Sixteen years of Merkel have instilled a culture of what she herself calls „auf Sicht fahren“, driving as if in a fog, punctuated by sudden and unpredictable reactions to crises, like a driver alternately hitting the brakes and the accelerator. It's difficult to see how any of this will change after the election, because of the complicated mathematics of coalition-building in the fragmented political landscape. Some of the polls now see the Greens in first place, ahead of the CDU, others suggest it's the other way round. Public support is running at around 25 percent each. The SPD follows with around 15 percent, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) with an astounding 12 percent, and the radical parties of the left and the right have not quite 20 percent between them. And while 60 percent of Germans say they want a change in

government, and over two-thirds say they want different policies in many areas, there is no agreement what those policies should be. Climate and immigration are the two issues at the top of people's agendas – not Europe, not foreign or defence policy, not China, Russia or the USA. At the same time climate, and immigration and integration, are the two most contentious issues. There may be broad agreement among the Greens and the CDU/CSU, the SPD and even the FDP on maintaining a liberal refugee policy and opening Germany up for legal migration, but these issues split the country. Broadly speaking, while German male voters and East Germans consider immigration the most important issue and want a more restrictive policy, women and West German voters consider climate policy the number one issue, and want strict policies on emissions and so forth.

What will the elections bring?

So what will happen after the election? One might wish theoretically for a Green-Red coalition – or perhaps a „traffic light“ coalition, of Green, Red (SPD) and yellow (FDP) -- because that would make for a clearly progressive government and a conservative CDU/CSU opposition, and it would allow the CDU/CSU to formulate a consistent conservative opposition policy and marginalise the AfD, but the numbers only just add up. And it's hard to see the Liberal FDP enabling a coalition that would be under pressure from its Green and Social Democratic base and vocal sections of the media to be very radical on climate change and social issues like LGBTQ rights, immigration, racism, housing and jobs. A Green-Red-Red coalition like the one we have in Berlin is even less likely, as the positions of the Left party -- „Die Linke“ -- on NATO, defence in general, relations with Russia, America and Israel are anathema to the Greens and to a lesser extent the SPD. Anyway the numbers just don't add up.

Probably it will boil down to a coalition between the Greens and the CDU/CSU, possibly with the FDP added to make up the numbers. We call this a „Jamaica „ coalition because of the colours – black, green and yellow. The SPD, meanwhile are really eager to get out of government. They've been part of the successive ruling coalitions since 1998 -- first with the Greens for 7 years, then with the CDU/CSU for all but 4 of the past 16 years, and during that time their support has fallen from 41 percent to 15 percent. It would seem suicidal not to attempt a regeneration from the opposition benches. So my money is on a coalition between the Greens and the CDU/CSU. And probably the CDU will come first, if only by a hair's breadth. It will be up to Armin Laschet, who will lead his much-diminished CDU/CSU into the election, to convince voters that what he lacks in charisma he makes up for in experience and civility. Indeed, he is well qualified for government: he has been prime minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia since 2017 with a population of almost 18 million people, and his time in office has been free of scandals. At first blush Laschet is also a Merkel clone, he seems not to have any big ideas of his own. Laschet has opposed stopping work on NordStream 2, the Russian--German gas pipeline which has had the effect of circumventing and isolating Ukraine and dividing up Europe. However, as a Rhenish Catholic like Adenauer and Kohl, Laschet has much more affinity to Europe than the East German Protestant Angela Merkel, and he may be more receptive to French blandishments, if Macron can win a second term in office. That may not be good thing, as Macron, for all his talk of liberal values and European rhetoric, shares the French instinct to define Europe in contrast or in opposition to the USA and the Anglo-Saxons. Macron has called NATO „brain-dead“, and seems to hope that Europe can somehow attract Russia away from China and into

its orbit, which now looks like a dangerous illusion. And Laschet too is softer on Russia than others in his party,

The Green „joker in the pack“

The joker in the pack are the Greens. Polls give them a slim chance of capturing the Chancellorship, but they will more probably join Laschet's government as a very strong junior partner -- which would give them the foreign ministry by tradition -- hoping to gain a majority in the 2025 elections having assuaged misgivings about their radical ideas for combatting climate change. Though the Green rank and file are often pacifist, sceptical of capitalism in general and the USA in particular, their leader Annalena Baerbock and the leadership in general is decidedly pro-Western and much more critical of Russia than the SPD and some elements of the CDU and the FDP.

The Greens are the only party committed to stopping NordStream 2, and their espousal of a human-rights-based foreign policy means that as foreign minister Baerbock would be more like Joschka Fischer than the present one, Heiko Maas. Baerbock has talked of a „climate alliance“ with the USA. In the European Parliament, the Greens have been very vocal in their condemnation of China's actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. And it was a Green MEP who was instrumental in stopping the planned investment agreement with China.

The Greens have also espoused the idea of a federal state of Europe, so they too, like Laschet, might be more interested in Macron's ideas. These ideas are worrying in the long-term, but in the short-term a revival of European foreign policy should be welcomed. Only a concentration on beefing up border controls, solving outstanding disputes like Cyprus and Ukraine, developing European defence capabilities, and managing the conflict over China, can unite the EU. Europe is now fragmented along similar lines to Germany itself.

Much hinges on the ability of the next government to deliver on climate change without crippling the German economy. A poll of German bosses shows they would actually prefer Baerbock to Laschet as Chancellor. Maybe they are banking on a Green-led government to make serious changes to energy policy once they realise the extent of the problem. Nobody but the Greens would be able to contemplate a reversal of the counterproductive German policy on nuclear power. If Germany did reverse that policy it would immediately change the geopolitical situation in Europe.

Will Germany now lead?

Germany remains a medium-sized power masquerading as a small-sized power, with all the frustrations that entails for our allies and friends. And there is no guarantee that Germany will not continue down that road. But not least thanks to Merkel's reforms, which as I said have left the majority of the country more comfortable with itself than at any time in its history, there is a chance that Germany will be more ready to assume the responsibility its size and geopolitical place in Europe demand.

And here is a last thought: a lot will depend on whether Britain remains tied up in the mess created by Brexit -- the Scottish bid for independence, the emergence of more troubles in Northern Ireland, the stupid confrontations with Europe over vaccine deliveries, or god forbid fishing rights in the Channel -- or whether the UK can offer Germany a credible partnership in leading the continent. I'm afraid, however, that that might just strain Boris Johnson's attention span to breaking point.