

‘The Schröder project: a rational approach, tainted with domestic policy concerns' from Le Monde (8 May 2001)

Caption: On 8 May 2001, the French daily newspaper Le Monde analyses the scope of the European plan devised by the German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, and outlines the reactions in French political circles.

Source: Le Monde. 08.05.2001. Paris: Le Monde. "Le projet Schröder: une approche rationnelle teintée de préoccupations de politique intérieure", auteur: Leparmentier, Arnaud.

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The Schröder project: a rational approach, tainted with domestic policy concerns

Analysis

Raising the odds on Europe in Germany, while it's down to the lowest bidder in France, especially on the Left

Is this just a political manoeuvre for the benefit of domestic public opinion, or a real project for Europe? The resolution on Europe released on Monday, 30 April by the leadership of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, prompted a wide variety of responses, with a closing of ranks at home and a very lukewarm, even hostile reaction abroad, particularly in France. The French Minister for European Affairs, Pierre Moscovici of the Socialist Party, condemned 'a speech [...] that may go some way along rather German lines, which are very federalist. But I do not think it represents a consensus position for the mainstream in Europe'.

The prime concern of Mr Schröder is to grab the limelight in the European arena some 18 months before the next general election. He must prevent his Foreign Minister, the federalist Green Joschka Fischer, from monopolising the attention. He must also fend off criticism that he has no real policy on Europe, voiced by the Christian Democratic (CDU) opposition, which sees itself as the guardian of the European legacy of Chancellors Adenauer and Kohl. The Chancellor is also anxious to placate the Bavarian Right and the *Länder*, which are sick of Brussels interfering in their prerogatives and are demanding a Constitution that specifies who does what in Europe. Lastly he had to reassure his SPD comrades, who are generally unenthusiastic about European integration. In his memorandum Mr Schröder has managed to reconcile these pressures and set forth a German vision of Europe that should enable him to claim during the election campaign that he is calling the shots on Europe.

A leap forwards

If Schröder can carry it off, it is because the Germans have a rational attitude to Europe, based on the assumption that 'there is no alternative to increasing integration and Europeanisation'. For that to work there has to be a driving force. The Chancellor has realised that the existing institutions are outdated. The Nice Summit showed that European leaders were incapable of reforming them. So he is now proposing to turn the Commission into a proper executive and to make the Council of Ministers into a second Chamber of the Parliament, an idea that has always made the French wary.

This leap forward involves reconciling his fellow citizens with Europe. Mr Schröder consequently wants to make the European Union more democratic, by giving more power to the Parliament in Strasbourg, by enabling citizens to take a case before the European Court of Justice — just as Germans can do at present with the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, when they consider their basic rights have been disregarded, whereas the French cannot.

Secondly, the Chancellor considers that Europe should protect the population, so he has resurrected the idea of turning Europol into a sort of FBI and is demanding a seven-year transitional period before granting freedom of movement to workers from Eastern Europe. He is also calling for the adoption of a European Constitution.

Thirdly, he wants to correct the things about Europe that the Germans see as unfair. He is calling, among others, for deregulation of the energy market and, now that cases of BSE (mad cow disease) have been detected in Germany, root and branch reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP). He is proposing co-funding by Member States, which would reduce the amount Germany has to pay to Brussels. Some of these measures upset the French, but delight German voters.

Fourthly, the SPD is asking for common defence and security policy to be increasingly managed by the Community, whereas France, concerned about its sovereignty, prefers an intergovernmental approach.

However, in keeping with German tradition, Mr Schröder does not want a federal super-State. Under his project, some powers — the CAP and regional development — would be restored to Member States in line with the principle of subsidiarity. Nor does he plan to raise the upper limit on the European budget, currently 1.27 % of gross domestic product (GDP), which pleases German regionalists.

A ‘party matter’

Predictably the Schröder project was welcomed by the German press and by most of the political parties. Ultimately it is not very important that this attempt to up the odds in Europe should have been prompted by domestic policy. Germany has a policy on Europe, whereas the political situation in France, also preparing for an election, prompts a quite different response, with parties saying as little as they can, particularly on the Left.

The French Socialist Party (PS) is irritated. The group surrounding the Foreign Minister, Hubert Védrine, and Pierre Moscovici have spent the last year making fun of Mr Fischer’s unworkable ideas, claiming he was isolated. That ploy will not work with Mr Schröder, although he did take the precaution of speaking on behalf of the Social Democratic Party. The French riposte is to wave the red rag of ‘a German Europe’.

The publication of the Schröder manifesto just a few days before the start of the Congress of European Socialist parties in Berlin may seem provocative. It certainly shows that despite attempts to establish closer links with France’s PS, both parties have carried on putting their own interests first.

Mr Schröder’s decision to release the text was certainly hastened by a determination to cut the ground from under the feet of *Der Spiegel*, which was preparing a big feature along the lines of ‘Germany no longer does anything in Europe’. But all the same, the Chancellor apparently had no qualms about upsetting his French partners.

Mr Fischer was careful to keep his proposals sufficiently vague, to avoid being accused of taking too German a line, which might have stifled debate. But Mr Fischer waited in vain for Mr Jospin to state his position and Mr Schröder does not seem to be expecting much from that quarter. On Friday, 4 May the former CDU leader, Wolfgang Schäuble — who alongside Karl Lamers signed a proposal in 1994 to create a ‘hard core’ in Europe (an idea rejected by France) — summed up German thinking on this topic. ‘Mr Jospin does not really seem interested in Europe,’ he said. ‘For example, he made a keynote speech on policy without mentioning the word “Europe”.’ Chancellor Schröder still thinks Germany and France should act as a driving force in Europe, but, he has suggested in private, he will go it alone if France refuses to play its part.

Publication of the manifesto shows that the revival of Franco-German relations announced in the aftermath of the Nice setback has not yet come to fruition. This does not make the task of Chancellery officials any easier. Michael Steiner, Mr Schröder’s advisor on foreign affairs, admitted that it was an ‘exclusively party matter’.

Commentators in France have sought to minimise the importance of the text: ‘This paper is like a wish list for Father Christmas. But at some point one has to let go of the pleasure principle and accept the reality principle,’ said a French official, who accused Mr Schröder of wanting to hog the limelight. The Chancellor is certainly an adept of Realpolitik. In March 2001, at the European Council in Stockholm, Germany blocked a Swedish Presidency proposal to deregulate the energy market in 2005. The aim then was to rescue France and prevent yet another fiasco. But the SPD ‘paper’ is probably a more accurate reflection of the Chancellor’s real convictions than the compromises he has to reach with his European partners and with French leaders.

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