

Policy of peace and German unification (1975–1992)

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Even after his resignation as Chancellor on 6 May 1974, Willy Brandt continued to play an active role in the international political arena, with a particular focus on Third World issues. He was elected President of the Socialist International (SI) in 1976, having already been its Vice-President since 1966. Brandt's Presidency, which lasted until 1992, was a period of renewal for the SI, in terms of both organisation and policies pursued. The organisation gained in effectiveness and opened itself up to friendly parties in the Third World. At the request of the President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, Brandt took on an additional role in 1977 as Chairman of an 'Independent Commission on International Development Issues', known as the 'North–South Commission'. In early 1980, he was able to present to the United Nations Secretary-General the Commission's Final Report, entitled 'A Programme for Survival'. What became known as the Brandt Report was a major input to the debate on the challenges of dialogue with the Third World. It was followed three years later by a supplementary report, 'Common Crisis'.

But for Willy Brandt, European unification was one of the keys to global political cooperation and remained a central feature of his political activities. Leading the SPD party list in the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, Brandt succeeded in drawing much-needed attention to the election campaign. His commitment was not, however, enough to prevent a poor showing by the Social Democrats, in the Federal Republic in particular. Brandt was a Member of the European Parliament for one parliamentary term (ending in 1983). In the various roles that he was called upon to perform, Brandt played an active part in the discussions on deepening and enlarging the Communities. Here Europe's role as a 'factor for peace' lay particularly close to his heart.

Europe's role as a factor for peace

In a speech given in June 1978 to an assembly of the socialist parties of Europe, Brandt presented Europe as an important factor for peace, by which he was referring to the European Communities' contribution to the establishment of a worldwide peaceful order. He recalled the aim, formulated in 1973 in Copenhagen, of creating a European identity and the associated requirement that the European Community should emerge as a major player in international relations. In practice, however, the Community was rarely able to live up to its global political aspirations, constantly held back as it was by the promotion of individual national self-interests and repeatedly frustrated by international crises. The attempt by the 'Nine' to move forward with the idea of political union, on the basis of the 1976 Tindemans Report, ultimately came to nothing as a result of the indifference of the national governments — the very governments which had assigned the task to Tindemans in the first place. These various setbacks notwithstanding, Brandt was convinced there were a number of international tasks which the Community could and must assume. Against the background of his North–South commitment, he saw development aid as one of the areas in which the Community had something to contribute. Brandt believed the Community must seek to 'increase the self-reliance of the developing countries and bring about a fairer distribution of prosperity, knowledge and power'. Another important aim was to 'vanquish racism and residual colonialism'. While Brandt was still in office, the EC had already initiated negotiations with former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (the ACP countries) with a view to placing their relations with the Common Market on a new footing following the 1973 enlargement. The negotiations culminated in February 1975 in the Lomé Convention, which in Brandt's estimation constituted a landmark decision.

Brandt regarded enlargement of the Communities as another key challenge for the EC. The enlargement agenda in the 1980s included applications for accession from Greece (1981), Spain (1986) and Portugal (1986) and hence also completion of the democratisation process in southern Europe. As SPD Chairman and President of the SI, Brandt was an important interlocutor for the social-democratic parties in the applicant countries, parties which in the mid-1970s had made an essential contribution to the defeat of the authoritarian regimes in their countries.

His efforts in the direction of enlargement were accompanied by a commitment to continuing close ties with the countries of northern and central Europe (Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and Austria) with which the EC had concluded trade agreements in 1973. Brandt maintained close relations in those

countries with such leading politicians as Olof Palme and Bruno Kreisky and was insistent that the Community must not cut itself off from these ‘highly developed nations’; instead, by building on common traditions and shared experience, it must benefit from them.

Nor did Brandt ever lose sight of the pan-European dimension. For him, ‘Europeanising Europe’ always encompassed action to reinforce relations with Central and Eastern Europe. It was incumbent upon Europeans to implement ‘step by step’ the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act which had been signed in 1975. Europe must also be a driving force in the arms reduction process.

It was nevertheless essential, in Brandt’s view, for the ‘Paris–Bonn axis’ to remain at the heart of the process of European unification. Recurrent disagreements must never be allowed to mask the fundamental importance of Franco-German friendship for European cooperation and for the development of the continent.

German reunification and the geopolitical upheavals after the end of the Cold War

Brandt was Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany from 1961 to 1987. When he stood down at the party conference in Bad Godesberg in 1987, he promised not to ‘vanish from sight’ but rather to continue to place his experience at the service of German and European social democracy. And indeed as Honorary Chairman of the SPD and as a Member of the Bundestag Brandt contributed actively, until his death in 1992, to the policy and manifesto discussions within his party, taking the floor in the major debates on domestic and international affairs. The voice of the *elder statesman* carried considerable weight in political circles at home and abroad, as well as among the general public. This was particularly apparent in connection with German unity, for which he believed his Ostpolitik and German Policy endeavours could take some credit. On the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall he delivered a speech outside the Schöneberg Town Hall, from where, as Mayor of West Berlin in the late 1950s, he had ushered in the ‘new Ostpolitik’. Thousands of people from East and West listened to his admonition on 10 November 1989 that there was still much more to do. His words on that occasion, ‘Now let what belongs together grow together’, were to become a leitmotiv of the unification process.

Unlike many of his political ‘grandchildren’ who were now responsible for the SPD’s destinies, Brandt was an advocate of an accelerated unification process and on this issue supported the positive approach taken by the Chancellor and CDU Chairman, Helmut Kohl. Like Kohl, he was convinced of the need to work for German unity as part of European unification. Not only must the negotiations concerning German unity proceed in close cooperation and consultation with the former occupying powers, but Germany must, once unified, commit itself even more firmly to its European partners. The fact that Socialists like the French President François Mitterrand were just as uneasy at the prospect of German unity as Britain’s Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made it even more urgent to reinforce the European dimension. Brandt, who no longer held any political responsibilities, could only support these developments, offering his comments and advice as appropriate. His past as a key figure in German, European and international détente did, however, lend him a measure of authority which provided valuable support for the Government’s actions. One of the main pillars of Brandt’s Ostpolitik in the 1960s and 1970s had been the concept of a pan-European peaceful order and the assurance that German Ostpolitik began in the West. Now the negotiations for the creation of a European Union were proceeding in parallel with the German–German unification process. In February 1992, in Maastricht, the Member States signed the Treaty on European Union. And in this same period, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact opened up the prospect that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe might, in the not too distant future, be integrated into the structures supporting European cooperation.