

European unification and the politics of freedom (1948–1966)

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On his return from exile in Scandinavia, Brandt worked as a reporter for Norwegian news services before taking German citizenship in 1948 and establishing himself as a politician in Berlin. He focused initially on the power struggle within the SPD to find a successor to the Mayor, Ernst Reuter, and on his activities as a Member of the German Bundestag, to which he was elected on an SPD ticket in 1949 and again in 1953. But he also took a stance, politically and in the media, on the major national issues of the day: rearmament, integration with the West and German foreign policy generally. Unlike his party, he soon came to recognise the need provisionally to accept the reality of partition and carry through the reintegration of West Germany, economically and in terms of security policy, within the Western Alliance. Under the leadership of its party chairman, Kurt Schumacher, the SPD responded with a scepticism approaching hostility to the policy of integration with the West pursued by the Adenauer Government. Aside from his concern that this policy might detract attention from the aim of German unity enshrined in the German Constitution, Schumacher condemned the supranational union as a ‘conservative, clerical, capitalist, trust-driven’ attempt to ‘create a Europe whose capitalist structure, poor democratic credentials and lack of social vitality would make it an easy target for an attack from the East.’ On this issue Brandt supported the position taken by what was known as the SPD’s ‘Mayors’ Wing’. The popular Mayors of the city-states of Bremen (Wilhelm Kaisen), Hamburg (Max Brauer) and Berlin (Ernst Reuter) challenged the party chairman’s line by coming out in favour of integration with the West. Party-political power relationships did however oblige Brandt, then a rising young politician, to tone down his opposition to the party leadership’s policy on Europe, using many ifs and buts and generally hedging his position. So it was that Brandt, at the Federal Party Convention in May 1950, preferred to abstain rather than join the small number of delegates who voted against the resolution tabled by the party’s executive committee rejecting the Schuman Plan.

Party-political considerations aside, Brandt’s assessment of the individual steps towards integration was very much a nuanced one. He supported participation by the Federal Republic in the Council of Europe, while raising certain objections concerning participation by the French-controlled Saar and the structure of the Council, which in his view was incomplete. Nor did Brandt extend an unmitigated welcome to the Schuman Plan (1950) and the Federal Republic’s accession to the European Coal and Steel Community. He criticised the exclusive nature of the association formed by the ‘Six’ and perceived a risk that a one-sided integration with the West might hinder progress towards German reunification. These considerations were however in his view outweighed by the economic and political benefits of a dense web of relations between the fledgling Federal Republic and the West. Brandt did, in contrast, find little to recommend in the proposal for a European Defence Community put forward by France’s Defence Minister, René Pleven, in 1952. West German rearmament, which Brandt believed was necessary, could in his view be better achieved within NATO. So when the project failed following rejection by the French National Assembly (1954), he did not, unlike others, see this as a dark hour for Europe.

Brandt’s attitude to these first steps towards integration foreshadows the aspiration, as he would later write in his memoirs, that ‘Europe should come together and radiate political energy.’ But these years also saw the emergence of the pragmatic stance towards the project of European unification which was to mark Brandt’s thoughts and activities during his political career.

As regards the tense relationship with his own party over the Western Alliance, Brandt had the satisfaction, towards the end of the 1950s, of seeing that the line that he had advocated had won out in the end. Under the leadership of Erich Ollenhauer, Kurt Schumacher’s successor, the party began slowly to move away from its hostility towards integration with the West. Its crushing defeat in the 1953 federal elections had brought home to the party the untenability of its anti-Europe line. Admittedly, Ollenhauer continued, at the SPD Convention in July 1954, to draw attention to the relationship between German unity and European unification. But when it came to the 1957 vote in the Bundestag on the Rome Treaties, a majority of Social Democrats backed the course advocated by the Adenauer Government, a majority also voting in favour. The abstention of some Social Democrats, among them a future Minister and Federal Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, was intended as a criticism of the exclusive nature of the ‘Club of Six’ and in particular of the non-participation of the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries.

In 1959, with the adoption of its Bad Godesberg manifesto, the party finally abandoned its resistance to the Federal Republic's pro-Western stance. European unification was now recognised as a necessary basis for securing economic and social progress. Herbert Wehner, at that time deputy party and parliamentary group leader, was to announce in the Bundestag in 1960 the SPD's unreserved acceptance of integration with the West as the basis of German foreign policy and policy on Germany. From his base in Berlin, Brandt had contributed greatly in the second half of the 1950s to the process of change in the Social Democrats' position on European policy. Opinions within the SPD on its Europe policies continued to diverge into the early 1960s, when Brandt — who in the meantime had become Mayor of Berlin and one of his party's leading foreign policy figures — stood as candidate for the Chancellorship (1961), going on to become party leader (1964). Under its new leadership, which also included Helmut Schmidt, Herbert Wehner and Fritz Erler, the SPD gained recognition both domestically and vis-à-vis its European and Atlantic partners as an interlocutor to be taken seriously and, in the longer term, as an alternative party of government. The German Social Democrats soon acquired a reputation among European sister parties as a model reformist party. On the domestic front a dialogue was engaged with the CDU and its coalition partner, the FDP, on the German question and on foreign and European policy issues. One result of this 'common course' between government and opposition was the preamble to the Franco-German Friendship Treaty of 1963, jointly formulated by the Bundestag and Bundesrat, which emphasised the Federal Republic's loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance. Brandt, who, as spokesman for the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Bundesrat, had played a 'coordinating' role in the drafting of the preamble, was entrusted, shortly after, with the thankless task of explaining the German Parliament's decision to the French President, General de Gaulle. The General, who had negotiated the Treaty one-to-one with the Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, was 'vexed' but he had to acknowledge the declaration that a majority of German politicians were prepared to accept neither the exclusion of the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries from the process of European unification nor a strain on transatlantic relations. Brandt was however among those who could see some definite merits in de Gaulle's thinking on European policy. 'Why is no one else saying this?' was the question that he asked in his well-received address in 1964 to the Foreign Policy Association, by which he was referring to de Gaulle's assertion of an independent role for Europe in the space between the superpowers. There was certainly common ground between the General's conception of a 'European Europe', of a 'Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals', and Brandt's pan-European ideas. Addressing the German Foreign Affairs Society, again in 1964, Brandt argued that the Federal Republic too needed more room for manoeuvre and called for action to loosen the petrified policies on Germany, Europe and East–West relations, in particular through a more active and independent pursuit of national interests.

And yet, for all his respect for de Gaulle's concept of Europe as a Third Force, Brandt never lost his awareness of the importance of the transatlantic relationship for the Federal Republic. Brandt and the SPD were closer to the 'Atlanticist' camp in the governing parties than to the 'Gaullists' around Adenauer. When the 'grand old man' retired from office in 1963, the dialogue with the CDU on European policy issues was stepped up. Social and Christian Democrats were particularly close on the question of the enlargement of the EEC to include the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Scandinavian countries. As from 1963, there were virtually no party-political differences in the Bundestag on European policy.

Looking beyond party limits and national frontiers, Brandt's European consciousness — and that of other leading Social Democrats — was heightened from the mid-1950s onwards by the encounter with Jean Monnet. Brandt had at an early stage identified the *père de l'Europe* as a future decision-maker and had established contact with him. In the Action Committee for the United States of Europe, founded by Monnet in 1955, Brandt, Helmut Schmidt and Herbert Wehner rubbed shoulders with such CDU politicians as Kurt Georg Kiesinger and Rainer Barzel, with whom they would go on, in the 1966 to 1969 Grand Coalition, to determine the Federal Republic's European policies.