

The place of unification of Europe in Willy Brandt's political credo — Introduction

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Last updated: 08/08/2016



The place of the unification of Europe in Willy Brandt's political credo

The name of the fourth Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Willy Brandt, is primarily associated with his Ostpolitik. And it is certainly true that a commitment to the freedom of Berlin, German unity and détente in relations with Central and Eastern European neighbours was central to Brandt's political activities. Nevertheless, Brandt attached no less importance to the unification of Europe and to ensuring that, in its alliance with the United States and its dealings with the Soviet Union, Europe acted independently from a position of strength. His oft-repeated catchphrase that the Ostpolitik begins in the West and the concept of a pan-European peaceful order, which he and his close collaborator Egon Bahr continued to develop over the years, bear witness to that wider concern.

Even before becoming Chancellor, Brandt had grappled extensively with the issue of European unification and Germany's place in a European post-war order. As a socialist living in exile in Scandinavia (1933–1945), he was much exercised by the 'dream of the United States of Europe'. As a regional politician [*Land* politician] and member of the Bundestag (from 1949), he spoke for the Berlin SPD on the emerging foreign policy orientations of the fledgling Republic. Later, as Mayor of Berlin (1957–1966) and then SPD leader (from 1964), he began to play an active role in shaping German foreign and European policy, going on, as Foreign Minister in the Grand Coalition (1966–1969) and finally as Chancellor (1969–1974), to contribute decisively to the forging of that policy. Brandt remained committed to the idea of European unification even after his resignation as Chancellor (1974), carrying it forward as President of the Socialist International (1979–1992), as a Member of the European Parliament (1979–1983) and again as SPD leader (until 1987) and a Member of the Bundestag (until 1992).

Brandt's understanding of European unification was informed by a pan-European dimension from the outset. The conviction that a solution to the German question could be attained only in a wider context can already be found in his writings in exile. At that time Brandt saw neither the Soviet Union nor the United Kingdom as parties to such a union, but he did on the other hand see a place for Germany's Central European neighbours. Later, however, he contributed decisively as Foreign Minister and Chancellor to the United Kingdom's accession to the EC (1973). The gradual inclusion of Central and Eastern Europe in issues involving European cooperation came to be an important aspect of his Ostpolitik, a policy which was subsequently taken forward in a pan-European framework following the 1975 Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). And before his death in October 1992, Brandt would hear Mikhail Gorbachev refer to the Soviet Union as a member of the 'Common European Home' and, with the end of the Cold War, would foresee the possibility of the countries of Central Europe joining the Western Communities.

Apart from the 'visionary' writings when he was in exile, Brandt's thinking and activities in connection with European unification were ever more pragmatic, ever less concerned with wide-ranging plans. However inadequate the European institutions might be, they constituted an unavoidable stage and had to be accepted; similarly, the association of Western European nations was to be seen as a step on the way to the long-term goal of a comprehensive, pan-European peaceful order. The key concepts underpinning the 'new Ostpolitik', crystallised in the slogans 'the policy of small steps' and 'change through rapprochement', also influenced Brandt's stance on the integration process, which had to be worked at despite endless obstacles and setbacks. Admittedly, Brandt's attitude towards European unification was marked also by impatience, as his close collaborator Egon Bahr recalls. Brandt found it 'sobering' that in the united Europe it was always the slowest ship which dictated the overall speed, that initiatives fizzled out and processes that had been initiated ground to a halt. He was concerned at the limited acceptance of the European endeavour among the general public and in particular among young people. And, like others before and after, he sometimes despaired at the 'technocrats in Brussels'. That said, Brandt laid the blame for the European malaise not so much on the Brussels bureaucracy as on the national governments and their 'grim defence of outdated sovereignty and parochial interests'. Irritation at the 'irksome to infuriating inadequacies of the EC' was never enough, however, to divert his attention from the 'golden concept of unification'. As a Social Democrat, he thus saw himself as faithful to SPD traditions and in particular to the resolution adopted at the party's 1925 Heidelberg Convention, when the Social Democrats called for a United States of Europe.

It was Brandt's view, however, that the unification project should not be threatened by a narrow ideological

focus. Referring to the sharp disagreements, in the Federal Republic's early years, on integration with the West, Brandt argued for a cross-party consensus on European policy. While he never retreated from his commitment to a social Europe, he distanced himself on a number of occasions from calls for a 'Social Democratic Europe'.

As regards the practical shape to be taken by the unification project, Brandt openly supported the functional, gradual approach to integration. Hence his frequent references to the influence of Jean Monnet, the *père de l'Europe*. In his last major speech on European policy as Chancellor, which he gave in November 1973 when he was the first Head of Government to speak to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, he emphasised that more than 20 years of integration had taught that the functional route was shorter than the constitutional alternative. If people liked to call that approach pragmatism, that was fine by him. As Brandt put it on a later occasion, Europe would never emerge on 'a constitution-maker's drawing board'.