

Angela Merkel: The IKEA Politician

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Global Research, September 26, 2017

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“The recipe for her success, which she has only latterly discovered, is that she’s been able to develop an image as someone who is tuned in to the German soul.” - Oskar Niedermayer, Sep 22, 2017

Modular furniture divinities, or corporations, may not be the best points of comparison for a politician, but German Chancellor Angela Merkel has invited it. She is stable, reliable, self-assembled from history. But more to the point, she has managed to forge a workshop of political viewpoints, angles, and perspectives, a tent so vast it has neutralised opponents within and without her political base. Her capacity to deal in “flat pack centrism,” otherwise termed the “IKEA principle” has become textbook.

The notion of IKEA politics is not something that has been missed by conservatives and centre-based politicians. IKEA supplied a point of reference to Jane Mayer of *The New Yorker*, when she observed a certain organisational principle at work in the conservative movement in the United States.[1] The State Policy Network proved particularly interesting, some 64 groups loosely assembled as free-market think tanks. Its president, Tracie Sharp, while denying the IKEA model had any role to play in a public sense, secretly spoke about it, its points of assembly and distribution.

For all its stock standard reliability, Merkel’s period in office has also seen hiccups, some of the dangerous sort. The Syrian refugee crisis, and the open door policy to migrants and refugees which her European counterparts fear, has threatened inroads into her political base. She has managed to prevent a general exodus from the centre, but dissatisfaction is finding form across a range of smaller parties across the political spectrum.

To that end, any vision of furniture is only as good as its final product. These wear over time, and not even the advertising agency Jung von Matt could conceal the creaks and breaks for this campaign. This was the question that presented itself on Sunday. Mutti did pull through eventually, but it was a scarring encounter.

The first signs on Sunday night, true to a form that has become a recurring pattern across the elections of Europe, were that smaller parties, notably those reaping the populist whirlwind, were set to make strong gains.

The Free Democrats (FDP), which had vanished from the Bundestag in 2013 on 4.8%, found themselves projected to return with a notably present 9%. (As the figures continue being finalised, that number has moved to almost 11%.)

The AfD (Alternative for Germany), while still garnering support as a far-right wing alternative, did not do as well as certain worried predictions went, though, with just under 13%, things promise to be merry for this coming term. As the party’s manifesto went with

conspiratorial glee, a “secret sovereign... has cultivated itself in the existing political parties.”

Nothing can get away from the reality that the party has made good its promise to found a petulant base in the Bundestag, a nationalist rear guard hopeful of dampening the refugee agenda. The party’s co-leader, Alexander Gauland, has made clear through his conservative soaked account *Anleitung zum Konservativsein* (Instruction on Being a Conservative), that he wishes for a return to such notions as “deutsche Leitkultur,” a dominant German culture which arrests any other notions of identity. Germany first is not a dirty term.

Despite being a refugee of the German Democratic Republic during the Cold War, Gauland saw his experience as singularly German, one to set apart from those swarms Merkel was accepting onto the soil of the fatherland. He, as he explained, “went from Germany to Germany. It is quite different when someone comes from Eritrea or Sudan. He has no right to the support of a foreigner.”[2] A fantasy he holds near and dear is a Muslim ban and an open cradling of the nostalgia of Heimat.

It was a night where major parties received more than a touch-up. Merkel’s CDU/CSU grouping received the lowest share of the vote since 1949, on 33%, while the SPD’s effort was even more impoverished at 20.5%.

The message from the electoral pundits and analysts was generally uniform: Merkel would win. Thankfully for her, the FDP performance means that a “Jamaica” coalition with the CDU/CSU and the Greens is in the offing. But she could barely conceal the exhausted fact that it was a victory stripped of its sweetness. Her own efforts to reverse the rot had seen a more curt electioneering approach, a visible hardening in policies, including support for a burqa ban and attempts to gauge the conservative temperature.

“The CDU could have hoped for a better result, but we mustn’t forget – looking back at an extraordinary challenge – that we nevertheless achieved our strategic objectives: we are the strongest party.”

The next period in the Bundestag promises to be truly astringent, the very politics that resists the convenient brand labelling of modular, stable furniture. For Merkel, its objective is clear.

“We want to win back the AfD voters above all through good politics.”

The chancellor’s political centre risks breaching.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-ikea-the-new-model-for-the-conservative-movement>

[2] <http://www.dw.com/en/afds-unlikely-duo-alexander-gauland-and-alice-weidel/a-38563247>

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