

Who will run Germany – and the EU?

As always the mainstream UK media ignore the gripping power struggles going on in Germany and the EU. You would have thought the media's enthusiasm for all things EU and the geographical proximity of these countries to us would merit some news and analysis to balance the intensive coverage they give to the USA across the vast Atlantic.

Three years ago Mrs Merkel announced she was standing down as Leader of the CDU, the largest German party in the government coalition which had supplied her as Chancellor of Germany since 2005. She implied her successor would become the CDU's candidate for Chancellor in the 2021 general election, though Mrs Merkel intended to remain in the all powerful number one job for the time being.

The party duly elected AKK in 2018 who presided over poor election results and then decided she would resign in February 2020 before ever fighting a general election to try to become Chancellor. The CDU agreed to hold a new contest to choose a replacement this spring. The virus interceded making it difficult to hold a party conference for the traditional in person voting. The election was put off until December 4th. This date has now also been cancelled, with the lead candidate complaining the further delay is to damage his chances, whilst the party establishment claims the further delay is another CV 19 inspired move. They apparently do not wish to turn to the obvious alternative of a postal ballot.

There are three main candidates for this all important post. After two women in a row as Leader and with the transfer of Mrs Von Der Leyen from the German Cabinet to the role of President of the Commission, this time all three are men. Norbert Rottgen is a self styled centrist and keen enthusiast for a strong EU along German federal lines. He is currently chairman of the Federal Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. Armin Lashet is another so called centrist who can also accept Merkel's drift to the Greens and the left. He is also a strong Catholic which affects his political views and is Minister President of North Rhine Westphalia. Friedrich Merz is said to be the current front runner. He moved into the private sector some years ago, and is more right of centre than Merkel or the other two candidates.

The media may have sensationalised and trivialised the campaign, or the candidates may be doing that for themselves. Mr Lashet has been criticised for his opposition to gay marriage, though he now has a deputy on his ticket to soften this. He has also attracted hostile attention for his attitude to girls under 14 wearing headscarves. He is thought to have handled the pandemic poorly in his state. Mr Merz has also been criticised for one of his answers on homosexuality, and has his critics for supporting leitkultur, the promotion of German culture for migrants. He claims to be an economic liberal who has in the past attracted flak for his wealth and for flying himself around in his own plane. In the wings stands Mr Soder, leader of the Bavarian CSU sister party and Prime Minister of Bavaria, who might fancy putting himself forward to be Chancellor were the votes at the general election to

give him a chance or more importantly were he able to do a deal with whoever does become leader of the far larger CDU party. He is the most popular candidate for Chancellor in some polls,

The polls show that during Germany's response to the virus – which has gone better than other large European countries – the CDU have risen , with the Eurosceptic AFD falling back to around 10%. The Greens have sustained ratings close to 20%, leading people to assume there would have to be a CDU/CSU/Green government next time. It is a moot point whether the much lower virus impact came from better actions by government or from a different response of people in Germany to the threat or even just a different pattern of virus transmission but it has helped the CDU as the lead party in government.

Mr Merz thinks that a more authentic Conservative message would help win back lost votes and contain the electoral damage to the CDU from the Greens and AFD. His two other opponents are more willing to praise green policies and prepare for a different coalition. Whilst there are different degrees of EU enthusiasm all three will wish to see Germany as the leading country in the EU. All three would assume good lines of communication and influence directly into the Commission with their former Cabinet colleague or party friend in control there. It is surely time for the mainstream media to show us these people and interview them about their intentions were they to come to power.

Politically correct speaking

Wokeish is not my mother tongue, but I feel I can usually speak and write it fluently because it is all the opposition parties in the Commons speak all the time. It is prevalent on the BBC and mainstream media, so news is dominated by its tropes and preoccupations.

It is stifling much debate and creating a divide with the informal conversations of some parts of the social media and of life when permitted in many clubs, bars and homes. It seems to be driving some people who do not follow politically correct thought into more extremes of language and frustration, which is bad for democratic debate. It means anyone however moderate and decent can fall foul of the unwritten rules of language and attitude that the left insist on. It leaves those of us who want proper debate about the preoccupations of the public struggling to allow it, given the severe censorship of the very topics on one side, and the roughness of language of some frustrated voters on the other side who threaten to abuse what should be the right of free speech.

There is a narrow preoccupation with certain themes, and a rigid view of certain challenges and opportunities. Brexit is all bad and always bad to the followers of politically correct fashion. They simply take every lie, half truth and threat from the EU side in the negotiations and retail it as truth. Many editors and interviewers bat for the EU in composition and

questions of the interviews.

They alternate their anger over Brexit with their dominant wish that every sacrifice be made by the UK to purge the last drop of oil, the last molecule of gas and the last lump of coal from our lives and economy, as if the UK alone was responsible for their view of impending climate disaster and as if it will save the planet if the UK does abandon all carbon. There is no proportion in their understanding, and no room for anyone to ask critical questions or offer an alternative way forward. Gone is the usual worry about lost jobs or economic penalties as they chase a perfectly carbon free economy before the technologies to deliver it resonate with the public or are even available to buy.

Like most of us, they object strongly to slavery, yet their main anger is to slavery past by UK traders, with no mention of the people who traded slaves with them. They show scant parallel interest with the ugly slaveries of today that we might do something about. They rummage through UK history to highlight events and attitudes that we no longer support, ignoring the noble causes and the successes. They decline to mention the common adoption of the unacceptable by other countries and governments at the same time. England is always in the wrong, and never the victim in their world of devils and angels. There is a complete lack of pride in the UK's role in bringing democracy to the world, in the successful campaigns fought against religious intolerance and slavery, and the battles for equality under the law and votes for all.

We need to take back control of our language and of the agenda. A strong democracy is one that can conduct a civilised but serious and passionate debate about what matters to large blocks of opinion. Attempts to prevent topics and ban any view you disagree with is usually an unwelcome move to alienate significant parts of the electorate and impoverish decision taking.

[Will you change cars – and boilers?](#)

The EU, the US under Mr Biden and the UK all want people to dump their petrol and diesel cars and buy electric or go by train. They also want us to scrap our gas boilers for home heating and install heat pumps or all electric systems.

They also want us to do this in the next ten years. The enthusiasm for tougher targets to reduce “carbon footprints” means governments have to move on from forcing companies to change their energy use patterns to hit modest targets, to requiring everyone to change our habits to get closer to net zero.

In the UK there are an estimated 25 million gas heating systems in homes. It is going to be a vast task, and a very expensive operation to take all these

out and replace them with something else this decade. Many people will object they do not have the money to make the change, or do not wish to have the disruption of replacement when their existing product is just fine. Some may decide to renew their gas boiler with another just before they are banned as they like that product and are wary of the new.

To make the switch happen government and business together have to come up with a great offer which makes people think the replacement is better than the old, and that the net cost of the change is worthwhile or subsidised. It would be better to leave the gas boiler as a legal product until there is a very popular range of other options which most people want to buy.

Governments are also keen to ban the diesel and petrol cars that have served us well over the last century. True greens do not want us to have individual transport other than a bicycle, but governments accept that many people need cars to get to work, to take children to school, to go to the shops and lead normal social lives. They urge us to buy the battery electric alternative.

So far this year in the UK diesel and petrol car sales are down 780,000 whilst battery cars are up by just 47,000. Some of that is of course CV 19 related, but some is the very trend government wants. It is deeply damaging to employment in our car factories and showrooms. Again it is good advice to say first help the industry find and promote popular non fossil fuel products. Only then think about banning the products people have liked up til now.

A green industrial revolution?

The Prime Minister this week wrote an article setting out his plans for a green revolution. His immediate target is to help create 250,000 new jobs to go with the 450,000 jobs currently said to be involved with decarbonisation. The plans entail £12bn of public investment designed to lever in an additional £48bn of private sector cash. That's under 1% of the total jobs in the economy.

There are some good ideas in the list. He wishes the UK to plan an additional 30,000 hectares year with trees, some 100m additional trees. Last year the UK added 13,000 hectares of new wood to the total, with the largest share in Scotland.

I would add to this ambition the rider that we should at the same time plant trees that can be harvested and replaced with others, so we remove the large amount of timber import we currently bring in. We should above all wish to eliminate the import of wood pellet for Drax power station and replace it with domestic output that needs much less fuel to transport.

We need to know how this investment is going to be raised. Are there going to

be more tax incentives for people to put their money into timber? Will the UK public sector start buying domestic timber for its needs?

He wishes to extend the Green Homes Grant scheme. It needs simplifying to get it to take off. Offering people cash help to get their homes better insulated, with double glazing and good draught exclusion is a good idea.

He wishes to fund research and development into hydrogen powered systems for homes and vehicles, and wants to pump prime UK made batteries. It is worrying how the UK and the EU have let China establish a lead in these areas, and gain a dominant position in some of the rare earths and materials needed to make modern batteries, which places us at a current disadvantage.

The headline from the PM's intervention was a negative. The UK wishes to ban new diesel and petrol vehicles from 2030. The best way to cut the number of diesel and petrol cars is to produce new products which are better and better value than the cars we currently rely on. If the industry has done that by 2030 then moving on from diesels and petrol cars will be easy. If they have not, maybe the then government – which might just have some different Ministers around the table – will not want to end good products that people need.

There is need for more work on how all the electricity will be generated and how the cable network will be strengthened to take all the extra power. The UK is short of power and needs more reliable power as back up to wind farms. I will talk more about the policy of banning diesel and petrol cars and gas boilers tomorrow.

My speech during the debate on the National Security and Investment Bill, 17 November 2020

I support the idea of Ministers having powers to prevent foreign acquisitions where security matters are of concern. I trust that Ministers will want to ensure that all the other transactions that do not pose those security issues will go through smoothly, easily and quickly for obvious economic reasons.

There is a wider concern. As Ministers have rightly said, this is not the debate to deal with all the other worries we might have about unsuitable foreign investors, but there is concern out there in the public that we do not want asset-strippers, we do not want large companies that come here in order to gradually close down the UK capacity to take out a competitor, and we do not want them to come in under cover of sustaining jobs in Britain only to take away the intellectual property and then later to discover that they are not so keen on the British business after all.

We do need those protections, but where Ministers are checking their defences on competition grounds as well as on security grounds, they need to ask themselves this fundamental question: why are so many of our assets sold to foreigners? There is, of course, one very simple reason: throughout this century, under all three types of Government we have had so far, we have run a massive balance of trade deficit with the EU on trade account, so we need to raise the foreign currency to pay the bills so we can afford to buy the tomatoes, the vegetables and the German cars and all the other things that we have been importing, not matched by an equal volume of exports to pay those foreign currency bills.

We see that it is having a bigger impact now on our long-term balance of payments situation. Before we ran this long series of huge deficits, we had net assets abroad, which meant that there was a big positive line in our balance of payments, which said that as a country we earned a lot more in interest and dividends from our investments overseas than foreigners earned on the investments they had in the UK. That has now been reversed, and every year now we have a very big deficit on the interest and dividends, because there are so many more foreign claims on us than we have claims on foreign assets.

This is a matter of concern. Ministers need to work on a series of economic revival policies that put much more emphasis on British people investing in Britain, so that we recreate more of that wealth in our own national hands and do not have the vulnerability, that need for foreign currency, which has been brought about by the current twin deficits—the trade deficit and now the deficit on investment income account.

I was very pleased to hear Ministers saying, rightly, that there are many great investment opportunities in the United Kingdom, so we need to deal with this paradox: why is it that foreigners can see them and are piling in with all their money to buy our best ideas, our best companies and our best properties, and why are more British people and British companies not able to do just that? The Government need to work with the British investors, British companies and British entrepreneurs to make it an even better climate for them to do the investing, as well as taking advantage of the foreign investors coming in and giving employment opportunities.

We need that entrepreneurial Britain, which grasps this opportunity and understands that we have a huge opportunity here to take out imports—to grow more of our own food, and to produce more of our own cars and more of our own products generally—so that we chip away at the very big balance of trade deficit, and in turn then generate cash that can be reinvested in the United Kingdom.

This Second Reading debate presents an opportunity to make the wider plea to Ministers that, as we recover from covid and the damage, we remember that £100 billion deficit that we were running in 2019 before covid-19 disrupted world trade and say that that is unacceptable: that means too big an increase in claims by foreigners on our country year after year. That is why we need policies to get the investment in, chipping away at the £20 billion deficit in food with the EU and at the fishing deficit and the car deficit, so that

we are generating those jobs on British capital, and starting to reverse that net liability position that now disfigures our accounts.