

A New Style of Governing (November 22, 2006)

Abstract

According to this conservative journalist, Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership style and political path set her apart from her (male) predecessors. Her reasoning is deliberative and fact-based; her decisions are more pragmatic than ideological. This apparently unsettles the opposition, because it means that she can't be easily pinned to a certain position. At times, her opponents have interpreted this as weak leadership.

Source

She Doesn't Put on a Show

Angela Merkel's Style

Chancellor Angela Merkel cultivates a different political style than her predecessors – in the way she presents herself, in her dealings with others, in bringing about compromises. This has little to do with the special circumstances of her chancellorship, namely, the alliance with the SPD in the grand coalition and the unprecedented dominance of one party – her party – in the Bundesrat. Ms. Merkel is a different kind of person than her predecessors Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, and Gerhard Schröder.

She doesn't put on a show, except by attempting to impress with this lack of showmanship – an attempt that no one is supposed to notice. Ms. Merkel doesn't have Kohl's room-filling presence; she doesn't cultivate Schmidt's managerial approach. And Schröder's "old boys' club" attitude is totally foreign to her. Some of the characteristics ascribed to her by her fellow politicians derive from this difference, including the claim that she does not lead. Schröder's outburst on the evening of the Bundestag elections – i.e., that the CDU chairwoman shouldn't get carried away since she wasn't going to be voted in as chancellor – stemmed from his own conception of what a chancellor should be: an impressive embodiment of power. But as Ms. Merkel just reported on television, the question that went through her head at the time was: "Haven't you overlooked a basic fact?"

It is characteristic of the chancellor that, in a conversation with an important representative of the CDU's coalition partner [i.e., the SPD], she remarked: "My problem isn't with the Bundestag faction. My problem is with the minister presidents [of the federal states]." Back in the day, before she had any prospect of becoming chancellor, she had already had the chance to make similar remarks about long-established party colleagues who had known each other for decades. By now, she has explained the circumstances and conditions of her chancellorship in many conversations with SPD ministers. Her own political past in the CDU was part of it: She was a member of a rather small state association [Landesverband], the one from Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. She wasn't part of the CDU Schüler Union [i.e., the organization for high school students], nor was she in the Junge Union [i.e., the Young Union or youth association]. She had to learn about the history of the old Federal Republic – and therefore about its government and party system, its pitfalls, personal networks, and political currents – by reading and listening. That she would get to where she is today was doubted first and foremost by those who had, and still have, an eye on the chancellorship themselves. From Schröder to [Friedrich] Merz, they are still annoyed that they misjudged and miscalculated her abilities.

The concept of "*durchregieren*" [efficiently governing the country unhindered], which Ms. Merkel used at the time when she was still hoping to form a coalition with the FDP, still resonates and is being refuted

every day. The CDU minister presidents have shown time and again – at times, at the expense of the chancellor – that they are looking after their own interests in the federal states and the party. In the early summer consultations on health-care reform, they made clear the limits of Ms. Merkel's influence as chancellor and CDU party chair. Ms. Merkel had reached an agreement with the SPD leadership to finance the health-care system predominantly with tax revenue. The minister presidents formed a front – from [Edmund] Stoiber in Bavaria to [Roland] Koch in Hesse to [Jürgen] Rüttgers in North Rhine-Westphalia – that made both the plan and the agreement obsolete. In the end, the chancellor sought refuge by arguing that financing the health-care system through taxes – supposedly according to the SPD – would require 40 billion Euros. But that would necessitate additional tax increases. The plan was dropped. But for both sides – the minister presidents in the Union as well as the SPD leadership – the event was used, as needed, to prove the supposedly insufficient assertiveness of Ms. Merkel.

The event may also be characteristic of Ms. Merkel's style of reasoning. Likewise, this hasn't changed over the course of her chancellorship. She is able – as though she were not an active participant but an observer – to lay out various positions with their respective pros and cons, weighing the alternatives and also providing politically surprising moments. In the end, the opposition doesn't know what is certain and doesn't know what she wants. At times, she also presents herself as someone in search of an answer and as someone who doesn't have a ready-made answer for every question. Sometimes she goes into such painstaking detail that people wonder where her thoughts will lead and whether the head of a government should be concerned with such details. People who deal with her on a daily basis often ask what Ms. Merkel actually has in mind.

The criticism that citizens, once again, aren't being sufficiently informed of the motives, principles, and aims of government policy is cautiously deduced from this perception. The three party chairs of the grand coalition agreed this past summer in Bayreuth to do things differently and better. The coalition government's major positions were to be made clear so that leading politicians wouldn't have to resort to nightly discussions of draft bills. Up to now, things haven't changed all that much.

When conversation turns to the Union's decline and the coalition's poor image in public opinion polls, many point to the blurry picture that the grand coalition is presenting to the public. Above all, the kind of debate that took place on health-care is regarded as a sign of weakness. Within the Union, people point to the compromises that the party agreed to on the anti-discrimination act. At the moment, it seems as though North Rhine-Westphalia's minister president Rüttgers, in alliance with Bavaria's minister president Stoiber, has taken over the programmatic aspect of policies. Rüttgers' efforts to enhance the CDU's social-policy profile are not only motivated by tactical considerations pertaining to the next party congress. The indignant reactions from the SPD leadership illustrate the effects on the climate within the grand coalition. Should the ideas of the North Rhine-Westphalian CDU prevail, then part of the coalition's political management will be outsourced – to the federal states.

Ms. Merkel survived the first year of her chancellorship without any personnel upheavals, if one leaves aside the falling out with FDP chair [Guido] Westerwelle. It is currently of no significance and could at most have an impact at a later date. Not a single minister was let go or stepped down of his or her own accord, and that can by no means be taken for granted: it happened three times in Schröder's first year. The female SPD ministers who were already part of the cabinet in Schröder's time are happier now. Deliberations under Ms. Merkel's leadership follow a male-determined pecking order to a lesser degree, and no one is browbeaten in front of colleagues in sessions anymore, which used to be passed off as the chancellor "putting his foot down." Ms. Merkel tries to demonstrate agreement among women in the Bundestag, too, by seeking out conversations with female colleagues in the cabinet, even those from less important ministries. Of course, the sessions are also less structured and people are starting to say that there is too much beating around the bush, like on Sunday in a cabinet session on policy on Europe when there was nothing to be decided.

The chancellor does not speak arrogantly or badly of others. Problems with defense minister [Franz Josef] Jung (CDU) because his public statements revealed different points of view? Problems with economics minister [Michael] Glos (CSU) because he chose the wrong moment to open a new debate that endangered peace in the coalition? Ms. Merkel agrees with the two ministers in principle. She wraps specific criticism in well-meaning advice. In other cases, she is less frank. She appears to have developed a trusting relationship with labor minister [Franz] Müntefering, which has negatively affected the vice-chancellor at times – within his own party. The chancellor even “had a beer” with SPD parliamentary faction chair [Peter] Struck, who was the loudest and most public critic of Ms. Merkel’s leadership qualities. Maybe they spoke about comparable problems. Since then, both of them have been able to praise what the coalition has accomplished thus far: including a rough blueprint for the health-care reform program, agreements on reforming the corporate tax, the passing of federalism reform, and the [parties’] commonalities in foreign policy. This Wednesday marks one year since Ms. Merkel was elected chancellor. She will elaborate on her policies in the current budgetary debate in the Bundestag.

Source: Günter Bannas, “Sie inszeniert sich nicht. Angela Merkels Stil,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 22, 2006, p. 3.

Translation: Allison Brown

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