

Time for Germany to wake up from its political slumber

Few people outside Germany are familiar with the caricature that many Germans hold of themselves in their minds. Far from the aggressive bully of 20th-century war propaganda, the perfectionist engineer of Madison Avenue car advertisements or the rule-following know-it-all of the silver screen, the German many picture today is a sleepy-headed character clad in a nightgown and cap. Sometimes clutching a candle, this German cuts a naive, forlorn figure, bewildered by the surrounding world.

This figure is not new. On the contrary, referred to as “Der deutsche Michel” or “the German Michel,” it was popularized in the 19th century as a character whose limited perspective causes him to shun great ideas, eschew change and aspire only to a decent, quiet and comfortable life.

But Michel has now made a comeback. And who can blame him? Germany now boasts a booming economy, near full employment, rising wages, and content unions. The financial crisis is long forgotten, public budgets are under control, and the 2015 influx of migrants has been relatively well managed.

What bad news there is — industrial scandals (like that at Volkswagen), airline bankruptcies, endlessly delayed infrastructure projects — does little to dampen the general sense of safety and wellbeing enjoyed by Germany’s Michels. The only real threat, it seems, is the world outside Germany’s borders.

In this sense, last autumn’s election campaign was perfectly suited to Germany’s Michels. “A land where we live well and happily,” the campaign slogan of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), resonated with them, as did the rather provincial and mostly empty messages of rival parties. With the exception of the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the parties displayed a rote civility and drowsy acceptance of consensus that pacified the electorate.

After the election, the real politicking began, but even then pains were taken to obscure those activities from Germany’s Michels. But Germany’s political class, like its ordinary Michels, is in denial. The soporific federal elections, the

breakdown of coalition talks among the CDU, its Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Greens, and the Free Democrats (FDP), and the timid dance between the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) since then all point to a serious deficit in German politics.

The truth is that the various party platforms, which are meant to inform the electorate and provide a basis for coalition talks, reveal a shocking lack of imagination and paucity of new ideas. Second-order issues are presented as red lines, with largely technical questions taking center stage.

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Considering the state of Europe and the world, and the hopes many outsiders are pinning on German leadership, these issues seem rather marginal. But the real problem is that they are distracting from larger issues relating to, say, the euro, security and defense, migration, infrastructure, and taxation.

Lacking any forward-looking political visions, German politics has degenerated into tactical plays being carried out by established players. The CDU can live neither with nor without Merkel, while the SPD is unsure of itself and fears further political decline. None of this bodes well for a country whose parliament has already been diminished, after these three parties, during their eight years forming a coalition government, marginalized the opposition and failed to build up new leadership cadres.

Coalition agreements in Germany have always been elaborate documents of a quasi-contractual nature. But there is a growing tendency to plan out four years of governing, with leaders then using legislative periods not to debate laws, but rather to enact previously agreed policies.

Moreover, no major reform has been successfully implemented in Germany since the 2000s, when Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder pushed through labor-market reforms. No forward-looking reforms of the caliber of Schroeder's Agenda 2010

were even attempted under Merkel in over a decade.

The CDU/CSU and the SPD are now pursuing a grand coalition that would keep Germany roughly on the same path it has taken during the last eight years. The 28-page agreement that will allow formal coalition talks to proceed is overly detailed, technocratic, unambitious, and lacks vision.

It is thus unsurprising that, though CDU/CSU and SPD negotiators have touted the deal as a breakthrough, many, especially in the SPD, are unhappy with the outcome, with some calling for renegotiation. The SPD now faces a choice: At its special party congress this weekend, its leaders must decide whether to join yet another grand coalition government that promises more of the same, or move into opposition, probably triggering new elections.

But there is another option, which many have ignored: a CDU-led minority government, with Merkel as chancellor. Freed of stifling coalition agreements with a reluctant SPD or a coldly calculating FDP, Merkel could choose her cabinet based on competence and vision, rather than party politics. She could even appoint ministers from other parties.

Most important, Merkel could finally tackle the important issues that have fallen by the wayside in recent years, to which the current coalition agreement pays only lip service. This means cooperating with French President Emmanuel Macron to move the European project forward; modernizing Germany's public administration system; preparing the labor force for digitization; and tackling immigration issues.

Michel may prefer the modest policy initiatives and incrementalism that have characterized Merkel's chancellorships. But a minority government forced to muster coalitions of the willing to address the critical issues confronting Germany and Europe could escape the constraints of Michel's expectations, freeing German politics from party tacticians and enabling real and much-needed reform. In other words, the modicum of political insecurity Germany faces today may well be just what the country needs to give rise to new ideas and voices, and a better future.

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