

MONTESQUIEU INSTITUUT

Europe is still Germany's future

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In the Trouw of last Monday, Prof. Haverland published a piece contributing to the "Germany in the EU" debate that is on all over Europe. His message, however, will have been as surprising to many of your readers as it was meant to be reassuring: Germany, he explained, is still a "tamed power". Of course, Prof. Haverland is completely right underlining that "Europe is still Germany's future". This is how the economic, cultural and political elites feel in Germany. But still, it is also hard to deny that "tame" Germany hasn't been more bullying in a very long time. These seemingly contradictory assertions can be reconciled, though, if you just add a third aspect: self-righteousness. We Germans are such eager pro-Europeans that we just cannot allow the EU going down the drain by not learning the lessons we have in store for everybody else!

It seems ironic, indeed, that the one measure intended to guarantee a European Germany rather than a German Europe after German re-unification had become inevitable, namely the introduction of the common currency, the Euro, turned out to have been the strongest motor for Germany's increasing strength within the EU. Or, maybe, that would be too linear an explanation. Remember when, about 10 years ago, Germany was being ridiculed as the sick man of Europe?

I'd argue that the country's done a couple of things right since then. Like: cushioning the East-German transformation by a lot of state spending; holding on to a strong manufacturing sector of the industry; pushing industry in the direction of green innovation at the same time; not shying away from labour market reforms, even though considerable mistakes were made in this regard; modifying the Stability and Growth Pact, when sticking to it would have killed the necessary reforms. It was – mark! – a Red-and-Green government that engineered the turn-around which Chancellor Merkel did then reap.

Of course, virtues came also with vices. Undermining the Stability and Growth Pact carried a cost. Germany overspent just like almost everybody did. Germany followed the follies of neo-liberal deregulation ideologies. Still, the common market and the common currency were to Germany's benefit and most Germans understand that. That makes Germany solidly pro-EU. Even if a newly emerging anti-Euro party would make it to the Bundestag in September – anti-Europeans are not the problem. The problem is, that Germany, proud of its economic strength, is trying to force the rest of Europe to apply policies that, had we adopted them ourselves, would have prevented us from getting where we are. We're preaching our historical preoccupations, e.g. inflation, and not our recent experience. German growth wasn't built on austerity über alles. Europe's growth won't be either. Possibly the EU could be reconciled to some German leadership on economic affairs, if the German gospel would be more realistic.

On April 8, 2013, Mr. Buetikofer and prof. Haverland debated on the issue of Germany and the European democracy. This debate was part of the debate series 'The State of the European Democracy'.

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