

A Leaderless Europe

Little noticed in the general mediocrity and ineptitude of recent Western national leadership is the trend in Western Europe to the irresponsible Left. Certainly, the victory of the eco-socialist Greek Syriza party (a catchment for all the discarded loopy Left) has been noticed, because of the anticipated implications if it leads Greece out of the eurozone and back to the drachma, which has never been a hard currency in its very long history. Though it has backtracked a little, it still promises to pay unaffordably generous social benefits by steadily inflating and devaluing the local currency, promoting Greece's only generators of foreign currency: tourism, cement, and vegetables. A chicken game is in progress, between Syriza and a Europe now much better prepared than during the Greek-generated financial crisis of several years ago to deal with a Greek falling-out. There would be a hit to many of the European banks, but it seems to be clear that they could absorb the loss, though some degree of Central European Bank and national bank and treasury support might be needed. The Greek government, elected on a defiant and flamboyant platform of telling off the Euro-authorities for their requirement of continued austerity, has retreated from its election pledges less rapidly than remaining cash has run through its fingers. Europe appears to be ready to inflict the national equivalent of the Lehman Brothers abandonment, to make a point that not all insolvencies will be underwritten, and to show the rest of Europe that the succeeding anticipated collapse of the resumed Greek national currency is not the route for the other vulnerable economies in the eurozone to follow.

This entire scenario, which to some extent represents the lot of Portugal, Spain, and Italy, as well as Greece, came to pass because of a double confidence trick at the establishment of the Euro: German chancellor Helmut Kohl strongly believed that

Germany needed to be in a cocoon of economic and military allies and was sincere in saying, "A European Germany and not a German Europe." Not only did he mistrust Germany's capacity to act responsibly as an autonomous Great Power, with some historical reason in post-Bismarck times; he was also prepared to have Germany's pocket lightly picked in order to make the Mediterranean eurozone members beholden to Germany, and to ensure that the Euro had some elements retardant to high comparative value to facilitate the export of Germany's world-leading engineered products at prices below where they would be if denominated in Deutschmarks. Successive German leaders have had to balance domestically between a German desire for a currency that is more competitive for exports than the country's own currency would be, and the German voters' irritation at financing the conspicuous refusal of most of their Mediterranean Euro-colleagues to be martyrs to the industrial work ethic.

Whatever perturbations the fall of Greece out of the Euro might generate, the German government apparently thinks it is worthwhile not only in foreign-exchange terms, but to keep a rod on the backs of the rest of Europe to follow the German lead in reducing the orgies of official Danegeld paid to unionized labor and the small farmer, to avoid recurrences of the terrible unrest in the working and agrarian classes that has caused such immense upheaval in the entire post-medieval history of Europe. It is a gamble, but probably a sensible one. Whether Greece drops out of the Euro, with the predicted unsettled domestic consequences, or scrambles onside by standing down from its governing party's more clangorous electioneering promises, the reckoning is that the result will stabilize a consensus for prudent financing – if, perhaps, a less hair-shirted austerity than has obtained for the past several years – and, particularly, will help persuade laggards to follow Germany in creating more-flexible labor markets and a more pro-job-creation legal and industrial-relations climate.

Germany itself should have another two to three years before another general election, but it is hobbled by a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, the only parties that have provided a federal chancellor in the country's 66-year history as a federal republic. The SPD is chronically divided between its Reuter and Schumacher (or Schmidt and Brandt) wings of pro-Western Alliance and neutralist factions, which largely immobilizes Chancellor Merkel's government. The other opposition parties with which she might be able to make a coalition – the anarchistic Bandits, the over-the-top German Greens, and the Left party (the detritus of the old East German Communists) – are completely unsuitable for association in government, and Chancellor Merkel must be praying (daughter of an East German Lutheran minister as she is) for a return of the pro-business Free Democrats, who have fallen under the cutoff of 5 percent of the total vote that parties must achieve to enter the Bundestag.

While the German government seems fairly stable, the status of some of Western Europe's other governments is less clear. The United Kingdom will be going to the polls on May 7 and the result is very uncertain. In elections since 1935, Britain has generally given the Conservative or the Labour party a majority, as the first-past-the-post parliamentary-election system seats whoever leads in each of the country's 650 constituencies, each of about 100,000 people, no matter how fragmented the vote is. (Voters decisively rejected a version of proportional voting, beloved of all splinter parties, three years ago. The proportional vote is the reason Germany and Israel never have a majority one-party government.) The country has had a Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition for the past five years, the first British peacetime coalition government since 1935. Its economic performance has been quite defensible, but the prime minister, David Cameron, generally conveys the impression of irresolution and righteous opportunism, advocating profound education and health-care

reforms and then executing a 180-degree turn, waffling in all directions on European integration, striking an overconfident note on the Scottish-independence referendum and then seeming to panic even as the Unionists were victorious, being among the most grimly purposeful of all world leaders opposing an Iranian nuclear weapon before floundering off into the arms of President Obama and telephoning U.S. senators to urge their support of the president's policy.

The polls now show the Conservatives and the Labour party, now led by the completely unfeasible Ed Miliband, neck-and-neck in the popular vote, which would generally give Labour the edge (because Cameron mismanaged post-census redistricting). But that truism may be debunked this year because of the apparently heavy move of the Scottish Labour voters to the Scottish Nationalists, even though they lost the independence referendum. Compensating for that and further dividing the electorate, the U.K. Independence party, which Cameron mistakenly and unjustly tried to smear as a ragtag of xenophobic skinheads, seems set to take about 15 percent of the vote, about two-thirds of that from the Conservatives. And the Liberal Democrats seem about to be rolled back to the handful of MPs that they have traditionally enjoyed from outlying districts such as the Scottish islands and parts of Wales. There are also normally some distinctive Northern Irish parties, and the whole picture looks now like the Conservatives will emerge as the largest party, but again about 25 or 30 MPs short of a majority and needing to scrounge among three or four smaller parties to sustain themselves.

In these circumstances, if the past is any guide, the Conservatives, whose leadership is entirely in the hands of the parliamentary party, and which have eased out or unceremoniously dumped every leader they have had since Stanley Baldwin in 1937, apart from those who resigned just before they could be removed, and including even the greatest prime ministers of the past 135 years, Winston Churchill and

Margaret Thatcher (albeit Mr. Churchill was 80 and had had a stroke), will give Cameron the order of the boot and replace him with a trans-factional leadership of the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and the flamboyant mayor of London, Boris Johnson. This tandem could probably win a couple of confidence votes, form an electoral alliance with the U.K. Independents, and return to the polls and likely emerge with a solid majority. The Western world will thus be spared the calamity of a government of the United Kingdom led by an unreconstructed, old-Left Labour party, a fate worse than François Hollande's retrograde socialism has inflicted on stagnating France.

But the regression of the British Labour party is worrisome, as is the advance of the primitive Left elsewhere in Europe. In Ireland, the most successful of the economic-recovery stories of those Euro-countries that almost went to the wall in the past few years, Sinn Fein, the political force behind the lengthily terrorist Irish Republican Army, now wields the astonishing poll total of about 24 percent – not enough to win, but enough to raise absolute mayhem in the Irish parliament if, which has not been their habit in Northern Ireland, they take their seats there?. Europe is still sorting out the relaunch of the European project; federalism has stalled, the complacently assumed rise of Europe to rivalry with the United States has evaporated, despite the feebleness and failed foreign policy of the past 15 years in Washington, and there is no consensus about what to do, nor any serious leaders to provide one, nor any encouragement from Washington.

Obviously, Europe survives, and, despite abrasive posturing from the Kremlin, Russia is in no position to threaten Western Europe as it did throughout the Cold War. But the political vacuum in Washington, unprecedented since the 1920s, is fully mirrored in a confused and uneasy Europe, afflicted by declining population, economic inertia, and acute official mediocrity where just a few years ago Thatcher, Kohl, and even

a cunning scoundrel like François Mitterrand led very effectively. Europe is waiting for Germany to behave responsibly as the Continent's greatest power, a position it has held, when unified, since Bismarck assembled modern Germany in 1871, and Germany and Europe and the world are waiting for the end of the Obama torpor, without longing for the misplaced simplicities of his predecessor. Europe and the world are missing the firm leadership the United States gave, apart from the aberrant Jimmy Carter, from Franklin D. Roosevelt even unto Bill Clinton. And so far, Europe shows no disposition to fill the vacuum, as Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Schmidt, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and even Pierre Trudeau did for Carter.

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