

Angela Merkel's Memoirs

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At St. Nicolas, when the Dutch celebrate the birthday of this saint by exchanging presents and poems, I got a book containing the memoirs of the former Chancellor of the German republic, Angela Merkel [1]. I had asked for it, because of the memorable career of this woman, who entered politics in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik at the verge of its dissolution and made a rapid career in the new unified Bundesrepublik, first as member of parliament, then as minister and in 2005 as Chancellor. Apparently, she had a natural gift for politics and combined this with the energy to pick the right issues and pursue them with determination. However, this does not entirely explain her success. What helped her, I presume, is the fact that she was an outsider in the Bundesrepublik. Helmut Kohl, the acting Chancellor, spotted her talent and promoted her in German politics. He did so at his cost. It turned out that he had accepted a substantial gift of money without declaring it. Merkel brooded over this fact and then wrote a letter which she sent to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* in which she wrote that Kohl's position in German politics had become impossible. That letter created a scandal and divided acting politicians in two camps. There were those who thought her to be ungrateful and ungenerous and those who agreed with her. She indeed took a terrible risk, but she won. The majority backed her.

Luck played a large part in her career. Fresh in politics she joined the *Demokratischer Aufbruch*. That group was however a non-starter and she had to join the CDU/ CSU fraction (not being a socialist nor a liberal), a combination of two parties for which she had but little sympathy to start with. She joined politics in 1990 and in 1991 she became minister in Kohl's cabinet. In 2005 she became chancellor and 16 years later she retired from politics.

In her book she has a section on "Staatsraison. This means the reason that leads us beyond party principles. It is the reason which comes close to what most people regard as being

reasonable. So when in 2015 Germany threatened to be swarmed by hundred thousands of refugees, mostly from Syria she decided to let them in. The words she spoke then made her famous: 'wir schaffen das', we will manage. It was as she tells us, for her a stock expression, but then it fell at the right moment and she did manage. She knew of course that she had no other option. The asylum seekers would be coming anyway. The episode ought to teach a lesson to those who simply want to close the border, problem solved, like many argue in the Netherlands, but *Staatsraison* tells us that will not do.

A large part of the book deals with her daily business as Chancellor. It strikes me that she first of all deals with European politics and Germany's role in it. Apparently, she left domestic policies to her ministers. That makes sense of course for they were much more knowledgeable about domestic affairs than she was, but it also underlines the importance of her role. More than many Germans in the West she realized how important it was to be actively engaged in the European Union. Merkel who started her career to stress German unity ended as the advocate of European unity and as such we, outside Germany, should remember her in a climate where an important Dutch politician openly declares that he wants to dismantle the E.U. from within.

In her last period as chancellor, she had to deal with a domestic issue: the pandemic caused by corona. It was painful to her that she had to restrict the movements of German citizens and even then, she did not lose her German soul. One of the vaccines was discovered in Germany. There was a loud outcry that Germany should reserve this vaccine for Germany, but she refused and left the division of this vaccine as of other vaccines to the European Commission.

She wrote her book together with Beate Baumann, her trusted adviser and chef de cabinet. The book bears the title *Freedom*.

We usually make the distinction between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is a clear and crisp concept. Everybody is at liberty to do as he or she likes till he is stopped by the law. It is a clear, but barren concept, because it does not allow us to work together with others, particularly those who have different opinions from us. Positive freedom inspires us to work together with others to reach a common goal. Some critics accuse the advocates of positive freedom that when they speak of freedom, they mean duty. However, when we succeed together to do something positive that gives a feeling of freedom that is much more rewarding than doing as one likes can provide. Merkel opts for positive freedom. She writes (in my translation the Dutch version, I do not have available the English translation):

Freedom asks for democratic circumstances- without democracy we have no freedom, no rule of law and no respect for humanity. (671 in the Dutch version) These are true words of a remarkable woman.

Reference

1. Merkel A, Vrijheid, Herinneringen 21954-2021. Translated by Anne Folkersma & Jansje Post. Amsterdam. Arbeiderspers. 2024.