



A blog by the author of our column on the European Union

Charlemagne's notebook

Mr Cameron visits Mrs Merkel

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ONE of the less plausible political predictions of recent times was that David Cameron would find doors closed to him in Paris and Berlin, were he to be elected Britain's prime minister. The theory was that Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel would refuse to see him, in protest at his decision to move Conservative members of the European Parliament from the European People's Party (the main centre right group in that assembly) to a new more sceptical alliance with mostly east European parties.

In another life, I [interviewed Peter Mandelson](http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/all/15078/part_5/peter-mandelson-my-member-states.shtml), (http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/all/15078/part_5/peter-mandelson-my-member-states.shtml) the Labour party's wiliest political strategist and, at that time, Britain's EU commissioner. The commissioner at least pretended to believe that an EPP pull-out would consign Mr Cameron to the European equivalent of Siberia, saying:

"He is not going to be able to call on counterparts in Berlin, Paris and Rome and elsewhere and be given an audience. To think that the fortunes of the Conservative party, and our country, are going to be served by linking up with this rag-tag and bobtail collection of individuals on the fringe of European politics is crazy."

This afternoon, 10 days after Mr Cameron took office, he called on Mrs Merkel at the modernist, concrete and glass Chancellery in Berlin. "Did you come here from Paris?" Mrs Merkel asked him in English, as he alighted from his motorcade: referring to the previous night's dinner Mr Sarkozy hosted for Mr Cameron at the Elysée Palace. Then the pair walked out of earshot to inspect an honour guard, as a military band played God Save the Queen and Das Deutschlandlied.

Modern Germany does pomp and circumstance warily but well. The carpets were red, flags flew under a muggy sun and the honour guard stood crisply to attention. But the courtyard of the chancellery is deliberately open and unintimidating, with only low modernist railings between in and the street. A civilian woman usher, as you might see at an old-fashioned cinema, stood between the soldiers and the chancellor. As for Mrs Merkel, she visibly blanched when the soldiers shouted out a formal greeting to her in unison (she dislikes that bit, it frightens her, a member of staff told one of my colleagues).

Mr Cameron looked a little nervous, which seemed fair: he has become another person in a matter of days. Even after seeing motorcades sweep into government buildings a hundred times, there is something about the speed and inexorability of a leader in motion that remains oddly intimidating. There is the long wait as officials and aides fuss and joke nervously among themselves and then voom, a blur of motorcycle outriders, limousines and chase cars and a man in a suit is there, a few feet from where you stand with the other reporters but a light-year away too, on the other side of an invisible line of protocol and power.

The big question for the press was whether Mrs Merkel and Mr Cameron would find themselves at odds about EU integration, on this their first formal meeting. Germany, more than any other country, has been talking about measures to shore up the stability of the eurozone that could require changes to the EU treaties, eg, a rule allowing for countries that repeatedly flout budget rules to lose their voting rights in EU ministerial councils for a year. Mr Cameron, at the head of his Conservative-Liberal coalition, has said that he wishes to be a pragmatic, positive EU player, but that his government will not allow any new treaty to transfer new powers from Westminster to Brussels in this parliament.

Reporters at the Berlin press conference today were ready to sniff out a split. I think the two leaders managed to avoid one. Mrs Merkel conceded some of her plans might well involve treaty change (and her aides said they rejected the idea the EU could never have another treaty again, saying that would

condemnt the EU to sclerosis in a fast-moving world). Mr Cameron seemed to leave the door open for a treaty that only changed the rules for eurozone members, and that would thus not involve transfers of powers from Westminster to Brussels. That was presumably what Mrs Merkel wanted to hear, but I wonder if she enjoyed what Mr Cameron felt he had to say next for domestic consumption, when he told us:

"Any treaty, even one that only applies to the euro area would have to be agreed by 27 countries, and Britain there has a veto, it is very important to make that clear."

In theory, this was not a hostile thing to say: Mrs Merkel herself responded that she saw no need for powers to flow from Westminster to Brussels to tighten up eurozone rules, as Britain was not in the euro. But I wonder if she enjoyed hearing the words "British veto" in the cool, air-conditioned calm of her chancellery, on Mr Cameron's first visit.

The pair have much they do agree on: notably, they both agree that budget rigour is a priority for Europe right now, and that economic growth must be the overwhelming priority later. That makes Germany and Britain allies, sort of, in the tussle between fiscal hawks and doves. But will that be enough?

The eurozone is in a moment of historic flux. Mr Cameron made it clear several times that Britain had no intention of being drawn closer to the euro, though he made the case that the euro's stability was of vital importance to Britain, as a major trading partner. This was not a meeting between members of a single political family, but a polite encounter between new neighbours.

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