

The ambivalence of

Europe

The Guardian
Dec. 7, 1991

The Little Englanders should be reassured that Germany has more in common with Britain than with France, says **Josef Joffe**

Germany

EC DOES not stand for European Cant; it stands, as we all know, for the European Community, poised to leap forward at the Maastricht summit next week into something much grander: a true political and monetary union. At least this is what Francois Mitterrand, so ardently wishes and what Helmut Kohl so ardently supports.

But Little Englanders need not fear for their way of life. Those coloured pieces of paper with the portrait of the Queen on them will continue to buy Marmite and fish 'n' chips for a long time to come. Jacques Delors will not turn the Houses of Parliament into an annex of the European Commission's headquarters. Nor will British schoolchildren soon be forced to say, "To miss by 2.5cm is to miss by 1.6 km."

So why has Kohl been threatening that he won't sign an agreement on monetary union unless he can also sign a treaty on political union? Why have Kohl and Mitterrand been muttering that failure in Maastricht would signal the decline of Europe?

Not to worry. Chancellor Kohl has been back-peddalling for two weeks, and for the time being, he will be quite happy if Maastricht merely sets in motion an "irreversible process" towards political union. Decoded, that reads: "I understand that Europe isn't quite ready; that a common monetary, foreign, and military policy will take time. In the meantime, we will build Europe as we have always done: by bickering and compromising."

Nor is this such a surprising insight. "Europe is 12 sovereign nations, with interests as diverse as their flags and languages. And so Europe will be built only when these interests all point in the same direction. Today the lowest common denominator is controlled progress towards a better customs union: the single integrated market through which, from January 1, 1993, not only goods but also people, companies, and capital can move freely from Cork to Calabria, from the Aegean to the Atlantic.

But on all other issues, the 12 nations behave like, well, nation states. Their visions are different, with some countries overlapping on this and pulling apart on that. With the exception of Britain, all seem to genuflect before the altar of feder-

alism and political union.

The church metaphor is appropriate: just because you kneel doesn't mean that you will go out into the real world and live by the good book ever after. If you believe that Europeans want nothing more than common foreign and defence policies, look at Yugoslavia, Europe's first post-cold war test, which so far has ended in abysmal failure.

Which is where the cant comes in. Deep in his heart, Kohl does believe in a federal Europe. Or as he is wont to tell visitors: "I have only one ambition left in life: to put the European train on the track in such a manner that it can only roll forward." Perhaps Mitterrand, the socialist heir of Charles de Gaulle, also believes in a united Europe. But ask either point-blank, "Do you really want to have your national legislature emasculated by a powerful European Parliament?" and the bet is that neither would respond with "Ja" or "Oui".

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(the key issues. France instinctively wants a protectionist Europe, and Germany — just as instinctively — wants free trade (which should not come as a surprise for a country that earns 30 per cent of its gross national product through exports). Paris wants a "European" defence, and Germany does not want to lose the powerful insurance policy underwritten by the United States. When it comes to "deepening versus widening", France prefers the cosiest club possible, and Germany, facing an incipient earthquake next door, wants to give the east European democracies a European home as quickly as possible.

Thus the demonstrations of amity in the Franco-German case conceal the conflicts. But exactly the opposite is true in the Anglo-German case. There seems to be little love lost between London and Bonn, but underneath lies a community of interest on precisely those items that separate Germany from France: like John Major, Kohl does not want to dispense with the Great Transatlantic Protector; like Britain, Germany wants a Europe of open

trade and open membership.

As a result, such Franco-German ventures as a joint army corps are heavier on symbolism than substance. Even on monetary union, pushed hard by France, Kohl, his finance minister, and the head of the Bundesbank tend to put discretion before valour.

The reason is self-evident: Europe today is a de facto Deutschmark bloc, managed by the Bundesbank in Frankfurt. If it pushes up interest rates to combat inflation and to finance reunification with foreign investment, everybody else has no choice but to follow. Such control is not lightly relinquished, which is why Bonn and Frankfurt will ensure that a Eurobank is either the Bundesbank writ large or a non-starter.

In fact, the squabble and cant on the road to Maastricht is about power and the age-old question of who gets what and where? More specifically, the question is about Germany: newly liberated from the fetters of the cold war, and the most powerful nation in Europe by dint of economic clout, geography, and demography.

The French answer is straightforward: embrace and envelop Germany in as many institutions as possible. Like a boxer who cannot hope to prevail, Paris has chosen a strategy that would immobilise German strength in a bear hug. The British strategy reflects an ancient habit of balancing rather than bracketing power. Hence the studious effort to keep America entangled in Europe; hence the instinctive preference for a greater Europe where Germany and/or Franco-German power is diluted.

The good news is that Germany in 1991 is not the Germany of 1891 whose hubris pushed the country into all-round conflict with France, Britain, and Russia. Indeed multilateralism and communitarianism have become unwritten articles of the German constitution. Kohl rightly knows that German power needs a legitimising framework under which all others feel comfortable with the new behemoth.

Thus Bonn will push for a European "constitution" that favours its interests, but not too hard for fear of losing the communitarian cocoon that has promoted its interests. It will go part of the way with France and part with Britain, avoiding ultimate confrontations and ultimate commitments.

The British should feel more comfortable in such a Europe than Mrs Thatcher and friends would have them believe. And Major is right to live by an old American adage: "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em." It is better to stand at the helm than to hunker down in the hold.

Josef Joffe is a commentator for *Suddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich.