

The British bacillus hits Germany

Helmut Kohl remains a red-hot Maastricht man but his electorate's ardour is cooling

Josef Joffe

SOMETHING funny happened on the way down from Maastricht: Germany, once the motor of European integration, suddenly looks like a continental version of Britain. Helmut Kohl, the chancellor, is still pushing the European message with vigour and verve. But his electorate seems to have been infected by the British bacillus. This, at least, is what the most recent opinion poll is signalling.

In a Europe-wide sounding sponsored by seven European newspapers, the level of anti-Europeanism in Germany was virtually identical with the British level. The key question, posed to samples in the 12 EU countries, was this: "Do you favour a more integrated Europe as envisaged under Maastricht or a looser arrangement between independent nation states?"

The British came out way ahead on the "looser arrangement" side, with 61 per cent. The Danes, who rejected Maastricht in their first referendum, also favour a looser arrangement by 61 per cent. The Germans won't get a prize from Jacques Delors, either: 58 per cent of east Germans and 62 of west Germans want to go the Thatcherite route. Only a third of the German sample wants to rally around the Maastricht flag. In terms of opinion, Britain and Germany are now in the same boat. Does this comradeship-in-spirit make an Anglo-German axis? Hardly.

To begin with, Kohl is the last of the red-hot Europeans. He helped to craft the Maastricht treaty, and with good reason. Sensing the changing tectonics of European politics in the aftermath of reunification, he was eager to fashion a framework that would outlast him and safely embed the greater Germany in a sturdy European framework.

But for Kohl, Europe is not just a device for clamping down Germany in order to keep it from turning into a loose cannon. Kohl deeply believes in the idea of Europe. And since he looks well-positioned to win the

the chill factor. That is something psychologists might want to ponder. Politicos, however, must take the Franco-German marriage as a given, no matter how often it is rocked by clashes of interests.

So if John Major is looking for partners to follow him down the slow lane in a "multi-track" Union, it won't be Germany. For it is hard to see how Germany would suddenly ditch its Europeanist faith and abandon France in the quest for a more perfect union.

But in the longer term it is a different story. A 60 per cent level of "anti-Maastrichtism" in Germany is significant. Nor should this verdict come as a total surprise. In the past 40 years, the West Germans were such avid Europeans because that made for a perfect fit with the position in Europe. Integration was tailor-made for a half-nation that had to gain respectability and community after the Nazi horrors. Europe offered a shelter and a role. And nationalism, given Germany's murderous fling with ultra-nationalism, was out.

In the meantime, Germany has become a respected member of the international community. The cold war dependencies have waned and eastern Europe beckons both as an opportunity and a threat. The opportunities for investment and trade are obvious. But so is the threat posed by impoverishment and political upheaval in those ex-communist countries that border on Germany. Hence, one should expect a partial reallocation of resources and attention from west to east.

The best explanation for the cooling of Germany's Europeanist ardour has to do with the spectre of a European currency, as foreseen by the Maastricht treaty. If it used to be "Deutschland über alles" in the past, it is now "Deutschmark über alles" that instils pride and a sense of national identity. Indeed, anti-European agitation by German neo-nationalist parties consistently zeros in on the betrayal of Germany's most sacred national symbol, as supposedly enshrined in the Maastricht compact.

But as the last Euro poll reveals, that fear seems to be waning. Asked whether they expect a common currency by the year 2000, 61 per cent of Germans say "no". That may reflect a sober and correct assessment of post-Maastricht reality. Germans have

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But for Kohl, Europe is not just a device for clamping down Germany in order to keep it from turning into a loose cannon. Kohl deeply believes in the idea of Europe. And since he looks well-positioned to win the national election in October, one should bet on continuity in Bonn's European policy.

Nor will Germany forsake the French connection. Strangely enough, Britain and Germany are often closer on policy matters than are Germany and France. Whether it is free trade, keeping the US tied to European security, or widening the Union eastward, Bonn and London share the same priorities. And it is Paris that is the odd man out.

Nonetheless, there is no warmth in the Anglo-German relationship, and the slightest

waning. Asked whether they expect a common currency by the year 2000, 61 per cent of Germans say "no". That may reflect a sober and correct assessment of post-Maastricht reality. Germans have apparently concluded that a lot of water will flow down the Rhine before their precious Deutschmark will be sacrificed on the altar of European unity.

And Britons should take heart. Almost two-thirds of them believe — or, more accurately, fear — the arrival of a Euro-currency by 2000. Yet the German sample signals the very opposite. If you have to bet, bet with the Germans and don't worry about the early demise of the British pound.

Josef Joffe is leader writer and editorial page editor of the