

TRIANGULATION

'Her Anthem Is a Soothing Lullaby'

Angela Merkel once preached self-reliance. Not anymore.

By JOSEF JOFFE

Gerhard Schröder, the Social Democrat who ruled Germany from 1998 to 2005, left Angela Merkel with a nasty legacy: bad relations with old friends like the United States and too cozy relations with traditional rivals like Russia. So Merkel hardly had to bone up on master strategists like Bismarck to do the obvious: restore the classic balances of German foreign policy by rebuilding ties with the United States, Britain and Eastern Europe while loosening the grip of Moscow and Paris.

She did so with an uncanny sure-footedness. In Washington, she talked openly about Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib; in Moscow and Beijing, she raised human-rights issues. At home she solidified her standing by orating on climate change. And like a latter-day prodigal daughter, the chancellor was suddenly a coddled friend all around. It was good politics and the politics of goodness rolled into one. With George W. Bush terminally weakened, and Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair on their way out, Merkel had become the uncrowned monarch of Europe, mediating among them while pulling the strings in the EU, NATO and the G8.

Now 70 percent of Germans consider her to be a "good

chancellor." Her Christian Democrats lead the Social Democrats (SPD) in polls by 13 points. Better still, 67 percent of Germans say they would prefer Merkel to her SPD rival if they could vote directly (they must vote for parties), giving her a historically unprecedented 48-point lead over her challenger.

But the chancellor's regal role on the international stage is far from the real reason for her popularity. Once hailed as a German doppelgänger of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, preaching markets and self-reliance, she has moved sharply to the left. Now she is a Mrs. Feelgood, whose anthem is not the rousing marching song of reform but a soothing "lullaby," as Die Zeit put it.

Why the reversal? First, after a decade of stagnation, modest growth has returned to Germany. More than a million people have come off welfare rolls. This economic upturn has made it hard to persuade Germans to undertake more painful reform. Second, Merkel has opted for a strategy that steals the thunder of the left. After all, it was Schröder who pushed through a "workfare" reform, essentially by cutting the level and duration of benefits. But now Merkel's government is lavishly restoring what was timidly taken—and adding more goodies, including free infant care and paid vaca-

tion days for those providing home care for elderly family members. Third, Merkel is paying homage to the German Zeitgeist: like much of Europe, Germany has had it with reformism as the response to globalization. Hence the rise of the new hard-left party Die Linke, which has shot up to 11 percent in polls, and hawks a reactionary utopia of protection and paternalism.

Does Mrs. Feelgood worry? Yes—about decimating the Social Democrats, to whom she is chained in a "grand coalition." This is why she has traded reformism for welfarism, and it works beautifully. In fact, her domestic policy looks just like her foreign policy. It is the politics of maneuver and mediation—"triangulation," as that past master, Bill Clinton, had it. Her 48-point lead over SPD rival Kurt Beck suggests Merkel is even better at it than Clinton. There is only one sliver of doubt about Mrs. Feelgood's shiny future, as revealed by an October poll: 53 percent of Germans suddenly want Merkel to demonstrate "stronger leadership." The message? They want a chancellor, not a chairperson.

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