

## Merkel can help Christian Democrats

Retiring early could promote new Berlin coalition

by Michael Stürmer and David Marsh in Berlin

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel bequeaths a political legacy that leaves leadership of Europe's most powerful economy in less than wholly secure hands. The result of her manoeuvring is a country with seven major political parties competing in parliament. This will make it extraordinarily complex for her successor(s) to navigate a safe passage on the European and world stage.

Belying her widespread image as a politician who thinks before she acts, Merkel places great weight on short-term tactical scheming rather than implementing strategic ambition. Policies of great import have often been adopted without sufficient consultation. This extends beyond the celebrated step in September 2015, defying the intelligence services' warnings of troubles ahead, to open Germany's borders to refugees from North Africa and the Middle East. It includes, too, the move in spring 2011 in reaction to Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster, to change direction on energy policy and close the country's atomic energy plants by 2022.

The result of Merkel's unrolling of a 'welcome culture' on immigration – [forecast in October 2015 as badly undermining her](#) – is the enshrinement across German politics of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The rise of this angst-driven protest movement has turned to nought the admonition of Franz Josef Strauss, the legendary former leader of the Bavarian Christian Social Union, that Germany would never tolerate a democratically-validated party to the right of the conservative establishment.

Merkel decided the nuclear U-turn principally to counter the ecological Green party in the 2011 state elections in nuclear-conscious Baden-Württemberg. The ploy failed. The Greens won Baden-Württemberg and are in the ascendancy nationwide. But the energy shift heaped extra costs on German industry that will be a long-term brake on the country's competitiveness, whatever its present economic health.

Merkel knows how to cover defeat with the veneer of victory. She has made the best out of political weakness by deciding to quit in December as chairman of her Christian Democratic Union, the leading force in the troubled Berlin coalition with the CSU and Social Democrats (SPD). She has proclaimed that she will stay on as chancellor until the next scheduled general election in 2021. However, [she will probably go much sooner](#). German stability is best assured through combining the two functions of party leader and government. The party is the source of power; the chancellor exercises this power through setting and implementing the main strands of policy, including in the vital fields of foreign affairs and security. Cohabitation between two different people as party leader and chancellor could make Germany ungovernable.

The CDU must choose between three disparate figures who all combine strengths and weaknesses. Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the anointed figure as CDU general secretary, is a younger, less experienced but socially more agile version of Merkel. Jens Spahn, the health minister, hard-line on immigration, liberal on social policy, has long stoked anti-Merkel opposition but may find that his chance has come too early. Friedrich Merz, an old pro-business Merkel adversary, who chaired the CDU/CSU parliament group until Merkel defenestrated him in 2002, has built a career with the BlackRock fund management group. The 6 November raid on BlackRock's Munich offices by tax fraud investigators will not have endeared Merz to CDU centrists who are suspicious of big finance.

Those bidding for Merkel's job will need to keep an eye on a possible revival next year of the earlier-considered four-party coalition with the Greens and liberal Free Democratic Party. If the SPD leaves (or is pushed out of) the 'grand coalition' next year, Merkel's successor will have another chance of forging a new governmental constellation.

Merkel has been the single most potent source of support for the AfD and the single main reason the FDP did not join the government earlier this year. By choosing to bow out before the next election, Merkel would render the CDU great service by weakening its main adversary and nurturing its most propitious ally.

Those reasons alone, as well as straightforward common sense, should propel Merkel into retiring early from the Berlin fray. Moreover, other opportunities – perhaps in Brussels where the Commission will be seeking a new (German) chief – could open as a result.

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