

ANGELA MERKEL

A QUEST FOR HUMANITY AT THE COST OF POPULARITY

ANGELA MERKEL: AN OVERVIEW

Angela Merkel (born 17 July 1954) has been the Chancellor of Germany since 2005 and the Leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) since 2000. She is the first woman to hold either office.

Merkel entered politics after earning a doctorate as a physical chemist. After the German reunification in 1990, she was elected to the Bundestag (the German parliament), a seat she has held ever since.

Merkel was appointed as the Minister for Women and Youth in 1991 under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, later becoming the Minister for the Environment in 1994. After Kohl was defeated in 1998, she was elected Secretary-General of the CDU before becoming the party's first female leader two years later.

Merkel has been described as the de facto leader of the European Union, and was ranked as the world's second most powerful person by *Forbes* magazine in 2012 and 2015, the highest ranking ever achieved by a woman.

On 26 March 2014, she became the longest-serving incumbent head of government in the EU. Merkel is currently the Senior G7 leader.

In May 2015, she was named the most powerful woman in the world for a record ninth time by *Forbes*.

(Source: Wikipedia)



Alberto Nardelli, in an article for *The Guardian* on 8 November 2015, wrote the following:

“In 1957 John F Kennedy, then a senator from Massachusetts, published the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*. In it he describes those rare instances when politicians should go

against what’s popular and the opinion of their party, and take instead brave action. The politicians profiled in the book all have one thing in common: **they put their careers on the line to do what they felt was right.**”

This sentiment can be said to describe the leadership of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, particularly regarding her decision to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking a safe future in Europe.

As the Europe Union (EU) faced an influx of people in need, many of its member states became inward-looking and leaders adopted anti-immigrant stances, betraying the founding ideas that shaped today’s Europe. In this regard, Angela Merkel is the exception.

Germany has, more than any nation in the Western world, exemplified the values of Scripture in its welcoming of strangers and caring for foreigners. Despite severe criticism from inside and outside German borders, Angela Merkel followed her convictions at the cost of her own popularity.

This courage makes her *INcontext’s* ‘Person of the Year’ for 2015, recognising a voice that is restoring humanity in a dark hour of modern history.

In his article for *The Guardian*, Alberto Nardelli sketches a picture of Ms Merkel’s voice - and the cost of her policies - during Europe’s escalating refugee crisis: “As criticism grew louder, her popularity dipped to its lowest levels since 2011. For the first time in a long time, her position as chancellor no longer seemed invincible. [But] to the critics at home, as the number of asylum seekers swelled over the summer, she said Germany would continue to welcome refugees. Otherwise, she argued, it would **‘not be my country’**”.



EUROPE: FROM EMPATHY TO APATHY

Nardelli goes on to describe the general European attitude towards the refugees:

“Less than 10 weeks ago, Europe’s front pages were dominated by the photo of Aylan Kurdi, a dead Syrian child who washed up on the shores of Turkey after his ship capsized while he and his family attempted to flee war torn Syria. Once the tears dried, many of those same newspapers went back to their usual ways. The noble words of politicians were not followed by action. ‘Europe has a duty to help refugees – but not in our country’ is still the prevalent view among most Europeans.”

Germany, however, stood out as a beacon of light in a cloud of apathy:

“Germany has received almost half of all asylum-seeking Syrians in Europe this year: 243,721 since January – more than 12 times the number that Britain will take over the next five years. Was it not for one nation, led by a leader with a conscience, there would have been more questions than answers: What would happen if Germany suddenly adopted Britain’s approach – or Hungary’s, and started to erect fences to keep refugees out? Or took the position of governments in Eastern Europe that want to welcome only Christian refugees? Hundreds of thousands of people would be left stranded in no-man’s land across Europe short of aid, food and shelter. A continental crisis would rapidly become a global catastrophe.

One inescapable fact remains: there are hundreds of thousands of refugees in Europe. They are here now and they will keep coming. The hundreds of thousands are fleeing war, they leave home to embark on perilous, often fatal, journeys because their home is no more. And no fence, wishful thinking or amount of aid money alone will change this. The choice for Merkel was ultimately between doing what is necessary to save lives, or turning away. On this particular decision, she stood tall above her European counterparts. Sadly, she stands almost alone.”

THE NEED TO MOVE FROM ACCEPTING TO REMEMBERING

Nardelli continues that receiving refugees is not just about opening borders and embracing foreigners. It should primarily be about remembering the past and reapplying key principles:

“Modern Europe was founded on the ashes of a world war, post-war suffering and uncertainty. Not long ago the citizens of many of those same countries that today are shutting their doors were the ones escaping persecution and seeking refuge. Europe was built on principles and values such as freedom of movement, solidarity, peace, prosperity and human dignity; it is meant to be united in diversity, enriched by different cultures, traditions and languages. The fork in the road in front of Europe’s leaders, something that Angela Merkel has victoriously embraced, is about the purpose of their power.

Politics evolves on the daily twists and turns of polling and approvals and there is rarely the time or space for longer-term vision and boldness. But if we take a longer view and think back through history, at what fills its pages, and at how today's events will be recounted decades from now, it is not the highs and lows of polling that will be remembered. True leadership is about taking risks when the issue at stake is so great.

The current refugee crisis has been labelled as the largest since the end of the second world war. We have been told it's the greatest challenge Europe has faced since the cold war. But the response of Europe's leaders hasn't matched that impressive billing. Some have argued that it was Merkel's welcoming approach to refugees that opened the floodgates. That this is a tragedy of her own making. Such an argument is not only wrong, its proponents fail to explain what the alternative is.

Merkel is right – both morally and ethically [as well as spiritually] – on refugees: there should be no upper limit to the human right of asylum. On the contrary, her challenge, if anything, is that pretty much every other European leader is wrong. That is the real tragedy.”

LOOKING BEYOND THE DISASTROUS TO SEE THE PROSPEROUS

Rather than accepting refugees as an 'obligation' under international law, it could be argued that Angela Merkel is a visionary amongst her peers, seeing an opportunity to improve living standards not only for refugees but also for Germany as a whole.

Sinclair Donaldson wrote an article for the *Institute of Public Affairs* in 2009 about the benefit of refugees and immigrants for a receiving nation, and these principles can be applied to Germany (and Europe) today. “By having more people [in Europe] there are more people to cooperate with, more people to trade with and more people to grow the market. As the wealth and economy grows there is more money for the finer things in life.”

In many ways, accepting people into the country – skilled people who want to work and to make a better life for themselves and their children – is benefit Europe. There is no doubt that there will be negative elements in the refugee multitude, but it is not as if current European communities are exempt from this.

Donaldson, in his article, dismisses the argument of immigration bringing unemployment and infrastructure stress as a fallacy: “There isn't a finite amount of work that needs to be shared out amongst more and more people.” He argues for bringing more people in, and this is what Angela Merkel has done.

Ms Merkel's display of vision will probably only get real recognition for what it is in the next generation. But there will be countless numbers of people indebted to her and to Germany for courageous compassion and pro-active empathy.

SOURCES:

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