



EU 'is about furthering' German interests

Soft power grows in importance

Robert Bischof, Advisory Board

In just over a decade, Germany has been transformed from the 'sick man of Europe' into a domineering and threatening force, according to some.

Given the UK's decision to leave the EU and the negotiations about the terms of Brexit, there is renewed interest in all things German, and British authors have responded. If you plan to read Paul Lever's book, *Berlin Rules: Europe and the German Way*, to enjoy a bit of good old fashioned German bashing, and to confirm your anxieties about a Europe run by Germany, you might be disappointed at times and reassured at others.

Democratic rectitude

There are a few passages that may fall into the disappointing category: 'Although Germany's dominance in Europe is in soft, rather than hard power it is no less real'; and 'Germany is, in the words of Professor William Paterson, Britain's leading academic expert on the country, a "Reluctant hegemon". Power of the kind that Germany now wields in Europe is not something that German governments have consciously sought, nor indeed is it welcome in German public opinion.'

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies have not made Germany loved, Lever argues, but 'she has provided the answer to Henry Kissinger's question, "Who do I call, if I want to speak to Europe?"'

Lever, UK ambassador to Germany 1997-2003, expresses British worries about Germany's role in Europe. 'Clausewitz observed in 1832 that war is the continuation of politics by other means', writes Lever, 'modern Germany has shown that politics can achieve what used to require war'. This last point, he says, is at the heart of a deep-seated mistrust of Germany. The British and many other Europeans see the country has become an icon of democratic rectitude and economic competence. But Lever wants to understand where is it going with that power.

He takes the time to explain the reasons for Germany's economic and business prowess. He puts it down to three factors:

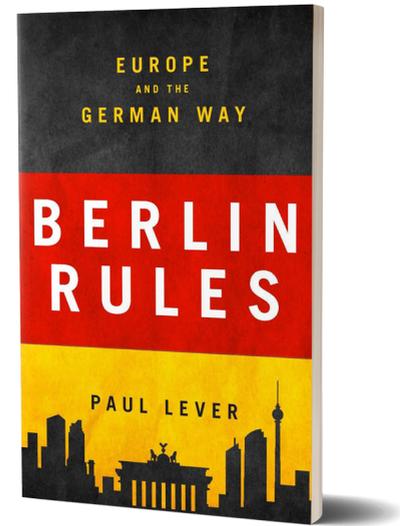
the country's corporate governance system, which gives companies the ability to plan and act long-term; the much-praised apprenticeship system; and the 'Mittelstand' of successful family-owned businesses powering the country's regions. This part of the book is a must-read for UK politicians who talk about industrial strategy, worker representation on boards, an overhaul of the mergers and acquisitions code and a push on skilling up the workforce post Brexit.

Germany also manages immigration well, as it proved after the fall of the Berlin wall. Not only did it provide pensions, jobs and health insurance for 19m east Germans but it integrated a further 3m east Europeans with German ancestry.

No wonder Angela Merkel said, of the influx of refugees from the Middle East, 'Wir schaffen das' [We'll manage it]. What she got wrong was that other European nations, in particular poorer ones, had neither the infrastructure, nor the appetite or the empathy.

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Towards the end of the book, and after much praise for modern Germany, Lever reflects on Germany's 'power without purpose' and concludes that for Germany the European project has never been anything other than a means to further German economic interest. A very Anglo-Saxon view indeed! He argues that 'in thinking how a German-led Europe may develop, it is better to ignore what German politicians say but consider what they do. It is not German rhetoric about political union that matters. It is German national interest and the way



in which German governments are likely to interpret it.'

On the question of the Europe envisaged by Germany, he says that in 'Germany's traditional approach to how the EU should evolve: direction of travel is more important than the identification of a destination'. The word evolve is key. Incremental, well thought out steps – very reminiscent of how German Mittelstand companies improve their products. Not surprising because grand designs aren't popular in modern Germany.

Looking to the next 20 years, Lever sees no dramatic changes in the EU, 'a cold place for the poorer nations... no resource transfer, no common credit just budgetary rigour'.

'And of the British public itself? In 20 years' time many of them will have forgotten that Britain was ever a member of the EU... [and] looking back on the referendum and the years of introspection about Europe, may wonder what all the fuss was about.'

A good read indeed – although I am not entirely sure about its conclusions. ■

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