http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/party-insiders-say-angela-merkel-may-leave-office-early-a-980987-druck.html

Is Merkel Thinking of Stepping Down?

The Buzz in Berlin

By Nikolaus Blome

7/16/2014

Angela Merkel turns 60 this week and is celebrating the pinnacle of her political career, highly popular and uncontested in office. Still, many in her cabinet and party believe she will step down as chancellor before her current term ends.

Several days ago, a young boy asked Angela Merkel a profound question. The chancellor was on a trip to China and found herself in the central city of Chengdu, where she was visiting a social project that provides assistance to migrant worker families. The German leader had already asked a few questions herself, but it was the children's turn. The boy, in shorts and a T-shirt, wanted to know: "Ms. Chancellor, do you have a happy life?" One person in attendance said that Merkel smiled for a moment, paused for a second and then said, "Yes, I live a happy life."

On July 17, Merkel will turn 60. There will be a party and a speech, both taking place at the Berlin headquarters of her conservative Christian Democratic Union party. Merkel will take pains to ensure that the celebrations aren't too extravagant. She would like the event to seem inconsequential and prefers sparkling wine over Champagne. Regardless, it will still be a momentous day, one likely to draw attention to the fact that Merkel has joined Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl as the most influential chancellors in Germany's postwar history.

But the event will also be accompanied by a question just as profound as that asked by the boy in China: How much longer will she remain in office?

Neither Adenauer nor Kohl left the Chancellery voluntarily; one was forced out by his party, the other was voted out by the electorate. They left under a cloud of defeat, one which, at least for a time, overshadowed their achievements. With no term limits in Germany, it is, of course, how all other German chancellors have left office as well. But for Kohl and Adenauer, it is a problem they might well have avoided. The circumstances for either of the two to step down voluntarily would have been far more accommodating given that they had already been re-elected multiple times, they had viable successors and they had historical milestones closely affiliated with their names. And yet neither seemed able to take the step.

Angela Merkel would prefer to do things differently.

The chancellor, nicknamed "Mutti," or mom, remains largely uncontested both within her own party and in her coalition government. She is almost disturbingly popular among German voters (with a popularity rating of 77 percent) and is one of the clear leaders of Europe; she is on equal political footing with the presidents of Russia, the United States and China. Despite this, almost all of those closest to her professionally -- be it in her party or her cabinet -- are convinced that she will eventually step down. They are certain in their belief that she intends to become the first postwar German leader to decide on her own when she should leave office. "The idea really appeals to her," says one person on her government team, echoing the feelings of many.

Merkel, though, said during the election campaign that she intends to remain in office for the full term.

Expectations, in other words, are not consistent with Merkel's statements. But it is not difficult in Berlin to find people willing to talk about the paradox, be they members of Merkel's own Christian Democrats or of its junior coalition partner, the center-left Social Democrats. But no one is willing to speak on the record.

The question as to whether the chancellor is considering stepping down voluntarily is one that Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, doesn't really care to hear. Officially, he replies with one word: "No." He then points to Merkel's own statements in the 2013 election campaign. But it's implausible that she's not at least thinking about it.

After a cross-country skiing injury at the beginning of the year, Merkel spent several weeks half working and half bedridden. One source close to Merkel says that the chancellor used some of the time thinking about her future and life after the Chancellery. Recent months, the source said, have been more intense, for reasons including the crisis in Crimea and elsewhere in Ukraine, leaving little time to focus on other things. But the questions about her future intentions remain.

Plausible Denial?

A short time ago, a person close to the chancellor pulled her aside to tell her that many in Berlin were already discussing the possibility that she might step down voluntarily and that the gossip

wasn't just limited to journalists. "And how did you answer them?" the chancellor asked. "That it's not true," the person said. "Rightly so," the chancellor answered.

That's not an unequivocal reply. "Rightly so," could mean "That's right, no resignation." Then again, it could also mean: Well done, good job blocking the stupid questions.

Stepping down voluntarily is quite possibly the toughest decision a top politician can make. Those who step down can quickly be accused of being weak and become vulnerable to questions about their health. They even run the risk of being viewed as failures. Besides, there are always objective reasons to continue in office. Even absent such reasons, most of Merkel's predecessors came to believe that they were truly irreplacable.

That's an idea alien to Merkel. But she also knows that, no matter how much she wants to be the architect of her own departure, the fuss surrounding it will be intense. And she too feels the call of duty.

Case Study

Few top politicians in Germany have succeeded in stepping down in this way. One of the few is Roland Koch, the former governor of the state of Hesse who was once a Merkel rival for the leadership of the CDU. Good luck, strong nerves and the political impotency of his SPD opponent Andrea Ypsilanti ensured Koch re-election at the beginning of 2009, after which he succeeded in building a government in Hesse together with the business-friendly Free Democratic Party.

"At the end of 2009, we began considering the idea of a voluntary exit," Koch's long-time political confidant Dirk Metz said after the politician's resignation. "Koch had been saying for years -- even if no one believed him or wanted to hear it -- that he one day wanted to return to the business world. Being in his early fifties, he still had very good prospects for landing a job."

The decision also involved other considerations. "After 15 years in government, the fact that the next election wasn't going to be any easier for him was also a factor," he said. Those close to Koch say he also wanted to escape the fate faced by many other politicians -- that of being forced out under pressure from their own people.

At the time, Koch only discussed his future with his wife and Metz, thus managing to retain the element of surprise. In May 2010, the politician first announced his plans to step down to his party's stunned leadership before going public with the news a few days later. Afterwards, he said it had given him "perverse delight" that he had outwitted journalists.

Merkel's Husband Would Be Vital in Decision

Almost everyone close to Merkel agrees she would do things similarly. She would speak about it with one or two political confidants as well as with her husband Joachim Sauer, a professor of physical and theoretical chemistry at Berlin's Humboldt University. The influence he has on Merkel is often dramatically underestimated. This is partly due to the fact that Sauer makes very

few public appearances, gives virtually no interviews and often travels abroad. Some friends of Merkel in Berlin say it will be his word and their plans together that will be the determining factors. They say he's the most important point of reference in her life.

But Roland Koch did more than just talk to his wife. He also took a sober look at himself and his prospects -- an ability absent in most politicians at the top. It became clear to him that his political career was unlikely to have a trajectory taking him higher than the office of governor of Hesse. For years, his name had been dropped as a potential CDU chancellor candidate. Although he had the ambition for the office, it had been clear for years that he no longer had the support or power to attain it. It was also becoming increasingly apparent that his time as governor was also limited and that he faced the prospect of getting voted out of office one or two elections down the road. Given that he had little chance of higher office and that he had already served for more than a decade as governor, he abandoned politics for a high-profile job at German engineering company Bilfinger, where he is currently CEO.

He was supported by Merkel at the time. She had reacted with mystification or even mockery to other resignations, but not to Koch's departure. "He simply asked the right questions," she said at the time. "And then he acted."

So when will she follow in his footsteps? That's the mother of all questions in Berlin right now. Even at a time when the capital is in the midst of unprecedented political calm, a political thriller is taking shape -- one that includes all the necessary ingredients: motives, means and a perfect opportunity.

Searching for a Motive

One motive could be fatigue. Merkel has said several times in the past that 10 years would be the limit for her term in office in the Chancellery, adding that the wear and tear of 16-hour days and six-and-a-half day work weeks wouldn't be sustainable beyond that. Besides, much of what Merkel experiences these days must feel like déjà vu. She has more than three dozen European Union summits behind her, eight G-7 and G-8 summits in the bag and 48 governmental addresses. She has won three general elections. Her next trip to the United States will be her 16th.

One senior CDU member says that Merkel has made all of the necessary reforms to her party. Be it the image of the family, same-sex marriage, abandoning military conscription, implementing a national minimum wage or education reform -- regardless what one thinks about the CDU's policy shifts, it would be hard for the party to move any closer to the political center that Angela Merkel has steered it. Indeed, the party is a key Merkel achievement, transforming it into the perfect reflection of a zeitgeist that lacks much edge. The changes have muted the conservative and business-friendly wings of the party, but they also brought in 41.5 percent of the vote in last September's general election. With no major moves left to make, it seems inevitable that that number is destined to fall the next time voters make their way to the polls.

It's a line of thinking that must have been shared by quite a number of ministers. At a December meeting, just as the new government was beginning its work, everyone began looking for signs,

one minister said. Signs of what? "That it is likely her last term in office," the minister said. "Or at least many believe that."

The minister says that a presentation at the meeting by Environment Minister Barbara Hendricks provided a case in point. She was outlining her ministry's plans, one of which extended to the year 2020. "Oh, then," Merkel said, making a vague hand gesture. The minister says he wasn't alone in thinking her reaction might be a hint and wondering how far into the future the chancellor was still thinking.

Many party acolytes were also baffled as to why the SPD was granted almost every economic or socio-politically relevant ministry in the current government. The center-left party controls the economics, family and labor portfolios, with conservatives left wondering: "Why is she doing that? And what's left for us?"

Merkel has countered this feeling of impotence within her own party with a shrug of her shoulders and terse responses like the one she gave last Thursday at CDU's Council of Economic Advisors in Berlin. "A stable government is a value in and of itself," she said. There was very little applause from the hundreds of businesspeople gathered in the packed hall. "Is she even interested in domestic policy anymore?" one board member from a major German company wondered afterwards.

Merkel 'Very, Very Relaxed'

The chancellor's weight has dropped several kilos since the beginning of the year and she appears to be in much better shape physically than she was when she first entered the Chancellery in 2009. Many perceive her to be "very, very relaxed" as a head of government in her third term who has nothing left to prove. Domestically, that means that she makes governmental statements and gives speeches to parliament in an unanimated manner, at times coming across as downright disinterested. She seems not to be putting much heart into the issues on her to-do list.

When it comes to dealing with international crises, by contrast, she gets her hands dirty, engaging in long telephone discussions about Ukraine, Russia or EU leadership positions. She travels abroad, most recently to China, where she was curious enough to ask a seemingly endless array of questions -- to the provincial governor, to a female employee at a VW factory, to a chef teaching her how to make kung pao chicken or to an engineering student. Her eyes lit up when she compared the Chinese system with Western democracy, just as she did when she conducted joint talks with Beijing leaders, discussions balancing advantages and disadvantages, limitations and dangers and the individual and the collective. Even late nights in a windowless conference room, you could listen in and get the sense that Merkel was still in top form.

And yet, she doesn't appear to have a goal. There is no political point that she wants to achieve at all costs -- one that she can later look back on with satisfaction. Politics for Merkel seems all process and no projects. The consumation of a political vision is foreign to Merkel's nature -- which is one reason that the idea of her quitting at any time doesn't seem out of the question.

Contrasting Merkel with Kohl

Helmut Kohl was different. In 1994, he announced that that year's election campaign would be his last, a vote that he won by a narrow margin. Then, on his 67th birthday in early 1997, he surprised friend and foe alike by announcing that he would run once again. Kohl felt that he was the only one who could complete his most important project, the single European currency. In 1997, the idea of the euro was the focus of serious controversy and Germany's central bank, the Bundesbank, was only one of a number of parties demanding that the plans be delayed. At the time it appeared that France and Italy, both founding members of the EU, might fail to meet the criteria for joining the euro. Serious decisions had to be made in the spring of 1998, and Kohl didn't trust anyone other than himself to make them. "Why do you think I am even still in office?" Kohl allegedly said at a 1996 summit held in preparation for the euro, according to an account by Kohl's biographer Hans-Peter Schwarz. "I'm still here because of Europe. Without me, no one will push this through in Germany."

In the end, Kohl got the euro. But he lost the election.

Merkel's equivalent to the euro could be a newly written EU Treaty, perhaps even a constitution. But she hasn't made any attempts to achieve that because she doesn't think she will be able to win over all 28 member states. In fact, one of her most important maxims seems to be never to promise anything that she isn't certain of being able to deliver. For almost nine years, that maxim has prevented this German chancellor from suffering from any major defeats. At the same time, it has also prevented her from achieving any great deeds.

"Helmut Kohl has now become ... the most respected sitting statesman in the world as we know it," SPIEGEL founder Rudolf Augstein wrote in 1996, just as Kohl's time in office surpassed that served by Konrad Adenauer. Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash has used similar language to describe the current chancellor. During the euro crisis, he wrote that "world history" depended on Merkel.

More recently, that didn't appear to be the case, with Merkel miscalculating badly during the process to name the next European Commission president. More than one German cabinet member warned her against underestimating the political impact of adopting the leading candidate system for European elections. And sure enough, following the vote, Merkel could do little to prevent the European Parliament from taking the initiative and installing Juncker at the head of the EU's executive body.

Goals for Europe

It is only during crises that Germany's position as Europe's leader is clear -- when conditions call for it or suffering euro-zone member states demand it. But in quieter times, Merkel would have to actively claim a leadership role. "But she wouldn't dare to do so," says one of Germany's most important bankers who meets with Merkel now and then. Nevertheless, there are issues that are important to the chancellor in her third term in office. She intends to adjust euro-zone rules to make the common currency more crisis resistant; she hopes to ensure that members get back on track economically and she hopes to renew the trans-Atlantic relationship with the US, despite

the NSA espionage affair. In addition, there is the question as to how Western societies can exert more control over the process of global digitalization.

To address the latter issue, Merkel invited Mathias Döpfner, head of the powerful German publishing house Axel Springer, for a meeting on May 5. They spoke about Google and how the American company's influence is changing competition and society for the worse. Merkel also spoke of Ludwig Erhard, the former German chancellor who was a major proponent of the kind of social market economy that defines Germany. She said the system holds that the power of individual companies must be limited both by free competition and by state regulation. The maxims of the social market economy must also retain validity in the digital age, she told Döpfner.

That would be a sizeable project, implying that policymakers would like to exert the kind of control over global digital capitalism that they do over world financial markets. But it is also the kind of enormous undertaking to which Merkel has historically had an aversion -- and unsurprisingly her public comments have been more reserved.

Still, she did recently utter a sentence that made greater waves than normal. "The grand coalition government intends to make the fountain of the good life available to all," she said at the beginning of the legislative period.

Perhaps more than anything, the comment was reflective of her all-encompassing approach to society and politics. Furthermore, it was delivered in the tone of a mother reading a comforting goodnight story to her children -- and not just because she delivered it sitting down, the product of a cross-country skiing accident. But it nevertheless raises the question as to whether she has specific steps in mind to make progress toward that stated goal. Thus far, a satisfactory answer has not been forthcoming.

Merkel Is in a Position To Control Her Own Departure

The lack of specifics is symptomatic. Having established no great goals by which she can be measured, Merkel has maneuvered herself into a difficult corner: There is a danger that her period at Germany's helm will lack a clear endpoint. Many who know her say that she doesn't want to be pushed out like Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder were before her. But her leadership style has made such an end a distinct possibility.

Among the obligations felt by Merkel is that of not wanting to leave the Chancellery and her Christian Democrats rudderless when she departs. Because her party and her governing coalition has thus far avoided scandal and squabble, she currently enjoys significant trust from the German electorate, says one cabinet member. Germans, who tend to view politics with a certain degree of mistrust, love the calm. And in order to preserve it, Merkel would like to hand over both of her offices -- as chancellor and as head of the CDU -- to a single heir.

As things stand now, that person is Ursula von der Leyen, though asking her about it won't get one very far. "Every generation has a chancellor. In my generation, that chancellor is Angela

Merkel," says von der Leyen, who currently heads up the Defense Ministry. She refuses to elaborate beyond that.

Even the many von der Leyen detractors among Merkel's conservatives admit that they would support her should it become necessary. Von der Leyen, they say, is the "accident chancellor" -- the one that would take over should something happen to Merkel. She has made it clear that she is willing, having done little to hide her desire to become defense minister. But what many forget is that it was Merkel who granted her the portfolio, a clear indication that she wanted to give von der Leyen a crash course in foreign policy to prepare her for the top job.

Of course any such move to install a Merkel successor during the current legislature period would require the support of the chancellor's junior coalition partner, the SPD. But at last one top conservative says that "Sigmar Gabriel wouldn't have the gumption" to jump ship. The SPD head's plan to take back the Chancellery, after all, is focused on the 2017 elections. Backing out of the current coalition would be difficult to explain to the electorate without a clear rationale.

Gabriel also knows that he still needs a few years to maneuver the SPD back to the political center, which is where elections are won in Germany. Still, public opinion polls will play a crucial role in the decision. Should the SPD enjoy over 30 percent support when Merkel steps down, the party could be tempted to try its luck in a shortened campaign against a Merkel-less CDU. But if polls show lower support -- and it currently appears as though they will -- the party would likely avoid taking such a risk.

The bottom line is that Merkel is in a position to control her own departure. "I have always been able to find a coalition partner who wants to govern with me," she once said. The same can no doubt be said of the search for her successor in the Chancellery and in her party.

What Comes after the Chancellery?

Merkel, though, is famous for thinking things through from the endpoint she envisions. What, then, might be in store for her after the Chancellery? Growing potatoes at her dacha north of Berlin? Traveling around the world with her husband? There are plenty in Berlin's government quarter who believe that such a quiet retirement is a distinct possibility. But there are many more who think that she will remain in politics. Merkel, they say, can't live without politics.

There are two international posts that could come into question: president of the European Council, the powerful body representing the leaders of the 28 EU member states, or United Nations general secretary. The first comes with a term of two-and-a-half years and will be available again at the beginning of 2017. Furthermore, Merkel loves maneuvering in the complex political environment of Brussels and also possesses more experience in European politics than any other sitting European head of state or government. "There are many in Brussels who could imagine Angela Merkel making her experience and energy available to Europe," says Elmar Brok, the CDU European parliamentarian. "She would enjoy broad support."

The position as head of the UN in New York will also be open as of January 2017, with Ban Ki-moon's successor being determined in mid-2016. Just recently, the *Luxemburger Wort*,

Luxembourg's leading daily paper, wrote extensively about the possibility that Merkel might aspire to the position, though it was quickly denied by the chancellor's spokesman. The speculation, however, has continued. "It is a European's turn," said one senior CDU member at a recent evening event.

An additional voice from German parliament noted: "On Jan. 1, 2017, Ban Ki-moon's successor will take over. That fits perfectly, early enough before the next general elections in Germany."

It is difficult to imagine Merkel experiencing much opposition in Europe or the world were she to express interest in one or the other of the posts. Indeed, it looks as though her own pledge is the only thing standing in the way. Prior to last year's election, she insisted that she intended to remain in office for an entire third term were she re-elected. Should she wish to control her departure, she would have to break her word.

That, perhaps, isn't such a high hurdle. It is, after all, a fundamental rule of politics that candidates cannot say they are only interested in staying in office for part of a term. Doing so would turn them into an immediate lame duck -- and Merkel is fully aware of that.

Thus, if motivation, means and opportunity must come together for a significant move, speculation over Merkel's departure at some point during the current term does not seem that far-fetched. There are many impossible-to-predict events that could forestall her farewell to German politics: a deadly attack in the country, a return of the euro crisis or a military escalation in Eastern Europe, to name but a few. Merkel could even become so enamored of her position that she refuses to go. The latter, though, hardly seems possible; there has been little indication in her almost nine years at the top that she is addicted to power.

Much more likely is that Germany, in the not too distant future, will be blindsided by the news that Merkel has arranged for a successor and that she is only planning to stay in office for a few more weeks. With such a move, she would show up her male predecessors, who considered themselves indispensable in the Chancellery. With such a move, she would also, once again, get what she wants.