

'Grand outline but no clear features' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (28 June 2000)

Caption: On 28 June 2000, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung comments on the French President Jacques Chirac's address to the Bundestag on the future of the European Union and refers back to the German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's speech given on 12 May in Berlin.

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Grand outline but no clear features

The Europe outlined by French President Chirac in his speech in the Reichstag

By Christoph Schwennicke

Berlin, 27 June — Before the gravitas came bustle, edginess and excitement. There was still a good half-hour to go before a foreign politician would speak for the first time at the lectern in the Reichstag Chamber below. But at the entrance, syllable-swallowing French security officials were already creating a fair bit of commotion, while in the public gallery, Bundestag ushers were making heavy weather of convincing guests from France that their mobile phones would have to be switched off. The behaviour on both sides was just what was needed to confirm the sort of clichés that can be imagined: the French lady with the mobile phone saying ‘d’accord’ and keeping right on talking, the German usher slipping into a very definite parade-ground mode. So it was not until 10.32 a.m., when the first statesman entered the Chamber long before the others, that a sense of historical significance began to descend on the Reichstag. And in honour of the occasion, Helmut Kohl, accompanied by his erstwhile Chancellory liegeman Schmidbauer, chose to sit a row nearer the front than is his custom since returning to the backbenches.

That on this Tuesday in the Reichstag the humdrum of parliamentary routine was, for just an hour, to give way to politics on the grand scale first became clear some 30 minutes later when Jacques Chirac referred to none other than Helmut Kohl. Apart from the opening greetings, the French President had up to this point addressed in person neither the Chancellor-in-Office, nor the Foreign Minister, nor even the Federal President. He had run through the history of Franco-German friendship and named the names, like so many milestones. Konrad Adenauer. Charles de Gaulle. Willy Brandt and Georges Pompidou. Helmut Schmidt and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. ‘I would like, finally, to pay tribute to Helmut Kohl and say to him that the immense achievement that he, together with François Mitterrand, brought about will remain in the memories of the French and of all Europeans.’ Did he say ‘committee of investigation notwithstanding’? Of course he didn’t. This was to be the only point in Chirac’s address at which Members applauding and others sitting arms crossed would divide at the CDU/SPD demarcation line formed by the Greens. Kohl himself, otherwise highly susceptible at such moments to the promptings of sentiment, gave all the appearance of being unmoved.

Jacques Chirac was speaking as the first foreign state guest in the Reichstag, and he was speaking about Europe. While he did not make the connection explicit, a response was of course expected to the jolt delivered some six weeks earlier by the German Foreign Minister with his vision of what Europe might become. It had in the meantime remained somewhat unclear whether, in the most important partner country, Fischer’s ideas were being greeted with goodwill or with scepticism. Chirac’s words would offer some initial clarification.

The tone of voice which Chirac adopted as he spoke in the Reichstag was very calm and steady. The gentle melody of the French language, to which the building is unaccustomed, played its part in lending a dignified solemnity to the historic address. Chirac’s delivery was that of a story-teller, or rather a history-teller, presenting his view of the ‘projet européen’ to his German audience. This serenity, this agreeable tone tended initially to disguise the fact that the President had some very clear messages to convey and occasional outright refusals. Enlargement of the European Union must on no account become an excuse for rushing headlong into unknown territory. The President was convinced that the ‘le rythme de la construction européenne’, the pace of European integration, could not be determined in advance. Neither the Germans nor the French were seeking a European super-state which would supplant the nation-states and mark the end of their existence as actors on the international stage. And lastly: ‘le visage de l’Europe future’, the face of the Europe to come, had yet to be drawn.

Chirac made no direct reference to what Fischer had had to say about Europe’s ultimate objective. And yet he was in this way offering a fairly clear answer. Comparing the content, one might say this: speaking as a private individual, Fischer spoke eloquently in a high literary style; Chirac, in contrast, answered as a statesman with a strictly political address, one which was hardly visionary but in many places proved much

stronger on specifics. In this sense his words did not amount to a rebuff for the German Foreign Minister but were more to be seen as guidance along the way, as clarification and an attempt to channel energies down the correct path. Nuances of language should not be overlooked — those who in Europe were to lead from the front were referred to by Chirac as the ‘groupe pionnier’, which in the written translation came out as ‘avant-garde group’, an expression which smacks more of elitism and less of hard work.

It is clear too that Chirac, in his unofficial answer to Fischer, saw himself in the role of one who seeks to dampen the ardours of a right-thinking hothead but who at the same time exudes fatherly goodwill for the impetuosity of his younger European colleague. Substance apart, this assignment of roles was manifestly a problem for the Foreign Minister. As the speech wore on, Fischer sat with his arms gripped ever more tightly round his chest; his eyes strayed constantly from the lectern and, from time to time, he made that familiar chewing movement of his like a lizard swallowing a large grasshopper. And he could not suppress the hint of a smile when Chirac proposed that 2 000 schoolchildren, at the end of their first year learning a foreign language, should be invited to visit the neighbouring country on a reciprocal basis — perhaps in his view too conventional a measure compared with his ideas on the jolts that are needed to create a new Europe.