

Germany's Angela Merkel feted by the UK to little effect

By Julie Hyland
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The visit to Britain by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel last week was intended to be the source of much self-congratulation on the part of the Conservative-led coalition government.

She is only the third German leader to be accorded all the privileges of a visit by a head of state (without actually being one)—and the first ever of a unified Germany. Merkel addressed both Houses of Parliament, dined at Downing Street and took tea with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Introducing her to assembled MPs, Speaker John Bercow waxed about the many achievements of a woman he described as Europe's "anchor."

The red carpet treatment was in marked contrast to that afforded French President François Hollande for his summit on January 31, held at an Oxfordshire air base with lunch at a nearby pub. Yet there was no disguising that this was one tête-à-tête that mattered far more to its host than the guest of honour. So much so that the German chancellor allotted just six hours to her visit, stopping off on the way back to Berlin from Israel, where she had spent two days with her entire cabinet.

Prime Minister David Cameron laid on the entire occasion in the hope that Merkel would help pull him out of the very large hole he has dug himself into over British membership of the European Union (EU).

The Conservative Party is imploding. A growing number of Tory backbenchers are demanding Britain quit the EU, while the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) is making electoral gains at Conservative expense.

In an effort to re-establish his leadership over the party, Cameron had pledged that—should he be re-elected in 2015—he would guarantee a referendum on British membership of the EU by 2017. His plan—to the

extent that it can be dignified as such—was that this would settle his backbenchers and win over enough UKIP supporters to ensure victory in the 2015 General Election. In the meantime, he would seek to renegotiate the terms of Britain's membership with his EU partners.

Relying on the fact that Germany, France and others are keen to pursue greater fiscal and political union within the EU, Cameron would pledge British support for their aims in return for treaty revisions to safeguard the City of London. This "reformed" version of membership—one that would satisfy the demands of big business—would be put to a referendum and successfully passed, he calculated.

Cameron's gamble has backfired. Not only has he failed to placate Tory backbenchers, but a February 14 by-election in Wythenshawe, Manchester saw an 11 percent fall in votes for his party, which was pushed into third place behind UKIP.

At the same time, as Hollande indicated on his visit, many EU members are unwilling to make revisions—not least because this could constitutionally oblige them to place any resulting treaty before referendums in their own countries.

Cameron's one hope is that he can get the support of Germany, described in a briefing by the Open Europe think tank as the "most important 'swing state' in the debate about the EU's future." Germany, it stated, is in favour of enabling certain EU powers to be returned to national governments, while its "desire to put further eurozone integration on a sounder constitutional footing and enforce economic supervision on other eurozone economies" provided Cameron with his "best chance of securing an EU Treaty change."

Thus the chancellor touched down in London to headlines declaring "Angela Merkel has Britain's future

in her hands” (*Guardian*) and “Angela Merkel-led attack on Syria. Subsequently, London has had to watch on as Hollande was feted by Washington on a recent visit and France has taken the lead in interventions in Africa.

Just to hammer home the point, reminders of previous German “rescues” surrounded Merkel as she spoke in Westminster’s Royal Gallery. From George I of Hanover ensuring the continuity of monarchy in Britain with his accession to the throne in 1714, to the 46-foot painting of the Duke of Wellington meeting Prussian Field Marshall Blücher at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815—“an alliance which was to shift the balance of power in Europe decisively for the rest of the nineteenth century,” Bercow said, referring none too diplomatically to the defeat of France.

Desperation, however, is never an appealing quality in a suitor. While Merkel made clear she was flattered, she also made plain that she would have to leave her prospective paramour frustrated.

Those who expected her remarks to “satisfy all kinds of alleged or actual British wishes” were in for a “disappointment,” Merkel said. Equally, those expecting a “clear and simple message... that the rest of Europe is not prepared to pay almost any price to keep Britain in the European Union” would find their hopes “dashed.”

Urging the UK to remain within the EU, Merkel suggested that certain revisions could be made. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she said.

The *Guardian* cited as potential concessions assurances that non-euro members would not be outvoted when rules for the single market are drawn up, enabling national governments to limit welfare provision to EU workers and a British opt-out from the EU’s working time directive.

The latter measures especially make clear that the German and UK governments are united when it comes to attacking workers’ rights. But this commitment to austerity and free-market capitalism notwithstanding, their interests cannot ultimately be reconciled as the German bourgeoisie’s agenda of political union is the very opposite of that pursued by Britain’s ruling class. In the end, Merkel’s visit was cause for despair among their number, who saw it as further proof that domestic problems are jeopardising the interests of British capital.

Mass popular opposition and disarray in the political elite saw parliament veto plans for an immediate

UK-led attack on Syria. Subsequently, London has had to watch on as Hollande was feted by Washington on a recent visit and France has taken the lead in interventions in Africa.

Scotland is to vote on independence from the UK in September. Whatever its outcome, the vote is fuelling an atmosphere of crisis made all the more febrile by rising tensions over EU membership.

In its editorial, “Merkel comes to Little England,” the *Financial Times* warned that “Britain’s eurosceptic obsession means it is losing clout.”

The most striking feature of Merkel’s visit was that while the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland gathered in Kiev to implement Washington’s latest instalment of regime change in the Ukraine, Britain was notably absent. The political elites constant obsessing “about the minutiae of the EU’s rule book” was seeing “Britain slowly moving to the sidelines of world affairs.”

In a similar vein, the *Economist* commented on “The dispensable kingdom”:

“[N]arrowly focused on squeezing concessions (currently so vague as to be virtually meaningless) out of its partners, all while threatening to flounce out of the union all together”, it complained, the UK was a “bit-player” in Western imperialism’s provocations in the Ukraine, adding, “France is now Europe’s leading military actor. Germany now dominates its economic policies. Poland is the main force for enlargement.”

On Monday, Foreign Secretary William Hague appeared in Kiev to show “solidarity” with the fascists that had staged last week’s coup, while threatening Moscow with diplomatic and economic isolation.

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