THE ECONOMIST – 22 APRILE 2017

Martin Schulz wants to emulate his "idol". It won't be easy

di Charlemagne

WHEN Martin Schulz entered the village hall in Nunkirchen on March 24th, in the hilly German state of Saarland, the cheer nearly blew the roof off. To a beery crowd of villagers and party activists, the candidate for Germany's centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), who hopes to replace Angela Merkel as chancellor, was introduced as a near-messiah: "the man who made politics in Germany interesting again, who has reinstated the SPD's self-belief, who has put social justice back on the agenda, who will be our next chancellor!" As he ascended the stage a hush fell. The bells of the church next door began to peal: "I didn't ask for that!", he insisted.

His speech quickly transcended the borders of Saarland, which was about to elect a new government. Mr Schulz ruminated on Europe; cracked folksy jokes; solemnly intoned about Germany's historical burden; cast his family, neighbours and acquaintances from the campaign trail as characters in a compendium of parables about the country. He lingered on Willy Brandt, the SPD chancellor of West Germany from 1969 to 1974, who had once spoken in the very same hall. In reverential tones Mr Schulz recalled his 20-year-old self receiving a book as a prize from the great man. "I still have that book," he said, eyes a-glisten.

This was the peak of what Germans call the Schulz-Effekt. It started on January 24th, when Sigmar Gabriel, then-leader of the SPD, unexpectedly handed the reins to his charismatic comrade, the outgoing president of the European Parliament. The new face worked wonders. Having long languished in the polls, the SPD suddenly shot up by ten points. It drew level with Mrs Merkel's centre-right alliance of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), with which the SPD rules in coalition. Euphoria gripped the party. Then, two days after Mr Schulz's speech, the SPD returned a mediocre result in the Saarland election. It has since fallen back in national polls; Mrs Merkel is once again the most popular prospective chancellor. Can the Schulz-Effekt be revived?

In trying to answer that question, it helps to contemplate the man Mr Schulz calls his "idol". A half-metre-high bronze statue of Brandt stands in his office. He has described the 1972 election, the first in which the SPD won more seats than the CDU/CSU alliance, as "the moment of my politicisation". He quotes Brandt religiously and encourages comparisons.

There are indeed similarities. Like Brandt in 1969, Mr Schulz leads an SPD that is tired of being the junior partner in a grand coalition, yet struggling, at a time of economic boom, to usurp a long-dominant CDU/CSU. Like Brandt, a one-time mayor of isolated West Berlin, the former

European Parliament president is an outsider in German federal politics. And like Brandt he is blunt, approachable, emotional, idealistically European in outlook and palpably hungry for power.

Their political strategies are alike, too. Brandt's campaign was hyper-personal, known as the "Willy Election"; Mr Schulz orates under banners proclaiming "Time for Martin" and in front of crowds chanting his first name. By focusing on things like schools (saying that he will offer voters "fee-free education from nursery to university") he wants to emulate his idol's path to power: an alliance spanning the working-class SPD, the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the intellectual left (in Brandt's day the peace movement, today the Green Party). In 1969 the laboratory of this coalition was the new SPD-FDP government in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Today the equivalent is the SPD-FDP-Green coalition in Rhineland-Palatinate, which has already introduced fee-free education.

So far, so Schulz-Effekt. But his problems have to do with the differences between then and now. Brandt had the benefit of three years as vice-chancellor in the lead-up to 1969. Mr Schulz, by contrast, is unfamiliar with Germany, having been away since 1994. He is frantically swotting. A recent interview in which he claimed 40%, not the correct 14%, of young Germans are on short-term contracts cost him credibility. Meanwhile, where Brandt's time in Berlin berating the communist East burnished his reputation, Mr Schulz's support for euro-zone debt-sharing is a political liability. Jens Spahn, a rising CDU star, brands him a better friend to Greek communists than to German taxpayers.

2017 is not 1969

The biggest difference has to do with coalitions. In Brandt's day there were just four parties in the Bundestag. He became chancellor by forming an SPD-FDP coalition, condemning the larger CDU/CSU to opposition. In the next Bundestag there will probably be seven parties, complicating the arithmetic. Mr Schulz could seek another grand coalition with Mrs Merkel's centre-right CDU/CSU. But his party has long suffered in this arrangement. Promoting yet another alliance between the two would thus only help Mrs Merkel. So Mr Schulz is going for a coalition with the FDP and the Greens. But his putative liberal partners are not keen and polls put this grouping well short of a majority.

That leaves a coalition with the Greens and the socialist Die Linke (the Left), which descends from the Communist party that ran East Germany. Unlike previous SPD candidates for chancellor, Mr Schulz refuses to rule out such a coalition. But Die Linke's anti-NATO views make it politically toxic. Talk of an SPD-Left government in Saarland, for example, appears to have raised turnout among CDU/CSU voters and contributed to the SPD's defeat.

There is a historical irony here. Brandt dreamed of reunification and as chancellor warmed relations with East Germany. In the long term his vision came true. But this ultimately created a force in Die Linke that now hoovers up social-democratic votes in the east, is electorally toxic in the west, and without which the SPD may not be able to build a left-of-centre coalition. The legacy of his hero weighs heavily on Mr Schulz.