



## Skating on thin ice – Don't take Europe's victory for granted

By Epimetheus

Some people have accused Elmar Brok of being a “hobby politician”. But if that just means that he enjoys what he does then it’s probably true and not much of a criticism. The fact is Mr Brok has been fascinated by European politics since he was a schoolboy, writing off for information from the age of twelve. It was reading a book by the American historian Gordon A. Craig that set him on the road to a political career. In Professor Craig’s 1958 book “From Bismarck to Adenauer: Aspects of German Statecraft”, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer is praised for being the first German politician to have looked beyond his country’s borders in framing his European policy. “That was an important historical step,” explains Mr Brok, “and the next day I became a member of Adenauer’s Youth Foundation.” It was to be the first step on the ladder to a career in European politics. Elmar Brok has his political heroes and Adenauer is very

much one of them, largely because of his long-term commitment to a more united Europe. “Adenauer already wrote articles in the 1920s about European affairs and he and Robert Schuman had met in 1926 and discussed European matters for a long time,” Mr Brok tells me. And he feels the founding fathers of what would become the European Union were partly influenced by the geography of their upbringings. “It’s an important point that all three of them – Adenauer, Schuman and (Alcide) Di Gasperi – came from border regions: Lotharingia, Rhineland, Trentino – where they know what war means between nations.” An all-too-intimate knowledge of the sufferings visited upon peoples living near the frontiers in any conflict was not the only influence, however. “Also they had deep religious relationships which I think was part of that.” Elmar Brok began his education at a school where

the only languages taught were classical Greek and Latin, but he feels he gained from it, even if he would have welcomed the chance to learn a modern language. “Greek philosophy and such things were deeply rooted and I think that might have had an impact on me,” he admits. He’s more convinced of its impact on Europe. “I think Europe is built on three hills,” he explains, “Golgotha, Acropolis and the Capitoline: the Christian and

Jewish world, Greek Philosophy, the Roman legal code.” He pauses. “And enlightenment,” he adds. “These are the four cornerstones of Europe and of European culture and all of us have some of that in a different balance.” He believes what the nations of Europe have in common far outweighs what divides us. It was that 20% difference, he says, that was used by politicians in the past to convince their people that they were in some way





superior to their neighbours. Now they don't. "That's the big change we've had in Europe in the last 56 years," he says, proudly. But we shouldn't be complacent. Elmar Brok is concerned that today's politicians and the generations that have no memory of war are taking Europe's triumphs for granted, which can be dangerous. "Now we have to make clear how thin the ice of civilisation is, and if we look at certain election results and so on then it shows that we have to explain again the old motto we had after the war: no war any more, no dictatorship

any more," he says. "It's still an important rule, although it's not the only one." He's afraid that the strains caused by the economic crisis are tempting some nations to seek their own salvation, which simply won't work in a more interconnected world. "With the challenges of globalisation, energy security, climate change and so on, we can only reach the future if Europeans stick together. No nation state can achieve anything alone any more. Not even Germany can do it alone any more. But the old ideas are still there and I think

with these discussions about the financial crisis then I see the old arguments returning and that frightens me." Mr Brok is very much a man of the wider world. He studied at several universities and was especially influenced, he believes, by Professor John Mitchell, who founded the Centre of European Governmental Studies within the Faculty of Law at Edinburgh University in 1968. It was there he was able to observe what was the European Economic Community from the outside, so to speak. "The UK was not a member at that time," he explains, "and there was a discussion where I looked at the European Community with other eyes." Negotiations for Britain's entry were going on at the time and heading towards a successful conclusion. But looking at Europe from beyond its borders was a salutary experience. "That clarified things for me, sharpened it, so there was Professor Mitchell and whenever I hear discussion between European and national law then I always see the writings of Professor Mitchell." They are still worth reading today. Elmar Brok shares the view once expressed by US

Secretary of State Dean Acheson that Britain's decision not to join the European Coal and Steel Community at its foundation was a major mistake. He believes that British euro scepticism has weakened Britain's position within the EU. "American politicians and businessmen no longer look to London because London's influence in the European Union has become weaker," he believes. "This is a very interesting argument that I hear very often in Washington and I think there should be detailed consideration of Britain's policies towards the EU." But of course, Europe is one of those issues British politicians prefer to ignore as a hostile media paints an ever-bleaker picture of Brussels. The "E-word" is just not said. It's an issue that worries Elmar Brok. He believes today's leaders see a Europe at peace, with open borders and – in most cases – prosperity. "The advantages that Europe brought, like peace, freedom and wealth are not talked about any more," he says. "If it rains, it was Brussels' fault, if it's sunny this was because of Berlin, London or Paris.





Brok in Iran  
Brok in Israel



And I think this is a problem; how can our young people know what advantages Europe has brought because the open borders and the peace and freedom are taken for granted. It is not any more connected to the EU." He blames national politicians for this lapse and for not explaining or giving credit where it's due. "The governments of

the member states have to do that more and not just use Europe as an alibi for their own shortcomings." What of Elmar Brok's influences? Professor Mitchell was an early one, along with Konrad Adenauer, whose photograph is among several that adorn the wall of his Brussels office, all of them a tribute to big moments in Europe's

history. It shows the meeting between Chancellor Adenauer and David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister. It was the first post-war meeting between leaders of Germany and Israel. But the man Mr Brok cites as his major influence was Helmut Kohl. "He was the man who was an example for me," he says, "and from whom I learned how to do politics." His picture is there, too, in that historical hand-in-hand moment with the Socialist French President, François Mitterand. Looking back, not surprisingly, he sees the unification of Germany and Europe in 1989 as the defining moment for his generation. He's especially keen to point out that this wasn't the result of one nation's efforts. "It has to do with Václav Havel, Solidarnosc, with the people of Leipzig," he points out. "It was the same movement of the same cultural and political freedom, the hunger for freedom that brought the Europeans together." And as for today's economic problems, he still believes that only through being

competitive will countries get out of the mire of debt. He rejects the Keynesian approach of pouring state money into infrastructure projects. "If money doesn't meet the right structures, the money is thrown away," he argues. "Look at Spain. You see 50% youth unemployment but even in the best times they had 30% youth unemployment, just because they have the wrong vocational training system. If you do not change that system, all the money in the world won't help you." But Elmar Brok is not despondent. He has been known to fly into furious rages but to get out of them just as quickly. And he likes life in the European Parliament. "A degree of friendship has developed here," he says. "Here is really a place where people of different nations and different political backgrounds talk openly to each other, have trust in each other and I think it is very favorable to have that feeling. At the end of the day, when it really counts, we kick in the same direction."

