

Helmut Kohl: why can't our present leaders match his record?

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2017-6-16

One of the great figures of 20th century history, Helmut Kohl, the former German Chancellor, has died. We Brits tend to think Margaret Thatcher brought down the Berlin Wall and ended the Cold War, but in many ways Kohl had more significance in re-shaping Europe.

His decision to press ahead with the unification of Germany when everyone thought it would take decades transformed that nation but also Europe.

As a journalist I once covered him on the campaign trail and, as they say, he was larger than life. He had the hulking presence of someone who is filled with their sense of what visionary politics plus determination and guile can achieve. He was someone who saw the big picture but was also prepared [to engage in hand-to-hand combat](#).



As someone with German heritage (my mother, and my father-in-law were both born there, albeit on different sides of German history) I have always had respect for a country that (when not drinking beer) takes itself seriously. He was the symbol of the new German power and its constructive role.

Merkel is not the same kind of politician, though in her own way she faces similar challenges and shows signs of honouring his tradition of pragmatic but principled leadership on the national and international stages. Certainly, we in the UK lack anyone remotely in their class.

There is a cliché about how there aren't any Big Beasts of politics anymore. Where are the politicians that can put

their hand on the tiller of destiny and change the course of history? Or just help us straddle the fault lines of the modern world? It was always a bit of a myth. We know there are always larger forces at work.

But Kohl really can claim to have personally made a major difference. When we look at some of our current leaders like Trump, Merkel, May and Macron we can see how individuals still matter. Character or celebrity is persuasive in a world where politics has become personal. The trouble is that the calibre on offer is distinctly variable. And also perhaps, the demands are even more complex.

Since Kohl was born in 1930 we have all become wealthier and healthier while advances in science and technology have opened up remarkable possibilities for society. However, for present-day leaders the problems such as climate change, inequality, political extremism and violence are more complicated and unstable. Add to that a more intense, diverse and omniscient media pressure and you can see why life for politicians in the 21st century is more difficult than ever. That does not excuse their flaws and failings. But it does mean that as well as vision and pragmatism they must also have emotional intelligence and outstanding communicative skills. We expect a lot, we deserve more than we are getting.

This article by Polis director Charlie Beckett @CharlieBeckett

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