

## **“Political Think Tanks – What they can, what they can’t, what they should do”**

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Ladies and Gentleman, Shalom!

You might remember the wonderful Peter Falk starring Lieutenant Columbo in the world famous series. In one part, in „Mind over Mayhem“, he asks the director of a think tank this wonderful question: „Oh a think tank! I read about that in the paper. That’s a place full of geniuses, isn’t it? May I ask, what YOU do here, Sir?“ I take this nice and ironic quote to explain you, why I am here...

Michael Mertes already told you that I am in between two stages of my professional and personal life: in between being the director of the Policy and Consulting branch of the foundation in Berlin – the think tank within the “think tank Adenauer Foundation”, so to say – and being the representative of the Foundation to Israel. My time in Israel will start in early August.

I am extremely happy to be here and I am really looking forward to working with you. I do not exaggerate when telling you that I love Israel, and the next years in this country will be a dream coming true for me and my family. I am confident that we – our three kids, my wife and I – will learn a lot during the next three years! Let me apologize that I cannot talk in Ivrit to you yet, but I promise to learn at least a little bit during the next years.

One last preliminary remark, which is also concerning the language issue: My relation to the English language is somewhat similar to my relation to my wife: “I love her, but I can’t control her”. So please be patient with me.

Why does a political think tank seem to be a good idea? Why does a party-affiliated think tank seem to be good idea? Is there really a need for something like this?

We all know in the western-type democracies that we entered the era of the volatile voter, who make their decisions literally at the last minute, and who are somewhat distant to politics. We just recently asked people in a poll: Do you feel currently involved in politics: 77 Percent of the Germans answered: NO. In the same poll we asked: Have you been upset about politics during the recent months: 66 percent answered: YES. The big question is: How can you be upset about something you do not feel involved in?

Correspondingly, voters are not very well informed about politics: Another poll shows that more than 60 percent could not answer the question correctly: "Do you know who has served as the top-candidate of the CDU in the 2009 elections"? Of course it was Angela Merkel and that is not exactly the one-million-dollar-question.

Back in the highly polarized and politicized seventies, parties in Europe have been expected to be a supplier of ideologies and a more or less convincing world-view. Nowadays, they are expected to be problem-solving-agencies. This sounds very pragmatic. But beware: The voters are – and I think this will apply all over the world – ambivalent: The fact, that they want their problems to be solved does not mean that values and convictions do *not* count any more.

"Muddling through without a clue" is not exactly the song that people like to be played. Mainstream and value-based parties still play a role in our times which the German Philosophy Guru Habermas described to be the era of a new complexity. In this situation: Political parties must submit proposals

- which remove or at least handle uncertainty,
- which offer long-range orientation as well as a basis composed of fundamental attitudes, insights and approaches inviting identification and loyalty. A "Promise for the future" must be found that is both: credible and realistic.

The decisive question is: Can a party do that on its own? Can party-affiliated think tanks offer help in finding this "promise for the future"? Do parties like the German Christian Democrats need help like this? Do they take this help from an institution which is, so to say, part of the family and thus seems not to be neutral at all?

In the international think-tank research, think tanks like the political foundations have been classified – or one should say: dismissed – to be so called "advocative" institutions. I personally think that this classification is naïve: Almost no think tank in the whole world is neutral, in the truest sense of the word – nearly all think tanks do follow their own political agenda. The US think tank *Heritage* for instance is definitely not a political foundation. Is it neutral? No, not at all. Even academic think tanks who do political consulting work, like the DGAP (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*) or the SWP (*Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*) are to some extent advocacy-oriented and actively try to gain political influence.

This classification reflects another fact: In Germany – and this might be specific for the German situation –, political consulting still encounters some prejudices and misconceptions: Our former Federal President Roman Herzog, by the way a great friend of Israel, once asked: "Why is it that political consultancy is common in America, and still regarded as luxury in our country?" This has changed, and the need for consultation grows, because the requirements of the problems and challenges threaten to become overwhelming. Just take the complexity of the euro crisis as an example.

Of course the think tanks in Germany are diverse, and it is important to realize that due to the fact that the government moved from Bonn to Berlin, the whole political consultancy business and landscape in Germany changed dramatically. The number of government officials, members of parliament, parliamentary staffers and so on is pretty much the same, compared to the Bonn times. But

since this time the number of consultants, lobbyists and so on has grown four times higher. The result of this development is that there is a new sense of competition in the German think-tank landscape.

Are we able to compete, for instance with commercial think tanks? It seems to be so: Forgive me for being a little bit proud. In the "2013 global Go To Think Tanks Report" (<http://www.kas.de/israel/en/publications/36679/>), which is done by some renowned academics at the Pennsylvania University, the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* is ranked to be number 33 among the 150 best think-tanks in the world. There is also an Israeli think-tank on this list with the *Institute for National Security Studies*, also ranked quite well number 104 in the world. More than 8.000 think-tanks have been in ranked in this study.

In Western Europe we are number nine. We were also – and this is important for our topic today – ranked number one among the world's party-affiliated think-tanks.

What makes us special? There are hundreds, maybe thousands of party-affiliated-think tanks and foundations in the world. However, there is one fact which makes the political foundations in Germany unique: No other party-affiliated foundation in the world is funded by the state, financed by tax-payers' money. This may sound strange to your ears, but there is of course a historic reason for that.

In the German constitution, the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), you will find the phrase: "Die Parteien wirken an der Willensbildung des Volkes mit.". That means in English: "The parties take an active part in forming the political will of the people". This gives the political parties in Germany a semi-official status in the Basic Law, and that means something if you take into account that the relation of the German people to their constitution and the constitutional court almost has a religious dimension.

But the fathers and mothers of the German constitution still remembered the parties of the Weimar era. The Weimar parties were huge organizations, often equipped with militarized troops. The authors of our Basic Law wanted the parties in the post-war time to play a big role, but they should be supported by organizations which offer political orientation and education without being part of the party. The founders of the political foundations aimed at reconciling two principles: Neither did they want to channel various educational, research-oriented and international activities *directly* through the party system, nor did they want to keep them outside the influence of the political parties. This is the reason for the state funding. And this state funding was twice approved by the Constitutional Court.

This financial support offers us a lot of possibilities, but it also imposes some obligations on us: We are obliged not to involve ourselves in campaign activities of the parties. We are obliged to keep a certain distance to the party. We are obliged to act very transparently. That means: Every single activity we are undertaking has to be revealed to the public sooner or later. It must in the end lead to a publication or to an event.

Transparent action is not only important because we aim to use our resources to the greatest possible benefit, for which we are accountable to the public. It also protects us from those charges of collision and non-transparency, which are not infrequently laid at the door of political consultancy agencies and institutions.

Yes, we are independent from the party. But of course, this independence is a relative one, if one regards the fact that all the leading figures of the CDU, like Angela Merkel, Volker Kauder (head of the Christian Democrats' parliamentary group) and others are members of the board of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

This leads directly to the crucial question: How big is our influence in the party? And again: Is our party affiliation a problem in this regard, is this a source of conflicts?

It may sound banal, but it is true: Relevance and quality of think-tank products are decisive: An advice which is filled up to the top with kindness and courtesy, a recommendation which is just designed to please the party officials will not help any decision-maker, and it is accepted just once and then never again. My personal experience, not only in Germany, is that Politicians expect to be advised in a particularly comprehensive and, more importantly, credible and honest way by consultants whose political philosophy is close to their own.

The former Secretary General of the Adenauer Foundation, Wilhelm Staudacher, once said: "For a public-oriented think tank, the basic prerequisites of successful communication are: competence and credibility. These are the only characteristics that will give it access to decision-makers and opinion-leaders in politics, administration, the economy, and society, as well as to the media".

Let me now give an answer to one of the questions you asked me to address: How can a think tank start earning reputation and prestige? The answer is comparably simple: The first and foremost obligation, besides quality, is to be both: reasonable and courageous.

Courageous means to be innovative, to at least try to think ahead of the current political agenda, to take a new perspective. One example: The political discussion about family politics denied the fact that parents are under some pressure nowadays. In times of globalization and worldwide competition for jobs, they really feel the need to intensively care for the education of their children. They do feel an immense time-pressure. We conducted a major research on this issue, and we were the only institution which translated this subject into the political agenda. This was very innovative and had some political impact.

Courageous means – this my second example – to clean up wrong interpretations of the political situation or stereotypes about the voters and the parties. A large part of the more conservative members and functionaries of the CDU always stated that it is important to convince the former or current core voters of the party to vote again for the party, and the conservatives assumed that these voters are very conservative, very well informed, very ideological. We made the first in-depth investigation and found out that the core voters are not a homogenous entity. No, they are entirely diverse. We made this very clear to the party and, believe me, in the beginning this was not very popular, but even the conservatives in the party accepted it in the end.

The same applies to a study we made about the non-voters. The media and a lot of party members were extremely concerned about abstention from the vote. They thought that this unwillingness to vote is the expression of political protest. The media already spoke of the "party of non-voters", being the biggest and most successful party. We made the first study about this. It was not an easy task, because the method to measure the abstention from the vote is very

complicated. We found out that the rumor about the so called non-voters' party is simply rubbish.

I mention these studies also to give you an insight in what the modern "management guys" would call a "unique selling point" of our think tank-work. What we achieved during the last ten years is that we are known within our own political spectrum to be *the* number one address for knowledge about the development of the German party system and the electorate.

If you think about tools: We have a lot of competence in the field of polling. And my experience is that polls are gladly welcomed by the press. With polls, we can also have a direct influence on political decision-makers. But that is not always an easy thing to do for a political foundation. The Adenauer Foundation was one of the leading organizations in empirical research in the nineteen-seventies and -eighties. But to be frank: The "problem" about polls is that they sometimes reflect what people really think. If you do not follow the advice of Winston Churchill who once said: "I only believe in those statistics which I have manipulated myself", you have to accept that those polls will bring some truth to the surface which may not be very pleasant and thus may not be very welcome. There were some rather skeptical voices in the beginning. This did change during the recent years because the party realized that we did some rather helpful things with these polls. And they are aware of the fact that there is the urgent need to know more about the electorate because electoral behavior changed dramatically during the last years.

This is one of my main points: If we are not very clear, if we are not at times critical in dealing with the party, we are in the end useless for the party. This is my conviction. But – and this but should be written in capital letters –: Our criticism is not risky for the party, because we are part of the political family.

This is the second point that I mentioned: reasonable. We are reasonable in whatever we do, because it is not just a job we are doing. It is a heartfelt service. Almost every colleague of the foundation is deeply attached to the political idea the Christian Democrats stand for. We are all contributing to this idea and do not seek our fortune in being dissidents.

Let us take a close look at the potentials and advantages.

What are our advantages? Why can we compete with other consultancies? Let me name three basic things: First: Insider-knowledge. Second: It's all about synergy. Third: It is just a matter of translation.

**1.) Insider knowledge:** Almost no other consultancy institution knows the party and its representatives this exceedingly well. Take again my example or, if you wish, the example of Michael Mertes. Both of us served in the German Chancellor's office: Of course, Michael some years longer and some levels higher than I did. Our professional careers prior to our engagement in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung were linked to the party. We can rely on a very broad political network within the party. We have known for years and decades how the party feels, thinks and reacts. We have a more or less direct access to the leading figures of the party. They know us and they ask us for support. And we are familiar with the programmatic orientation and development of the party. And I can tell you that programs and manifestos *do* play a major role in the German party-system.

**2.) Synergy:** The breadth of its political and societal mission is the Foundation's distinguishing asset. With the possible exception of a few global agencies that come more or less close, there is no consultancy institution, which operates a far-flung network of offices abroad comparable to that of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, with decades of experience acquired in the fields of democracy promotion and development policy, and with around 200 projects in more than 120 countries of the world and with offices in almost 80 countries.

This is what we are doing: We always try to bring international expertise to the fore of the national debate. One example: You might know that the German *Bundesrat* through which the German federal states (*Länder*) are participating in national legislation, invoked the German Constitutional Court and asked it to ban the NPD, the right-wing extremist party, which is still suspected of having been involved in the terrorist killings committed by NSU Gang. What we do currently, with the support of our offices in Athens and in Budapest, is to launch a comparative study which looks at the extremist Greek "Golden Dawn" movement, the Hungarian "Jobbik" and the German NPD, including some recommendations how to cope with these extremists. Who else can do that – not in an academic, but in a very political and strategic manner?

But it is not only the international dimension: Is there anyone else who can rely on more than 16 educational centers and institutions throughout Germany? The regional level is important in a federal state like Germany, and through political education, we are able to make people aware and conscious of political facts. Accordingly, we are not only analyzing political developments, we also exert a direct influence on people. This is why some say that we are not only a think-tank but more and more a "do-tank" as well. This is of course a development which is not only true for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Most think-tanks have the aspiration not only to think, but also to act publicly.

And of course, our public appearance can have some good impact on politics. Take another example: You might know that the model of the people's party (in German we say *Volksparteien*), plays a crucial role in the German political system. Those parties are so called "catch-all parties" which are able to integrate very different groups and segments of society under the roof of one party formation. For almost twenty years some more or less influential academics have kept telling us that the era of these parties is gone: Forget about the "Volksparteien". I doubt that – and the fact that the CDU won almost 42 percent of the votes in the 2013 national election clearly shows that this party still is able to "catch" a vast portion of the electorate.

We tried to correct this misconception by starting a blog – it is in German, but you might be interested to have a look at it: [www.zukunftsvolksparteien.de](http://www.zukunftsvolksparteien.de) –, and this blog has triggered a very active discussion about the future of this party type. More than 80.000 people visited this blog, and without overestimating our influence, I am pretty sure it has some impact on the way how the parties are perceived in the public.

The third important pillar of synergy is the fact that we have access to a unique network of some ten thousand current and former scholarship students who, after completing their studies, now mostly occupy key positions in politics, society and the economy, themselves offering access to other networks.

**3.) Translation:** The third advantage is what I called "It is a matter of translation": You might have heard the anecdote about an American President

who told his chief of staff: "Next time you are going to hire a new consultant, please make sure that the person you pick has only one hand, because I am fed up with all these advisers who keep on telling me 'On the one hand ..., but on the other hand...'" There is a very serious dilemma behind that joke: The German expert Ulrich Heilemann once described in telling words the classic problem of having to reconcile politics and science in a useful way. He said there might be a tremendous misunderstanding, "because the politician expects *political* advice, while the academic is only prepared to give *policy* advice – a conflict which Germans feel particularly strongly about."

We – as a foundation – can solve this problem at least a little bit. We know the party, we know the mechanics and the specific characteristics of the political process. The academic expert does not have this information. And my personal experience is: Even those who have been working with politicians for years are often not aware of party basics. In background talks, in roundtables, in policy papers we try to feed the knowledge of academic experts into the thinking of the party. We have – this is at least true for my department – a good mixture of those who have a lot of experience in the academic sphere and those who have been – like myself and others – in the political sphere. There is not much to say about the tools. It is what all think-tanks do: Keep it short, keep it simple!

This translation work is important. And, talking about special tools: Political education is not only valuable for the broad public. This might sound kind of arrogant, but sometimes it is extremely important to explain basic facts also to experienced politicians and members of parliament. Take again the euro crisis. It is extremely complicated to describe what is going on and why this bail-out is correct and that bail-out is not, and so forth. But of course, a member of parliament who might not be familiar with economics will have a terribly hard time explaining to his constituency why he voted this way or that way in parliament. What we did is, we published in the internet and in a printed publication the FAQs, the frequently asked questions, about the euro crisis. I do not remember one single publication we did, which was sought after more than this by the members of parliament.

But there is not only the bright but also, to use a term of the "Star Wars" movie saga, the dark side of power: What kind of problems and deficits are we facing?

One problem is institutional logic: We are an independent institution, which is at the same time close to the party as well as playing its own distinct role. There is at times some kind of mismatch: The party has to cope with day-to-day political business. Their HQ is mainly dealing with campaigning. But we are offering – and this is our legal obligation – long-term advice. The party needs – to give an example – some new details about the federal system regarding the financial duties of the "Länder", the federal states. We in KAS would probably organize an expert seminar about the nature of subsidiarity in an efficient and modern state. The party official might feel that this is neither helpful for his daily work, nor for the next campaign. So it is not always easy to make clear that our first obligation is not to serve the party or to support a campaign but to serve the public. We can be a platform for debate.

In the end, everything boils down to the simple truth which the founding father of all political consultants, Machiavelli, described in "Il Principe": Not only the wise advisor is needed, but also the wise ruler who is able to accept advice. This means in modern terms: A party which is not open-minded, which does not practice a culture of debate and consultation, which does, in its internal

discussions, not create a truly liberal climate – such a party does not really need a think-tank. The CDU has this openness.

Another challenge is the media: The media is interested to broadcast and print stories about conflicts. It is the ancient wisdom that good news is no news. And political struggle, conflict, fights are always big news.

Most of the Journalists are not familiar with the fact that the political foundations are – speaking at least in legal terms – independent from the party. They regard us to be part of the party and they treat us this way. That means they report about events and publications of the foundation especially in those cases where they smell the slightest disagreement between party officials and ourselves. Most of the headlines might then sound like this: “Dispute in the CDU. The ‘CDU foundation’ opposes this and that” and so on.

Of course, we are all – as I said before – more or less convinced members or at least supporters of the CDU. We are not at all interested in creating any kind of impression of struggling or conflict within the CDU.

In this regard it is important to also reveal the fact, which was recently discovered by a study about German journalists that dealing with the media is more difficult for our side of the political spectrum: More than 70 percent of the journalists in our country are affiliated with the left. This is no conspiracy theory, it is a simple empirical truth. So we are always blowing against the wind. And guess which institution was authoring that study: The *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*. That makes this study even more credible.

Another problem is money. This might sound weird to you, taking into account the fact that we are financed by the state. But you might know that the federal government implemented several measures to reduce the debt and to consolidate our state budget. This of course also affects the amount of money that is being given to the foundations.

This is not a reason to mourn, but it means that every project officer, every researcher is not only responsible for his or her project but shall also take care of the funding. Sponsoring gets more and more important. It is indeed not always an easy task to be a good fundraiser and a good researcher at the same time, but there is no alternative because no one can convince other institutions or possible donors to support a project better than the responsible project officer himself or herself! This is why we are training our colleagues in fundraising skills.

Of course money is not all that counts. What really counts has been told to us by one of the greatest German sociologists ever, Max Weber. His academic father was the very well-known German Jewish law-professor Levin Goldschmidt. Max Weber wrote the famous sentence, which might be something like the goddess of wisdom – both for politicians and political advisors: “Politics is the vigorous, slow drilling of hard boards with both: passion and a sense of proportion.”

I wish you in Manof and us in KAS to always have this sense of proportion and, most importantly, the passion to serve those who are the real sovereigns of our countries: the people.

And if you feel at times desperate about the voters who do not act the way you expect them to act, you should remember the witty sentence of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of Germany and friend of David Ben-Gurion, who



said in his Rhenish idiom: "Se müssen de Menschen nehmen wie se sinn, andere jibbet nit". That means in English: "You ought to accept the people the way they are, because you won't get others."

Thank you for listening – toda raba!