

Martin Kettle watches Berlin come together

## Natural Attraction

If the scale and complexity of the German question can be understood in any one place, then that place is Berlin. History dings to Berlin like mud to the boots. There is nowhere in Europe more conscious of its history. There is nowhere more aware, especially at present, of its existence, not just at the centre of fast-moving events, but also as a city of symbol and metaphor.

The breaching of the Berlin Wall last November 9 exhibited these qualities supremely. But as the Western European socialist parties met in February in the Reichstag to debate their relationship with the new political forces of Eastern Europe, the ghosts of the past were again loitering. This, after all, was the building from which Social Democrats proclaimed the German Republic in 1918, a republic which was to collapse into fascism as the Reichstag itself was gutted by fire, and later, by bomb.

From a window, it was possible to look down on the remnants of the Berlin Wall, now full of holes made by souvenir-hunting visitors, and watch the disciplined queues of East Berliners patiently waiting to cross into the west by the Brandenburg Gate.

For some, that was symbol enough. It tells many Western observers all that they want or need to know about the German situation today. The Ossis want out. The Wall is down. Germany is reuniting before our eyes. And, undeniably, that is part of the truth.

In November, when the Wall first came down, the characteristic response of East Berliners was to get in their cars, check out the shopping districts of the west, buy a few comforts for Christmas and putter back to the east. That happens much less today. When they cross over - and they do so in their hundreds - they cross for keeps. East Germany is literally ebbing away.

Yet if you look behind the Wall, there is something more complicated. Across the free-fire zone where Hitler's Chancellery once stood, the East Berlin government is

erecting blocks of flats. Few people in the east want to live in them, partly because of East Germany's poor building standards, but mostly now because the pressure to move west is so strong.

West Berliners, though, have begun to see these flats differently. West Berlin's housing crisis has shaped and pre-occupied the city's local government for two decades. These flats will be in the middle of a reunited Berlin, within easy walking distance of the Tiergarten and of Unter den Linden.

In a few years' time, if and when the centre of Berlin can finally be cleared up, this will be one of the best places to live in Europe. If Berlin is once again the German capital and if, as Hans-Dietrich Genscher has suggested, it becomes an international city, home perhaps of the European Parliament and of various United Nations' bodies, those flats will be the Park Lane of Berlin. With an eye to the future, West Berliners are looking east.

East and West Berlin are such obviously different places that it is tempting to underestimate such continuing interdependencies. At the end of the 20th century, it is easy to forget the extent of Berlin's and Germany's old socialist past. And it is easier still, right now, to overlook

the extent of an emerging socialist present.

Yet West and East Berlin each now separately contain the seeds of new politics. West Berlin may have been the frontline of the cold war, but it has always been prosperous political territory for West Germany's Social Democrats. *Ostpolitik* began here and so, more recently, did the leftist alternative politics which eventually produced the Green Party.

Today, after a period of Christian Democrat rule in the 80s, West Berlin is firmly under the control of a Social Democrat-Green coalition headed by Walter Momper, a man whose political stock has rocketed since November 9 to the extent that many Social Democrats think he should have been chosen to lead the party nationally.

My impression is that the West Berliners' initial response to the breach of the Wall was surprisingly mixed, back in November. They were delighted on a human level, of course, but they were equally concerned both that the German Right would exploit the event for nationalistic reasons and that East Germans would be too dazzled by the consumerism of the west to perceive its deeper inequalities and problems.

Today those feelings still exist but they seem to have

been moderated by closer contact with East Berliners and by the emerging course of reformed East German politics. Between them, these developments have made the reunification question far less antagonistic than the West Berliners feared when they booed Chancellor Helmut Kohl during his speech in the city just after the Wall came down.

Central to this reassurance is the apparent strength of the East German Social Democratic Party. An opinion poll in East Germany at the start of February showed the SPD, a party then less than four months old, on

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course to win a comfortable outright majority in the coming March elections, with the other parties nowhere. Whether or not that poll is precisely borne out by events, the SPD seems to command the instinctive loyalty of East Berliners and it is likely that East Germany will therefore elect itself at least a social democrat-dominated government this month to oversee the transition into a unified nation.

Observers of the East German scene are quick to tell you that there is one simple reason for this prospect. The SPD, being a new party, has clean hands. And undoubtedly this mere fact of not being tarnished with the past is a big factor in its popularity.

But East German civil society is still surprisingly socialistic. Whether that is a legacy of the GDR or of some earlier phase in the political formation of the country, it is recognisably the case that East Germans, at least at this stage of German history, remain as concerned with a democratic and pluralist agenda as they do with the materialist agenda on which commentators have concentrated.

