



Discussion with Jens Spahn – Berlin, November 2019



Jens Spahn, Axel Springer's Journalisten-Club in Berlin (6 November)

In November, the Club of Three held an evening discussion in Berlin on the theme “Germany: leading Europe through troubled times?” The keynote speaker, Jens Spahn, is currently serving as Federal Minister of Health in Angela Merkel’s fourth cabinet, and is seen in the CDU party as a radical thinker and a rising star.

Jens Spahn was appointed Federal Minister of Health in March 2018. Prior to this, he was Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance. Mr Spahn has been an MP for the Steinfurt I-Borken I constituency (North Rhine-Westphalia) since 2002. At the age of 22, he was the youngest-ever politician to join the Bundestag. His parliamentary roles include Chair of the Working Group on Health Policy and CDU/CSU spokesperson on this topic. He has held several positions in the business and charity sectors, including member of the supervisory board at bank Sparkasse Westmünsterland (2009-15). In 2018, he was one of the candidates for the CDU leadership alongside Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Friedrich Merz.

During his keynote address, the Minister shared his views on the task ahead as Europe was trying to find a stable path in a very unpredictable world. He also outlines the conditions under which Germany could be leading Europe.

This discussion over dinner was hosted by Axel Springer in its Journalisten-Club, with the support of Britain’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Airbus. It involved

some 30 senior figures from business, politics, diplomacy, academia and the media in France, Germany and the UK.

After a brief introduction by Norbert Röttgen, Chairman of the Bundestag's Foreign Affairs Committee and Vice-President of the Club of Three, Jens Spahn highlighted what the end of Pax Americana meant for Germany. The business model developed by Germany in the aftermath of WWII, whereby it had become a major export country selling its products all over the world under the security umbrella of the US, was no longer valid. The US had clearly signaled that it did not want to continue paying for most part of European security. At the same time, China and Russia were now posing serious external challenges. But perhaps the most fundamental problem for Germany was domestic polarisation, something it shared with many other western societies.

The liberal order that had prevailed in the 1990s was now threatened by ever increasing internal frictions and divisions at the domestic level. Public debates that were once held in a reasonably calm and constructive atmosphere had turned hostile. Those who were most affected by rising inequalities were embracing identity politics. This could be seen in Germany with the rise of the far-right and other countries such as Britain with the Brexit vote. According to Jens Spahn, the solution in Germany was to encourage a "weltoffenheit patriotismus" (open-minded patriotism). This, he felt, could help heal internal divides by bringing all Germans together around a common identity while remaining an open and liberal democracy.

On immigration issues, this weltoffenheit patriotismus could see Germany open the door to large numbers of skilled migrants from countries that shared the same values. In the health sector alone, Germany needed up to 80,000 nurses and this shortage could not be filled by the domestic labour market. This could be done as long as German people understood that such policies were in their own interest.



Top right: Victoire de Margerie **Bottom:** Norbert Röttgen

At European level, Germany needed to significantly increase its defence spending, including on critical infrastructure to counter major cyber attacks. There too, it was necessary to explain to the German people that this was in the national interest. Dodging these discussions for electoral reasons was not the right approach. It was time for Germany and other European countries to take more responsibility for security in their neighbourhood. Without US support, Europe was currently not able to secure its borders. Frontex was simply not working.

A key proposal was the establishment of a European security council, an inter-governmental structure where common approaches to crises such northern Syria would be agreed and decisions to intervene militarily made. It would involve key EU Member States and close allies such as the UK.

There was strong support for inter-governmental solutions to address European challenges. The Defence Union was very much an inter-governmental initiative led by France and Germany and now involving more than 20 countries. The Community method was being challenged by parts of the European public. The widening and deepening of the EU had not delivered enough. This made close cooperation between big nations such as France, Germany and the UK all the more important.

Jens Spahn called for a Europe of pioneers whereby a small number of countries got together to lead European action in certain areas while always inviting others to join. This inclusive approach could win public support and deliver for Europeans. It was quite different from the idea of a multi-speed Europe in which everyone had to reach the same goal. Flexibility and inclusiveness were the way forward.



Left: British Ambassador Sebastian Wood **Right:** French Ambassador Marie-Hélène Descôtes

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