

Angela Merkel is a politician you can applaud in good conscience. She's one of those individuals, rare among politicians, who'll rethink her position and, if evidence warrants, alter her take on the issue. Not many are willing and able to be this flexible; when it happens, it's something to watch.

In my native country Angela Merkel has been Chancellor, the equivalent of President in the U.S., since 2005. She became active in politics upon Germany's 1989 reunification. Before that, she was a prominent researcher in quantum chemistry, and she continues to hold an abiding faith in science.

When she first became head of state, Merkel was no great friend to Germany's energy policy with its feed-in tariff, which recalibrates the price of electricity to favor renewables. However, she changed her mind.

What prompted Merkel to reexamine her stance? The 2011 disaster in Japan with its meltdown of a nuclear reactor in the wake of a tsunami, precipitated by an earthquake. Merkel stunned the world with her response to the Fukushima tragedy: Within days she ordered eight of Germany's oldest nuclear reactors shut down, pledging to take the remaining nine off-line by 2022. So drastic was her about-face, one observer described it "as if the pope were suddenly advocating the use of birth control pills."

True, she had points in her favor. Germany was already an established leader in the technology and generation of renewable energy; the country was less dependent on nuclear energy than, e.g., Japan.

Hence, Merkel's advisors could point out that withdrawal from nuclear power would "spur growth and offer technical, economic, and social opportunities . . . to position Germany even further as an exporter of sustainable products and services." These predictions proved to be on the money.

Also true, Merkel has the support of the Bundestag, the German equivalent to the U.S. Congress, where all major political parties embrace the idea of taking responsibility to mitigate climate change. Germans take global warming seriously. Any politician who professed doubt in human-caused climate forcing would be laughed out of office. And public resistance to nuclear energy was expressed in decades of demonstrations.

After Fukushima, Germany decided to build resilience into its energy system—while in Japan, policymakers still defend the old system and its radioactive components. Ten years earlier Germany had begun the most ambitious renewable energy policy on the planet; hence, alternatives to nuclear power were close at hand.

In 2000, the Bundestag had enacted a new energy law, the Renewable Energy Act, that includes the remarkable FiT (the Feed-in Tariff for Renewable Energy). FiT pays premiums to everyone—individuals, co-ops, big utilities—for feeding renewable energy into the grid.

Premium expenses are shouldered by consumers via a surcharge on their electricity bills; nevertheless, the average monthly electricity bill is \$108, comparable to \$110 in the U.S.

Not surprisingly, German utilities—the Big Four—mounted strong opposition, saying supply would become unreliable. Individuals, however, embraced the law, forming co-ops to buy wind turbines, construct biodigesters for wood chips or rapeseed oil, and investing in solar voltaics.

Today 25 percent of Germany's energy comes from renewable power—biomass, thermal, solar, and wind—versus six percent in the United States. The target is 35 percent by 2020; 80 percent by 2050. Germans are ten times more likely than their American counterparts to use bikes or public transportation, partly because of hefty surcharges on gasoline and diesel: \$7.80 per gallon versus \$3.29 in the U.S.

Hans Josef-Fell is the architect of FiT. His hero is former President Jimmy Carter and the solar-research institute Carter brought into existence. That entity was promptly dismantled by Ronald Regan, who called it solar socialism. While the U.S. sunk into a downward spiral of denial and environmental callousness, Germans took flight where Americans left off.

Germany is the fourth largest economic power globally. Angela Merkel has been described as the de facto leader of the European Union; Forbes Magazine currently ranks her as the world's second most powerful individual.

Naturally, Merkel isn't bashful about criticizing fellow world leaders. Her Bundestag mounted a passionate defense of Army whistleblower Bradley Manning as the Obama Administration held him in solitary confinement. In late 2009 to early 2010, Manning had passed more than 250,000 U.S. State Department files to Wikileaks that document American abuses abroad, including the Afghan War Logs, the Iraq War Logs, the Guantanamo files, and pertinent State Department cables. The exfiltrated documents include a 2007 video clip of American forces in Iraq gunning down a group of unarmed civilians who happened to be speaking to two Reuters journalists. The journalists were killed also, along with a van full of Iraqi school children that happened by. Wikileaks publicized the clip under the gratuitous heading, "Collateral Murder."

I wish Merkel and her Bundestag would visit Wyoming and talk some sense into our governor and legislators, who recently threw themselves a party to celebrate the 10 billionth ton of coal mined in the state.

Wyoming is set on "producing coal at the current rate for the next fifty to a hundred years," gushed the head honcho of the Wyoming Mining Association, Marion Loomis.

Quotes the Gillette-News Record from Governor Mead's most recent pearls of wisdom: "The fact is, as I see it anyway, the issue of climate change, of global warming, is still under debate, is still developing

Duh?