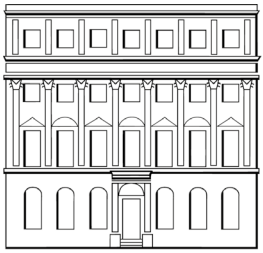

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by Constantin Goschler

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ARTICLES

THE GENIUS OF PARLIAMENT? CULTURES OF COMPROMISE IN BRITAIN AND GERMANY AFTER 1945

CONSTANTIN GOSCHLER

The crisis of Western liberal democracy has frequently been invoked in public discourse and in academic studies. It is said that Western democracies are increasingly polarized, making public communication on political issues more difficult, and that a key component of liberal democracy is particularly affected: the willingness to compromise. Such fears about a wavering pillar of democracy were for example articulated by the left–liberal German journalist Heribert Prantl in 2016. In an editorial which he cheerfully titled 'A Hurrah for Compromise', he expressed his concern about the endangerment of a democratic virtue that he argued had only displaced the previous German hostility to compromise after 1945. Responsible for this, he said, was above all the TINA rhetoric—'there is no alternative'—which had been popularized by Margaret Thatcher and adopted by Angela

This article is the edited version of my Inaugural Lecture as Gerda Henkel Foundation LSE/GHIL Guest Professor 2022/3. I am very indebted to Frank Trentmann (Birkbeck, University of London) for commenting on several versions and providing me with endless new ideas, and to Rüdiger Graf (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam), who made extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft. I would also like to thank Sina Steglich for her valuable comments on the final version of the manuscript and, last but not least, Angela Davies and Jozef van der Voort, who revised the text linguistically and stylistically. I would also like to thank the members of the research network 'Cultures of Compromise' in Duisburg-Essen, Münster, and Bochum for stimulating discussions and intellectual inspiration. All translations are my own.

Merkel: 'The claimed lack of alternative was the successor to the old lack of compromise.'[1]

German perceptions of a crisis in the connection between democracy and compromise, which have also inspired social science studies of populism,[2] often refer to the British case as a warning. Yet a similar anxiety over the loss of compromise has developed in Britain in recent years. After the narrowly decided Brexit referendum of 2016, the British political consultant Chris Rumfitt wrote an essay titled 'How Britain Lost the Art of Political Compromise'. Britain had imported the 'culture wars' from the USA, he argued, and was now also deeply divided politically. 'This hasn't always been the British way': in a golden past, both major parties

> recognised that Britain is a country founded on compromise and consensus, and that maintaining 'one nation'—Disraeli's famous expression—is more important than 'winning'. To put it another way, this is not a country where the 52 ruthlessly impose on the 48, for that doesn't make for a sustainable and stable society.

Rumfitt ended with an Obama-like appeal to British national virtues: 'We can do the British thing. We can compromise. We can respect the majority while reflecting on and accommodating the concerns—and indeed the anguish—of the minority.' And so he ended: 'Let's come together and find the grand national compromise that is consistent with our national character and our history.'[3]

[1] Heribert Prantl, 'Ein Hoch auf den Kompromiss', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 Apr. 2016, at [https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/essay-ein-hoch-auf-den-kompromiss-1.2927339], accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

[2] In 2018 and 2020 the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin investigated the prevalence of populist attitudes in Germany with the help of an online survey. Question eight presented the statement: 'What is called "compromise" in politics is in reality nothing but a betrayal of one's own principles.' Expressing agreement with this sentiment was considered an indicator of populist attitudes in the terms of this survey. See Robert Vehrkamp and Wolfgang Merkel, *Populismusbarometer 2018: Populistische Einstellungen bei Wählern und Nichtwählern 2018* (Gütersloh, 2019), at [https://doi.org/10.11586/2018059]; eid., *Populismusbarometer 2020: Populistische Einstellungen bei Wählern und Nichtwählern 2020* (Gütersloh, 2020), at [https://doi.org/10.11586/2020044].

[3] Chris Rumfitt, 'How Britain Lost the Art of Political Compromise', *Unherd*, 26 Feb. 2018, at [https://unherd.com/2018/02/britain-lost-art-political-

Such assessments of national political character in Britain and Germany in the media raise questions about the definition of 'compromise' and also about the difference between compromise and other modes of conflict resolution, namely consensus or striking a deal. According to Veronique Zanetti, 'a compromise refers to the process or outcome of a decision or negotiation in which the parties involved modify the objective of their action or their action itself in the light of divergent and irreconcilable beliefs in a manner acceptable to all parties but not considered optimal by any.'[4] In this way, compromise differs from consensus, in which a shared judgement on the subject of the conflict is produced. Unlike consensus, compromise is characterized by the fact that it is painful for both sides, which is why the underlying conflict does not have to become permanently quiescent. However, it is more difficult to distinguish a compromise from a deal. Here I will follow Ulrich Willems, who suggests distinguishing deal from compromise depending on the degree to which the objects of conflict are normatively charged by the opposing parties. In a deal, the concessions thus concern claims of lesser importance than is the case with a compromise.[5] This is ultimately a gradual distinction that can change depending on either the perspective of the parties involved or that of the observers, which poses a first challenge for historical interpretation. A second challenge is to ascertain whether the sources actually refer to factual compromises—that is, either to political procedures or to political outcomes—or whether talk of compromise is merely used as a rhetorical figure in political debate.

Moreover, Sandrine Baume and Stéphanie Novak have suggested that we should differentiate between compromise 'as a strictly technical

compromise/], accessed 6 Dec. 2022; for another example, see Martin Kettle, 'Britain Needs a Brexit Compromise: Forging One Could Be the Making of Corbyn's Labour', *Guardian*, 3 Apr. 2019, at [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/03/britain-brexit-compromise-making-corbyns-labour], accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

[4] Veronique Zanetti, *Spielarten des Kompromisses* (Berlin, 2022), 20.

[5] Ulrich Willems, *Wertkonflikte als Herausforderung der Demokratie* (Wiesbaden, 2016), 251–3. Willems also offers a subtle interpretation of alternative attempts at definition.

process' and compromise 'as a political principle'.[6] In line with this approach, the following article examines neither techniques of conflict, nor the concrete resolution of conflicts through compromise, but starts the analysis one step earlier by discussing the transformations of the seemingly disparate cultures of compromise in Britain and Germany after 1945. According to Willems, such cultures of compromise include the 'social, politico-legal, and cultural preconditions and conditions which make settling social conflicts based on painful mutual concessions easier or more difficult'.[7] To what extent do different cultures of compromise exist in Britain and Germany and how did they change after 1945? In which discourses, institutions, and practices were such cultures of compromise anchored? And how can their significance for the resolution of specific political conflicts be assessed? The article will first inspect the lines of tradition behind interpretations of British and German cultures of compromise, before in a further step conducting an empirical exploration focused on the House of Commons and the German Bundestag, as parliaments are places where the conditions for compromises are both shaped and reflected in a special way.

I. *Compromise in Britain and Germany: Traditions of Interpretation*

In 1945, Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian economist who at that time taught at the London School of Economics and Political Science, responded in *The Spectator* to criticism of his book *The Road to Serfdom*, published the previous year, in which he had condemned the current trend towards a planned economy in Britain. He pointed out that his critics repeatedly referred to a British self-image which he summarized in the title of his article as 'The British Genius for Compromise'. Hayek argued: 'The peculiar point about these invocations of the genius for compromise is that they are produced in reply to an argument which, at least by

[6] Sandrine Baume and Stéphanie Novak, 'Compromise and Publicity in Democracy: An Ambiguous Relationship', in eaed. (eds.), *Compromises in Democracy*, 69–94, at 70.

[7] Ulrich Willems with Jan-Hendryk de Boer, Mariko Jacoby, Karsten Mause, Manon Westphal, and Stefan Zeppenfeld, 'Kompromiss, Konsens, Deal: Ein Definitionsversuch' (unpublished working paper).

implication, was a defence of the very institutions which have created this trait, and a warning that they are rapidly disappearing.'[8] Hayek thus elevated himself to the status of defender of the British genius for compromise, which for him was indissolubly linked to a free-market society.

Hayek's confrontation with his critics points to the extent to which the British self-image was shaped as early as 1945 by a firm belief that British political culture was characterized by a special capacity for political compromise. This self-image was probably based on a British literary tradition that had already started in the late eighteenth century, according to which democracy and compromise belonged closely together. Examples range from Edmund Burke (1775)—'All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter'[9]—to Thomas Babington Macaulay (1843)—'A life of action, if it is to be useful, must be a life of compromise'[10]—and John Morley's book *On Compromise* (1874).[11] In the first place, however, these were elements of a discourse that did not say anything about whether political practice in Britain was actually characterized by compromise, and many counter-examples could be cited.

In any case, such perceptions of an intimate relationship between democracy and compromise in Britain have not gone unchallenged in more recent times. Against the backdrop of intensive European efforts to find a compromise solution for a trade agreement with the UK, the political journalist Paul Taylor explained Brexit in April 2019 as the logical consequence of 'Britain's culture of confrontation'. Taylor described the British national character quite differently:

> Despite a global reputation for skilled diplomacy, pragmatism and common sense, the truth is that the Brits have spent

[8] Friedrich Hayek, 'The British Genius for Compromise', *Spectator*, 26 Jan. 1945; republished in *Mises Daily*, 22 Sept. 2010, at [https://mises.org/library/british-genius-compromise], accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

[9] Edmund Burke, *Burke's Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies (March 22 1775)*, ed. L. DuPont Syle (Boston, *c.*1895), 75.

[10] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays, Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 3 vols., 5th edn (London, 1848), ii. 91.

[11] John Morley, *On Compromise* (London, 1874).

> centuries fighting each other and tend to regard compromise, rather than patriotism, as the last refuge of a scoundrel. This central feature of British politics has proved historically incompatible with membership of the EU—a den of perpetual compromise and incrementalism.[12]

Even if a particular tradition of British willingness to compromise is turned on its head here, Taylor shares an important premise with that position—namely, the assumption that deeply rooted national traditions exist that either facilitate or hinder compromise as a means of political conflict resolution.

Political scientists have also tended to regard Britain as a classic country of compromise, while Germany is seen as the stronghold of a tradition that has long been hostile to compromise. Alin Fumurescu explains these differences in terms of the history of ideas and notes different lines of tradition in the relationship between political representation and self-representations since the early modern period. On this basis, he distinguishes between a British and a Continental European model, identifying the latter primarily with France: 'by the end of the sixteenth century the French had started to be increasingly *méfiants* about compromise, while their English counterparts, far from manifesting such worries, became increasingly enthusiastic about it.'[13] According to Fumurescu, the contrast between Continental absolutism and early parliamentarism in England led to different manifestations of the dialectic between inner life and public roles. While absolutism on the Continent intensified the opposition between the two spheres of the self, in England it collapsed.[14] Unlike in England, compromise in France and Continental Europe was therefore understood as an attack on the core of individuality. Against this background, Fumurescu contends, compromise was always tainted with the odium of betrayal of those inner principles that constituted the centre of the self. However, the extent to which this intellectual–historical interpretation conforms to the history of the concrete political conflicts in these countries is another matter.

[12] Paul Taylor, 'Britain's Culture of Confrontation', *POLITICO*, 5 Apr. 2019, at [https://www.politico.eu/article/britain-culture-of-confrontation-brexit/], accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

[13] Alin Fumurescu, *Compromise: A Political and Philosophical History* (Cambridge, 2013), 5.

[14] Cf. ibid. 12.

Fumurescu's theses culminate in the nineteenth century, when the first reflections on the role of compromise were published, especially in Britain. This is where the German political scientist Martin Greiffenhagen comes in, who contrasts British friendliness with German hostility to compromise, and in doing so brings us into the late twentieth century.[15] His argument is based primarily on the *Studien über die Deutschen* by the German–British sociologist Norbert Elias, who stated that Germany had a weakly developed bourgeoisie compared to England; instead, he says, a militaristic aristocratic culture had dominated Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[16] Greiffenhagen, who was born in 1928, might be considered a typical member of the so-called '45ers. This designation, which should be understood as an expression of a generational self-interpretation,[17] is aimed at those members of a common age cohort who had grown up during the Nazi era and afterwards often translated their personal catharsis into a commitment to the newly established Federal Republic.[18] Greiffenhagen was part of a particular group of male, bourgeois intellectuals in the Federal Republic that shared not only a certain biographical experience, but also a common political project: the transformation of Germany into a Western, liberal democracy, often combined with a non-traditional understanding of the nation. In his case, this also involved a personal

[15] Martin Greiffenhagen, *Kulturen des Kompromisses* (Opladen, 1999).

[16] Ibid. 27–32; see also Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Michael Schröter (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), published in English as *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1996).

[17] Benjamin Möckel, *Erfahrungsbruch und Generationsbehauptung: Die 'Kriegsjugendgeneration' in den beiden deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaften* (Göttingen, 2014); Christina von Hodenberg, 'Zur Generation der 45er: Stärken und Schwächen eines Deutungsmusters', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 70/4–5 (2020), 4–9. Martin Greiffenhagen's generational self-interpretation becomes clear above all in his *Jahrgang 1928: Aus einem unruhigen Leben* (Munich, 1988), esp. 13–14, 55–63.

[18] See Ulrich Herbert, 'Drei politische Generationen im 20. Jahrhundert', in Jürgen Reulecke and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (eds.), *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2003), 95–114; Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge, 2007).

dimension: a rebellion against his father, a Protestant pastor, who for him embodied the German tradition of authoritarianism to the highest degree:

> The answers to the paternal challenge remain the same to this day: instead of decision, mediation; instead of either/or, dilemmas; instead of confession, scepticism; instead of commitment, analysis; instead of call to action, retreat into theory; instead of declarations of enmity, readiness to compromise; instead of the faith that is the only one that can bring salvation, a sense of a pluralism of world views.[19]

Greiffenhagen asserted that there had been a fundamental change in the political culture of the Federal Republic, so that the traditional hostility to compromise had finally been overcome and the country was able to catch up with the British, Western model. For him, compromise represented a democratic paradigm which was deeply embedded in everyday life. At the same time, for him the concept of 'compromise' involved an expectation; it predicted future development. The liberal optimism of the 1990s was in a sense extended in *Kulturen des Kompromisses* into a coming golden age of compromise. These ideas refer to an evolutionary model of a process of civilization, relying not only on Norbert Elias, but also on Alexander Rüstow and Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, thus ultimately linking the evolution of society with biology.[20]

To historians of modern Germany, the narrative of German redemption after 1945, to which Greiffenhagen contributes his own variant, seems familiar. It is obviously in the historiographical tradition of Germany's 'special path to modernity', its *Sonderweg*, which had its heyday in the 1970s. According to this theory, the catastrophe of National Socialism was a consequence of Germany's partial modernization, which deviated from the 'normal', Western path, but after 1949 the Federal Republic finally succeeded in making great

[19] Martin Greiffenhagen, 'Anders als andere? Zur Sozialisation von Pfarrerskindern', in id. (ed.), *Pfarrerskinder: Autobiographisches zu einem protestantischen Thema* (Stuttgart, 1982), 10–34, at 12.

[20] See Greiffenhagen, *Kulturen des Kompromisses*, 1–3; id., 'Die Deutschen: Norbert Elias und die politische Kulturforschung', *ZiF: Mitteilungen*, 4 (1997), 1–9.

strides on the long road to the West.[21] Since the 1980s, the thesis of a German special path to modernity has been increasingly criticized. Not only was the idea of Germany's civic deficit called into question, but it was also asked whether Britain did not itself represent a special case in many respects.[22] A little later, the end point of the development process presupposed here also began to dissolve in a discursive acid bath: 'modernity', 'civilization', 'the West'—the key terms of this thinking have all become extremely precarious. One might be sceptical about Greiffenhagen's teleology, which points to a coming liberal age of compromise. Nevertheless, his reflections have great heuristic value, as they suggest that the cultures of compromise in Britain and the Federal Republic developed in contrary directions after 1945. In the process, he raises questions that are in part also significant for events that occurred only after the publication of his book in 1999.

II. *House of Commons and Bundestag: Parliaments as Spaces of Compromise*

Parliaments are particularly appropriate places to study cultures of compromise, although this has hardly been attempted so far.[23] An important exception is an article by Wolfram Pyta, who discusses the Reichstag in the Weimar Republic as an experimental field of democratic consensus culture. For him, a parliamentary 'culture of compromise' means 'a disposition of the main political actors to make decisions'. Thus, his main focus is on the 'leadership of politicians . . . to make compromises palatable to their party which touch on particularly sensitive policy areas for its identity'.[24] In the end, however,

[21] From the extensive historiographical debate on the German *Sonderweg* see notably Helmut Walser Smith, 'When the Sonderweg Debate Left Us', *German Studies Review*, 31/2 (2008), 225–40.

[22] Cf. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

[23] For a political science approach to the role of rhetorical strategies in parliamentarism for dealing with dissent, cf. Kari Palonen, *Parliamentary Thinking: Procedure, Rhetoric and Time* (Cham, 2019).

[24] Wolfram Pyta, 'Die Weimarer Republik als Experimentierfeld demokratischer Konsenskultur', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 140 (2020), 22–67, at 28–30.

Pyta's main concern seems to be the old debate about the responsibility for the failure of the Weimar Republic. He seeks to exonerate the Catholic Centre Party led by Chancellor Heinrich Brüning while at the same time incriminating the Social Democratic Party (SPD) because of its dependence on the trade unions, which, he argues, had left it incapable of compromise and thus ultimately made a coalition of democratic parties impossible.

However, compromise was never just an achievement of charismatic democratic party leaders. Rather, parliaments seem interesting in three particular respects: first, standards of political decision-making are negotiated on the parliamentary stage; second, a compromise reached in committees of various kinds has to be presented to the public in parliament; and third, reflection on the institutionalization of compromise takes place in parliaments through repeated discussions of the institutional and normative preconditions of compromises. A first step here will be to discuss the spatial and procedural institutionalization of compromise in the House of Commons and the Bundestag, before in a second step analysing the role of compromise in parliamentary debates. In such a *histoire croisée*[25] which is aware of the several dimensions of reflexivity involved in the topic, reciprocal influences must also be taken into account, even if they mainly worked in one direction. Even after 1945, Westminster democracy served as a 'parliamentary place of longing'[26] for Germany, with an idealized image of the British constitutional system of the nineteenth century as the point of reference.[27]

[25] Cf. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory*, 45/1 (2006), 30–50.

[26] Christoph Schönberger, *Auf der Bank: die Inszenierung der Regierung im Staatstheater des Parlaments* (Munich, 2022), 4; cf. also Florian Meinel, *Vertrauensfrage: Zur Krise des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (Munich, 2019), 49–53; Andreas Wirsching and Andreas Schulz, 'Parlamentarische Kulturen in Europa: Das Parlament als Kommunikationsraum', in eid. (eds.), *Parlamentarische Kulturen in Europa: Das Parlament als Kommunikationsraum* (Düsseldorf, 2012), 11–26.

[27] See Marie-Luise Recker, 'Westminster als Modell? Der Deutsche Bundestag und das britische Regierungssystem', in Gerhard A. Ritter and Peter Wende (eds.), *Rivalität und Partnerschaft: Studien zu den deutsch-britischen Beziehungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Festschrift für Anthony J. Nicholls* (Paderborn, 1999), 313–37, at 334.

Christoph Schönberger has studied the spatial arrangements of the parliamentary chambers of the House of Commons and the Bundestag and analysed the symbolic order built there. He rightly points out that the political staging is decisively shaped by the location of the performance.[28] In the House of Commons, ministers, if they are also MPs, sit in the front row of the benches to the right of the speaker. Behind them sit the members of the parliamentary majority. Opposite them, across a large table, sit the members of the opposition. The Bundestag, on the other hand, continues the seating arrangement of the Reichstag in Imperial Germany. The president of the Bundestag is enthroned in the centre and the government sits to his or her right, with civil servants seated behind the government. As Schönberger aptly puts it: 'The seating arrangement in London presents the government as the leadership of the parliamentary majority, that in Berlin as the head of an administrative machinery.'[29] In the House of Commons, the confrontation between the governing party and the opposition is thus symbolically staged. In the Bundestag, by contrast, the government is enthroned somewhat above the parliament and is thus spatially not directly involved in debates between MPs. If a German member of parliament wanted to attack the government from the lectern, they would have to look over their right shoulder.

The spatial arrangement of both parliaments also expresses those elements that shape the institutionalization of compromise. Thus to the left of the president of the German Bundestag we find the—mostly empty—seats of the Bundesrat, that is, the chamber of the states (*Länder*). Federalism forms an essential institutional element of the German culture of compromise, since important areas of legislation, such as the budget, can only be regulated in agreement with the states. For this reason, Article 77(2) of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic established a mediation committee between the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, which was supposed to 'bridge the factual and political differences of opinion between the two houses on a legislative resolution of the Bundestag by finding a compromise proposal'.[30] This institutionalization of compromise in the legislative process,

[28] Schönberger, *Auf der Bank*, 17. [29] Ibid. 148.

[30] Max Josef Dietlein, *Der Vermittlungsausschuß des Deutschen Bundestages und des Bundesrates* (Munich, 1983), at 2–3.

which has played an important role especially at times when the two houses had different political majorities, has some similarities to the conference committees which are supposed to mediate between the Senate and the House of Representatives in the USA. In contrast, the House of Lords, which was deprived of the right of veto on the budget in 1910, developed into an institution where 'important committee work is done behind the scenes', while 'politics for the public' takes place in the House of Commons.[31]

Another institutional prerequisite of compromise is electoral law. The House of Commons is elected by a system of majority voting, while personalized proportional representation applies to the Bundestag. Attempts were made in the Bundestag in the 1950s and again in the 1960s to introduce a majority voting system,[32] and several attempts have also been made to introduce proportional representation in the House of Commons.[33] While both efforts were unsuccessful, the accompanying debates provide important insights into the different understandings of the role of compromise in each country. In 1955, Hugo Scharnberg, an MP for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and chairman of the electoral law committee of the Bundestag, argued for the introduction of majority voting to help deradicalize politics and assist the parties in the centre:

> From this predominant interest of both parties in the marginal voters in the centre, a policy of moderation, understanding, and compromise must consistently result for both government and opposition. In a sense, they are subject to a centripetal force. This is all the more true for the opposition as it must be ready at any time to take over the government after new elections.[34]

[31] Thomas Mergel, *Großbritannien seit 1945* (Göttingen, 2005), 28.

[32] Marie-Luise Recker, *Parlamentarismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Deutsche Bundestag 1949–1969* (Düsseldorf, 2018), 72–105; ead., 'Westminster als Modell', 324–32; Eckhard Jesse, *Wahlrecht zwischen Kontinuität und Reform: Eine Analyse der Wahlsystemdiskussion und der Wahlrechtsänderungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949–1983* (Düsseldorf, 1985).

[33] Pippa Norris, 'The Politics of Electoral Reform in Britain', *International Political Science Review*, 16/1 (1995), 65–78, cf. esp. 71–5.

[34] Stenographische Berichte des Deutschen Bundestags (hereafter DBT), 2. Wahlperiode (hereafter WP), 94. Sitzung (6 Jul. 1955), 5332; see also DBT, 2. WP, 254. Sitzung (18 Mar. 1953), 12204.

The background to these considerations was that in the 1950s the CDU and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), had to rely on a broad alliance with parties that were often far to the right in order to form a government. Thus, without much enthusiasm, Konrad Adenauer formed changing coalitions with the Free Democratic Party (FDP) as well as other parties such as the German Party, the Free People's Party, and the All-German Bloc/League of Expellees and Those Deprived of Rights. It was not until the 1960s that two-party coalitions between the CDU/CSU or the SPD and the FDP developed into the defining political model of the Federal Republic for almost four decades. Florian Meinel describes this as a 'dramatic shrinking and consolidation of the party system from eleven to two and a half parties'.[35]

On the other hand, in the House of Commons, Conservative British MP Gary Waller defended first-past-the-post voting in 1981 because it led to stable governments rather than shaky coalitions: 'Coalitions are far more likely to come about after an election as a result of compromises and bargains dictated overwhelmingly by political opportunism. In that sense it is a far less democratic system.' And finally, he went on, small parties would gain enormous power and would thus be able to force compromises from the larger party 'which, very likely, the majority of those who did not vote for that party would find unacceptable.' While he considered coalitions in politics necessary, they should not be formed between parties but within them for reasons of stability:

> We have a coalition in Britain, but it is one within the parties. Compromise can best be achieved within the parties even though some of my hon. Friends, for example, have more in common with some Labour Members than with others of their hon. Friends in their own party. Centre parties introduce a fundamentally unstable element into the system, which is currently not present.[36]

Conservatives in the Bundestag and in the House of Commons thus both spoke out in favour of majority voting as they were keen to

[35] Meinel, *Vertrauensfrage*, 66.

[36] House of Commons Hansard (hereafter HC) Debates (hereafter Deb.), vol. 2, col. 1274 (10 Apr. 1981).

govern without unloved coalition partners. But their justifications contradicted each other on one important point. Scharnberg hoped that the introduction of majority voting would lead to an increasing orientation of the major parties towards a politically moderate 'centre'.[37] This intimate connection between 'compromise' and the political 'centre' has a long tradition in German political culture.[38] Waller, on the other hand, feared the strengthening of the political centre, which could tip the scales and force the major parties to make unpopular compromises as a consequence of proportional representation. In this respect, the liberal German FDP may have been in his mind's eye. For Britain, he described a political system in which compromises ideally took place within the parties, while Parliament appeared as a place of political confrontation. Behind this was thus also an opposing understanding of the relationship between political stability and compromise.

In the Federal Republic, the model of a *Volkspartei*, or catch-all party, which made compromise an internal party matter, became the guiding principle at least for the major parties. But there, unlike in Britain, a broad consensus prevailed that such popular parties should be oriented above all towards the political centre in order to keep extremes in check—the spectre of the Weimar Republic still hovers over this political discourse today. However, since personalized proportional representation has remained the rule in the Federal Republic, coalition governments were usually necessary, which entailed interfactional compromises, as CDU/CSU whip Heinrich von Brentano described in the Bundestag on 6 December 1961: 'The existence and success of a coalition government depends on the willingness of the coalition partners to overcome differences of opinion on the domestic and foreign policy course by way of genuine compromise and to meet each other in loyal cooperation.'[39] As I have said, in Britain coalition governments were described as a nightmare by the defenders of first-past-the-post voting, who preferred intra-party compromises. Thus

[37] On Scharnberg's role in the suffrage debate cf. Recker, *Parlamentarismus*; ead., 'Westminster als Modell', 324.

[38] See Pyta, 'Weimarer Republik als Experimentierfeld', 42; Recker, 'Westminster als Modell', 318–19.

[39] DBT, 4. WP, 6. Sitzung (6 Dec. 1961), 65.

not only the institutionalization of political compromise differed in the two parliaments, but also the associated interpretations of the political function of compromise, which can be traced in parliamentary debates.

III. *Parliamentary Debates and Cultures of Compromise*

Compromise does not usually emerge from parliamentary debates. Rather, it is generally achieved in party or parliamentary committees, and also in informal discussions between MPs, since the sociability of parliamentarians, which often cuts across parties, plays an important role.[40] However, for research into the cultures of compromise, which aims to identify the manifold social preconditions for this particular kind of conflict settlement, parliamentary debates form an excellent source. There we can not only examine the different uses and evaluations of the term 'compromise' and the changes associated with it, but parliamentary debates in both countries also provide information on what expectations were associated with compromise, which political conflicts could be regarded as subject to compromise in the first place, and, last but not least, where compromise was considered impossible. To this end, the stenographic minutes of the House of Commons and the Bundestag for the period from 1949 until the 1990s will be analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The discussion proceeds in three steps. First, how are compromises justified and connoted in parliamentary speech acts? Is the notion of 'compromise' used differently in Britain and Germany? Second, how is the relationship between democracy and compromise described? And how is this related to the self-understanding of parliamentarism in both countries? Third, how are the limits of compromise described in these debates? Which issues are considered non-negotiable? And with which counterparts is it impossible to compromise?

[40] See Thomas Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag* (Düsseldorf, 2002).

'True' or 'Fair' Compromise?

An analysis of the uses of the word 'compromise' in the House of Commons and in the Bundestag faces the problem that it captures terms of both reference and analysis. Their uses differ significantly in some cases: while 'compromise' as an analytical term draws a sharp line between itself and both 'consensus' and 'deal' in order to create a clearly definable study area in the first place,[41] this clear-cut demarcation is blurred in the language of the source. For analytical purposes, then, the term 'compromise' must be considered as an ideal type (to use Max Weber's concept), and therefore the variations in the usage of the term which we can find in the sources are important for the investigation, in that relevant aspects of the different cultures of compromise become visible through the analysis of shifting semantic borders. Whenever compromise has been mentioned in the House of Commons or in the Bundestag since the late 1940s, it has been embedded in different semantic fields. Such differences can be investigated by applying collocation analyses that statistically represent the proximity and clustering of adjectives with which the term 'compromise' is linked.[42]

A quantitative analysis—for example in the form of an evaluation of the frequency of the term 'compromise', or a collocation analysis of the adjectives occurring together with it—only provides meaningful results when accompanied by a qualitative analysis of the content. Neither the frequency of occurrence of the term 'compromise' nor the positive or negative attribution of this term allow us to directly conclude a particularly compromise-friendly or compromise-unfriendly political culture, as the comparison of the content with the debates shows. However, when these are combined with a qualitative analysis of the occurrence and use of the term 'compromise' during parliamentary debates, revealing insights emerge. This can be illustrated by an example: the all-time high in the use of the phrase 'spirit of compromise', which evokes the positive myth of British friendliness towards compromise, came precisely at the time of the dispute over

[41] Cf. Willems et al., 'Kompromiss, Konsens, Deal'.

[42] Stefan Pulte and Bithleem Sagiroglou (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) have helped me a great deal in creating collocation analyses of the word 'compromise' in the House of Commons and in the Bundestag.

Brexit, which is generally regarded as the nadir of the British culture of compromise.[43] But this seemingly paradoxical result again points to the value of combining qualitative and quantitative methods, for here the hypothesis could be formulated that the evocation of a willingness to compromise can also have an appellative character aimed precisely at an opposing political practice. The following analysis, which seeks to correlate quantitative and qualitative findings, is thus concerned with such complex processes.

If we look at the British case, the first thing that strikes us is that in the House of Commons—and likewise in the House of Lords—positive uses of the term 'compromise' consistently dominated in parliamentary speeches (see Table 1). These were mainly signalled by adjectives such as 'reasonable' and 'fair', which are mirrored, as it were, by the most frequently used negative adjectives, including above all 'unsatisfactory' and 'shabby'.[44] If this already implies that compromise was primarily understood in British parliamentarism as a more or less fair exchange of interests, the impression is reinforced by the fact that the boundaries between compromise and the words 'consensus' and 'deal' were fluid. The notion of compromise in British parliamentary debates thus referred to a specific understanding of political conflict that corresponds to what some commentators see as Adam Smith's ideal of a free market, 'in which everyone could simply trade fairly with one another, each seeking their best advantage and then walking away without owing anyone anything.'[45] This does not mean, of course, that the British parliamentarians who used the term 'compromise' in this way were necessarily convinced that political reality really always reflected such mutual maximization of benefit. But the use of this term had and still has a considerable appellative

[43] See keyword search for 'spirit of compromise' in House of Commons Hansard, 1945–2021, at [https://hansard.parliament.uk/search/Contributions?startDate=1945-01-01&endDate=2021-12-31&searchTerm=spirit%20of%20compromise&house=Commons&partial=False], accessed 27 Dec. 2022.

[44] See House of Commons and House of Lords, list of adjectival collocates, evaluation of changes at ten-year intervals, 1950–2000, in *Hansard Corpus: British Parliament* at [https://www.english-corpora.org/hansard/], accessed 27 Dec. 2022. The statistical tool does not allow values for the House of Commons to be shown separately.

[45] See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York, 2014), 399.

potential, and in this respect it also resembles the term 'free market'. As such, the genealogy of the alleged 'British genius for compromise' which Friedrich Hayek sketched out in 1945[46] certainly made an important point: as I have shown, for him, compromise and the free market belonged inextricably together.

Table 1: Adjectival collocates for the word 'compromise' in House of Commons and House of Lords debates, 1950–2000.

COLLOCATE	FREQUENCY*	FREQUENCY PER MILLION
reasonable	545	0.68
possible	248	0.31
fair	220	0.28
noble	205	0.26
sensible	199	0.25
acceptable	178	0.22
good	165	0.21
honourable	162	0.20
other	140	0.18
British	120	0.15
satisfactory	114	0.14
necessary	113	0.14
right	112	0.14
political	111	0.14
best	94	0.12
difficult	80	0.10
happy	72	0.09
new	68	0.09
certain	61	0.08
present	61	0.08

* Frequency of the collocation within the interval of five words before or after the search item.
Data from *Hansard Corpus: British Parliament*, at [https://www.english-corpora.org/hansard/], accessed 27 Dec. 2022.

[46] Hayek, 'The British Genius for Compromise'.

In contrast, the term 'compromise' was used differently in the Bundestag in the first decades after 1949 (see Table 2). There, the concept of 'necessary' compromise dominated, especially in the 1950s. Thus the intellectual–historical tradition of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's dictum 'freedom is insight into necessity' was combined with the contemporary historical dimension of the Federal Republic struggling to take its first steps towards sovereignty. Over the following decades, this semantics gradually shifted towards 'sustainable' and 'fair', which can be described as a gradual alignment with the British semantics of compromise.[47] Compromise was thus also regarded in the Bundestag in the best case as the result of a rational reconciliation of interests, albeit with a stronger emphasis not on common sense, but rather on the moral quality of the agreement reached.

Table 2: Adjectival collocates for the word 'Kompromiss' in Deutscher Bundestag, 1950–2000.

COLLOCATE	FREQUENCY*	FREQUENCY PER MILLION	STRENGTH OF ASSOCIATION
gefunden (struck)	188	0.27	7.0681
faul (rotten)	164	0.24	7.0552
tragfähig (workable)	104	0.15	6.1565
tragbar (tolerable)	73	0.11	5.7027
fair (fair)	85	0.12	5.5356
vernünftig (reasonable)	187	0.27	5.5062
ausgehandelt (negotiated)	39	0.06	4.9622
erzielt (achieved)	40	0.06	4.8331
akzeptabel (acceptable)	36	0.05	4.7868
vertretbar (justifiable)	46	0.07	4.7838
ausgewogen (balanced)	47	0.07	4.7032
erreicht (reached)	24	0.03	4.0164

[47] For the following, see the dynamic collocation analysis (word cloud) for 'Kompromiss', Bundestag, 1949–2000, at *Deutsches Textarchiv*, [https://kaskade.dwds.de/dstar/bundestag/diacollo/?query=Kompromi%C3%9F&date=1950-2000&slice=10&score=ld&kbest=10&cutoff=&profile=2&format=cloud&groupby=l%2Cp%3DADJA&eps=0], accessed 27 Dec. 2022.

vorliegend (on the table)	98	0.14	3.8571
unterschiedlich (different)	74	0.11	3.7687
Luxemburger (Luxembourg)	15	0.02	3.6503
gut (good)	193	0.28	3.4408
optimal (optimal)	18	0.03	3.4295
historisch (historic)	27	0.04	3.4084
schlecht (bad)	32	0.05	3.3154
annehmbar (adequate)	10	0.01	3.0546

* Frequency of the collocation within the interval of five words before or after the search item and only within the same sentence.
Data from *Deutsches Textarchiv*, at [https://kaskade.dwds.de/dstar/bundestag/], accessed 27 Dec. 2022. All forms and combinations of the word 'Kompromiss' have been considered.

Thus in German parliamentary usage of the word *Kompromiss* ('compromise'), the conflict between inner conviction and outer political action appears more strongly. This impression becomes even clearer when one considers the negative attributions of compromise. In the Bundestag, the adjective *faul*, which means 'rotten' and refers to the poor moral quality of a compromise, was consistently the top negative attribution. Accordingly, the use of the term 'compromise' in the Bundestag was also characterized less by that seamless transition between 'compromise' and 'consensus' so characteristic of the British case than by an opposition of these terms. Thus, on 14 July 1950, the German MP Georg August Zinn (SPD) justified the joint committee draft of a law on the election of judges as follows: 'As great as the differences in opinion seemed to be, if one looks at the original drafts, it has been possible to find generally satisfactory solutions here, and without any bad compromises being made. It has been possible here to convince each other.'[48] The Social Democrat opposition politician thus praised the consensus, which he explicitly distinguished from a—'rotten'—compromise.

While a long-term trend of alignment with the British understanding of compromise can be discerned in the Bundestag, so that it ultimately came to be considered as a rational reconciliation of interests in both countries, important semantic differences remained. These

[48] DBT, 1. WP, 75./76. Sitzung (14 Jul. 1950), 2731.

were based on disparate understandings of the nature of 'compromise': 'fair' compromise in Britain was opposed to 'true' compromise in Germany. So while the link between compromise and pragmatism which Martin Greiffenhagen aptly describes for the British case seems to have lasted, German decisionism[49] was apparently transformed, though the emphasis on the inner, moral quality of the decision[50] contained therein has been preserved for much longer.

Finally, may we conclude from the use of positive or negative connotations that there is principled hostility towards or sympathy with compromise on both sides? Unfortunately, it is not so simple. Often a strategic relationship is more apparent: those who wanted to legitimize an achieved compromise, or push through a certain compromise solution, made positive attributions, and vice versa. The liberal MP Otto Graf Lambsdorff (FDP) summed up this mechanism in 1973 in the Bundestag: 'People always talk about rotten compromise when the compromise doesn't suit them.'[51] Talking about compromise in parliaments therefore also forms part of a 'blame game' that thrives on the fact that uncompromising behaviour is sanctioned either positively or negatively in public.[52] We are thus dealing with complicated feedback mechanisms between parliaments and the public, the study of which still entails considerable challenges.

Compromise as National Tradition or Touchstone of Democracy?

The semantic differences in uses of the word 'compromise' which we have seen so far also point to different self-perceptions in the House of Commons and the Bundestag. On the British side there existed an unbroken and self-confident parliamentary tradition after 1945. Friedrich Hayek's assessment, already quoted, that there was a specific British 'spirit of compromise' was frequently echoed in the House of Commons. The ability to compromise was thus not only declared to be a major element of the institutional self-understanding of the

[49] Cf. Greiffenhagen, *Kulturen des Kompromisses*, 19–48.

[50] Cf. Ulrich Pfister, 'Einleitung', in id. (ed.), *Kulturen des Entscheidens: Narrative – Praktiken – Ressourcen* (Göttingen, 2019), 11–36.

[51] DBT, 7. WP, 42. Sitzung (14 Jun. 1973), 2331.

[52] Cf. also Baume and Novak, 'Compromise and Publicity in Democracy'.

British Parliament, but also a part of British identity. In the context of a debate on the abolition of the death penalty, which had been conducted in Britain throughout the twentieth century, Labour MP Sydney Silverman declared in 1956:

> Where people are unanimously resolved to serve the same ultimate end but are passionately, deeply, sincerely divided as to the ways in which that can be done, it is in the British tradition to look to some kind of compromise which will give to both sides something, perhaps the bulk, of what they want without conceding the whole case to either.[53]

And during a debate on the Glasgow Corporation Bill on 24 April 1956, Captain James Duncan, an MP for the National Liberals, also defended his position with an invocation of the British tradition of compromise: 'The great thing in the British Constitution is compromise and making a thing work.'[54] Referring to compromise in the House of Commons usually had a largely rhetorical function in that it either served to legitimize a compromise that had been reached, or was intended to persuade the opposing party to make such a compromise. In the case of the death penalty, it actually took several more decades before a compromise was finally achieved.

The Bundestag, on the other hand, had to build its self-confidence as a democracy in the first place after 1949, as the parliamentary tradition in Germany had been interrupted for twelve years by the Nazi dictatorship. In the process of reclaiming a democratic self-understanding, the notion of a traditional German hostility to compromise was also repeatedly addressed in critical terms. In 1950, during a debate on worker participation in German industry, the conservative MP Johannes Degener (CDU) declared: 'If we had been willing to compromise more often in our German history, we would not be in the predicament we are in today. I am a friend of workable compromises, and I hope that a compromise solution will be reached in committee.'[55] So while in Britain at this time compromise was talked about as if it were a self-evident national virtue, in the Bundestag we can find pedagogical exhortations

[53] HC Deb., vol. 548, col. 2629 (16 Feb. 1956).
[54] HC Deb., vol. 551, col. 1724 (24 Apr. 1956).
[55] DBT, 1. WP, 80. Sitzung (27 Jul. 1950), 2971.

that served to explain compromise and establish it as the new standard of political culture. The Social Democrat MP Helmut Schmidt in particular raised this point again and again. On 27 March 1968, for example, the then SPD whip justified the necessity of political compromise in government coalitions in the Bundestag:

> There are people in Germany who use the expression 'rotten compromise' for this agreement process as a relic from the Wilhelmine age, or even worse: from an age that came later. I want to make it quite clear that anyone who does not have the will to compromise within him or herself is not fit for democracy.[56]

In this way, compromise became the touchstone of successful democratization. Learning to compromise thus long enjoyed the status of a self-imposed project of democratic training in the Federal Republic, supported above all by parts of the Protestant milieu and by Social Democratic education reformers. An important place for the dissemination of such ideas was the Bad Boll academy, a Protestant educational institution founded in 1945, which is now the largest of its kind in Europe. According to Sabrina Hoppe, its founder, Pastor Eberhard Müller, was convinced 'that after the ideology of Nazi Germany only a culture of communication and exchange, a culture that is based on compromises, could anchor an understanding of democracy in the young German society.'[57] This was also in keeping with programmes which had been promoted by the Western allies after 1945 with the assumption that in schools and civic education institutions the (West) Germans should learn to debate like the British.[58]

Other sections of German Protestantism took up the tradition of decisionism, however. As Martina Steber has shown, in the 1960s the Protestant theologian Helmut Gollwitzer castigated the

[56] DBT, 5. WP, 161. Sitzung (27 Mar. 1968), 8469.

[57] Sabrina Hoppe, 'Demokratische Konsenskultur? Von der Sympathie des bundesdeutschen Protestantismus für eine Ethik des Kompromisses', *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte*, 23/2 (2016), 218–35, at 218, available at [https://doi.org/10.1515/znth-2016-0029].

[58] See also Nina Verheyen, *Diskussionslust: Eine Kulturgeschichte des 'besseren Arguments' in Westdeutschland* (Göttingen, 2010), esp. 272–81.

'conventionalization of Christianity' by the CDU and defined Christianity in a steely tone as a radical counter-programme to the society of its time: 'Gospel-oriented, radically different, of a "dynamic, revolutionary character", unworldly, uncompromising.'[59] Attempts to base democracy in the Federal Republic on a culture of compromise thus repeatedly wrestled with German intellectual traditions that preferred rigid adherence to truths of faith and convictions. Luther's legendary closing words at the Diet of Worms in 1521—'Here I stand, I can do no other'—had become firmly engrained in the German imagination and continued to be popularized and trivialized in many ways in the Federal Republic until more recent times, from Luther socks to Luther condoms.[60] One might say that Martin Greiffenhagen epitomizes this dichotomy within German Protestantism. Starting with his personal dispute with his father, a staunchly authoritarian Protestant pastor, he conducted a theoretical debate between militant decisionism on the one hand and an attitude of scepticism, tolerance, and willingness to compromise on the other.[61]

Such conflicts also shaped the debate when, on 13 March 1975, the Social Democratic Minister President Heinz Kühn, as the representative of the Bundesrat in the Bundestag, promoted the North Rhine-Westphalian school reform and spoke in favour of teaching children to deal with conflict:

> This means that the school must educate children in tolerance, in the ability to choose compromises, in the realization that truth always consists of partial truths and is almost never only on one side. Therefore, education in the ability to compromise and in tolerance is the main task of the school.[62]

[59] Martina Steber, *Die Hüter der Begriffe: Politische Sprachen des Konservativen in Großbritannien und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1945–1980* (Berlin, 2017), 189–90.

[60] See [http://www.luthersocke.de/] and 'Luther-Kondome: "Hier stehe ich und kann nicht anders"', *god.fish*, 21 Mar. 2017, at [https://god.fish/2017/03/21/luther-kondome-hier-stehe-ich-und-kann-nicht-anders/], both accessed 12 Dec. 2022. On the older intellectual–historical traditions of German decisionism, cf. also Greiffenhagen, *Kulturen des Kompromisses*, 19–48.

[61] Cf. Greiffenhagen, *Jahrgang 1928*, 17–22; id., 'Anders als andere?'.

[62] DBT, 7. WP, 155. Sitzung (13 Mar. 1975), 10806.

Kühn presented these educational reform ideas, which at the time were the subject of a veritable culture war, in the context of a debate on internal security that had been prompted by fears of left-wing terrorism in the Federal Republic. In the atmosphere of a state of emergency, which again promoted a climate of either/or, he thus attempted to plead for tolerance of ambiguity, though he was met with derisive comments from conservative MPs.

Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s the main concern had been to establish and stabilize democratic rules in the Federal Republic, which included learning to compromise, from the 1970s the democratic rules of the game were considered secure, provided that they did not appear to be endangered from the outside—above all by terrorism. From the 1980s, however, conflicts over compromise and democracy shifted back to the Bundestag itself. After a three-party system consisting of CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP had established itself in the Bundestag since 1961, a new party, the Greens, entered for the first time in 1983.[63] Because of its origins in the new social movements, this party initially questioned the political rules of the game that had by now become firmly established. In particular, the Greens criticized the fact that compromises were not negotiated in the Bundestag and were thus reached in a non-transparent manner. Their criticism went to the heart of the understanding of democratic culture that had developed since 1949, which is why the Greens were now accused of being hostile to democracy.

This situation was repeated in a similar way when a post-communist party, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, now Die Linke), entered the Bundestag after the first all-German election in December 1990.[64] Like the Greens before them, PDS MPs criticized the lack of transparency in reaching compromises, and the established parties again censured their lack of understanding of democracy. The new parties' criticism of the institutionalization of compromise in committees and not in the public arena thus shook the very democratic self-understanding that the Bundestag had so laboriously acquired after 1949, which had manifested itself not least in the emphatic adoption of the British model of

[63] See Silke Mende, *'Nicht rechts, nicht links, sondern vorn': Eine Geschichte der Gründungsgrünen* (Munich, 2011).

[64] Cf. Thorsten Holzhauser, *Die 'Nachfolgepartei': Die Integration der PDS in das politische System der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1990–2005* (Berlin, 2019).

compromise. While the Green party was ultimately considered 'fit for compromise', Die Linke, at least in the Bundestag, shares the fate of the far-right Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), which only joined in 2017. In both cases a limit to compromise continues to be maintained by the other parties, although here, too, the boundaries occasionally erode.

So while in the Federal Republic after 1949 it was believed by many, though not all, that a British culture of debate and compromise had to be adopted, that culture was persistently regarded in Britain as a national virtue. To a certain degree, the British 'spirit of compromise' was even considered an export good. During a 1953 debate in the House of Commons about expressing British gratitude for the Marshall Plan through a scholarship programme for scholars from the USA, the Labour MP Geoffrey de Freitas suggested: 'Marshall scholars should have a chance of learning our way of life and especially the value of our political characteristics of tolerance and compromise. Of course we have much to learn from them as well.'[65] In this paternalistic perspective, the USA became the grown-up model colony which received important impulses from Britain, but was also able to give something back.

But what about the other colonies? After the Second World war, the wave of decolonization repeatedly produced discussions in the House of Commons as to how far the former colonies had progressed in adopting those British political virtues that were seen as a prerequisite for peaceful development. However, decolonization was accompanied by violence from the beginning. Thus, while in the Federal Republic it was above all domestic political developments, including terrorism, that raised the questions of where compromises were applicable and where they were not, and also who was able to compromise and who was not, in Britain these debates were especially driven by the confrontation with political violence in the context of decolonization.

The Limits of Compromise

The limits of compromise can be described by a mixture of social, normative, institutional, and epistemological boundaries, and here

[65] HC Deb., vol. 517, cols. 742–3 (3 Jul. 1953).

we find some remarkable differences between Britain and Germany. For a long time, the House of Commons has been marked by a relatively high degree of social and cultural homogeneity, and therefore mutual recognition among MPs has tended to prevail. While this did not presuppose shared points of view or normative assumptions, it included a mutual commitment to a shared rationality. This was based on often similar origins and socialization, including a debate culture oriented towards sporting competition.[66] In an attempt to advance the long-running research controversy surrounding the British post-war consensus, Dean Blackburn has recently shifted the emphasis onto the importance of shared epistemological foundations. He refers to a 'common enthusiasm for empiricist reasoning' among the Labour and Conservative parties: both were 'committed to evolutionary forms of change, and they eschewed the notion that any social or political arrangement was of universal value.'[67] This is not an entirely new argument, as it essentially reformulates the familiar image of British pragmatism once again. But Blackburn calls attention to the importance of shared basic epistemological assumptions as an element of cultures of compromise.

It might be argued that besides a shared epistemological model of empiricism or critical rationalism, the alternative tradition of the gentlemanly ideal, which focused on personal trust as a criterion for vouching for truth,[68] still continued to have an effect in British politics after 1945. A good indicator of this is provided above all by attempts to have intricate conflicts solved by commissions headed by honourable chairpersons, as was also repeatedly attempted—unsuccessfully—in the debate on the death penalty. In 1949 the Attlee government set up the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment to find a compromise solution to the deadlocked dispute. After four years of work, the Commission's report was finally published in 1953. During a debate in the House of Commons on 16 February 1956, MP Sydney Silverman quoted the central result of this report: '"We conclude with regret

[66] See Mergel, *Großbritannien seit 1945*, 31–2.

[67] Dean Blackburn, 'Reassessing Britain's "Post-War Consensus": The Politics of Reason 1945–1979', *British Politics*, 13 (2018), 195–214, at 196.

[68] See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1985).

that the object of our quest"—that is, a compromise—"is chimerical and that it must be abandoned."'[69] So it was still up to the House of Commons to reach a compromise. In 1957 the Homicide Act was finally reformed and the number of crimes punishable by death was reduced. Labour MP Charles Mapp had defended the draft during the previous deliberations of the bill—'I believe that this is an experiment in compromise. It is a typical decision of our race and country'[70]—thus using a reference to the ostensible British national character to appeal to the Conservative opposition.

Yet the compromise contained in the Homicide Act continued to be fought over by both supporters and opponents of the death penalty in the years that followed. In 1961 the Conservative MP Fred Harris proposed a national referendum 'to ascertain public opinion regarding a revision of the Homicide Act, 1957, to permit the full restoration of capital punishment for murder.'[71] The secretary of state for the Home Department, the Conservative MP Rab Butler, bluntly rejected the proposal: 'No, Sir. The referendum is not part of our constitutional practice.'[72] This episode is significant for our understanding of the limits of compromise in the House of Commons: unlike the compromise, the referendum knows only winners or losers. As early as 1918, Max Weber had stated:

> The referendum, as a means of both election and legislation, has internal barriers that follow from its technical nature. It only answers with 'yes' or 'no' . . . The referendum does not know the compromise on which the majority of all laws are inevitably based in every mass state with strong regional, social, confessional, and other antagonisms.[73]

Thus to reject the idea of a national referendum on the issue of the death penalty in the early 1960s was to defend the British culture of compromise.

[69] HC Deb., vol. 548, col. 2632 (16 Feb. 1956).
[70] HC Deb., vol. 708, col. 1544 (18 Mar. 1965).
[71] HC Deb., vol. 638, col. 1356 (20 Apr. 1961).
[72] Ibid.
[73] Max Weber, 'Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland (Mai 1918)', in id., *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 3rd exp. edn (Tübingen, 1971) 306–443, at 398.

In the Bundestag, by contrast, limits to compromise were drawn from the beginning. These limits, which were based on ideological differences that were seen as irreconcilable, were directed above all at the KPD, the German Communist Party, which was still represented in the Bundestag until 1953 and was finally banned in the Federal Republic in 1956. However they also applied to extreme right-wing speakers. The East–West conflict had a stronger direct impact on parliament in Germany, which was divided until 1990, than in Britain. After the KPD was removed from the Bundestag, the limits to compromise were shifted outwards under the banner of an anti-communism shared by all parties in the Bundestag, and were now mainly focused on the Soviet Union and the GDR. 'Any willingness to compromise ceases where the fundamental rights and freedoms of the constitutional order are to be restricted',[74] declared FDP Whip Erich Mende on 1 October 1958, and similar statements can be found in abundance in the proceedings of the Bundestag.

The limits of compromise drawn vis-à-vis the Eastern bloc by the three remaining parties in the Bundestag only eroded in the context of the *Neue Ostpolitik* (New Eastern Detente) promoted by the SPD from the beginning of the 1970s. This policy was based on the assumption that there would also be at least a limited willingness to compromise on the part of the East.[75] Although the CDU/CSU did not subscribe to this position ideologically, it did eventually adhere to it in practice. German reunification was thus followed by an era of cross-party consensus between the CDU and the SPD centred on compromise with Russia, which was seen as the successor to the Soviet Union—and this has only broken down recently.

In the House of Commons, on the other hand, for a long time questions about the limits of compromise arose less in domestic affairs than in foreign relations—a dividing line which has been increasingly blurred by migration. In addition to the country's status as a junior partner of the USA in the Cold War, decolonization, which began after the Second World War, played a central role. The attempt to reorganize the British colonial empire in the form of the Commonwealth drew strongly on the guiding principle of compromise, which was considered the crowning

[74] DBT, 3. WP, 41. Sitzung (1 Oct. 1958), 2419.

[75] See e.g. Helmut Schmidt on negotiations between Germany and Poland, DBT, 7. WP. 202. Sitzung (26 Nov. 1975), 13972–4.

achievement of Britain's self-declared civilizing mission: 'This great concourse of nations, the British Commonwealth, has no future at all in a turbulent world unless it is based upon compassion, tolerance and compromise', Viscount Hinchingbrooke stated on 4 July 1960.[76]

Yet the conflicts that soon evolved during the process of decolonization also prompted the question of whether compromises with the former colonial other were possible at all. In 1775, when Edmund Burke had campaigned in the House of Commons for a compromise with the American colonies, he based this above all on the fact that 'the people of the colonies are descendents of Englishmen' and thus also possessed the English will to freedom.[77] But what if the colonized were not considered equal? On 8 November 1974, Conservative MP Ronald Bell blamed the African negotiating culture of the indaba for the failure of the recent talks between Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith and Bishop Muzorewa, the leader of the United African National Council:

> the discussion on whether the terms of that agreement should be approved proceeded by the African process of indaba instead of by the European process of discussion and vote. Had it been dealt with by discussion and majority vote, which is after all, what we understand by democracy—that is to say, by the representative system—we should have seen an end of the Rhodesia problem by now . . . One cannot have this mediaeval or, rather, primitive African system of indaba on one side of the negotiations and plenipotentiaries on the other. It does not make sense, and it will never work.[78]

While on the one hand it was debated whether Africans still lacked an equivalent to the British culture of compromise—if the former colonial others were considered capable of compromise at all—on the other hand it was repeatedly stated in the House of Commons that, as in the case of Southern Rhodesia, it was representatives of the White settlers, such as Ian Smith, who made the limits of compromise abundantly clear.[79]

[76] HC Deb., vol. 626, col. 116 (4 July 1960); see also Beverley Baxter, HC Deb., vol. 470, col. 1554 (5 Dec. 1949).

[77] Burke, *Conciliation with the Colonies*, 28.

[78] HC Deb., vol. 880, col. 1481 (8 Nov. 1974).

[79] See e.g. Humphry Berkeley, HC Deb., vol. 720, col. 589 (12 Nov. 1965); Andrew Faulds, HC Deb., vol. 737, cols. 1672–4 (8 Dec. 1966).

The conflict over Northern Ireland, which grew into a civil war, also put stress on the culture of compromise in the House of Commons. Even after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which put a temporary end to the violence, the conflict raised a problem that had already arisen in the context of decolonization: what kinds of dealings were possible and appropriate with radical opponents of compromise or even with terrorists? Where were the limits here? Thus, from the 1960s onwards, an ever-deeper divide gradually emerged between those MPs who favoured compromise solutions and those who, in case of doubt, advocated non-compromise—that is, violence. A symbolic turning point was the sinking of the ARA *General Belgrano* in the Falklands War in 1982. The torpedoes Margaret Thatcher had ordered to be fired at the Argentinian warship, as was pointed out in the House of Commons at the time, wilfully sank the chances of settling the Falklands conflict through a compromise.[80] Long before the dispute over British membership of the EU, this marked a deep break in the British culture of compromise on the part of the Thatcherites,[81] who thus seemingly took a contrary course to the Federal Republic.

There is much to suggest that the limits of compromise have continued to shift in both countries during the last three decades, but this must be left for a more detailed investigation. Here we can only hint at the lines that need to be followed. For the British case, it remains to be clarified in more detail what connection existed between the path to Brexit and changes to the national culture of compromise. The starting hypothesis would be that the British process of alienation from the EU can be seen above all in the way the so-called Luxembourg Compromise was handled: from 1966, due to a French intervention, an informal veto right existed in the Council of Ministers of the EEC in cases in which a country's national interests stood in the way of a decision with a qualified majority.[82] Paradoxically, the European culture of compromise was

[80] Cf. Tam Dalyell, HC Deb., vol. 34, col. 900 (21 Dec. 1982).

[81] See Richard Toye, 'From "Consensus" to "Common Ground": The Rhetoric of the Postwar Settlement and its Collapse', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48/1 (2013), 3–23; Steber, *Hüter der Begriffe*, esp. 90–2.

[82] Cf. Helen Wallace, Pascaline Winand, and Jean-Marie Palayret (eds.), *Visions, Votes and Vetoes: The Empty Chair Crisis and the Luxembourg Compromise Forty Years On* (Brussels, 2006); N. Piers Ludlow, *The European Community*

thus based on not having to compromise in certain cases. The gradual erosion of this unofficial right of veto set in motion a debate in the House of Commons that began in the 1980s and finally culminated in Brexit. The fact that the ultimate decision resulted from a referendum, which, as we have seen, had been considered an inappropriate political decision-making practice as recently as the 1960s, marked a deep rupture in the British culture of compromise: it was one of those yes/no decisions aptly characterized by Max Weber, one that allowed a narrow majority to triumph completely over a minority.

In the Federal Republic, on the other hand, the limits of compromise seem to have expanded with the nation's territory since reunification. This is illustrated in part by the controversial asylum compromise, with the SPD agreeing to the far-reaching restriction of the right of asylum, including the amendment of the Basic Law. In return, the CDU/CSU made only minor concessions on the naturalization of foreigners in the Federal Republic, rejecting the immigration law demanded by the SPD.[83] Above all, however, reference should be made to the grand coalitions under Angela Merkel's chancellorship from 2005 to 2009 and again from 2013 to 2021, in which the CDU/CSU and SPD jointly formed the government. During these years, compromise became the hallmark of German politics, epitomized by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who on the occasion of her last participation in an EU summit in October 2019 was praised by Luxembourg's Prime Minister Xavier Bettel as a 'compromise machine'.[84]

The consequences of the post-unification era for the German culture of compromise still need to be examined more closely. Yet it seems that while the United Kingdom is currently suffering from the consequences

and the Crises of the 1960s: Negotiating the Gaullist Challenge (London, 2006), esp. 118–24; Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe: A History*, trans. Meredith Dale (Cambridge, 2020), 23, 141.

[83] See Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland: Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge* (Munich, 2001), 315–22; Patrice G. Poutrus, *Umkämpftes Asyl: Vom Nachkriegsdeutschland bis in die Gegenwart* (Berlin, 2019), 161–78.

[84] 'Stehende Ovationen für die "Kompromissmaschine" Merkel', *Der Spiegel*, 22 Oct. 2021, at [https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/angela-merkel-auf-eu-gipfel-lob-fuer-die-kompromissmaschine-a-ffcff8ff-f7e0-4c79-bd80-c3c14e4c3c12], accessed 13 Mar. 2022.

of Brexit, which can be interpreted as a departure from a long tradition of political compromise, the Federal Republic is currently struggling with the fact that its adherence to compromise, represented above all by German policy towards Russia and China, has led the country into a dead end from which it is at present painfully trying to extricate itself.

IV. *Conclusion*

Taking a critical view of the current mainstream position that liberal society is in crisis owing to a declining ability to compromise, this article first examined various long-term interpretations of the contrasting significance of compromise in Britain and Germany. In the British case there is a tradition of emphasizing compromise as a national political virtue, though this has been called into question in the context of Brexit. In the German case, on the other hand, it is claimed that an original hostility to compromise dissolved after 1945. These often stereotypical opposing descriptions, which have long circulated between academia, politics, and the public, formed the starting point for my discussion of the opposing cultures of compromise in Britain and Germany. Hence my focus was not on the techniques of compromise, but on its social, cultural, and institutional preconditions, and to this end I examined the House of Commons and the German Bundestag.

First of all, the different institutional anchoring of compromise in the two parliaments became clear. On the one hand, both the spatial order of the House of Commons and British electoral law emphasize confrontation between opposition and government, while compromises must be made primarily within the political parties. In the Bundestag, on the other hand, the spatial arrangement was inherited from the Imperial Reichstag. This removed the government as the head of the executive from direct confrontation with the opposition and at the same time took into account the important role of federalism, which represents a key driver of the institutionalization of compromise in the Federal Republic. Moreover, Federal German electoral law, unlike its British counterpart, has focused primarily on strengthening the political 'centre'. In Britain, by contrast, for a long time political polarization and the willingness to compromise paradoxically seemed to go hand in hand.

While British parliamentarism after 1945 was supported by a great deal of confidence in stability and continuity, West German parliamentarism established a mode of crisis avoidance in which the ability to compromise was to be guaranteed above all by the 'community of democrats' and secured by the political exclusion of 'extremists'. The social and epistemic commonality among British MPs thus contrasted with the appeal to 'anti-totalitarian attitudes' among members of the Bundestag. This reflects the fact that the use of the term 'compromise' had different connotations in the two parliaments for a long time: it tended to be idealistic in the Bundestag, but more pragmatic in the House of Commons. These differences diminished over the decades, and the British understanding, which emphasizes the 'fair' exchange of interests in a political market rather than ostensibly disreputable bartering, gradually prevailed in the Federal Republic as well. Yet the regular, almost ritual invocation of compromise in both parliaments cannot simply be equated with a corresponding practice; rather, it often served to legitimize political agreements or to exert pressure on the political opponent to reach an agreement. This, however, presupposed that compromise had a high status in the national political culture.

In Britain, a dialectical relationship can thus be observed between a distinct political culture of conflict and the invocation of compromise as a national virtue, repeatedly renewed in the House of Commons. The latter not only served to invoke the national political community across all conflicts, but also supported a sense of global purpose and thus at the same time stabilized the idea of the 'civilizing mission', which came under increasing pressure in the era of decolonization. In the Bundestag, on the other hand, which first had to acquire a democratic self-confidence, it was precisely the Weimar democracy's alleged inability to compromise that was seen after 1949 as a major cause of its failure. Conversely, the willingness to compromise was repeatedly declared to be a sign of democratic capability in general. The latter has been shaken in several waves in the Bundestag since the 1980s as new parties moved in that regularly criticized the well-rehearsed parliamentary compromise routines as non-transparent; in Britain, majority voting has so far prevented such a development. The question of the limits of compromise, however, not only concerned procedures, but also centred on the counterparts with whom compromises could be concluded, especially

if they were enemies of liberal democracy. During the Cold War, communism and the Soviet Union were considered in both Britain and Germany as impossible to compromise with. Yet while this attitude was partially softened from the 1970s in the context of detente, the discussion of terrorism produced a new debate on the limits of compromise, in which advocates and opponents of compromise increasingly clashed. In this context, the study of cultures of compromise also touches on historiographical debates about the role of the 'state of exception' in liberal democracies during the Cold War.[85]

It thus remains to be investigated in more detail how far the changes in the role of the cultures of compromise in Great Britain and Germany since the 1980s and 1990s that are suggested by the findings to date can be explained. Initially, there is much to suggest that after a process of alignment in the first post-war decades, in which the Federal Republic adopted a British-style culture of compromise, Britain, which had traditionally prided itself on its 'spirit of compromise', moved in the opposite direction. The fact that a referendum, which structurally represents an antithesis to compromise, sealed the Brexit decision in 2016 can be seen as a powerful symptom, though it still needs a deeper explanation.

This would require an analysis of parliamentary debates in both countries that goes beyond the present study. Our view of the cultures of compromise in Great Britain and the Federal Republic as a whole must also be expanded. Three areas seem particularly important here. First, the study of cultures of compromise should also take in parliaments beyond the national framework. This includes both the European and the regional level, which would have to be examined at least by way of example. A stronger distinction would also have to be made between different party landscapes in a conceptual–historical perspective. Second, it will be necessary to look at interactions between politics and the public. To this end, the media's handling of the concept of compromise needs to be examined in particular, as does the difference made by social media. And third, to what extent are different cultures of compromise also rooted in everyday communicative practices? And

[85] See Cornelia Rauh and Dirk Schumann (eds.), *Ausnahmezustände: Entgrenzungen und Regulierungen in Europa während des Kalten Krieges* (Göttingen, 2015).

to what extent are these, in turn, linked to political and pedagogical concepts that aim to bring about the everyday normalization of practices of compromise as a contribution to anchoring democracy? It makes all the more sense to look at these concepts because, in view of the current discourse of a crisis in liberal democracy, the old ways of reacting to the experience of dictatorship after 1945 are in part experiencing a new boom.

The ongoing historicization of cultures of compromise in Britain and Germany will embed debates about the connection between democracy and compromise[86] more deeply in the context of the multifarious history of liberal democracy and thereby hopefully also contribute to a less agitated view of current crisis debates. Above all, this is also the prerequisite for answering the crucial question of whether political conflicts in Britain and Germany were resolved in practice more or less by way of compromise. In this way, the study of this subject can hopefully also contribute to discussing further a fundamental question: the significance of political cultures for political decision-making processes in democracies.

[86] For an excellent overview of the different positions, see Sandrine Baume and Stéphanie Novak, 'Introduction', in eaed. (eds.), *Compromises in Democracy*, 1–18, at 2–4.

CONSTANTIN GOSCHLER is Professor for Modern History at the Ruhr University Bochum. His research focuses on restitution and memory politics, on intelligence agencies and security, and also on cultures of compromise. He is the Gerda Henkel Foundation Guest Professor at the GHIL and the London School of Economics and Political Science for the academic year 2022/3. His most recent book is *Intelligence Agencies, Technology and Knowledge Production: Data Processing and Information Transfer in Secret Services during the Cold War* (2022), co-edited with Rüdiger Bergien and Debora Gerstenberger.