

56th Königswinter Conference
March 23-25, 2006, New College, Oxford
„Europe – Leaderless and Drifting?“

Lord Watson, Chairman of the Königswinter Steering Committee, comments on the 2006 Conference:

In their joint message to the 56th Königswinter Conference held at the end of March at New College Oxford, Tony Blair and Angela Merkel wrote:

“never have relations between Britain and Germany been more important in today’s world. We share common objectives including the modernization of the European economy to build a competitive future. We wish Königswinter, as the forum for Anglo-German dialogue, our very best wishes. It makes a major contribution to the European debate”.

To describe Königswinter as the forum for Anglo-German dialogue is flattering but inaccurate. There are many events and organizations providing opportunities for Anglo-German dialogue. Yet Königswinter retains a unique significance. In the decades since World War II, it has reflected and charted the progress of British-German relations. For a time the Germans were in awe of the British democratic achievement. In the 1960’s the British reciprocated deeply impressed by both the parliamentary and economic progress of the Federal Republic. The German Wirtschaftswunder with its consensual features of *Mitbestimmung* seemed to provide the UK with a model to envy and emulate through the 70’s and 80’s. But reunification was to take Germany into a long and painful period of readjustment under the double impact of globalization and the costs of unity. In the first Königswinters of this century the Germans were often gloomy – admiring British labour market flexibility, low unemployment and relatively high growth.

This year there was a new note. Angela Merkel is clearly no Teutonic Margaret Thatcher, but she is different and there is a new optimism. A Grand Coalition led by two East Germans seems to have restored morale. This year’s conference title “Europe: leaderless and drifting” wasn’t quite right – at least not for the Germans. The Federal Republic may be recovering a sense of direction. At the very least Germany’s performance was compared flatteringly to that of France.

Königswinter is a structured conference with plenary sessions and breakout groups from Thursday afternoon until Saturday midday. As British Co-Chair, I have been eager to innovate and both the British and German Steering Committees have striven to maintain the best of the Königswinter tradition and at the same time introduce new perspectives and methods of dialogue. Thus for the second year running, Sir Robert Worcester of MORI presented startling data on British and German attitudes to issues, to each other and to the rest of the world. As last year, the British emerged as

somewhat more pro German than the Germans are pro British. Sadly too many Germans believe that the Sun and the eternally rerun war movies of British television reflect contemporary British attitudes. It is all too understandable but demonstrably wrong.

Nik Gowing of "BBC World" led the first plenary discussion in the style and with the edge of first rate television studio debate. Dr Constanze Stelzenmüller of the German Marshall Fund and Timothy Garston Ash of St Anthony's Oxford analysed and illuminated current issues and provided the best conceivable introduction to the four group discussions of the following day. They focused on competitive challenges, the fragility of our societies, the international order and transatlantic relationships and the challenges of national self definition at a time of mass immigration, global competition and EU enlargement. All were excellent.

Oxford's new Chancellor, Lord Patten spoke provocatively and brilliantly at our closing dinner and the final Saturday plenary heard the best ever summaries from the four breakout groups under the witty, but also wise chairmanship of Sir Malcolm Rifkind. Dr Rudolf Adam concluded our conference with a brief "tour de force".

All in all it was a really good conference – reflecting and tracking British German relations. It did so with frankness, good humour and shafts of exceptional illumination. Baroness Symons, attending for the first time, wrote to me afterwards *"it is not often one has the opportunity to discuss international issues with such a broad spectrum of well informed people - or that one is able to listen to, and offer, opinions in such a frank and open way"*.

That is the purpose and justification of Königswinter. It indeed makes it a uniquely valuable forum of Anglo-German dialogue.