

## Freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Freedom is a word loved by filmstars, politicians and other actors, but what it actually meant outside of Hollywood and away from soapboxes was the 2008 Young Königswinter Conference theme in an academic departure from previous years.

Chaired by Sir Nigel Broomfield, the former British Ambassador to both the Federal and Democratic republics of Germany and by Gebhardt von Moltke, chairman of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft and former German Ambassador to the UK, the conference hosted several speakers who talked about freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in political, economic and cultural terms. Combined with introductions by selected delegates, these talks were aimed at triggering discussion amongst the three study groups – which focused on political and economic freedom and the culture of freedom – with rapporteurs reporting back at the end of the week to the final plenary session.

The aim of the conference was not necessarily to come up with answers to all the world's problems regarding freedom – though that would have been a boon – but to provoke thought, talk and musings amongst the generation that was going to have to deal with these issues in the decades to come.

The British Ambassador Sir Michael Arthur and Rüdiger Freiherr von Fritsch, director-general for economic affairs and sustainable development at the German Foreign office opened the conference.

Sir Michael asked the participants to look to the future and to try to shape it. At the same time, we should not forget the unique contribution the two nations have made in the past 60 years to the world we live in, either individually or collectively. Democracy had risen to becoming the dominant force in the whole of Europe. European cooperation and the European Union had a stronger effect on the countries, even on their internal politics than many of our citizens and also politicians were prepared to accept. Sir Michael called on the participants to be leaders in Europe, to shape the course as representatives of a new generation and not to be afraid to buckle down public opinion. He also reasoned whether modernity could meet tradition, modernity not meaning just new technology but also a new society. Which of our two societies was changing faster? Germany was said to becoming “more cosmopolitan” since the 1990’s. The UK always open to immigration saw some immigrant groups play a stronger role in the economy than their size would suggest. How could our societies handle best the influx of foreigners, which is likely to remain a growing challenge? Concluding the Ambassador reminded participants that new challenges would emerge as the world was changing fast.

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The EU had an important part to play in this changing world order. But we should not forget that individuals still needed an anchor at home, particularly as society changes. There is a role for Anglo-German dialogue in this regard.

Rüdiger Freiherr von Fritsch invited the participants to consider whether our political model that had been based on freedom and globalisation over the past 60 years – free investment, free flow of goods and services and an increase in liberalisation and freedom – was set to change as new, non-European world actors emerged. China, India and Brazil were touted as the next stars, but Turkey, Pakistan and Russia still waiting in the wings shouldn't be forgotten either. Liberalism alone was not as essential for economic growth as it was once thought, as new competitors' growing success was possible without adopting the liberal Western model of democracy and sticking instead to authoritarianism. The global economic stage is changing and so are the global actors and their motifs. As the 'classic' economies compete with the 'emerging' ones, talking to each other is the only way to get along. We still have a "good chance to face globalisation and to rely on our own advantages". History has proved Europeans right in the past and this will happen again, as long as there is social acceptance of globalisation.

### **Political Freedom**

Joe Koops, from the political science department at Kiel University, on political freedom. Getting the talks going with enthusiasm, he defined three areas he intended his group to discuss: negative and positive freedom; freedom from fear; and challenges and tension.

'Freedom from' is perhaps the toughest for people to realise they have it, that of the "freedom of the strong" and the "freedom to be left in peace", whilst 'freedom to' was democracy, civil liberties and all that heady stuff. However, it was freedom from fear and the "existential threat", as Joe defined it, that was perhaps a newer strand to thought on freedom – was freedom from threats worth the intrusions and perhaps limitations to civil liberty? Similarly, as democracy finally flowers around the world, why is it that the cradles (surely 'flower-beds') of popular government were now cutting down on the freedoms they once boasted to the world of having?

Yet while there may be threats to democracy, new technology was allowing more active participation, Joe stated, from e-petitions to surveys in the "public sphere", even if set against the apparent "dumbing down" of the media.

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In a similarly scholarly vein, Nat Copsey, co-introducer and research fellow of Ceelbas at the University of Birmingham, stated that he disagreed somewhat with the previous speakers who painted a future of threats. He gave the example of the decline in membership of political parties – was this really a sign that the public were giving up on democratic participation, or was it that the socialising and networking was a lot more fun down the pub or on Facebook than at party meetings?

Similarly, Nat stated that even Western democracies have always had a lot of beliefs that it would not put to the people as a democratic vote, otherwise Britain would bring back hanging before you could say 'the Sun says'. He also wondered whether it was even fair, and this tied in with Joe's point on freedom from, to foist political participation on those who did not want it.

Despite others' concerns about the future of Western democracy, Nat said that he believed that the democratic principle had strengthened society in Britain in the past 40-odd years - the state functions better and even the worst-off children of Albion would be pleased to know that they enjoy a better lot than their slum contemporaries in Poland.

Nat ended by expressing his belief, contradictory to other speakers, that China and Russia will have to liberalise as the only way for full economic progress as elites could not be so corrupt forever. Instead, his vision of the future is the rise of the citizen in a society with limits, expectations and guarantees on what the state should do.

### **Economic Freedom**

Christina Kolerus, a PhD student at the University of Mannheim, introduced the discussion for economics. As any good economist, she started with some hard facts about money – that income per capita in the west had risen threefold in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But did economic freedom necessarily lead to prosperity, she wondered, and where does economic freedom end, particularly if the markets don't serve things properly.

Yet the political was not forgotten in the economic. Christina gave the example of the African state of Lesoto, which had been given a free-trade agreement with the US for political reasons, and now the Chinese had set up shop there. Similarly, trade may be free, but labour isn't and minimum wage agreements were usually part of the political landscape and also had to be factored in when considering the political effects of economic principles.

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Suzanne Freegard, journalist and co-introducer, built on the view that the political was also relevant. So far as economic freedom from poverty was needed to allow people to participate in the economy and have a decent quality of life. Only those who have the resources to be free can engage and agencies such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) were hindering rather than helping poorer nations tackling the rich nations' economic might. Suzanne's view seemed to be that free trade could be good to Europeans, but not necessarily to others, particularly those in former colonies.

— For instance, she said that rich nations can afford lawyers and lobbyists at the WTO to gain favourable deals, while free trade meant that poorer nations were concentrating on making money rather than investing in infrastructure, the old cash-crop v food problem. Suzanne said that the EU's free trade policy kept others in poverty, citing Oxfam on this, and export volume doesn't mean greater wealth. After all, she said, Ghana's trade is double the amount of France yet had a seventieth of the GDP of the Gallic nation as it was trading in low-value goods.

— Sir Nigel added that President Sarkozy is seemingly striving for protectionism at Doha, so we may have to wait some time before we see Ghanese computers on the shelves of PC World rather than bananas, fruit and other low-cost exports at Tesco due to this protectionism.

### **Culture of Freedom**

Christian Rieck of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung took up the task with his questions on the freedom of science and how authoritative regimes could not produce efficient science. He argued that while a positive approach to science could be used to deal with the future, democracy was needed to breed new ideas as this would best use the inclusiveness and integration of such a society.

Naomi Wynter-Vincent from the University of Bedfordshire and co-introducer took a different approach to the culture of freedom. She stated that our ideas of personal freedom were largely based on the notion that we are all individuals, "lone wolves" with personal destinies, which Christianity reinforced with the teachings of an individual's personal judgment before God. Building on this, Naomi used Sigmund Freud's rather unashamed analysis of three revolutions that shook human thinking – the Copernican one when we realised that the sun does not revolve around us humans on Earth; the Darwinian one when humans realised that life on Earth does not revolve around humans; and the Freudian one, when the subconscious rose to the public consciousness, and the realisation that we are not completely rational actors revolving around a logical brain.

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Technology then, Naomi argued, was not incidental to human thought and culture but fundamental tools which we use to produce thought. Not only did technology enable thought but it also enabled new concepts of thought and discussion. Other 'cultures' of freedom included the freedom to give to charity (or not as the case may be) and the freedom to drink (or not, at least on London Underground).

## The study group reports

### Political freedom

The first group divided their approach into four steps: elements of political freedom; democracy as a system to guarantee political freedom; trade-offs with the political system; and examples of how British and German democracy can address 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges.

Focusing on the individual and freedom rather than the nation-state, Nick Bason used in his report to the plenary the example of civil freedoms, such as those of assembly and speech, to come up with a matrix of how freedoms were inter-linked and nested.

Giving what he dubbed the "shared values of matrix" for Germany and the UK, Nick's chart was meant to show the similarities and differences in political culture between the two nations. From there he leapt to explaining trade-offs within the political system and how they are driven by current issues.

We heard that technology and information; increasing diversity of population; emergence of alternative value systems; asymmetric threats to security; and unreasonably rising expectations from within the society were to be part of these trade-offs between elements of political freedom. But, we were told, there are "trade-offs between the different elements of political freedom and external drivers can lead to increased emphasis on one of the elements at the expense of the others."

First, the question of integration could be solved with the civic understanding of national identity, the availability of dual citizenship, compulsory pre-school teaching, including language skills, and the right to vote in local elections.

Similarly, the question of social mobility, or the lack thereof, could have a "solution" with more child care opportunities and equal access to education, with the acceptance that there are differences between the UK and Germany in attitudes to this.

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Finally, the inflexibility of the decision making process and the process of implementation was addressed with a proposed breakdown of bureaucratic structures; more co-operation between sectors or ministries; and a tailoring of capabilities to objectives, which some understood as making sure that you have the right people and skills for the task in hand.

With so much to cover, there were many more questions. First, the difference between 'protectionist' Germany and 'open' Britain. Herr von Moltke pondered on the acceptance of freedom for security and the potential for trade-offs there and whether Britain was open – after all, it has the highest amount of CCTV cameras in the world and could be throwing people into cells for 42 days without so much as a charge. And yet Britons were vocal in their criticism of ID cards, how could this be?

Instead, he said there is an assumption that Germany and the UK are similar – governments in both countries have grown over the years tackling the issues of liberty and have "lots of liberty" despite different limitations. Members of the group proposed that if that is the case, then "we've never had it so good", but if life was bigger and better, so were the problems. Similar, there was the thought that both governments were also becoming more transparent thanks to disclosure and other reporting items.

### **Economic freedom**

Agnes Ciuperca and Gero Elerd gave the second group's report by stating how economic freedom was at the centre of four other freedoms – to sell our labour; to trade; to consume; and to do business.

Yet, they said, not only are there differences between Germany and the UK, but they wanted to focus on the 25-30 age group and try to define this. They used a scale to come up with ways these may change as factors could affect certain freedoms, such as with climate change.

First, they looked at the limits to freedom, both natural and man-made. The main points were resources and skills; inactive members of society, such as pensioners and the disadvantaged, who they said were central to the debate; and market failure. To strike a balance between individual and collective benefits they saw a role for the state and international bodies to intervene, as the state does with tax, public education and regulation.

Agnes focused on trade and wondered who was involved in the process of increasing or decreasing trade. A political failure is that trade is never free but instead there were "double standards" of free trade and increase in economic welfare with unequal gains.

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Not only that, but there was also no consensus on how to tackle the political future and whether we take a different approach if things stop being in our interest. Instead, we should look at increasing social stability, Agnes argued. No doubt a night-time visitor to one of Britain's colourful promenades where fights on the streets were going on. She also discussed the standards of living in countries and retraining labour.

As the social security systems showed signs of market failure, so was climate change, with a lack of internalised environmental costs in industry and such things as carbon pricing. If we don't act now, things will become more expensive and flying around the world or even New York will become rarer. The talk caused much discussion, including several questions and answers. One, which some economists seemed to take as an affront, was whether wealth creation was necessarily good and whether money buys happiness. While there is probably some website out there that claims you can buy the good, it did raise the question of subjective happiness and how to legislate it and whether it was an ultimate goal of society – prisoners, the example given, may be happier on drugs but society at large may not be so keen on those doing.

Sir Nigel added that the gap between the top and bottom of society was certainly big in the UK, but would this necessarily make Germany, where top wages are controlled, a happier place. Other questions on the happiness of the poor were raised, such as whether the green taxes proposed by Agnes would disproportionately hit the poor. Green taxes again took a blow when Randeep said that carbon trading may well be a lot of gas, and instead methane should be targeted, but the focus on carbon was all down to economists getting their feet under the negotiating table rather than worthy scientists who know best.

Others retorted and the arguments and legitimacy for markets rather than the state to regulate prices came to the fore. But there were dissenters who said left to their own, car makers would still be producing foul emission belching autos and it took the EU to force a change.

### **Cultural freedom**

Randeep Sidhu in his report of the third group's discussion started off by stating what every generation has realised, that "we're facing challenges unknown to our parents' generation", and that we were at the birth of a brave new world. Claiming that the cultural freedom group's remit seemed so large, he focused on one idea of the many issues discussed and broke it down into four streams of freedom to illustrate the similarities and difference between these in the UK and Germany and genetic testing.

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Putting claims of freedom to the test, delegates were told to stand and then had the choice to remain standing if they believed that genetic screening, the ability to test an individual's genetic makeup for potential diseases and the like, should be allowed. Most stayed standing.

With the technology to conduct such tests so advanced that tiny chips can now test for this, we can now ask questions that we never thought we could – or at least expect an answer to – before. Yet asking these questions could threaten freedom, Randeep argued, reasoning that if one could determine their genetic future, for some it would mean why do anything when it was written in the genes, or at the other extreme where the state 'protects' and coddles us into a 'bubblewrap state'.

There is also the question of how we act on these answers and information. Expanding on this, should such data be allowed to others, such as the state, to prevent such an abuse.

Of course, information is neutral, it's how we act on it that can lead to good or bad. As such, Randeep pondered whether data could be used for greater good, and if this should be allowed. But going back on to the bad things is always more interesting, and the next question was whether DNA could be used to determine what jobs we get in the future, and whether we get a say on whether insurers can have access to such information.

He stated that all these questions arose and will arise as society's technology changes and improves, but in doing so we must be aware of four freedoms with regards to science and culture: research; belief; information; and movement. Starting with research, he asked if we could be free "regardless of the outcome", raising the possibility of Cern's Large Hadron Collider opening up a black hole – remote, but enough for seven concerned Americans to sue – compared with the knowledge we would gain about the universe. From scientific research to freedom of belief – the beliefs we hold about ourselves will change as science and research increase. There is also the idea of self-harm against self-improvement, discussions likely to increase as cyborg technology – the fusing of man and machine – increases.

As for freedom of information, and not afraid to use a cliché when it's based on truth, information is power, we were told. But who has access to it, and the ownership of this information can lead to heated discussion about copyright and patents and genetics. Finally there was the freedom of movement – as new technologies develop and we can move, it may be that genetic screening makes it easier to discriminate.

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With all this mind, Randeep wondered if we could conduct research for the greater good to change our makeup and give information to others when it could provide the basis for division, discrimination and depression.

All four freedoms were thus related, but there were still differences between Britain and Germany. Take research, where in Germany stem cell science is more restrictive, meaning that German scientists can only use umbilical cords. There is also the history of genetic testing and control and concerns about trust in private research that is different to the UK. Randeep stated that fundamentally there was a difference in belief and the role in these decisions between peoples.

Related to this fundamental belief on research was the fact that one of the major parties in Germany is the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a name explicitly linked to religion that is rare in the UK, and many see the CDU as tied to the church and dignity of man. Yet beliefs are not the exclusive domain of religion. Philosophy is also a primary source of beliefs and Randeep asserted that there is a fundamental philosophical difference between British and German thinking, crudely defined as Mills pragmatism in the UK and Kant's dignity of man in Germany. Similarly, there's a difference in approach to information, from the UK's Data Protection Act and the recent furores over data loss which is odd to many Germans unused to the state being treated with such information, to what to many Germans is living memories of the Stasi and a fear relatively unknown in Britain, that of the informant. Yet this still comes down to the question of who can see information and what we they do with it.

The question remained then what did this come down to for freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For one, Randeep quoted one of his team members as saying that "freedom determines our idea of freedom", that things change as technology allows us to ask more and find out more. Randeep ended by asking everyone in the room to stand if they would still allow genetic testing – most still did.

The culture of freedom probably provoked the most debate, from questions of whether it wasn't that we could gain more information, but it was the quality and quantity that now forced such challenges, to whether technology shapes society and whether this was a conscious decision and what should, if anything, be forbidden.

Similarly, if Germany and Britain were confident in their roles and responsibilities, did they have the responsibility to share with the rest of the world and restrict others. Democracy requires informed debate with facts and expertise, but this could still be used as a justification to force people to open up information.

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## **An end to it all**

Herr von Moltke closed the conference by stating that he enjoyed the discussions and debates they generated on what he called "well-chosen subjects", passing on his thanks to the chairs and reporters for each group.

Britain and Germany have a common future in the EU and the globalised world, he said, and the chairman hoped that this bodes well for a future with more delegates, even if it did have to rely on the British political habit of "humour and spin" to get more from the UK to attend.

— This conference was unusual compared with previous ones in that there was no specific focus on Europe but instead was on a profound set of ideas which set about a lot of thinking. Democracy was still the dominant theme, but trying to define it was like catching a knife, you're going to get cut whatever happens, Herr von Moltke said.

— Sir Nigel ended by saying that for many parts of Europe democracy was still new and may historically be based on the Christian ideals of equality tempered with the notion of the 'divine rights of kings'. Yet it was Europe's Renaissance that put man at the centre of ideas, including that of 'one man, one vote', although in some countries this has been taken literally to the leader being the man, and him getting the vote.

European democracy has been challenged, Sir Nigel added, particularly in Germany, by fascism and communism, but with the fall of ideologies this doesn't mean that the democratic system is without challenges, as with the approach taken in many democracies since the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

Challenges won't stop, there is no 'end of history' and the idea that democracy will win is a fallible idea, Sir Nigel warned. Yet despite our democracies and freedoms, Europeans have a reduced influence in the world and seen as decadent and feeble beings who don't stand up for our ideas. Freedom under the law is the sum of our debate in society. We are authors of our own fate and should be critical of what we don't like in freedom. Each generation has different challenges based on simple truths and the importance we should stay involved in public life across frontiers is essential.