

Letter from your Chairman

Dear Members and Friends,

Looking back

Especially since our AGM in late October Covid-19 has held the world in thrall: a rapidly rising death toll; rampant infection; struggling healthcare systems, with some regions near collapse; a new virus mutation; on-off lockdowns; partial to complete closure of our education system and cultural, sporting and leisure amenities; travel restrictions; Corona apps and tests and disinfectant and face masks, the list goes on. It has all become a bit much (at least for the undersigned). This has also impacted the Christmas period, which was a rather subdued affair this year, with little merriment or jollity; and the same will presumably apply to New Year's Eve and Day.

In the past two or three months, however, we have also seen many positive developments. The first relates to our evergreen topic, Brexit: the Trade Deal. By „going the extra mile“ and leaving the announcement until way past „the eleventh hour“ (on Christmas Eve, theatrically, antisocially and unhelpfully to businesses on both sides) the UK and the EU have managed to agree a deal, thereby avoiding what might have been Death by a Thousand Tariffs - especially for the UK. That said, there will still be border checks, customs forms, and specification and quality controls; so much for Brexit „cutting red tape and reducing bureaucracy“! On 21.12.2020, after France closed its borders with the UK during the previous night, and most European countries imposed bans on travel to and from the UK, we had a foretaste of how bad the End of Transition Period could be, with huge lorry queues in Kent, worries in the UK about fresh fruit and vegetable supplies, sharply reduced trading volumes and, last but not least, divided families on both sides of the Channel. (The reaction in the UK reminded me of a November 1993 article in the London magazine „The Spectator“ entitled „Fog in the Channel – Continent cut off“. While the article was a humorous review of British, especially English, exceptionalism and separatism, there were apparently regular genuine weather reports bearing a similar titles throughout the 1930s.) The situation is now substantially back under control after France relaxed its measures (albeit introducing a requirement for travellers in both directions to present a negative Covid-19 test result), but remains fragile. The weeks and months after 01.01.2021 will no doubt see further delays, complications and disruption until all participants really get used to the new systems. As for the approximately 1200 page thick Trade Deal itself, commentators are still poring over the details, and there may be some surprises, not to say disappointment, in certain quarters. Was „taking back control“ and „restoring British sovereignty“ really worth all that, one asks quietly and rhetorically.

We have had numerous other things to cheer about: decisive, massive, concerted financial support for the global economy; the imminent end of the Trump regime, with a final humiliating rejection of his presidential veto on the US Security Bill; a big EU-China trade deal; a possible similar EU deal with

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India; a powerful stock exchange performance since the slump in March; and strong confidence for a 2021 recovery in many economies and industries. Most importantly, we now have several approved Covid-19 vaccines in the market and mass Covid-19 vaccination has been launched in, inter alia, the UK, the USA and the EU. Many would also say that the pandemic has fostered kindness, compassion and community spirit, bringing people closer together despite meeting restrictions and social distancing.

There have also been some positive developments at DBG Rhein-Main. In 2020 we were obliged to postpone or cancel almost all of our planned physical or „in person“ meetings. On the other hand we have, I think it is fair to say, successfully managed a switch to the online format. In the past six months or so we have been able to offer regular Zoom events with some excellent speakers on fascinating and highly relevant topics. I especially liked John Kampfner's introduction of his new book on Germany, the Brexit update by MEP David McAllister and Prof. Mary Evans's musings on Memory and Age. I also loved the literature reading by Alison and Jo Rippier; this was the event where I missed most keenly an opportunity to mix and mingle and discuss over a glass of wine afterwards. Attendance has typically been strong, and IT has generally worked quite well. In addition there has been a welcome increase in communication and cooperation among DBG chapters, in which, alongside Berlin, Rhein-Main has played a leading role. And your tireless Geschäftsführer, Michael Gehrig, has already arranged a full and inspiring programme for 2021. Fingers crossed for at least a partial return to physical meetings next year...

Looking forward (and away)

That said, the current pandemic situation is dire and much hard work lies ahead. Yesterday both Germany and the UK recorded awful new daily statistics: over 50,000 and 20,000 new Covid-19 or variant cases respectively, and approximately 1,000 deaths in each case. Millions of people in the western world and many millions more around the globe will need to be vaccinated in order to achieve „herd immunity“. Cooperation and community spirit will also be called for, not least because many individuals worldwide are currently sceptical about the vaccines, and many others refuse them outright. Considerable challenges remain in terms of vaccine production, logistics and administration. There are set-back risks in the form of possible further virus mutations, and big open questions: will the available vaccines also combat virus variants; will they both cure the patient and prevent him or her from transmitting the virus to others? Last but not least, we also face the negative prospect of a possible wave of bankruptcies and accelerating unemployment once government support programmes expire. And future generations will have to shoulder the weighty burden of debt that governments worldwide have taken on to finance such support programmes.

Let us for a moment forget about the Pandemic, Climate Change, Biodiversity Loss, Third World Problems and any of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse who have not made an appearance. Let us cross our fingers and look, if not confidently, then at least hopefully into 2021.

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I often find guidance and solace in literature, especially lyric poetry. Here is a poem which starts in the cold late winter but ends with hope and promise and the „immeasurable“ wonder of spring awakening: „First Sight“ by Philip Larkin:

Lambs that learn to walk in snow
When their bleating clouds the air
Meet a vast unwelcome, know
Nothing but a sunless glare.
Newly stumbling to and fro
All they find, outside the fold,
Is a wretched width of cold.

As they wait beside the ewe,
Her fleeces wetly caked, there lies
Hidden round them, waiting too,
Earth's immeasurable surprise.
They could not grasp it if they knew,
What so soon will wake and grow
Utterly unlike the snow.

I am already looking forward to the spring. Maybe we will have Covid-19 and all its possible variants firmly under control by then. That would be a wonderful outcome given the current situation.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of DBG Rhein-Main I wish you and your families and loved ones a healthy, happy and prosperous 2021. May the Year of the Ox be a big improvement on the Year of the Rat (RIP) for all of us!

Yours sincerely,

Nick Jefcoat

Chairman

30.12.2020

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