

# DEUTSCH-BRITISCHE GESELLSCHAFT

## 65<sup>th</sup> Young Königswinter Conference

Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> October – Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2025, Berlin

### Conference Report



With the old world order in tatters, how do we transform our societies for the better?

1. The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?
2. Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?
3. Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?

## **Programme**

### **Conference Venue**

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### **Organiser**

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### **Date**

29 October - 2 November 2025

## Wednesday, 29 October 2025

From 12:00	Arrival and check in Light Lunch at EAB
13:00 – 14:30	<b>Opening of the conference</b> By <b>ANNE RUTH HERKES</b> , State Secretary ret. Chair of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft e.V. and the <b>Conference Co-Chairs</b> <b>DR BIRGIT BUJARD</b> , Chair, Young Königswinter Alumni e.V. Executive Manager, Department of Political Science, University of Cologne <b>JOHN KAMPFNER</b> , Deputy Chair of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft e.V., Journalist and Author
	<b>Tour de Table</b>  Dresscode: Casual
14:30	Coffee break
15:00 – 16:30	<b>Discussion on the Kensington Treaty</b>
16:30	Coffee break
17:00 – 18:00	Study group sessions begin Selection of Chair and Rapporteur
18:30	Walk to the Ambassador's residence <b>Hömannstr. 10, 14193 Berlin-Grünwald</b>  <b>Please bring your IDs</b>
19:00	Dinner hosted by the H.E. ANDREW MITCHELL CMG, British Ambassador to Germany  Dresscode: Smart casual
as of 21:30	Walk back

## Thursday, 30 October 2025

from 08:00	Breakfast
10:00 – 11:30	Panel on topic I: The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?  <b><u>Speakers:</u> DR JAN EICHHORN, dpart &amp; ALMUT MÖLLER, European Policy Centre</b>
11:30	Coffee break
12:00 – 13:00	<b>Group work</b>
13:00	Lunch at EAB
14:00 – 15:15	Panel on topic II: Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?  <b><u>Speakers:</u> TOM NUTTALL, Economist &amp; MARC WEISSGERBER, E3G</b>
15:30	Transfer to Berlin City Centre (Public Transport)
16:30 – 18.00	<b>Guided Visit to Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation</b> Stresemannstraße 90, 10963 Berlin
18.30	Transfer to dinner location (Public Transport)
19:00 – 20.30	<b>Dinner at Little Tibet Restaurant</b> Gneisenaustraße 6A, 10961 Berlin-Kreuzberg
as of 20:30	<b>Time off, participants make their own way back to the EAB</b>

## Friday, 31 October 2025

08:00	Breakfast
10:00 – 11:30	<p>Fireside Chat on topic III: Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?</p> <p>With inputs from Young Königswinter participants: <b>CAMRON AREF-ADIB, LUKAS GAST, KATHARINE HARBOURNE, OLIVIA SOADY &amp; ELIZABETH YOUNG</b></p>
11:30	Coffee break
12:00 – 13:00	<b>Group work</b>
13:00	Lunch at EAB
14:00	Transfer to S Friedrichstraße, Berlin Mitte (Public Transport)
15.00 – 17.30	<b>Guided Walking Tour through Berlin</b>
17.30 – 20.00	<p><b>Reception for the Alumni of the Young Königswinter Conference and the British-German Forum</b></p> <p><b>British Embassy Berlin</b> Wilhelmstraße 70-71, 10117 Berlin</p> <p>Please bring your IDs</p> <p><b>Opening remarks by H.E. AMBASSADOR ANDREW MITCHELL CMG</b></p> <p><b>Evening Speaker: BEN COLEMAN MP, Young Königswinter Alumnus</b></p> <p>Dresscode: Smart casual</p>
as of 20:00	Time off, participants make their own way back to the EAB

## Saturday, 1 November 2025

08:00	Breakfast
09:00 – 10.30	Group work
10:30	Coffee break
11:00 – 12:30	Preparation of group work results
12:30	Lunch at EAB
13:30 – 15:30	Presentation of group work results Plenary session
	Dresscode: Casual
15:30	Coffee break
16:00 – 17:00	Continuation of presentation of working group results
17:00	Concluding remarks
17:30 – 18:30	Farewell drinks
18:30	End of Conference

Sunday, 2 November 2025

08:00

Breakfast and check-out

THE CONFERENCE HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE BY THE KIND SUPPORT OF:



Auswärtiges Amt



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Berlin

Königswinter Stiftung



bp



DEUTSCHE BÖRSE  
GROUP

**PORSCHE**

## Topics for the 65<sup>th</sup> Young Königswinter Conference 2025

**Topic 1: The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?**

- Can democracies still deliver?
- Where do new alliances for our respective countries lie? Which current ones need to be reinforced?
- A new potential of EU-UK relations?
- With international law diminishing in influence, what is next? Do we need new international institutions?

**Topic 2: Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?**

- How do we get back to the generation of growth in our respective economies?
- Decoupling, derisking, independence
- How is the green agenda reconcilable with the view increasingly taken by all governments that economic growth is priority number 1?
- What can mainstream politics do to find a radical policy agenda that in recent times seems to be the preserve of populists?
- The end of neoliberalism: what could a new economic model for our two countries look like?
- What role could migration play?

**Topic 3: Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?**

- The changing role of work in younger generations' lives
- Whatever happened to social mobility?
- Tackling the cost of living crisis

# Report

## Foreword

*So very often in society we are told to choose or occupy a side. This may be political, national, or socio-cultural and, once chosen, we are taught to make coherent choices to reinforce and stabilise our lives.*

*As someone with tri-nationality however, what has always interested me far more, has been society's intersections. The meeting points between left and right, nation states, and the exchanges between seemingly opposing sides.*

*No doubt, this is why the Young Königswinter conference appealed to me, and why, after four days spent together, I feel confident in saying that it is in the intersections, in the liminal, open, unpredictable heart of interconnections, that shared flourishing truly starts.*

*This conference report shares only a small fraction of bright, brilliant, and deeply human conversations held in the Autumn of 2025 between a perhaps otherwise unlikely group of German and British representatives. I hope we become the leaders we long for as we forge our own paths, and remember we can rely upon each other as we did here, enacting visions of our shared future.*

## Summary

The 65<sup>th</sup> Young Königswinter Conference (YKWC) took place in Grunewald at the Europäische Akademie Berlin (EAB) between the 29<sup>th</sup> of October and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2025.

This conference brought together 45 participants from Germany and the United Kingdom to unpack the question: 'With the old world in tatters, how do we transform our societies for the better?'

Focus areas across the four days included:

- The end of institutional order – legal, humanitarian, military, democratic, civil;
- The health of the liberal-democratic agenda;
- Financial and social conditions for innovation;
- The status of the UK, Germany, and Europe as global powers;
- The contemporary relevancy of Brexit – trade, immigration, defence, identity;
- The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI); and
- The realities of green growth, degrowth, and sustainable futures.

Participants came from varied professional backgrounds with diverse expertise across the breadth of state and civil society. Attendees included academics, economists, civil servants, city councillors, policy advisors, entrepreneurs, managing directors, members of parliament, legal officers, product developers, filmmakers, risk managers, activists, cyber specialists, military commanders, journalists, and foreign language coordinators.

To this end, the conference brought together a cross section of society and posed a unique setting to foster dialogues, debates, critiques, and collaboration between German and British young professionals.

## Background

These conversations cannot be taken in isolation from the year just passed, a year marked by deepening geopolitical uncertainty, intensified competition, and cautious recalibration of global alliances.

June brought with it the NATO Hague Summit, which reinforced and increased collective commitments to defence spending while the ongoing war in Ukraine continued to dominate European security thinking. This, and other conflicts, notably that of Israel-Palestine in the Middle East, went on to serve as a poignant backdrop to German-UK relations this year, and contextualises moves to strengthen bilateral ties, most notably in the landmark Kensington Treaty.

This legally binding agreement on friendship and cooperation was signed in July, and committed to 17 priority projects across defence, migration, climate, innovation and youth exchanges. Accordingly, discussions at YKWC took particular interest in the structure, strength, and capabilities of such treaties, and the weaknesses of similar international protections.

With German-British trade outlooks turning to clean energy, advanced manufacturing, digitalisation, and defence-industrial capacity, this year's conference also asked questions of economic growth and its ability to guide us both into a technologically accelerated future, and safely from climate catastrophe. These conversations touched on populism and polarisation – spurred by disinformation, migration pressures, and national identity debates – as additional themes in wider public discourse, and examined the effects of displacement and migration on national psyches alongside the status of the liberal-democratic agenda.

In sum, this year's conference took place in an increasingly tired and tattered geopolitical landscape, though one not without beacons of hope. As well as the Kensington Treaty, I write this report as New York appoints Zohran Mamdani, its youngest Mayor in over a century, and it's a reminder you can't paint nations with broad brush strokes. With this in mind, we'll see if similar landslides may yet be precipitated by our own YKWC cohort.

## Conference Summary

### Wednesday, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2025

On Wednesday the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, delegates of the 65<sup>th</sup> Königswinter Conference came together for the first time. The next four days would be an opportunity for unscripted encounters, and opened by the Chair of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft, State Secretary ret. Anne Ruth Herkes, the group was encouraged to question, learn, and push for a new generation of bilateral solutions. For a room full of strangers, it may have felt like a daunting ask, were it not for the equally warm welcome of Manuel Knapp from the EAB, and Conference Co-Chairs Dr Birgit Bujard and John Kampfner.

This preliminary session emphasised the strengths to be found in all knowledge economies and the importance of cross-industry, cross-border collaboration. Also stressed, was the role of respect, kindness, and friendship as the group sought to disentangle some of society's thorniest challenges, with John's caveat being not to fear disagreement. With that, the room dropped its professional veneers, and delegates brought only themselves to a Tour de Table. Here, we met each other not as MP's, economists, and councillors but as Blue Grass singers, history TikTokers, amateur acrobats, skateboarders in progress, global travellers, and even novelty TV personalities.

## Opening Discussion - The Kensington Treaty

After the morning's introductions, the opening session for the YKWC centred around the aforementioned Kensington Treaty. The Treaty was discussed as an attempt to futureproof frameworks for governments, organisations, civil society and other groups working together for shared prosperity.

To this end, the Treaty was interrogated through the following lenses:

- 1) Its success in rectifying disfigured relations between the two countries post Brexit.
- 2) Its success in defining and outlining practical, actionable commitments.
- 3) The ambitiousness of its scope, including the number and type of priority projects.
- 4) The merits and capabilities of written treaties, particularly at a time where laws and agreements are being breached on an international stage.
- 5) The extent to which the public should have media awareness or detailed understanding of bilateral treaties.
- 6) The need for greater financial transparency in the budgets attached to such treaties.
- 7) The weighting of defence commitments to wider social, trade, legal, and civil projects.
- 8) The role of bilateral treaties in the context of wider governance channels e.g. the EU, the UN, the Commonwealth.

These conversations began with hands raised regarding who had heard of the Kensington Treaty prior to the YKWC, with around half the room raising their arms. This sparked a discussion on whether the treaty should have sought greater political capital, particularly in the UK, with reference made to the public obscurity of political decision-making as humorously depicted in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

Also notable, was the fact that while some in the room were heartened by the first friendship treaty between the two nations in 200 years, others felt the agreement was more mundane, and perceived it as a solidification of pre-existing commitments, largely defence-based, rather than a display of mutual ambition.

In addition, discussions identified areas that appeared to be missing from the treaty, with these ranging from legal integration and mental health to the cost of living and food security. These conversations also considered the limited scope of school exchanges in the face of shortages in modern foreign language teachers in the UK, and heightened German interest in professional secondments, including a desire for broader adult exchanges including for apprenticeships, those working in the arts, and for civil servants.

This was followed by collective scrutiny of the presentation of the 17 priority projects, with suggestions for greater detail to be applied consistently throughout, for example in relation to timeframes, responsibility allocations, budgets, and general levels of detail.

Discussions concluded with a broader consideration of the role the UK wanted to play in the EU moving forward, and whether it should seek stronger innovation, trade, and cultural bonds as opposed to simply maintaining a unified position on defence. This was explored in relation to Chancellor Merz pursuing more

opportunities for regional engagement, and the vulnerable political position of Prime Minister Keir Starmer as the UK Labour party navigates an increasingly powerful opposition.

## Study Group Introductions

Following the opening discussion, YKWC participants were split into three groups with each assigned a topic that would later be presented to the wider conference. The three groups were as follows:

- Group I - *The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?*
- Group II - *Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?*
- Group III - *Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?*

Moving between these groups in their preparatory stages, the following summary provides an insight into preliminary responses to these initial prompts.

### Group I - *The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?*

The first group started by working to define what was meant by 'old' and 'new' worlds. It was noted that a new world does exist to some extent in both countries, and that compared to the immediate post WWII period, our material circumstances, national demographics, and the political and commercial influence of climate change are markedly different.

On the other hand, others in this group interpreted the question in terms of geopolitical influence, with the 'old world dying' relating to a Eurocentric one, where both the UK and Germany were declining as global powers. Another member of the group continued this line of thought by suggesting we were entering a new era where authoritarianism was surpassing liberal democracy. This was discussed in reference to the rising popularity of AfD in Germany and the Reform party in the UK.

Reaching a more philosophical tone, the group also reflected on the lifespan of 'world order' and considered whether worlds could ever truly die or be born. Instead, they asked whether the world was always simply in flux, and rather than the negative framing of an old world dying, they could instead take this as a 'moment of transition and introspection'.

The literary origin of the group theme, from Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, was also discussed, as was the full version of his seminal quote: *'The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters'*. This consideration of monsters led to the suggestion of presenting this topic in the form of a fairytale, with reference to the Brothers Grimm and British folklore.

### Group II - *Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?*

The second group approached their topic by defining 'catching up' in relation to central categories including economic growth, social welfare, infrastructure, and green transitions. While some in the group used the starting prompt to ask whether sustainable transformation could take place under neoliberalism, the majority of the group preferred to work within existing economic bounds.

Relative wages and living standards in the UK and Germany before the 2008 financial crisis were suggested as one benchmark to try and 'catch back up to', and economic growth and innovation were discussed as reinforcing feedback loops central to transformations.

While there was a focus on the role of digitalisation and technological innovation to drive the economy, one member of the group also emphasised the social impact of innovation, for example the social isolation or accessibility of self-checkouts in supermarkets, as playing an important part of the question of 'catching up', with this holding both political opportunities and dangers.

### Group III - Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?

The third group opened their preliminary discussions with a roundtable, with all group members sharing a personal response to the starting prompt. A number of these touched on wealth in terms of access to public services, with the group then reflecting on failings in their respective countries - from difficulties booking medical appointments to lack of council housing. Others spoke on rural-urban disparities in wealth and work opportunities, and the difficulty of the job market for new graduates, particularly in an age of growing AI, and the outsourcing of digital jobs to Eastern Europe and beyond.

For one speaker, the economy was presented as the principal way to fund public services that were currently inadequate, and the slowing of GDP growth in both Germany and the UK was referenced as a point of concern. To this, a quote was shared from a German member of the group from Chancellor Merz, suggesting Germans were 'not working hard enough'. This opened a discussion as to whether this meant in relation to hours, years, or relative productivity, and whether this remark was well-founded.

Finally, the group debated what the biggest threats to growth, work and wealth were, and used the acronym PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental) to help structure their thinking. They all agreed work, growth, and wealth were intimately linked and hard to distinguish. In terms of presentation formats, they considered, manifestos, writing letters to citizens of the past and future, and mock therapy sessions as potential starting points.

### **Evening Programme**

The group was honoured to be invited to dinner at the British Ambassador's Residence in Grunewald where we were hosted by H.E. Andrew Mitchell CMG, British Ambassador to Germany.

Here, the Ambassador shared words of welcome and also spoke to the history of the British Residence itself.

*'We've been in this magnificent building since 1945 and it has been variously the residence of the British military governor in occupied West Berlin, the resident of the British ambassador in Germany during the time that Germany was separated, and now you're part of that history.'*

The group signed their names in the Residence's guest book and joined a generous discussion on the Kensington Treaty with the Ambassador before returning to EAB.

Thursday, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2025

The day started with a panel held to inform the topic for Group I – *The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?*

The speakers for this panel were Dr Jan Eichhorn, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh, and Almut Möller, Director for European and Global Affairs at the European Policy Centre.

### Panel I discussion and Q&A

Dr Eichhorn opened this panel by suggesting that while we may see shifts towards nationalist tendencies and right-wing politics as evidence of a new world rising, this could also be interpreted as the maturation of our old world order and its organisation of societies. Drawing on the academic Andrew Moravcsik, Dr Eichhorn went on to talk about how authoritarian parties and states tend to deliver bolder public policies while centrist governments, particularly Western liberal democracies such as Germany and the UK, struggle with public opinion polls, community engagement, and political dissatisfaction.

Building on these ideas, Möller spoke as a political scientist with experience in both think tanks and government. She approached the panel topic by considering Europe's position in a landscape of new global alliances, and encouraged making the most of emerging opportunities to talk to, engage with, and understand the perspectives of rising global 'worlds' such as China. This also meant, reflecting on how we want to live, what we have to share, and what we want to consolidate in the European narrative. *'This is an opportunity for the British-EU relationship to move from separation and grief to political ambition and collaboration'*.

These conversations opened to an energetic Q&A, where one member of the group sought to unpack the question of how to make liberal democratic governments 'braver'. Drawing the parallel to human personalities, they suggested that while dictatorships might feel brave due to ego, democracies could develop bravery by cultivating an environment that felt 'safe'. This may be by strengthening the European liberal democratic family, seeking ways to share resources, risks, and political opportunities.

Taking this topic a different way, others asked if we need significant economic growth to fuel radical policy changes or if we just need to improve the enforcement of policies that already exist, for example through stronger leadership from civil servants. The dangers of constitutional erosion were then discussed in relation to these ideas, including the loss of financial resources to local governments, and ways to ensure citizens had routes to action and dignity. Here, Rob Hopkins was mentioned as someone experimenting with creative, progressive, and community-responsive towns and cities, who included rather than feared electorates.

### Study Group Progressions

After the morning's panel, the YKWC delegates broke off into their groups to continue work on their presentations. Moving between the three groups in this secondary stage, the following summary provides an insight into the development of ideas.

Group I - *The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?*

The first group began by expanding on their fairytale structure, dividing into three clusters to depict the beginning, middle, and end of their story. The first cluster started by discussing the status quo of the old

world, including failed diplomacy; links between isolationism, nationalism and loneliness; the legacy of colonialism; and breaches of human rights.

Meanwhile, the second cluster considered its 'monsters'. This included the way that monsters can be misunderstood, as with characters in *Studio Ghibli* films, and questions about who should take responsibility for making, releasing, or perhaps reintegrating these monsters back into society. Initial ideas for monsters included climate change and disruptive technologies like AI and social media.

This left the third cluster to focus on imagining the 'happily ever after' of the new world. This included ideas drawn from interspecies parliaments; a desire to facilitate greater cultural knowledge sharing; and a commitment to not continuing colonial patterns of simply telling other nations what to do. The consensus for this cluster was to explore a new German-British world order that 'led by example'.

One of the other main themes of Group I's discussions centred around how to encourage more consistent applications of international laws. One group member suggested framing this in relation to how to motivate young children to do what you want, and how good parenting isn't about threatening or punishing, but compromise and being clear about shared benefits. Social ostracization or accountability was also discussed as a motivator to change behaviours, with reference to Elinor Ostrom's seminal work '*Governing the Commons*'.

#### Group II - Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?

The second group began this session by narrowing down core systems for change in both countries. These included entrepreneurial culture, labour supply, procurement, skills, funding, and regulation. It was suggested that if Germany in particular, wanted to 'catch up' to the USA or China, two core issues of risk aversion and laborious bureaucracy would have to be tackled.

More broadly, the group spoke about enabling conditions in comparatively strengthened European nations such as Poland, and also discussed alternative models such as Kate Raworth's '*Doughnut Economics*' as a means to innovate and transform within ecological and social boundaries.

One group member also noted that no single European country has all the infrastructure to be self-sufficient when it comes to transformation, so the challenge with this topic would be for creating a distinct but co-dependent environment to make innovation both competitive and strategically secure. It was suggested that this could include a certain level of UK-DE, DE-UK mandatory public procurement, or the two nations sharing some of their wider historic trade routes for example the British Commonwealth. By the end of this session a consensus was reached in regard to answering the topic by 'getting the basics right', with the presentation idea being a life-sized boardgame or race.

#### Group III - Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?

The third group used this session to reflect on the fact that not everybody has the freedom to decide what their work, growth, and wealth look like, and with that being the case, it may be best to consider how societal structures can help enable more equitable decision-making in all three categories. This was made in reference to social mobility issues in both nations.

A large mind map was then used to further unpack some more nuances around all three words. Work was related to skills, purpose, financial gain, security, daily rhythms, social circles, and free time. Growth was linked to GDP, innovation, personal improvement, education and knowledge, sustainability, equality, public

services for a growing population, and cultural shifts. And wealth was connected to quality of life, public and private ownership, personal power and political influence, generational security, inequality, health, happiness, and safety.

The group then decided to focus on 'work' as the linchpin connecting growth and wealth, and built a list of all the things they felt they would like to experience or gain from work in an ideal world.

This list stated that utopian structures of work would:

- Provide personal purpose and the feeling that time was being used well
- Offer balance and flexibility (e.g. to cook, exercise, made medical appointments)
- Provide stability
- Take place in a safe workplace
- Be environmentally net positive
- Provide personal growth and constructive criticism
- Ensure personal freedom to safely express yourself (gender, sexuality, religion)
- Foster a sense of belonging and community
- Treat workers with dignity, respect and kindness
- Generate a sense of 'affluence'
- Not limit other people's opportunities
- Include moments of joy/fun

## Panel II discussion and Q&A

After lunch the second panel of the day began on the topic for Group II – *Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?*

The panel speakers were Tom Nuttall, The Economist's chief Germany correspondent and Marc Weissgerber, the Executive Director of E3G, an independent climate change think tank.

Nuttall began this discussion by sharing the perspective of German SME's he had recently interviewed, with these expressing frustrations over tax, economic and industrial regulations, and the wider global trade environment. Germany was discussed as a nation substantially export dependent, and the group assessed the vulnerabilities of this position and the need for a political system able to respond to global procurement shifts affected by geopolitics and climate change.

This led to a broader discussion on finding additional reserves to spend on the green transition, with Weissgerber clarifying that such funds should not be seen as an 'expense' but as investment which carried both financial and social returns. This, it was suggested, should encourage nations to engage in the sector more ambitiously and rapidly, as has been the case with China.

At this point the floor was opened for a Q&A with questions including: where Germany and the UK should prioritise spending political capital and whether Europe should try to catch up in fields such as AI. In relation to the first of these points, one of the group members shared how in Germany there seemed to be a greater culture war when it came to the Green Agenda. With the recent success of UK Green Party leader Zack Polanski – increasing membership almost 50% since his arrival – the UK delegates agreed.

Here, conversations suggested there was broader British public support related to the affordability, health, and security benefits of domestic renewable energy and environmental policies, and national psychology was discussed as a significant force impacting responses to change. Despite this, one member of the group

noted how the Green Party's success seemed to stem more from a focus on the cost-of-living crisis than explicit environmental policy.

Another member of the group also approached this topic by suggesting we should seek to bring supply chains and manufacturing back to Europe, with critiques that Germany was stuck in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in terms of well-established, but hyper-specialist, large companies. Reference here was made to 'das Ruhrgebiet', a region in Western Germany equivalent to the American Rust Belt, and barriers to scaling innovation. The general consensus was that Britain and Germany were both successful in the research stages of innovation but faced restrictions in capital markets and pension structures that hampered investment in the \$10 million to \$1 billion range.

The panel discussion ended with a reflection that it was not necessarily rules that were restricting innovation and growth, but often bureaucracy, with some areas such as emissions pricing seeing a lack of regulation and clarity, and others being slowed through obstructive paperwork.

### **Afternoon Programme**

After the second panel, YKWC participants spent the afternoon at the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion and Reconciliation, where they were guided on a multi-lingual tour.

Reflections and stories of their own family heritages spilled over into dinner at Little Tibet Restaurant in Kreuzberg.

### **Friday, 31 October, 2025**

The morning began with a fireside chat on Group III's topic – *Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth*. This began with inputs and perspectives from YKWC participants: Cameron Aref Adib, Lukas Gast, Olivia Soady and Elizabeth Young.

### **Panel III Fireside Chat Discussion**

This discussion began with British delegates noting the relative lack of economic growth in the UK since the financial crisis. While the raising of minimum wages was mentioned as a constructive system that has helped support living standards, delegates noted many core occupations, such as medical professionals, continue to strike in pursuit of salaries proportionate to the rate of inflation. One delegate quoted that the average British individual was 20% worse off economically than their German counterparts, and also stated that the greatest difference was seen in low-income households.

This led to a wider group consensus among both German and British delegates that unless you were born into wealth, it was very difficult to change your economic positions. Suggested ways to tackle these inequalities included: lowering thresholds for affordable housing, increasing requirements for social housing within development projects, tackling loopholes in inherited wealth, restructuring the ways wealth is taxed, and creating bi-lateral municipal or occupational networks that tended to people's needs beyond electoral cycles. The latter of these propositions went on to open up discussions on regional inequalities in both Germany and the UK, and debates on how stronger town/city twinning might be harnessed to greater mutual benefit.

Similarly, following suggestions that young people are unable to break wealth ceilings, the group discussed emerging incentives in the workplace. These included the four-day work week (of which several delegates had already sought and enjoyed); flexibility for childcare; mental health support; positive social/gender

dynamics; the right to disconnect; travel opportunities; and continued professional development. In this sense, 'good employment' was no longer primarily perceived as long-term contracts, high salaries, or large pensions. It was more significantly linked to personal lifestyles and freedoms.

Another strand of discussion in this session centred around the rise of AI and robotics. Here, it was identified that there was an increasingly delicate balance between the benefits of mundane jobs and physical labour being outsourced from humans, and the fear of individuals losing their jobs, livelihoods, and purpose.

While one delegate made the point this issue would also concentrate money in the hands of a few tech-innovators, other people felt confident that markets in both nations could adapt, *'as with the transition of scribes to typewriters, and typewriters to word processors'*. The UK's entrepreneurial capacity was also cited as a reason for confidence, with one British delegate describing it as *'a nation of shopkeepers'*. A caveat to this was provided in the fact that much of these shopkeeper's work was non-formalised and struggled to scale. Meanwhile, one German delegate asked if the security of employment in any number of large, stable national corporations failed to encourage a healthy 'start-up' culture.

## Afternoon Programme

After lunch, YKWC participants transferred to the city centre for a guided walking tour. Following this, the delegates made their way to a reception for Alumni of the Young Königswinter Conference and the British-German Forum, held at the British Embassy in Berlin.

Here, the evening's speaker was Ben Coleman, Labour MP for Chelsea and Fulham:

*'75 years after the Königswinter Conference's foundation our countries are cooperating in ways we could only have dreamed of and brilliant young people are living, working, studying, and building futures in each other countries. It's truly extraordinary.'*

*'My hope for our two nations is that we see the deepening of our tremendous bilateral activity and at the same time explore new opportunities, and fresh, positive action at the EU level that can support growth and protect the democratic values that define us.'*

## Saturday, 1 November 2025

On the last day of the conference, time was dedicated to group work in preparation for the afternoon's presentations. This included rehearsals and final troubleshooting. After lunch, all groups joined back together for the plenary session. These are summarised below.

### Group Presentations

Group 1 - *The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Is the global order collapsing?*

This group presentation began with a series of 'old world' fairytales.

*'Once upon a time, all nations had different rules which meant they fought against each other terribly. Then one day, three fantastic heroes, the ICC, the ICJ and the WTO, arrived to save the day and now when bad things happen, these heroes tell us right from wrong - and we all lived happily ever after.'*

*'Once upon a time, we had an economic system that worked for everyone; global trade, free trade, all monitored by those who had everyone's best interests at heart. This was a time of social markets - where we traded resources, debt, mortgages, goods and services in a way that superseded cumbersome regulation - and we all lived happily ever after.'*

*'Once upon a time, we decided to act for the good of humanity and worked to solve terrible diseases like HIV/AIDS. Germany gave lots of money to global aid projects and the UK set up the Department for International Development which would live for ever and ever and ever. We also signed the Paris Climate Agreement to stop climate change - and all lived happily ever after.'*

Between each fairytale whispered mentions were made of things that complicated these simple narratives: international wars, breaches of human rights, the financial crisis, and extreme weather. But the storytellers hushed these whispers away.

At this point, more group members burst into the room as 'monsters' - unignorable characters depicting:

- **Climate Change** - including species extinctions, floods, droughts, and climate migration
- **Disrupting Technologies** - including AI and new energy, warfare, and communication tools
- **Isolationism** - including nationalism, militarisation, loneliness, and individualism
- **Disillusionment** - including the end of institutional order and weakening of social contracts
- **Insecurity** - including volatile geopolitics but also hope and action for something better

These monsters were introduced not just as threats, but as opportunities and warning systems, albeit clothed in frightening masks. As one participant announced to the room: *'They challenge us, test us, and demand that we grow stronger, wiser, and more human.'*

And so, instead of ignoring them, the group joined their arms together to embrace the monsters, leaving the final act of the presentation to tell a braver, better story of the 'new world'.

In this vision of a future Germany and UK, nature was embedded within people's daily lives, colonial patterns of waste shipping were replaced by domestic management, sea drilling was banned, and cities were powered by clean hydrogen. As for trade, this became less about materials and more about purpose, merging UK's creativity with German precision. Here, people were paid their true worth and instead of chasing endless growth, both nations pursued more of what really mattered: trust, balance, and belonging.

Furthermore, both nations would harness education to bring in a new consciousness, with school curricula adapted for the 21<sup>st</sup> C. This included integrating understandings of technology, including child safe AI programmes, and using the arts and culture to lead projects visualising collective infrastructure. This was a world that also rewired its international diplomacy, where the UK and Germany were bolder, more innovative, and less bureaucratic. This included talking to more countries than ever before, and breaking up echo chambers with new partnerships, for example in West Africa.

By doing so, the new Europe acknowledged its past, acted with integrity, grew stronger, safer, and more sympathetic to the things its people really needed. Where the old world created profits, the new world created meaning, and as the presentation concluded, the YKWC participants took to the floor for a discussion.

## Discussion

This discussion acknowledged many of the frameworks for this new world already existed, for example in international laws, but the issues lay in these not being upheld across the board. Here, one participant made the point that while we were good at activating laws against our 'enemies', we were less competent when it came to holding our 'friends' to account. Further reflections commented on the fact that while in the initial fairytales, we were good at celebrating our 'wins', we tend to be less proactive when it comes to acknowledging our failings.

Following this, another conversation opened up about the importance of bringing 'the monsters' to the table, as it would only be through engagement and understanding them that we could build a just world. This led another participant to comment on the way the old world and new world could also co-exist for a period of time, as with a literal mother and child. Here, if the 'mother old world' was good, it would help the new world to be its best self, teaching it lessons from its own mistakes before eventually passing on.

The group closed with a hope that greater alliances, more integrity, and increased responsiveness to our publics would help liberal democracies regain popularity against authoritarian states, and prevent this new vision of the world becoming its own wishful fairytale.

### Group II - *Innovation, transformation: how do both countries catch up?*

This presentation began with three group members standing side-by-side on a life-sized playing board. One player represented an entrepreneur in the UK, another in Germany, and the last in the fictionalised, ideal nation of Königswinterland. An AI-generated presenter was then projected onto the screen and announced the parameters of the game. The aim of the game was to see which of the entrepreneurs could take their 'big idea' through a series of obstacles the quickest, and so win their government's moonshot prizes for innovative transformation.

The first obstacle would be 'culture', and in each country this related to what happened when players shared their initial ideas with friends, family, and their wider communities. For the German and UK players, these cultural voices were quick to seed doubt. They suggested the player was a fool or crazy, and focused on the risks involved, from bankruptcy to making future employees redundant. For the German player, progress was further slowed by voices suggesting they forget their idea entirely and sign on to a nice, big, safe company instead like everyone else.

Meanwhile, in Königswinterland, progression up the board was aided by a community amazed, supportive, and proud of their ideas. Emphasis was put on what was possible and how they could make the world a better place, and the community also contributed helpful introductions, offers of early funding, and formative feedback including from varied private and public parties.

The second round of the game then focused on the set up and legal formalisation of each entrepreneur's business. For the Germany player, a large stack of paperwork and lengthy assessment periods delayed their progress up the board, while in the UK, a quick review of the player's Companies House form and a nominal fee had them move on to the next stage (despite potential delays down the line). In Königswinterland however, a simple but thorough single form made the processes a one-stop-shop to formalisation.

Next up was the third stage of the race, which described how each nation dealt with entrepreneurial funding. Here, due to its mature markets and focus on tech, the UK player managed to acquire Series A

funding with relatively ease, allowing them to take a modest step forward. Meanwhile, in Germany, Series A funding was also unlocked from European innovation, funding programmes, and VCs. Unfortunately, for larger Series B funding, both these players were forced to look to the USA for greater capital, stronger growth, and wider funding networks.

Meanwhile, in Königswinterland, our player took a large step forward after enjoying access to deep capital markets right through Series B and C funding. This was achieved through higher limits for banks and pensions to VCs, guaranteed investment for high-tech strategic innovation companies, and a more mature VC network that recycled funding into new ideas and ecosystems.

The next round of the game turned to employment, with Germany gradually hiring and growing their business through strong dual education systems that produced technically skilled workers alongside a culture of life-long learning. This progress was accelerated by access to multiple languages and an extended workforce from the European continent. For the UK however, progress up the board was slowed due to Brexit regulations restricting the labour force, lower language capabilities, and an education system more focused on the theoretical than the technical.

For the Königswinterland player, however, global working visas attracted world class innovators, along with an existing pool of domestic high-qualified STEM professionals. These were supported by a modern, adaptive curriculum aligned with emerging technologies, while rich-multi-lingual environments and exchanges with built in study-to-industry pathways, helped our entrepreneur hire forward-thinking team members.

After this round, it was time for the players to start thinking about infrastructure. This could either be hired out from a third party or come from investing in, and building, their own. To get ground clearance to build new infrastructure in the UK, costs would be high for our entrepreneur, in part because of the lack of space on the small island (unless they had access to offshore opportunities). Meanwhile, in Germany, with land already widely assigned for various uses such as agriculture, our entrepreneur would have to argue hard to have land reallocated.

Once this land was secured, they would also need surveying for cables, pipes, and industrial foundations, further burning through both country's initial funding. For our German player, it could look to recoup costs from access to European capital opportunities and construction networks, but both they and the UK player would also be up against Governments rife with internal disputes and variances in communications, budgets, and infrastructural priorities.

Meanwhile, in Königswinterland, a more robust, all-informed network prevailed where communication between companies, land users, and Governments was easily facilitated. Here, trust was given to organisations to make their own decisions and agile project management, live documentation, and continued high-risk investment from the state and private sectors, accelerated infrastructural scaling aligned to the moonshot goal.

The final step the players had to traverse before 'lift off' was political will, and here again, the UK and Germany were slowed. Both nations were limited by electoral cycles and short-term industrial impulses that overlooked our entrepreneurs projects in favour of quick fixes to stimulate growth.

Meanwhile, in Königswinterland, our player faced a far more strategic landscape with political understanding that joint decisions have joint benefits, including for our long-term economies. Here, parties realised they must work together to leverage resources for entrepreneurs and strategies were mutual and consistent, allowing our Königswinter player to be the first past the finishing post.

## Discussion

With the race over, the group then opened the floor for discussion, with it being suggested that Germany and the UK should pay greater attention to each of these core phrases to help good ideas mature. The emphasis here was on the state helping to create enabling environments for innovation, rather than innovation needing to come from the state directly.

A domestic example of this process was cited in London's Super Sewer, a 25-year project where the government set up the core legislation, derisked the project, and then moved aside for the private sector to execute it. A number of the group agreed with this approach, expressing frustration that the UK seemed to have 'a new industrial strategy every 20 minutes', and there was general consensus that there needs to be systems in place to help large, multi-year transformation projects maintain a steady keel during shorter political cycles.

In terms of ideas to help solve some of these problems, it was suggested that German and UK industry players at all levels could benefit from a European Silicon Valley, providing more opportunities to talk to each other, pool funding, and nurture innovation. This could also have inbuilt joining incentives for cross nation, cross sector, and demographically diverse innovation teams, particularly in regard to the fact only ~16% of business founders are women.

Finally, it was highlighted that no single nation has all stages of the boardgame perfected, so plenty of scope for cooperation and capability sharing exists. Here, one participant called for more creative incentives to support business ideas, for example tax returns for businesses that increase employment by a certain number over a 5-year period, or grant awards for businesses that collaborate with regional or twin cities.

### Group III - Do we need to change our whole approach to work/growth/wealth?

The final group to present their topic assembled the room as if for a husting. At the front sat three representatives from our future society, and in the audience were other group members planted to ask questions.

First though, the panel chair introduced the session by asking the room to raise their hands if they believed they were 'wealthy'. A mixture of hands were raised and we were encouraged to think about this question and our answers as a narrator set the scene for the planned public debate.

*'The year is 2075, the new world order is firmly established and the Kensington Treaty has exceeded all expectations. We have turned the tide on climate change, we have global peace, 500,000 school trips have happened in the last 50 years, digitisation and technology has continued to reshape our world rapidly, and plans for the railway between Germany and the UK have at last had full planning approval.*

*Diplomatic relations have now reached the point where we have the 'Kensington Coalition' and this has set up joint policy for both countries making radical changes including the introduction of a standard 4-day working week and a highly controversial trial gifting each citizen of our two nations a birthright grant of £/€ 50,000 on their eighteenth birthday to try and increase social mobility.'*

With this context laid, the 2075 panel on work, growth and wealth, was opened and the following fictional panellists introduced:

- **Constantine** – a 25-year-old conservative representative

- **Ron** – an 80-year-old liberal representative who lived through the birth of the Kensington Treaty
- **AlphaX** – a 35-year-old tech representative from the AI industry, accompanied by their personal AI assistant Drew-bot (played by another group member).

The floor was then opened to the first question: *'We currently have a four-day-work week do you think this is still the optimal approach for our coalition and citizens?'*

Here, AlphaX began the discussion by acknowledging the incredible success of the four-day week. This was described in terms of the public having greater mental capacity for creativity, and increased productivity, innovation, and economic growth as a result. This was framed as a particular boost for the AI sector with AlphaX's Drew-bot being introduced as positive evidence of AI guiding people lives and enhancing strategic decision-making.

This logic led AlphaX to go even further, proposing a three-day-working week and encouraging the audience to allow AI to take on even more labour responsibilities. This came with a plea for greater resources, investment, and liberalising legislation to support AI's expansion, including greater European water and electricity allocations.

Constantine then came in to offer their view. They asked the room to consider if the four-day work week was so productive, perhaps it was time to think about what five-days a week could do. This was proposed to increase people's affluence but also sense of belonging and identity in work, which had been lost since Constantine's great-grandparent's generation. Here, criticisms were also made of 2075's younger generation floating into a media void.

Ron closed this question by defending the four-day work week, recalling their younger days when the transition from five days a week to four days was first introduced. Ron described burnout, mental health, and crises in productivity as key incentives for this turn, with business research showing this was the right decision.

The second question for the panel was then put forward: *'As I'm sure you're aware the two-year trial of the birthright grant is somewhat controversial, with some saying it's not financially sustainable. Is this something you'd hope to become a permanent feature of our coalition?'*

Constantine took this question first, calling the trial a *'lunatic's approach to winning elections'*. In their opinion, the grant made young people lazy and unskilled, and Constantine hoped by ending it young people would regain an interest in generating their own wealth, thereby boosting the economy. Ron rebuffed this criticism by stating the grant was not designed to increase wealth but to tackle wealth inequality. That said, Ron acknowledged adjustments should be made when the trial finished to means test and adjust it over certain thresholds, ensuring its financial sustainability.

AlphaX, took this question in another way, saying the trial should be continued because of the huge opportunities it had for young people to invest in, and harness AI. They cited the fact that humans were not reliable financial decision makers and by giving their birthright grants to 'AI finance managers', young people could trust in sustainable economic futures.

This prompted the third question from the room: *'AI has seen unprecedented growth in the last 50 years, we can all agree on that, but are we actually happier now it's here?'*

Ron took this question first and said that while recent GDP growth from AI has been fantastic, when he talks to his children and grandchildren, he is concerned he can't seem to hold proper conversations with them. In addition, he mentioned that despite what the AI lobby says, AI has also led to job destruction and inequalities are re-emerging as a result. Ron voiced their desire for a new wider metric for societal progress and one that revisits the question of relationships and happiness.

Constantine, on the other hand, shared how in their family, their grandparents often spoke of how small their economies were back in the day, and this new boom period meant freedom that shouldn't be taken for granted. In their opinion, today everyone is better off for AI and having this wealth, in materials, goods, and choices, is something that makes them and many others, happy.

AlphaX agreed with this approach, and looked back at the inflated fear of the 2020s surrounding AI and it taking everyone's jobs. They pointed to a new algorithm that measured human happiness and showed publics were happier than ever. They then went on to push the argument one step further and asked the room if happiness and human emotions were really the most helpful metrics for society anyway, considering they were so variable and random.

The last question came from a concerned citizen asking *about 'the role of education in our current societies'*, with AlphaX, agreeing that the existing education system was outdated. They called for a shift from books, online texts, and in person teachers to something more personalised and creative. They cited AI's role in democratising access to knowledge and the scope for individualised learning plans that reflect specific, adaptable learning styles. Anticipating the other panellists saying this would lead to a drop in critical thinking skills, AlphaX also said human critical thought would soon be less important as AI assistants became more mainstream and took over analytic responsibilities.

Ron agreed there were merits to AI in education, but worried that interpersonal skills had been lost. They cited an event 50 years prior called the Young Königswinter Conference where informal time spent together had been hugely educational and transformative.

Finally, Constantine drew attention to the many things that AI still can't do. *Who is building the Berlin-London railway?* While also raising the point that going to school and university in person was important to build communities of belonging. With people living longer, their suggestion was that people should in fact go to school for extended periods creating a future generation who *'know who they are, where they come from, who have manners, communities of identity, and who take pride in their skills and what they know'*.

## Discussion

This brought the panel to an end, and discussions opened to the floor. The first debate focused on the future water-consumption of AI, cloud, and quantum computing technologies, and anticipated transitions towards air-cooling systems to minimise resource-based conflicts.

While some in the group still feared AI would end up diverting water or energy supplies from the needs of poorer or less technologically competitive communities, others pointed to market mechanisms where large companies with vested interest in resources, tend to be the first to finance and invest in their protection, as with Coca Cola's investment in fresh water projects.

Meanwhile, another line of discussion observed the likelihood that as lifespans increase, individuals will come to inherit wealth later in their lives, with this potentially having knock-on consequences for work, growth and wealth. On the one hand, it was suggested this pattern might help incentivise younger generations to make their own wealth as they do not receive their parents' until later in their lives, but on

the other hand, it was felt this may increase surges of intergenerational wealth transference to grandchildren as individuals looked for loopholes in inheritance tax. On this, one group member suggested the proposed birthright grant would also likely exacerbate wealth disparities in the present day, with those whose parents can financially advise them, compounding their advantage.

The last few discussions of the day centred around the way that the Army in the UK has a positive culture to long-term learning, with 'learning credits' potentially being something that could benefit wider society. Meanwhile, the topic of more creative policies to incentivise wealth transference was also brought up in relation to housing shortages, with one delegate suggesting we could encourage elderly individuals in larger houses to downsize earlier, for example through stamp duty exemptions or other tax reductions.

On the question of work, wealth, and growth, the last comment was made in reference to singer Cat Stevens, with one participant concluding that whatever our future, core social questions can't be forgotten, citing Steven's song: *'Where do the children play?'.*

### **Concluding Remarks**

Participants reflected on the experience of the conference and the merits of coming together outside of our professional and political echo chambers. Benefits were noted in how present all attendees were in their interactions and the comparably reduced time participants spent on their digital devices and social media platforms.

In terms of UK-DE and DE-UK relations, everyone agreed it was beneficial to step out of our national and professional bubbles and there was hope that diversity of opinion and backgrounds continued to be a priority for the future of the conference.

### **Farewells**

The end of the 65<sup>th</sup> YKWC was marked by an evening of pizza and drinks at EAB.

During these farewell discussions there was some sense that while German delegates could name many facets of British identity they were fond of – from universities and the royal family to films and music – it was noted that the British counterparts found it more difficult to reflect on successful German imports into favourable British culture. Christmas and many of its traditions were identified as one, and folkloric fairytales as another.

Discussions considered whether this imbalance was economically and politically problematic in an equal partnership, and how it could be rectified and strengthened. One recommendation included increasing the literary and arts representation at the YKWC.

### **Postscript**

In the month since finishing the conference, a number of small YKWC gatherings have already taken place in both cities, including most recently, a delegate tour of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in London.

Kate Balding  
London, December 2025

