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Report

British German Forum 2017

Securing the future in a changing world to 2020 and beyond

Sunday 9 – Thursday 13 July 2017 | WP1549

With support from:





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This year's group of young leaders from the UK and Germany, who met for the 31st British German Forum, identified practical ways to strengthen ties between Germany and the UK over the next three years in the lead up to and beyond Brexit.

Their hope is that their manifesto for 'Freundship', an amalgamation of the British and German words for friendship, will strengthen the bilateral relationship between both countries. The concrete suggestions made by the group emphasise the significant areas of shared interests and common values of the two countries, the important role played by exchanges, and the need to work together to find joint solutions to the challenging global context.

The British German Forum (BGF) was established by Chancellor Kohl and Margaret Thatcher in 1985 and provides a dynamic space in which future leaders can network and share ideas among their peers, construct common understandings and build strong relationships between influential young Britons and Germans.

The suggestions made below, summarised in four pillars and a manifesto, are the result of the conversations between participants in the Forum's final two sessions:

Building a positive narrative

1. A key challenge is defining a positive narrative about the UK's place in Europe and its relationship with Germany. Messages from the British government intended for a domestic audience can be damaging on the continent, especially with businesses. Media can also be unhelpful, feeding into negative perceptions of the UK in Europe. Public debate needs to be informed but sensational arguments can erode trust.
2. Strategic communications partnerships can engage the public in both countries and contribute to a positive narrative about British-German cooperation. The British Embassy in Berlin was noted as supporting a positive narrative highlighting and promoting acts of #Freundship on social media.

Overcoming shared challenges

3. The UK and Germany also have opportunities to learn from each other and collaborate further, especially about how to overcome shared challenges. Older generations are currently defining the course of Brexit. The young need to claim their stake in the UK's future beyond Brexit and look at how they can positively shape relations with Britain's European partners after Brexit.

4. Uncertainty over regulation and arbitration is fuelling uncertainty. The UK and its European partners should consider bringing non-governmental stakeholders, such as businesses or NGOs, together to make practical proposals about how this could work in their areas of practice. For example the Bertelsmann Foundation has already begun work on an initiative which convenes a board of experts whose advice can help enrich debate and discussion around the Brexit process more generally.
5. A nuanced dialogue about identity and belonging needs to be held in a new era of integration which is unfolding in both countries. Participants also recognised the importance of building a positive vision of nationalism and national identity bound up with diversity and equality.

Promoting exchange

6. Exchanges play an important role in building stronger connections between Germany and the UK. Participants suggested that the number of exchanges should be increased and that they take place across a variety of age groups and sectors.
7. The future of the British German relationship lies with young people, who are also the group that feel that they have the most to lose from Brexit. In addition to strengthening ties between governments, peer to peer dialogue was identified as a key avenue to engage young people in the UK and Germany's relationship. Exchanges at school, undergraduate and postgraduate level play an important role in building links between the two countries. Seminars similar to the BGF could be held for younger age groups to increase their understanding and create relationships at an earlier age.
8. At the government level, the UK's exit from European institutions will leave a void where previous exchange between counterparts took place. Regular bilateral exchanges between British and German civil servants could fill this gap. Similar sector specific exchange and collaboration could also be beneficial for the private sector. The potential of bringing together start-ups from both countries to discuss new opportunities was recognised as an area for further co-operation.

Constructing a shared future

9. It is important to identify areas of common interest for Germany and the UK beyond Brexit. Britain and Germany share a large range of interests which already form the basis for cooperation. Public health, international aid, promotion of human rights and equality, the circular economy, climate change and technological innovation are all platforms from which to build further collaboration.
10. The issues on which the UK and Germany cooperate speak to a wider set of shared values and each country's stake in a liberal, rules based international order. Recognising that we have common fundamental principles and values in our society and face similar challenges can be a powerful tool to influence international affairs and forge closer ties. Germany and the UK can work together to play a constructive role in other international fora beyond the EU, including the G20, as signatories of the Paris Climate Accord and within NATO and the UN.
11. However, Brexit is jeopardising cooperation. Areas of partnership previously under EU authority are now subject to negotiation and have become more contentious. Therefore, the UK and Germany should concentrate on building consensus around subjects that lie outside negotiations and continue cooperating on the themes outlined above. Jeopardising collaboration on areas of common interest risks damaging the British-German relationship.

A manifesto for 'Freundship'

12. One group of participants wrote a manifesto focused on solutions to bridge the gap between the respective positions of the British Government and the EU 27. The group noted that although solutions were hard to come by, there is more that brings the UK and Germany closer together than pushes them apart. Their manifesto is as follows:

"We believe our generation faces common challenges and has more in common than that which divides us. We identified the following areas where, notwithstanding whatever comes to pass with Brexit, deeper collaboration and cooperation are needed between Britain and Germany:

1. Addressing the erosion of democratic legitimacy and the belief that our post-war institutions are no longer fit for purpose.
2. Committing to work together, from regional, national and global perspectives, on the issues that face our countries and the world.

Regardless of our personal opinions on Brexit, the dramatic change it is provoking will provide an opportunity to restart our bilateral relationship, as well as strengthen the union of the EU 27.

Britain and Germany, with the EU, or in partnership with it, must remain a force for peace, stability and tolerance. This is best achieved by: fostering unity through diversity, reducing economic inequality, forging a shared sense of what a multicultural identity means, increasing innovation and trade in our respective countries and achieving the Global Goals for Sustainable Development through building a low carbon future, creating decent work for all and ending extreme poverty by 2030."

Ed Calvert

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