

MEETING MINUTES

Cross Party Group on Germany

Wednesday, 30th September 2015, 5.30pm

Committee Room 3

Next Meeting

Wednesday, 25th November 2015, 5.30pm

Committee Room 4

Attendees

Colin Beattie MSP, Scottish Parliament
Eleoma Bodammer, Edinburgh University
Jan Eichhorn, Edinburgh University
Annette Götzkes, Edinburgh University
Graeme Henderson, Scottish Parliament
Susanne Horsburgh, German citizen
Colin Keir MSP, Scottish Parliament
Sigrid Rieuwerts, Mainz University
Heinrich Schnettger, German Consul
Barbara Strickland, German citizen
James Trolland, Ridrum International
Jens-Peter Voss, Consul General of Germany
Petra Wend, Queen Margaret University

Apologies Cameron Buchanan MSP, Manuela Calchini, John Clifford, Kirsten Herbst-Gray, Peter Müller-McDougall, Jeanette Rissmann

Colin Beattie (CB) opened the meeting at 17.40, and welcomed new Consul General Jens-Peter Voss (JPV) to the group.

Topics Discussed:

Approval of previous minutes

The group read through the previous minutes. No changes were required.

Sigrid Rieuwerts (SR) brought a leaflet advertising the 'Study – Explore – Travel' programme in England to present to the group.

Jan Eichhorn – Edinburgh University

CB welcomed Jan Eichhorn (JE) from Edinburgh University to the meeting. JE gave a presentation to the group on the similarities and differences between the political systems and attitudes in Germany and the UK, and within the separate countries of the UK itself.

JE discussed the issue of constitutional change in both countries, referring to examples such as Germany's Federalism Reform Commission and the English

MEETING MINUTES

devolution of powers to Manchester. JE noted that due to the differences in process in each country, Germany cannot really be compared with the UK in this context.

JE referred to a public opinion survey his team had carried out between the September 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the May 2015 General Election. This survey found, amongst other points, that outside Greater London the majority of respondents believed local referenda should be used to make decisions ahead of Westminster.

The study also found that across the UK the majority of respondents believe welfare benefits are too high, that the UK should remain in the EU but reduce the powers the EU has, and that the overall majority of voters in the UK should decide whether the UK should remain in the EU as part of an EU referendum. JE noted that this last point was more divisive in Scotland (45% for a country by country veto vs 55% for overall UK majority) than elsewhere.

CB asked JE how they managed to ensure that the survey respondents were not 'political anoraks'. JE said they had used a representative sample and kept the questions neutral to interest people in a 'boring' topic.

CB asked JE how they allowed for the disproportionate numbers for respondents in each UK country. JE said they used oversampling and a weighting system to balance the respondents out.

Colin Keir (CK) noted the lack of federalism in UK was causing problems in the delivery of the forthcoming Scotland 2015-16 Bill. JE mentioned that the speed of the process in the Bill's creation was too fast to allow for all consultation responses to be taken into account.

SR asked if there was a double bind in that, if Scots wanted to stay in both the UK and the EU, they would need to vote 'No' in an EU referendum if the decision lay with the majority of UK voters. JE replied that there was an issue in how to frame the EU referendum question and who would determine the narrative, and noted that only 6-7% of Scots identify as European while constitutional change in Scotland had not seen a rise in national Scottish identity.

James Trolland (JT) observed that the main financial centres in Europe of London, Zurich and Geneva were outside the EU in terms of competitiveness, and that the EU becomes less important economically as the UK re-brands itself. JE said that the overemphasis on financial capital should be discussed more, and also noted that the migration debate was difficult to resolve.

Eleoma Bodammer (EB) asked whether a UK vote to leave the EU would result in new independence referenda in the separate UK countries. The group discussed what would be the trigger points for this to happen. JE noted that the pro- and anti-Scottish independence groups were evenly split on the EU.

CK mentioned that the European Parliament elections were the hardest to engage the electorate. JE said that people care about the pragmatic implications but they don't always see the link with the EU, and that if one side could benefit if it could mobilise voters over the other side

CB thanked JE for speaking with the Group.

MEETING MINUTES

Other Business

Consul-General Jens-Peter Voss

JPV thanked the group for welcoming him, and spoke on his consular background including his work in countries as varied as Copenhagen, China, Rome, North Korea and Haiti.

Political/Economic update

Heinrich Schnettger (HS) informed the group about a forthcoming delegation visit from the Conservative Party of Bavaria.

Cultural update

HS noted that the Goethe Institut had appointed a new director. SR mentioned that the Institut had recently welcomed three new trainees to the German Educational Trainees Across Borders program, and that the program itself had won the "Committed to Uniqueness 2015" award.

JPV mentioned he had recently been in Aberdeen to attend the 60th anniversary celebrations of Aberdeen becoming a twin town to Regensburg. JT spoke of an initiative he is launching to link younger people from Glasgow and Nuremburg through football. SR noted that the ERASMUS funding scheme can also be used for sporting initiatives and that its budget was being increased by 12% from 2017.

AOB

Barbara Strickland asked why the group wasn't named 'CPG for German-speaking countries'. CB replied that the group had initially been set up as the CPG for Germany and that the other consulates had become members further down the line having regard for cultural similarities, for example language .

The group agreed to examine changing the March 2016 meeting date to 16th March due to Scottish Parliament elections.

CB raised an email sent to him by the British Chamber of Commerce in Germany, asking for help with its profile being raised. GH mentioned he had invited the BCCG to speak to the group at the January meeting, but to date no response had been forthcoming.

Action point – Graeme Henderson to circulate the email around the group; the group to decide how to take this forward.

Colin Beattie closed the meeting at 19.08.