

Association for the Study of German Politics (ASGP)

Conference Report:

Hertford College, Oxford, 15-16 April, 2004.

The ASGP has reached yet another milestone. At Hertford College, Oxford on the 15-16th April 2004, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the ASGP, the membership had an ideal opportunity to take stock of the key events in German politics which characterised the first thirty years, and to indicate likely areas in which research will reach fruition in the future.

Initially, this task fell to the former Gladstone Professor of Politics at All Souls College, Oxford, and one of the most esteemed members of the association, Peter Pulzer. With characteristic wit and eloquence, Professor Pulzer noted the healthy British interest in German affairs in the immediate post-war period. It was this interest which led Professor Pulzer to caution the membership of the ASGP away from the 'warm soup of consensus' and the danger of not being able to raise innovative and enterprising questions on German politics. And it was this theme which recurred in the ensuing question and answer session. Professor Gordon Smith (LSE) remarked, much to the incredulity of the author, that the ASGP resembled an old folks dominoes club, and raised two key questions. First, what was the point of the ASGP? Second, where is the 'spark'? The responses adequately dealt with these questions: Simon Green (IGS, Birmingham) noted that the average age of the membership of the ASGP has been falling recently, and that the ASGP has, as the author can also attest, a lively graduate network.

Two further academic events also contributed to the first days proceedings. First, the German Politics lecture by Professor Rudolf Hrbek (Tübingen University). Hrbek put Germany's relationship with the European Union under the microscope by examining the historical context of the proposed European Constitution. Equally, Hrbek observed the importance of provincial leaders such as Edmund Stoiber (Minister Präsident, of Bavaria) to the future of decision-making in the EU, particularly on issues such as the extension of qualified majority voting. Second, a panel on 'Governing with Commissions'. Professor

Werner Jann (Potsdam University) noted that whilst commissions in Germany had declined under the Red-Green coalition government, the importance of the issues under investigation had increased, and the details of the reporting had been more extensive.

A neat comparison with the British situation ensued with the introduction of Andrew Adonis, a senior New Labour advisor on domestic policy, to the panel. Adonis noted the change in the role of commissions from the Thatcher era in which they were largely redundant, to the Major-Blair era in which they have become increasingly popular and (at least to some extent) have taken on the role of Royal Commissions. The recommendations were, it was noted, on some occasions implemented (parts of the Dearing Report into Higher Education), but ignored on others (the Jenkins Report on electoral reform).

After this, delegates received watering at a wine reception courtesy of Hertford College. The highlight of this reception was the arrival of the German Ambassador. At the annual dinner, the ASGP listened intently to the Ambassador who gave a superb after dinner speech. The Chair of the association, Professor Emil Kirchner (University of Essex) then paid tribute to the remaining founding members. And Ross Campbell, an inarticulate Glaswegian from the University of Strathclyde, scooped the ASGP postgraduate essay prize.

On day two proceedings commenced with Andreas Busch comparing the Red-Green reforms with those of the Social-Liberal coalition in the 1970s. Heralding a new era of modernisation, the success in the Brandt-Scheel era and failure in the Schröder era were attributed to the changing economic environment in which the Schröder project has been located, and the institutional inadequacy of the 1998-2002 Schröder reforms.

This was followed by a second panel discussion in which Reimut Zolnhöfer (University of Heidelberg) examined the fiscal policy changes proposed by the Red-Green government, and the problems encountered with the proposals in the Bundestag and Bundesrat. This was followed by papers from Claire Annesley (University of Manchester) and Simon Green (IGS Birmingham). Annesley focussed on the welfare reforms of the Red-Green government, whilst Green examined immigration reform.

In the afternoon, proceedings closed with an analysis of the relationship between the United States and Europe. Professor Bill Chandler (University of California at San Diego) examined the state of the current relationship and the likelihood of an improvement in the event that John Kerry emerges victorious after the Presidential Election in November. It was the considered opinion of Chandler that Bush would win the forthcoming election, and, as a result, the relationship between the US and the European nations was unlikely to improve in the immediate future.

As proceedings ended for another year, the ASGP could reasonably claim that the study of German Politics is as important today as it was when the ASGP was founded. It approaches the subject with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. The 'spark' is still present. And if the 30th Conference is anything to go by, the ASGP seems certain to reach a ripe old age.

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