

Consensus and Conflict

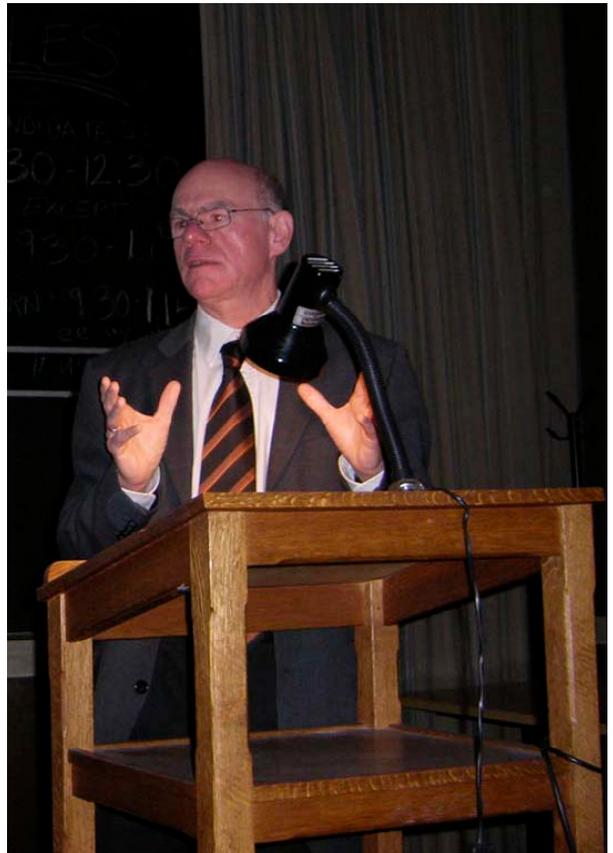
Dr Norbert Lammert,
Speaker of the Bundestag,
remarks on political culture

Oxford, 18 November 2008

Young Koenigswinter and the Oxford University German Society conspired together magnificently to pack out Lincoln College's handsome, barrel-vaulted Oakeshott room to hear Dr Norbert Lammert, Speaker of the Bundestag and thereby Germany's second highest representative.

It is rare in Britain to hear a politician talk philosophically. Here, politics is too often about politics alone, and philosophers, or anyone with a cultural heartland for that matter, rarely get a look-in.

How refreshing, then, to sit next to Dr Lammert at the terrific dinner laid on by Lincoln and hear him say how close he came to going into academia rather than politics; and how serious a musician he is, too. He has just taken delivery of a grand piano at his official residence on the edges of Berlin — the manufacturer, who works in his constituency, has loaned it to him for the duration of his term in office. Recently, after a long day of official business, he spent two hours at the piano, rediscovering the music of his youth, alone in the grand residence. Although he was frustrated at his talents not being as great as he would like, it brought tremendous spiritual solace. No surprise then that, just before the evening came to a close, he was invited to visit Lincoln's chapel to give an impromptu concert.



But before doing so, Dr Lammert brought something of the theatrical showman to the stage at Lincoln's Oakeshott room — his talk was lit up by elaborate, elegant hand gestures, and long, thoughtful pauses.

The talk opened on the back of an old Pelican paperback he had read during his term at Oxford in 1971 — Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics*, and in particular Crick's line that he was constantly depressed by the capacity of academics to overcomplicate things. Dr Lammert's determination was to make his talk avoid this trap.

In establishing what makes a country stable, he said democracy does not necessarily bring stability, and stability in turn does not only exist in democratic states. The Weimar Republic, despite the excellence of its democratic institutions, did not remain stable.

Societies are united not by politics, then, but by culture, and in particular those cultures identified by Pope Benedict XVI, then still known as Joseph Ratzinger, and Jürgen Habermas in their famous meeting in Munich — the cultures of reason and faith, the two major cultures of modern Western civilisation. One cannot be sustained without the other. No society can survive or remain stable without a minimum of common values, beliefs and orientations.



Dr Lammert then moved on to what was the essential point of his talk — despite the desirability of majority decisions in a democracy, the result of those decisions should not be thought of as truth. A vote is only necessary if no one is able to prove what is demonstrably right without a vote.

Majority rule can of course lead to bad, wrong results — thus the need for limited electoral terms. Thus, too, the necessity of the possibility of conflict. A society that does not allow conflicts does not allow individual freedom.

Dr Lammert concluded with a reiteration of his central point — the necessity of refusing claims for truth is crucial, in particular at universities. He hoped that this stance was maintained not only at a place like Oxford, but at least there.

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