

Translation

Office of the Federal President

**Opening Address by Federal President Horst Köhler
at the 55th Königswinter Conference
Berlin, 19 May 2005**

I

I was very pleased to accept your invitation to speak to you today. The reasons are obvious. German-British relations are important, both for our countries and for Europe. "Königswinter" has become such a widely-recognized brand name for bilateral social dialogue that you could almost take out a patent. The central task of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft and the Königswinter Conference remains highly relevant: to bring two of Europe's large nations even closer together, and to promote the German-British relationship, also within the European framework.

Moreover, I have a strong personal connection to Britain, having lived and worked in London for two years. I came to know and admire that country. That is why I am pleased to contribute to this dialogue.

II

The Queen's visit last November once again clearly demonstrated that relations between Germany and the United Kingdom are good. This holds true for the fields of politics, the economy and culture. It also applies to everyday relations between our citizens. Although it is difficult to measure relations in concrete terms, the enthusiasm with which Queen Elizabeth II was welcomed last year during her fourth state visit to Germany was precisely such an indicator. Rarely has an official guest sparked such great interest and received such a warm reception.

Granted, one German-British phenomenon calls for special attention. Exchanges between our countries are not balanced. Germans appear to have a greater affinity to Britain than Britons to Germany. We Germans admire qualities in our neighbours that we may sometimes lack: In confronting adversity, dealing with problems or enjoying success, the British remain unshakeable and self-composed. In fact, Germans have always had a greater tendency to visit the British isles than vice versa. In the past, many German royals were invited to ascend the British throne, and today one can visit British football stadiums to see budding German national players.

Language skills certainly play a role: Last year, out of 270,000 British A level graduates, only a mere 7,000 had studied German. In Germany, the figures are of course completely different. The fact that English is learned and spoken around the world certainly puts Britons in an easier position. However, in today's globalized world, they too cannot afford to deny themselves access to a country and its culture – access that is primarily gained through language. British diplomats have known this for some time. They receive some of the best foreign language training in the world before being posted abroad. It would be highly beneficial to also widen the foreign language horizon of British pupils – and doing so would even better prepare Britain for facing global challenges! I truly believe that language is a tool for gaining insight into a culture; language skills are again becoming more important.

However, diverging language aptitude cannot be the sole reason for this one-sided interest. What is to blame, then? Is it long-standing stereotypes that influence how each side perceives the other? Do these stereotypes determine our interests and even influence our encounters? I am afraid this is true at least to a certain extent. More specifically, I fear that Germans tend to have positive stereotypes of Britons while, generally speaking, Britons are more likely to have negative stereotypes of Germans. I do not mean to say that these preconceived views are unfounded. However I believe that in the end, Britain – whereby I mean the general public, not the political class – would benefit from an open approach to modern Germany and an undistorted image of its partner on the other side of the Channel. After all, one reason our country is so strong today is because Britain extended its hand to us following the War. And we will always remain grateful for this.

Many of you will have heard of the poll last year indicating that more than half of young Britons take no personal interest whatsoever in Germany and know only very little about our country. Also, almost one third of those polled consider Germans to be arrogant, impolite and

lacking a sense of humour. Although one certainly could find examples to back up all these claims, it is equally wrong to stereotype all Germans.

What does fill me with some concern is the fact that at British schools, German history lessons still primarily focus on the War and Nazi dictatorship. Allow me to quote from his year's Historical Association report: "The way in which the study of the Third Reich has come to dominate school history is a curious phenomenon ... It has become increasingly common for A level students to leave school having studied Hitler every year from Year 9 to Year 13. Universities complain not only that candidates appear to know no other history, but that they then opt in large numbers for special subjects in Nazi Germany. When in due course these graduates become teachers, they feel most confident teaching about Nazi Germany. Meanwhile, publishers continue to produce materials on Nazi Germany, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to break out of the cycle." Is it not, I ask, in both our interests to escape this self-perpetuating mechanism? After all, it could occasionally lead to German young people who visit Britain and are interested in and curious about the country – or who may even go to school in London – being vilified as Nazis on the street. In any case, these attitudes represent a missed opportunity for having the young generation in Europe grow together without stereotypes. These are the same young people who will live together in Europe and shape its future, regardless of what institutional form it will take. Here, we have quite a task before us, and Königswinter in particular must come up with ideas on how to tackle it. Everyone who is interested in a good relationship between our two countries is called upon to make an effort in this regard.

Most young Britons who visit Germany report that we are a friendly country – and of course the same holds true the other way around. Thanks to inexpensive flights, young Britons visit Berlin, quite literally, just to have a beer or go to a party before returning to Britain the next day. This is continuing despite the cancellation of the Love Parade. Young Britons realize that Berlin has a lot – and I think Germany has even more – to offer.

At her dinner speech during her most recent visit, Queen Elizabeth II put it very nicely: "We should learn from history, we should not be obsessed by history." This is exactly the point. The Queen and I agreed that both sides must make an increased effort to get to know each other better and to promote mutual understanding.

III

The focus of this year's conference is on the European Union. My first questions are: What is Britain's role in Europe? How is this multifaceted relationship going to evolve? Which policies will the re-elected government adopt?

I assume that with regard to Europe, the new government will stay the current course. Although this presents opportunities, it does not make a clear statement on how Europe should be defined and where it should be headed. In view of enlargement, new accession candidates, and current economic problems, citizens are asking what Europe's identity and final shape should be. Jacques Delors said that "if we do not succeed in communicating Europe's soul, we will lose Europe". We may have different opinions on where the EU should be headed. But we must listen to this admonition by a great European, and we must find answers to these current questions, by engaging in an open debate – and by speaking in a language that people can understand. I hope Britain will actively participate in this discussion.

I myself helped negotiate the Maastricht Treaty during my tenure as State Secretary. I know how such texts are drafted. Treaty language is becoming increasingly difficult for citizens to comprehend. We must engage in a debate on European questions by using words that speak not only to the political class, but also to citizens. Otherwise we risk losing their support.

Britain and Germany were arguably the strongest backers of the accession of Central and Eastern European states to the European Union. Among other things, the British were always in favour of accession because they saw it as a matter of historical fairness. Overcoming the division of Europe was both an important and necessary development. Granted, we are now facing change, bearing new burdens, and must agree to a new distribution of these responsibilities. Out of fairness, we must critically assess if previous preferential treatment and privileges can be maintained in view of the changed situation. I do think that we must help the new Member States.

IV

You rightly phrase the conference title "Economic competitiveness and political success of Europe?" as a question. Both issues give cause for concern, whereby there is an inextricable link between the two.

In order to remain economically competitive, we must overcome the current weak growth in many European countries and strengthen our economies. Every country must begin by tackling its own problems – which Germany has begun to do.

And what about at European level? As a strategic response to increased competition in the age of globalization, Europe created the internal market. It is a tremendous asset. For this reason, and also considering the problems we are currently facing, it is vital that we truly complete the internal market. We must not lose sight of the long-term advantages of the freedom of movement. I therefore believe our position is to a large extent the same as Britain's. Among other things, we must ensure a functioning European internal market if we are to actively shape globalization by giving it a human face.

My experience has shown that in many parts of the world, Europe is viewed as an attractive model because it established lasting peace and created solidarity among its citizens. Granted, only a strong economy can ensure a fair give-and-take between all sections of society.

Outside of Europe, the EU is expected to be an important global player. Europeans should expect no less of themselves. We certainly bring our influence to bear on international trade and finances, and therefore must also assume responsibility for development, the fight against poverty, the environment, security and stability – including the stability of financial markets.

I think the Europeans can and must pool their resources in even more areas. This applies above all to our common foreign policy. It is possibly the most pressing task we face. During my tenure as Managing Director of the IMF, I time and again witnessed how member states took many different and contradictory stances on issues, thereby weakening the EU and making it submissive and unable to inspire much confidence. Only together and in cooperation with the United States will we be able to adequately respond to the difficult situation in the Balkans, continue the fight against international terrorism and deal with future developments in the Middle East and in Africa.

V

Britain will assume the EU Presidency in the second half of this year. British policy has always been characterized by a keen awareness of the global context, and by strong trans-

atlantic ties. This is what the EU needs. I am confident the British EU Presidency will provide special impetus in this regard.

At the same time, Britain is also chairing the G8. Its dual presidency will focus on promoting development in Africa and responding to climate change. It would be in all our interest if Britain were to be highly successful in these efforts. Germany will certainly work hard to support them. Furthermore, I hope Britain will succeed in bringing about an EU consensus on making the Doha trade talks a true "development" round. We must reduce subsidies that distort trade, and we must give developing countries better market access.

VI

Our British partners will closely follow the French referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty. Its outcome will presumably also impact Britain's discussion on Europe.

I would like to repeat what I said on 5 May in Aachen at the awarding of the International Charlemagne Prize to President Ciampi of Italy: "It is in the best interests of the people of Europe that the Constitutional Treaty now enter into force. It consolidates Europe as a community of values. It strengthens European democracy and grants citizens more rights. It is necessary if citizens are to enjoy the advantages of an efficient Europe." It was therefore with great satisfaction that I learned of the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty by an overwhelming majority in the German Bundestag.

The Queen's visit to Germany last November was particularly symbolic. That year, her two annual state visits took her to France to participate in the celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale, as well as to Germany, Britain's other key European partner. There is no more elegant way to express the significant role that all three countries played for each other in European history, and will continue to play in the future. On the surface, the Königswinter Conference may seem an unspectacular event. In fact, it transcends all the ups and downs of everyday political life and makes a tremendously important contribution to maintaining the ties between British and German societies. For this, I would like to express my thanks.