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THE RELATIONS BETWEEN GREAT BRITAIN AND REUNIFIED GERMANY

Claudia Crawford

The standings after the first round of play at the 2010 World Cup led to a classic match-up for the round of sixteen: Germany versus England. Without going into the details, Germany won in the end with 4:1. Based on past experiences, a heated debate in England with many anti-German overtones, especially in the topical newspapers, was to be expected. However, save for a few exceptions from the tabloid newspapers, this did not happen. Not only the headlines, but also comments from readers were directed at their own team. The disappointment was clear, but none of the resentment was directed at Germany and there were no angry car drivers or outbursts on the streets of London. Even in the pubs, one could out oneself as a German with no repercussions. It seems that the relations between the two countries have eased. Perhaps soccer, more precisely the 2006 World Cup in Germany that many young Britons attended, contributed to this turnaround. While there, these visitors were able to form their own views of what Germany is today. Many might have been surprised to learn that the old stereotypes, portrayed for so many years in the British media, do not represent the reality and that Germany is a modern and open country. This new impression of Germany is certainly also due in part to the many German students attending British universities.

For many years, the German image portrayed in the British print media was peppered with comparisons to the Third Reich. The Germans, so the message, are incorrigible militarists bent on domination. The transformation in Germany and Germans actively and critically coming to terms with their history was hardly conveyed.

Of course, the influence of this type of reporting was not great enough as to endanger political, economic, or cultural collaboration between the two countries. Despite all of the ups and downs, this cooperation continued to improve, whereby the relations meant here were between Great Britain and West Germany. Germany became an important trade partner for Great Britain and vice versa.

Many businesses invested money and politically many common endeavors were pursued in regards to the European Community. The partnership could not be compared to the one between Germany and France, which was an exceptional case on account of the important reconciliation process. But the relations were nonetheless sound.

German reunification was viewed with skepticism in Great Britain by the media. Images of warmongering Germans once again began appearing in the media.

A new chapter for Germany and Europe began in 1990. German reunification, one of the most cheerful events for Germans, was viewed with skepticism in Great Britain not only at the political level, but also especially by the media. Images of warmongering Germans and their superiority complex once again began appearing in the media. Movies about the Third Reich that clearly differentiated between black and white became popular. It is not surprising then that, due to the absence of alternative images, young people in Britain adopted this view on Germany even at the beginning of the new millennium. In 2004, the then German Foreign Minister Fischer remarked in an interview with the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, "If you want to learn the traditional Prussian goose step, then you have to watch British television, because no young people in Germany, or even in my generation, know how to goose step."¹

One might point out that the British media is generally harsher, but the media could have used other stereotypes about Germans. Richard J. Evans, who teaches history at Cambridge, asked the question why the image of Nazi rule was so dominant in the British media during the time of reunification. He argues "because leading British politicians openly drew parallels between Germany and the European

1 | "Fischer schimpft auf Deutschlandbild der Briten," in: *Spiegel Online*, October 20, 2004, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,324047,00.html> (accessed July 13, 2010).

Union on one side and the Third Reich on other, it became acceptable for mass media to draw their own similar parallels."²

THE POLITICAL RELATIONS

Since 1990 relations have repeatedly fluctuated between Great Britain and Germany. The causes for these fluctuations were the different administrations and their distinctive leaders, the influence of both their own and external perceptions of their countries, and above all the prospect of a political union in the form of the European project.

THATCHER AND GERMAN REUNIFICATION

It is no secret that former Prime Minister Thatcher was against the idea of a reunified Germany. This was not just due to the fact that her relationship with then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was not the most cordial. She had serious misgivings about how Germany, with its population of 80 million and the strongest economy in Europe, would be integrated into the European Community.

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She knew that Germany would be even more powerful once the country weathered the burdens sure to come with the process of reunification. She made her doubts clear and searched for political allies to, if not stop, then at least slow the process of reunification. Her skepticism was certainly partly based on her perception of Germany. Lord Douglas Hurd, the British Foreign Minister at the time described the situation as follows. "As her memoirs make clear, Margaret Thatcher had a firm idea of Germany which was not however based on any well-founded understanding of the nature of the new German political system."³ The seminar she held at her country estate in Chequers in March 1990 with historians discussing the possible consequences of German reunification has since become famous. The seminar's minutes were leaked to the press, shining an exact light on her perception of Germany. It is not wrong

2 | Richard. J. Evans, *Mythen in den deutsch-britischen Beziehungen seit 1945* (Stuttgart, 1999), 28-34.

3 | Hartmut Meyer and Thomas Bernd Stehling (eds.), *German-British Relations and "the Spirit of Cadenabbia"*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2005, 159.

to say that she did not understand West Germany in 1990 very well and that she could not really perceive the transformation that Germans had made since 1949.

Germans viewed Thatcher's fears as inexplicable. The desire to become a part of the West and to deepen European unification was deeply rooted in the population. The notion that Germany would ever again become militarily active lay beyond the realm of consideration. Questions regarding the economic challenges of German reunification were dominant during this time. In light of the expected peace dividends due to the fall of the Iron Curtain, consolidating the former East German National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*) with the German Bundeswehr was used primarily to reduce and disarm the army.

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Chancellor Helmut Kohl was well aware of the skepticism that the British and the French harbored. That is why he all the more emphasized Germany's desire to continue integrating European states. For Kohl, German reunification and European unification were two sides of the same coin. The fact that not everyone in Thatcher's administration shared her negative views made things easier. The Foreign Office in London viewed the reunification process much more positively. Lord Hurd described his own position with the following quote. "As for myself I did not share Margaret Thatcher's misgivings. Unlike her I had benefited for many years from the openness and generosity of German democracy, particularly at the Koenigswinter conferences and at numerous occasions organized by the CDU/CSU. Although I was surprised at the speed of which events moved, I could not bring myself to criticize Chancellor Kohl for seizing an opportunity which might well disappear if not grasped. I accepted as genuine his conviction and that of his colleagues that the gradual integration of a united Germany in a uniting Europe was the best way of banishing the ghosts of the German past."⁴ This helped Hurd to constructively lead the negotiations with his German counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

As part of the reunification process, France and Germany in particular accelerated the EU integration process that eventually led to the Treaty of Maastricht and signing of the treaty on February 7, 1992. The treaty established the European Union as the umbrella for the European Community, the common foreign and security policy, and the cooperation in justice and home affairs. A large part of the Conservative Party in Great Britain took on an ever-increasing skeptical position in regards to Europe. This corresponded with increasing English patriotism that began under the Thatcher administration and developed parallel to the growing Scottish and Welsh independence movements. This made the work of the pro-European Prime Minister John Major more difficult.

JOHN MAJOR AND HELMUT KOHL

When John Major succeeded Margaret Thatcher in November 1990, politicians in Germany were hopeful that the European integration process would gain more support from the British government. During an official visit to Bonn in March 1991, Prime Minister Major stated that he wanted to lead Great Britain into the heart of Europe, where it belongs. The new administration would play an active and constructive role, especially in regards to the Treaty of Maastricht.⁵ Major saw Germany as a crucial partner for this plan. A further advantage was that Helmut Kohl wanted Great Britain to be Europe-friendly and that, unlike with Thatcher, he and Major were on very good terms personally.

However, disappointment soon set in. Following the 1992 elections for the House of Commons, the Conservatives were only able to maintain a slight majority. This increased the blocking power of individual representatives and groups of representatives. Euroskeptical representatives and groups especially used this power. This greatly limited Major's freedom to negotiate during the ratification process for the Treaty of Maastricht. He was able to secure some concessions for Great Britain. He was given an opt-out clause in the European Social Charter and the

5 | Sabine Lee, *Victory in Europe? Britain and Germany since 1945*, (London: Longman, 2001), 216.

European Monetary Union. Major received support for these concessions in particular from Germany. However, these difficulties showed that Great Britain would not be among those partners in the EU that are the driving forces behind the integration process.

The conflict in Yugoslavia added to the tensions between Germany and Great Britain. Germany's stance that it was necessary to quickly recognize the independence of Slovenia and Croatia was not shared by Great Britain. However, the greatest burden hailed from the poor economic situation in Great Britain. In 1992, the pound sterling devaluated so much that it was withdrawn from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism on September 16th, a date known as "Black Wednesday." The British media placed the blame particularly on the German central bank (*Bundesbank*). According to the media reports, Germany's neighbors were essentially bankrolling German reunification because of the Bundesbank's policy of high interest rates.⁶

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Other disputes between Great Britain and the EU in which Germany played a role led to a type of "non-cooperation policy" on the side of Major's government. The disputed selection of Presidency of the European Commission and an export ban on British beef by the EU following the outbreak of the BSE crisis come to mind.

NEW ADMINISTRATIONS IN LONDON AND BONN

Both countries experienced deep problems at the end of the 1990s. In 1997, while Labour took control of the government from the Conservatives, a coalition government comprising of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party took the reins for the first time in Germany in the fall of 1998. Both Heads of State, Blair and Schröder, embodied a generational change. This was not just on account of their age, but also their style and their resolve to change their parties. Tony Blair embodies *New Labour* like nobody

6 | Anthony Glees, "The diplomacy of Anglo-German relations: A study of the ERM crisis of September 1992," *German Politics*, № 3, (April 1994): 75-90

else. He designed a new, modern agenda for a center-left party with the aspiration of creating a social welfare state that would be financed by the fruits of the neoliberal market economy. In doing, so he also created a blueprint for social democracy throughout all of Great Britain. Gerhard Schröder felt strongly inspired and led an election campaign with the slogan, "New Center", which conveyed a bit of that "Blair feeling."

This led to renewed hopes, that German-British relations would get a new start. These positive expectations were given a boost, because from a policy standpoint, Labour created a new policy regarding Europe during the difficult

years in opposition. The Labour Party became more pro-Europe not only to be seen as an alternative to the government, but also because they feared that Great Britain would be marginalized in Europe. At the 1999 award ceremony for the International Charlemagne

Prize in Aachen, Germany, Prime Minister Blair said it was his goal that Great Britain once and for all lose its ambivalence towards Europe. He wanted to bring an end to the uncertainty, the lack of trust, the Europhobia.⁷

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Therefore, it seemed that there was great potential for common bilateral and European policy projects. Not only was the personal relationship between Blair and Schröder very friendly, but so too was the relationship between Peter Mandelson and Bodo Hombach, the men behind the Heads of State. Certainly in an attempt to differentiate himself from his predecessor Chancellor Schröder began by cooling the relations with France. This made even a shift in power seem possible – instead of the Bonn-Paris axis, a Bonn-London axis. The submission of the Schröder-Blair paper shortly before the 1999 elections for the European Union highlighted the close relations between the two countries. However, in the end there were no tangible results. The paper showed that Labour and the German Social Democrats each had a different understanding of the "third way." Much criticism came from within the SPD, which even at that time made it clear that Schröder was not in his party's good graces. On May 10, 2000, the German

7 | Philip Stephens, *Tony Blair: The Price of Leadership*, (London 2004), 163-164.

newspaper *Tagesspiegel* commented on the Schröder-Blair paper. "No one discuss this paper anymore, not even in the chancellery. This quiet departure counts less so for the content than the method. The Schröder-Blair paper, which was drafted by then Head of the Chancellery Bodo Hombach, is an attempt to give Schröder's catchphrase "New Center" a theoretical basis. Most of all, it is Schröder's last attempt to bypass and shape the SPD, not from within, but from the outside."⁸

The results were mixed on the European stage. Great Britain played an active role during the Treaty of Amsterdam (signed in October 1997) and the Treaty of Nice (signed in February 2001). Both treaties reformed the EU in preparation for the expected enlargement of the EU, which was to follow in 2004. The European Parliament received more voting rights, majority decisions were expanded in many areas, and the voting weight of the member states was changed. Blair agreed to many of the changes in the treaties and even signed the European Social Charter. It seemed that he was honoring his party's pro-European stance. The problem was that British voters were not behind this policy and that they remained euroskeptical. The administration's offensive course soon pitted it against the general population in an irresolvable conflict. Therefore, the Blair administration prevented attempts to have Great Britain join the common European currency. Although Blair was in favor of the euro, he was not in a position to win over his Finance Minister Gordon Brown and his party, let alone the general population for this project.

British voters remained euroskeptical. Therefore, Blair's administration prevented Great Britain from joining the common European currency.

The British government was strongly focusing on its own country, whereby it in no way changed the economic policies of the preceding Conservative government. Rather, it viewed the free movement of services, especially in the financial sector, as a source of new jobs and economic growth. London became the biggest financial center in Europe. Politicians in London, with then Finance Minister and future Prime Minister Gordon Brown leading the way, viewed Germany as an outdated economic model that was not up to meet the new challenges.

8 | Tissy Bruns, "Schröder-Blair-Papier," in: *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 10, 2000.

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German-British relations came to a standstill over the course of the Iraq conflict. Chancellor Schröder was strictly against attacking Iraq. In doing so, he searched for and found a partner in France. How much of this rhetoric is attributable to the elections or his actual convictions is not the object of consideration here. The September elections for the German *Bundestag* in 2002 could partly explain why not all avenues of European diplomacy were used to at least attempt to reach a common European position. The split into an "old" and a "new" Europe, as the then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld saw it, remains the bitter result of an unsuccessful common foreign and security policy. This is certainly not what was envisioned when the Treaty of Maastriicht was adopted ten years earlier. The deep divides between Europe were not just made apparent by the fact that the phrase "The old Europe" became the 2003 Word-of-the-Year in Germany. The quarrel and the loss of trust also continued to have an effect in the EU long after.

The EU took on a new dimension when it was enlarged in 2004 by ten new member states. The treaties leading up to the enlargement could not fulfill all expectations regarding the efficiency of the EU structures. In particular, the weight of votes remained an item of contention. These deficits were realized during the negotiations for the Treaty of Nice. As such, the Heads of State and Government called for a grand convention to draft a treaty for a constitution. This started a process that found widespread support, especially political support, in Germany, whereas in Great Britain it was predominantly rejected. The treaty was signed in October 2004 but was rejected by referendums held in France (May 2005) and the Netherlands (June 2005). This fact saved Blair from holding the planned British referendum and the subsequent difficult domestic political debate. Whereas a new phase of reflection began on the EU level, the relations between Germany and Great Britain remained at rock bottom.

THE NEW MERKEL ADMINISTRATION IN 2005

Relations could only be built up again only after administrations changed in Berlin. Angela Merkel became Chancellor of a grand coalition government comprising of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD. One of her first tasks were the difficult budget negotiations for the EU budget. She was able to succeed and skillfully avoided an expected confrontation with Great Britain over the agricultural budget and the UK rebate. This undoubtedly allowed her to reduce the tensions the previous administration had created at the beginning of her term. Furthermore, the relationship between Blair and Merkel was not burdened by the Iraq conflict. Despite being members of different parties, a warm atmosphere developed between the two.

The relationship between Tony Blair and Angela Merkel was not burdened by the Iraq conflict. Despite being members of different parties, a warm atmosphere developed between the two.

Both used this to work constructively together, especially on the European level. One example of this is the creation of new regulations regarding the right of asylum. Likewise, a solution was found during this period for the complex surrounding the constitutional treaty. During Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union the foundation was laid for the Treaty of Lisbon in June 2007 in Brussels. It was the last summit at which Tony Blair represented Great Britain as Prime Minister.

THE TRANSITION FROM TONY BLAIR TO GORDON BROWN

As they had met on previous occasions, Tony Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, was not unknown to Merkel. Both are the children of protestant ministers. However, the fact that they got along well probably had more to do with the fact that they shared a number of political views. Both were proponents of environmental policy and deregulating trade. Their personal traits, such as their attention to detail, most certainly were also a reason for their good relationship.⁹

9 | Simon Green and William Paterson, "After Tony – British-German Relations Under Gordon Brown," in: *AICGS Advisor*, May 25, 2007.

Gordon Brown adapted his stance on the EU based on the interests of the British, much more so than Blair. This may have reflected his own beliefs, but was probably also a nod to British voters. He ensured that an opt-out clause for Great Britain was written into the Treaty of Lisbon with regards to the Charter of Fundamental Rights. However,

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this clause is also in effect for Poland and the Czech Republic. In order to ensure the ratification of the treaty, Brown did not consider a referendum, as was planned for the constitutional treaty. Instead, the House of Commons voted on the treaty following a heated debate. This political maneuver certainly did not increase his popularity standings.

However, Brown faced bigger challenges in the fall of 2008 with the impending financial crisis. The crisis revealed the susceptibility of the British economy, which so heavily relied on the financial sector. Almost all governments in Europe were forced to give banks massive financial support. Compared to Germany, however, Great Britain was hit harder because the crisis directly struck the real economy and led to a noticeable rise in unemployment. In comparison, the German economy had become more competitive in the previous years on account of strict budget policies and moderate tariff agreements between trade unions and employers. Brown was forced to rethink his opinion on the German economy, because it proved to be more robust in the face of the crisis due to its large production base of small and medium sized companies. The necessary measures on the European level barely passed the vote. The good relations between Great Britain and Germany paid off, especially during critical months in 2008 and 2009.

The German Bundestag elections in Fall 2009 as well as the elections for the House of Commons in May 2010 in the United Kingdom led to changes in the administrations of both countries. Chancellor Merkel was able to defend her post, but now had a coalition with the German Free Democratic Party (FDP). The election results in Great Britain were significantly more exciting. For the first time since the Second World War a coalition government was formed. Labour had to accept a bitter defeat, but the

Conservative Party was unable to gain an absolute majority in the elections. This meant Conservatives needed a coalition partner to govern and found one in the Liberal Democrats. Although the agendas of both parties do overlap, the differences are very apparent. Especially regarding their stances on Europe the two parties could not be more different. The Liberal Democrats, most of all the party head, Nick Clegg, are the pro-European politicians in Great Britain. In comparison, the Conservatives became increasingly euroskeptical during the many years in opposition. Policies regarding Europe were, however, not the focus of the elections. Rather, the anxious question being asked was how the ongoing economic and financial crisis could be overcome. This is what occurred during the German elections several months before. Despite this, some people outside of Great Britain may have hoped that this would not be enough for the Conservatives to win, even if the polls had for months been showing otherwise.

CAMERON'S CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL COALITION ADMINISTRATION – NEW EXPECTATIONS OF A NEW ADMINISTRATION

When David Cameron, the new Prime Minister, took office, he was even younger than Tony Blair was when he first took office. Since taking over in 2005, Cameron, too, has set his party on a new course. Having learned from the Thatcher years, he made social issues, support for families, and civil society the focus of his agenda. In order to be elected to lead his party, Cameron looked for opportunities to incorporate the party's right wing. He also promised to quit the European People's Party (EPP) faction in the European Parliament, in case that there were enough numbers to form a new faction after the elections for the European Union. The EPP was always too pro-Europe and too pro-integration for the euroskeptical among the Tories. Additionally, Cameron said that if should he win, he would ensure that a UK referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon would take place. After the Czech Republic was the last member state to ratify and implement the Treaty of Lisbon, Cameron had to retract on his promise because a referendum was thus made pointless. However, by this time he had made good on his

After the election Cameron made good on his promise and pulled the Tories from the EPP. Merkel personally went to great lengths to prevent this from happening.

other promise and pulled the Conservative Party from the EPP following the election. Particularly the CDU within the EPP and Merkel personally went to great lengths to prevent this from happening. That is why their disappointment was all more the greater. Not the best starting point for working together now that Cameron is Prime Minister.

However, the new British government said from the beginning on that it would play an active role in Europe. And there are reasons to believe this statement. First, as seen many times before, regardless of which party was in power, as a rule the British tend to act

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pragmatically and ideologically. Secondly, the appointment of David Lindington, who is known for his pragmatism, as the Minister of State for Europe instead of the decidedly euro-skeptic Shadow Minister of State, Mark Francois, and for whom the position was intended, was a clear sign. Above all, the Liberals may be a balancing factor within the government that will help Cameron to rein in the right wing members of his party. The coalition agreement states that Great Britain will not join the Eurozone during the current legislative period and that a mandatory referendum must take place if there is a transfer of power from the member states to Brussels. In light of the current state of the constitution for the EU, even without these stipulations, neither scenario would occur in the near future. Cameron has chosen Paris, Berlin, and Brussels as destinations for his first trips abroad. His predecessors usually chose to visit Washington first. Cameron's performance at the meetings in Europe up until now has been very convincing. He knew exactly how to represent British interests without offending others, something that was followed with awe in the British media. Even his meeting with Chancellor Merkel in Berlin was friendly and constructive, which in light of what had happened, is a positive sign.

In a keynote speech on July 1, 2010, William Hague, the new Foreign Minister, laid out his agenda for the future. What can be taken away from his speech is that Great Britain will remain British, which means that Hague will place British interests ahead of his foreign policy. "This Government understands that foreign policy and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office primarily exist to serve and protect the interests and needs

of the British people in the broadest sense..."¹⁰ He stressed the fact that the world has changed and that if the country does not change as well, Great Britain's role in the world will diminish, effecting its influence throughout the world, its security, and its economy. Hague especially wants to focus on bilateral relations and has his eye on countries such as China, India, and Brazil that are steadily gaining influence on the international stage. Of course, the relations with the USA remain especially important for Hague. However, they will not be unconditional as they were under Blair. Hague also believes that the EU and other regional alliances are important. However, he also pointed out the importance of fostering specific bilateral relations, such as with Poland. Two aspects of the policy regarding Europe are especially important to him. First, the continuation of the enlargement process with an eye on the Balkan countries and Turkey and secondly, increasing the number of British representatives at EU institutions.

With this as a backdrop, it is expected that Germany and Great Britain will work constructively together in many areas over the coming years. After the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, key issues will first be put on the back burner. European citizens will have many more pressing practical questions to answer. Questions about how to overcome the economic crisis and climate change as well as questions about security policies, specifically the military mission in Afghanistan will be on the agenda. Much attention in Great Britain was given to the fact that Germany is not prepared to unconditionally help and, if necessary, pay in every situation. Sometimes it is said that Germans are becoming more British. The crisis in Greece made clear that Germans have expectations of the other member states. The calls for greater budgetary discipline are shared by the British government, even though it usually prudently stays out of trying to find a solution for the Eurozone. In view of their own deficit of about 11 percent in the current fiscal year and a significantly weakening pound sterling in the last years, London is trying very hard to maintain good budget discipline.

The crisis in Greece made clear that Germans have expectations of the other member states. The calls for greater budgetary discipline are shared by the British government.

10 | William Hague, "Britain's Foreign Policy in a Networked World," Speech at Foreign and Commonwealth Office, July 1, 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22462590> (accessed July 14, 2010).

If the Germans really were to become more British – which in this context would mean that their European policy would be primarily based on their national interests and that they would scale back their integration efforts, which sacrifice their sovereignty – this could mean that relations with Great Britain would improve. However, this would be a clear deviation from Germany's European policy up until now. On the other hand, if Germany continues with its traditional stance on Europe, confrontations and disappointment cannot be ruled out. There will always conflict, so long as the respective stance on Europe of both countries cannot be better aligned. In the coming years, fewer decisions on key issues will have to be made in the EU. That is why these years should be used all the more to strengthen the relations between the two countries as much as possible through close cooperation in key areas. On the one hand, there are reforms for the common market, such as in the area of financial market supervision and deregulating the market. On the other hand, there are structural reforms such as advances in climate protection and the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon. These concrete policies will ensure headway is made that will strengthen the EU – without there being much argument in advance about whether or not people actually are in favor of them.