

“German Perspectives on the British EU Referendum”

On 7 April 2016, a panel discussion organised by the Federal Trust, Global Policy Institute and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung UK and Ireland office took place in London. The well-attended event centred around German perspective on the UK EU referendum.

The discussion focused principally on German opinion regarding the possible British exit from the EU and the resulting consequences for Anglo-German relations.

The first to speak were Stefanie Bolzen, UK correspondent for German newspaper “Die Welt” and Professor Simon Green, Professor of Politics and Executive Dean at Aston University, Birmingham, moderated by Director of the Federal Trust for Education and Research, Brendan Donnelly.

Stefanie Bolzen emphasised that a clear majority of Germans want to see the UK remain a member of the EU. On the other hand, she also pointed out that there are those Germans who are in support of a Brexit, for example the right-wing populist AfD party. The threat of a UK exit from the EU holds the potential to act as a spark for other member states and thus lead to a weakening of the European Union. Furthermore, she pointed out that the conditions surrounding the EU have changed significantly between 2013 (when the Prime Minister David Cameron initially promised a referendum on EU membership) and today, with a clearly weakened EU, increasing Euroscepticism across Europe and the domestic political challenges facing Germany.

Professor Simon Green firstly addressed the traditionally close Anglo-German relations and the significant pressure on other EU member states to consider a leaving the Union, were a Brexit to occur. He argued that the perception of a united Europe had been significantly weakened and that the so-called “two-speed” Europe was now a reality.

Furthermore, he made it clear that an EU exit would take at least two years to complete, in which the numerous new regulations relating to relations with the EU would need to be negotiated. The extent to which Anglo-German relations will change, depends principally on the German federal elections in September 2017.

The closing discussion with members of the audience focused above all on the reactions of Germany and other member states to the consequences of a Brexit, such as further EU exits. Furthermore, the participants discussed foreign policy risks of the event of a Brexit – for example, Russia would be set to benefit in the event of the UK voting to leave the EU, as it is in their geopolitical interests to see the EU collapse.