Written Evidence from Dr Charlotte Galpin (EUR0003)

I gave oral evidence to the inquiry on 7th November and following the discussions I had some additional information that the committee might find relevant, based on my research into European identity in Germany and German perceptions of Brexit. My research expertise lies in political and media communication and public discourses about the EU in Germany.

Summary:

- European identity and attitudes to the EU in Germany
- Perceptions of Brexit as a threat to the European project
- Perceptions of British politicians and Brexit negotiators in Germany
- Perceptions of Britain and the Anglo-German bilateral relationship
- Recommendations

1. Since the early days of European integration, Germany has constructed a European identity that closely ties Germany to the European integration project. At the heart of this identity is a commitment to multilateralism, liberal democracy, peace and human rights. Germany’s integration in Europe was part of a broader process of what is known as the country’s Westbindung – integration into Western international organisations such as the EEC and NATO – which helped Germany regain its sovereignty after the war. Throughout the post-war period, Germany has sought to exercise power primarily through multilateral institutions. Germany’s commitment to the Franco-German relationship should be seen in this context, as it is considered to be the ‘motor’ of European integration.

2. In the early days, commitment to European integration was a way to ensure the country’s neighbours that Germany had overcome its past. References to Germany’s Nazi past still feature prominently in German debates about the European Union as a justification for further integration even today. More recently, exercising power through the European Union is viewed in Germany as necessary in a globalised world. In light of the rise of China and the other BRIICS countries, the EU allows European member states to have an effective voice in the world. As Henry Kissinger once said, Germany is ‘too big for Europe and too small for the world’.

3. European integration is therefore primarily justified in terms of identity and values rather than rational economic interests. Of course, as an export nation Germany has also benefited greatly from European integration. When there is an economic justification for Germany’s European policies, however, it tends to refer to the importance of the integrity of the single market and the stability of the Eurozone. From the perspective of many business voices, trading with the EU-27 is more important than trading with Britain. Although some business actors have called for concessions to be made to protect German interests, the broad consensus is that Brexit will damage the UK far more than it will damage the EU.

4. In my research into German media perceptions of Brexit, we find that Brexit is seen as a threat to multilateralism and to the European integration project as a whole, as well as to the stability of the single market and the Eurozone. One of the primary responses in Germany

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to Brexit has been to reaffirm a commitment to maintaining unity between the EU-27. Additionally, some voices express concern that the loss of Britain from the EU will result in Germany appearing too powerful in Europe. This echoes William Paterson’s description of Germany as the EU’s ‘reluctant hegemon’. There are also strong concerns about the possibility of a ‘domino’ effect from other Eurosceptic movements in other member states. The EU-27 therefore remains committed to the idea that there should be no so-called ‘cherry picking’ of the benefits of the EU and that the four freedoms are indivisible. In a recent statement about the progress of German coalition negotiations on the issue of Europe, a commitment to a positive relationship with Britain is made under the heading of ‘European neighbourhood policy’ – thus Britain is already being treated as a third country.3

5. The topic of the rule of law came up in the oral evidence session. There is absolutely no talk about the EU treating Brexit as an infringement of the rule of law in a similar way that it might in relation to Spain/Catalonia. Brexit is seen as Britain’s choice and that is accepted.

6. However, it is worth pointing out that in the German media, high profile members of the Leave campaign and our current negotiators are seen in a highly negative light. David Cameron and Boris Johnson were considered to have pursued their own personal or party-political ambitions at the expense of the country and of Europe. People such as Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Nigel Farage are seen as having repeatedly lied to the British public about the EU. Often, they are placed in the same category as Donald Trump and described as ‘enemies of Western liberal democracy’.4 The British tabloids are also seen in a similar light. Many of the leading supporters of Brexit have therefore been portrayed as populists who pose a threat to European democracy. Referendums such as the Brexit referendum, held without being integrated into a formal system of direct democracy such as in Switzerland, are also often described as ‘tools for demagogues’, providing populist politicians with an opportunity to act outside the framework of representative institutions. German scepticism towards referendums dates back to their use in Germany in the 1930s which facilitated Hitler’s rise to power.

7. Such perceptions of British politicians in the German public sphere mean that there is a strong desire to protect the EU from such challenges to democracy. This further explains the resoluteness amongst German politicians on the issue of the four freedoms, EU citizens’ rights as well as a renewed commitment by all mainstream parties to reinvigorating the Franco-German relationship.

8. When it comes to public debates about the Anglo-German bilateral relationship, they primarily relate to an economic relationship and particularly a shared economic liberalism. Britain has been considered a counterweight, together with the Netherlands and Scandinavia as ‘northern Europe’, to countries such as France and ‘southern Europe’ which are seen as

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3 https://ippr.org/juncture-item/the-german-election-and-the-uk-s-new-irrelevance

4 http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europblog/2016/10/17/boris-johnson-damaging-germanys-goodwill/
favouring EU-level redistribution. Britain was also seen as a partner, particularly in conservative newspapers, in opposing European political or federal union and David Cameron’s original renegotiation plan was welcomed. For conservative actors in Germany, the departure of Britain from the EU is seen as a loss for these reasons. It is hard to see how this relationship might continue post-Brexit.

9. There has also been a shift in the perception of Britain as a result of Brexit. On the one hand, it is the end of ‘Cool Britannia’, representative of Britain turning away from what is seen as its liberal, pragmatic and cosmopolitan traditions towards xenophobia and irrationality. On the other hand, Brexit is seen as a continuation of Britain’s imperial past, in which Britons are nostalgic for the empire.

10. When it comes to Britain’s relationship with Germany, I would therefore recommend a focus on maintaining multilateral relationships in foreign and security policy with as many willing EU member states as possible rather than bilateral relationships in isolation. There should also be a focus on overturning the negative public perceptions of the UK that have emerged as a result of Brexit. British leaders should publicly demonstrate a clear understanding of the EU and “European values” and a willingness to remain an open and cosmopolitan country. This will be vital for developing a productive and cooperative relationship with Germany after Brexit.

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