

Europa, Europa!

Graduate Centre for Europe Conference, 19-21 April 2007

From the depths of the Easter vacation there arose a new and, it is hoped, permanent fixture in the University postgraduate calendar. The inaugural conference of the Graduate Centre for Europe (GCfE), on “The Future of Europe”, was held on 19-21 April in the European Research Institute.

GCfE, which was launched in late 2005 by Neil Kinnock, is a major interdisciplinary initiative involving students and staff from the Schools of Business, Geography, Historical Studies, Humanities, Law, Public Policy, and Social Sciences. Its purpose is to bring together expertise that is currently spread across a wide range of academic disciplines, to enable exchanges of ideas on Europe among graduate students, and to facilitate collaborative activities. Its remit naturally includes the study of the European Union but the interests of GCfE members also transcend the EU, both spatially and temporally.

The inaugural GCfE Conference reflected and promoted these interdisciplinary aims by bringing together 34 postgraduate students from a variety of academic backgrounds (Law, History, Cultural Studies, European Literature, Geography, Economics and Politics) to share ideas of and on Europe, which are all too often confined within disciplinary boundaries. Delegates came from universities across the UK and Ireland, and eleven nationalities were represented, including five from outside the EU (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, India, Russia and the USA).

Fifteen papers were presented at five well-attended panels, spread over two full days. Subjects ranged from legal regulation of the Internet to the experience of exile from and within Europe, and from the right of minorities to education in their own language to Russia’s dwindling population and its implications for Europe as a whole. What was striking was the interconnectedness of the work being done on matters European. The widespread assumption that the way we deal with ‘Europe’ is embedded in our respective disciplines and that other approaches can surely have little to offer us was productively undermined. An astonishing number of commonalities emerged from apparently irreconcilable disciplinary approaches. Areas of common interest included: the antagonism between Europe and the US in its various forms; issues of cultural protectionism in Europe; Europe and its ‘others’ (notably its recent, turbulent past); the tensions within the EU project between diversity and harmonisation, and between cosmopolitanism and nationalism; and the host of often uncomfortable political, cultural and religious questions that Turkey’s candidate membership of the EU raises, not only for Turkey but also for the EU as a whole. ‘Interdisciplinarity’ is an over-used and often empty term. The conference witnessed it in action.

As an experiment, it was decided to invite participants to design and display posters of their work. The posters submitted were of a very high quality and were on display in the ERI Atrium throughout the conference. They attracted a great deal of interest and discussion, and the poster experiment was judged a success.

Geoff Hoon’s keynote address to open the conference (the full text of which is available at www.europe.bham.ac.uk/events/conference/HoonSpeech.htm) was well attended, tailored to the occasion and ministerially uncontroversial. Gisela Stuart MP, on the other hand, who was our guest on the second evening, entertained delegates with a seemingly unrehearsed and

refreshingly controversial speech, in which she declared that the European ideal had run into the buffers. It was time to face facts, to be pragmatic about the extent of the European Union's reach and capacities and to refocus attention on national priorities within the European framework.

The success of the GCfE Conference was a tribute to the energy and organisational skills of Nicola Corkin (a PhD student in the ERI), and the Postgraduate Committee which she chairs, and to the sterling work done behind the scenes by Sue Redding and Lizzy Sharman. The first Annual Conference of GCfE will be held in the spring of 2008. For further information about GCfE, whose activities run throughout the year, go to www.europe.bham.ac.uk or contact Nicola Corkin (eurograd@contacts.bham.ac.uk).

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