

Wilton Park Atlantic Youth Forum 2009

Monday 3 – Friday 7 August 2009, WP987

Conference Report for SGA-ASPE, Danny Bürkli¹

The Atlantic Youth Forum gathers around forty young people between 18 and 24 from the USA, Canada and Europe and aims to let young people gain insight into each other's concerns and perceptions about key challenges facing their countries and the international community. The program addressed thus a very wide range of political, security, economic and social issues. It is fair to say that this week was one of the most inspiring and stimulating ones I ever had. The program, the participants and the venue were all highly impressive.

Each day was filled with engaging presentations by different speakers about all kinds of pertinent topics: nuclear disarmament, migration, the BRIC countries, the dangers of modern social network technology and NATO, just to name a few. One of the greatest virtues of the conference was the fact that a lot of time was allotted to the Q&A part of the presentations. I learned as much from the intelligent and thoughtful questions asked by the other participants as from the presentations themselves. A one day excursion to London proved to be an unforgettable experience. We had a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament; met with Peter Bottomley, Member of Parliament; learned about US public diplomacy at the American Embassy and were received at a historic room at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for a discussion about the UK's foreign policy priorities. The caliber of the speakers that agreed to talk to us was remarkable and the fact that all meetings were held under the Chatham House rule allowed the speakers to talk freely. I further greatly appreciated that conventional wisdom was constantly being challenged during the conference. Is climate change legislation on really the right track? Do less nuclear weapons actually make us safer? Did migration increase in the last decades? Is the EU here to stay? All of these are intriguing questions with no easy answers, contrary to what one might expect. Because of the multi-faceted nature of the conference there are no proceedings in the conventional sense, except of course for forty heads brimming with new ideas and views.

The participants, mostly students, were awe-inspiring. Coming from different backgrounds, universities and countries (21 nationalities were represented) all shared a passion for trying to understand the complex challenges of today. I was humbled by the amount of knowledge, achievement and passion among the other participants and it was a privilege to be able to spend time with such interesting and like-minded individuals.

The venue of the conference, Wiston House, is an age-old beautiful manor house in Sussex surrounded by an equally beautiful landscape and a large garden. Due to the fact that the house is relatively isolated a very special feeling which bonds people together quickly emerged (the famous "magic of Wilton Park").

I feel very privileged for having been at this conference and I would like to thank Wilton Park and all of its staff for the absolutely flawless organization and of course the Swiss Foreign Policy Association for enabling me to participate at the Atlantic Youth Forum. This was certainly an unforgettable experience which I can warmly recommend to everybody interested in global issues.

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