

Trust and Truthfulness: Thoughts on Political Leadership in an Interdependent Age

**Keynote Speech by Former German President Horst Köhler
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I have been asked to share a few thoughts on political leadership tonight. When I was preparing my remarks, I couldn't help but feel a bit daunted by this task. First, because I know there are so many people in this room who certainly don't need any lecture on leadership from me; people I admire for their courage and their convictions, and I am grateful that I can be here with you today. Second, because...aren't these strange times to talk about leadership? On the one hand, in many parts of the world there is an unprecedented *contempt* for leaders and the so-called elites. On the other hand, we witness across cultures a renewed fascination for authoritarianism: the seductive idea of a leader as a "*Führer*", a strong man who can solve all the problems if only given all the power. Actually, in Germany, we still have difficulties using the German word for leader, "*Führer*", because it was the title of a man who led the world into the darkest years of human history.

So these are ambivalent times for the concept of leadership. Neither the vilification nor the glorification of leaders will help us to solve the gigantic challenges of our present. But both these extremes point us to a crack in the fundamentals of our societies: the growing disregard for *trust* as the basis for the relationships between leaders and their own citizens, as well as between leaders of different countries. For some strange reason, the issue of trust is often considered as a "*soft*" issue in politics, as opposed to "*hard*" issues such as money or power or military strength. Yet as an economist I know that the very foundation on which our economies are built is *trust*. I can go to the bookstore and buy a book with a 20 Euro bill, which is nothing else but a worthless piece of paper, but because my bookseller *trusts* that he in turn will be able to buy his wife a nice bouquet of flowers with that paper, he accepts my payment. The very moment people would lose trust in the value of money, the money actually loses that value. Why do we expect things to be different in our political systems? They, too, cannot survive if people do not trust – trust that leaders want the best for their country, not the best for their cronies; trust that in exchange for people's loyalty towards a society, they will be rewarded with a better future. The erosion of trust in institutions and public leaders is, in my view, one of the major causes for the political and economic problems in Europe, the United States, or in Africa. This is definitely not a soft issue. It is a question of survival for democracies, or any rule-based society, for that matter. It is also the foundation for productive cooperation in international politics.

So what can leaders do to gain trust?

Be truthful. It's so ridiculously simple, and yet somehow we have all gotten used to the cynical idea that truthfulness is detrimental to successful political leadership.

Now: truthfulness does not equal brutal honesty – brutal honesty would lead to rather brutal lives. What truthfulness requires, in turn, is a basic honesty about why I want to lead, a basic decency about the means with which I exercise my leadership, and a basic transparency about how I reach my decisions. Truthfulness is a *mindset* rather than a set of rules. It is an attempt to be a leader who is first and foremost a human being – a human being with potential and with flaws. Exercising truthfulness is difficult more often than not. Being in the spotlight is hard. Openness is hard. In politics and in life, openness makes you vulnerable. And vulnerability makes you weak. But does it really? Doesn't it rather make you more perceptive, more creative, more able to understand others and therefore more able to find solutions? Has any society ever thrived on deception, division or rigidity? Hasn't real and lasting human progress always been the fruit of being open?

Some might say that it is naive to ask our leaders to be truthful. And yet we all, no matter what culture we come from, teach our children to be kind, to be honest, to be generous, to be attentive to the needs of others. These are values we try to instill in every child, qualities we expect from every child. Why shouldn't we be able to expect them from our leaders? We certainly shouldn't accept the idea that you have to be selfish, mean, or mendacious to be a leader. This doesn't mean that leaders have to be perfect. Imperfection is human. It is recognizing one's own imperfections that makes a good leader. Nelson Mandela, probably the greatest leader of the 20th century, said more than once: "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying".

"Keeping on trying", isn't that what leadership in this ever more complex world is all about? Maybe leadership in this 21st century is not all about giving the right answers. Maybe it starts with asking the right questions.

After all, nobody knows *exactly* how to create the millions of jobs needed every year for the growing youth population in Africa. Nobody knows *exactly* how to decouple economic growth from environmental pollution in Asia. Nobody knows *exactly* how to find the right balance between unity and diversity in Europe. The transformation of our societies and economies, which is inevitable if we want to meet the greatest challenges of humanity, eradicating extreme poverty and protecting our planet, will only be possible if there is not only resolve at the top, but also ideas from bottom-up. Leaders, then, have to be learners. Leaders have to be listeners.

And in this complex, interdependent world we need forums in which these leaders can meet in an open, truthful way and learn from each other. It seems to me that the Mo Ibrahim Governance Weekend is such a forum. Haven't we all had enough of the formalized meetings where functionaries and dignitaries read preconceived statements to each other? Do we really still believe that this is how good ideas are born, how trust is built?

I feel that this is especially true for the relationship between Africa and Europe: sometimes these summits seem so formalized it feels like one is watching a perpetual re-run of the same TV show, hands shaken, statements read, fingers pointed only to hide one's own hypocrisy, communiqués calling for strengthened cooperation nevertheless, and – excuse my sarcasm – don't forget the obligatory action plan agreed on at the end.

Shouldn't we rather enable encounters of *human beings* in charge of leading their countries, sharing their visions, their possibilities and their limitations, listening to each other, trying to understand each other's perspectives? And yes, as a former president I understand how helpful protocol and formalities can be when you are under pressure and want to avoid an international crisis by making a stupid mistake. But we have to be careful not to suck all the humanness out of our leaders, not to make them little robots so stifled in their routines that real, new, fresh solutions become impossible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite all the difficulties of our present, I am not pessimistic. This is because I know many men and women all over the world, most of whom are ordinary citizens, many of whom are young, who have all the qualities we are looking for in a leader. You don't have to be in a formal leadership position to be a leader. Human history has known many moments when change happened not because leaders led and people followed, but because people pushed forward and leaders followed. This is not a naive trust in the wisdom of the masses, but a profound confidence in the ability of humans to strive for improvement whatever their position is. The transformation we want to achieve will be pushed forward by countless – and often nameless – leaders on the ground. By ordinary human beings making the right choices in their daily lives. By men and women trying to be truthful, trying to be respectful of other people and of our planet. These people know: if all you want to accomplish is preserving the status quo, then you are not a leader. A leader doesn't administrate the present. A leader shapes the future. You cannot lead without having a direction, without wanting to go somewhere.

This is why I am so profoundly convinced that the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change are the most important political frameworks of this century: because they give us direction in these confusing times. They are both a source and a test of leadership. If we take them seriously, both on the top and on the bottom, then new trust can emerge: Trust in each other. Trust in our democracies. Trust in Africa. Trust in the future.

Thank you.