

## **Friction creates energy**

**Speech by former Federal President Horst Köhler  
at the dinner in honour of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday**

**Schloss Bellevue, Berlin, 8 March 2018**

Mr Federal President, you are far too kind. Thank you very much indeed for your warm words and this wonderful evening.

I admit that I am moved. It is a great gift and privilege to be here with so many people whom I hold in such high regard. I would like to thank you all wholeheartedly for being there for me, and not just this evening.

Each and every one of you has accompanied me for a short or long period of my life. Every face in this room reminds me of experiences and encounters that have enriched me. I have learned, searched, hoped, failed and loved with you.

I am tempted to tell such a story about each of you, but out of long-learned respect for our strict colleagues from Protocol here at the Office of the Federal President, I will stick to the allotted time.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Shortly before my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, I took a very daring step and started using a smartphone as a companion to my old, indestructible and reliable Nokia mobile. As I torment myself trying to learn the noble art of swiping, I realise how many products, from cars and TVs to cookers, now have ever smoother and shinier surfaces, while beauty filters that automatically remove blemishes and wrinkles from people's faces in photos are now a standard feature of most smartphone camera apps.

I am not a sociologist, but sometimes I wonder if this longing for smoothness and perfection, this urge fingers feel to glide over a surface that offers no resistance, is not partly a reaction to the increasing erosion of our societies, that is, if it is perhaps an aesthetic retreat to smoothness from a turbulent world, which, as we know, is not characterised by clarity and purity, but rather by complexity and ambivalence.

And that is also how our *virtual* refuges are designed. The algorithms used by Google and Facebook seemingly protect us from being challenged and choose the entries for our search results or timelines that create the least internal resistance in us. This so-called bubble is also smooth and round.

However, as people and societies, we do not learn or grow if we go unchallenged. Learning and growth mainly come from obstacles, friction and contradictions. That is truer today than ever before. Our era produces conflicts and incongruity at such speed and in so great a dimension that our future will depend to a large extent on our ability to deal productively with such ruptures.

That poses very new challenges to politics' role in balancing interests, as nations' fates are irrevocably being intertwined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the ecological and social interdependence of everything that happens on this planet. This fundamentally changes any political cost-benefit analysis and equation of national interests. A government that has its country's welfare in mind can thus no longer merely take the immediate short-term interests of its own electorate into account, but must also ask: How will our decisions impact future generations? What consequences follow for people in other parts of the world?

At the heart of this we find an irresolvable dilemma – our political system is structured on the basis of nations and electoral terms, and thus limited in space and time. Yet, the solutions this system is meant to produce, to ensure a good future for all, must overcome these very limits.

Many people have a profound sense of this dilemma. They intuit the start of a new era in which some familiar balancing mechanisms will no longer work. They long for security and clarity. Perhaps they also long for smoothness. The neopopulists of the western democracies and the new autocrats all around the world exploit this longing by providing an unyielding political surface that clearly distinguishes between good and bad, inside and outside, and even pure and impure. They provide answers that are (1) simple, (2) short term and (3) national. That is absurd and dangerous, as this century's threats are (1) complex, (2) long term and (3) global.

And that is why there must be other ways to address the tensions between the national and global level, social and ecological issues, and the present and future.

I think we need to rediscover the contradictory nature and dilemmas of our time as a source of political friction and thus as energy. Paradoxes challenge our imagination because they lead us away from thinking simplistically in terms of either/or and right and wrong. Dissonance and incongruity are the lifeline of democracy, as freedom only arises from alternatives. That is why politicians must not paper over the cracks or smooth anything over. Let us trust the public to deal with difficult truths, complex debates and indeed incomplete answers. Let us put these things on the table!

Something we need to put on the table is our policy on Africa, where the hackneyed emphasis on “partnership among equals” shows its true colours in its patronising tone. Where equality truly exists, there is no need to offer or demand it. The phrase “among equals” is an attempt to smooth an uneven surface, as naturally there are very blatant political and economic asymmetries between Europe and Africa. We must not conceal these asymmetries, but instead use them productively to establish a new global social contract between the ageing, savings-rich societies of the North and the young, investment-hungry societies of the South. Many good initiatives were developed in this area during the last legislative term, but let's not delude ourselves. The migration movements of recent years, of which we in Europe have merely experienced a small part so far, are not an historical anomaly but rather the harbinger of a new era in which a restless and growing youth population in the South no longer accepts the glaring wealth inequality between nations. It *is* possible to give these young people prospects. But Africa's economic transformation can only be achieved alongside structural transformation in Europe, that is, a radical and courageous rethinking of European

agricultural, industrial, trade policy and, in any case, migration policy. Now that would be real partnership!

Another issue we need to put on the table are the conflicts between our environmental and industrial targets, where the truly uncomfortable questions about the sustainability of sectors such as the German car and coal industries have been put on the back burner for far too long. Those who fail to tackle structural change today, citing jobs as the reason, endanger employment in the future. And yet both Germany and Europe have everything they need for sustainable energy and transport policies!

We also need to discuss the auspicious but painstaking nature of multilateralism. Just two-and-a-half years ago, following a lengthy discussion process and despite many differences and conflicts, all countries across the world agreed on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations. Let us take this agenda very seriously. For it is the great strategic alternative to the climate of decline in world politics! Of course, there is an answer to the greatest dilemma of our time, that of enabling everyone in the world to live in dignity without destroying our planet. This answer is not found in the hubris of a zero-sum game or the luxury of cynicism. Only by working together for our mutual benefit, no matter how difficult and contradictory this may at times be in our interdependent world be at times, can we find solutions in this interdependent world of ours that do justice to the complexity of the problems.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I firmly believe that we can breathe new life into our democracies by addressing the contradictions of our time. Each and every one of us is called on to take part in this invigorating debate.

And perhaps there is a type of simplicity after all with which one can respond to the longing for clarity in a complex world. However, this simplicity comes from our approach rather than from the answer itself.

To me, this approach is: truthfulness. It does not aim for perfection, but instead to stay true to oneself and others in all the inconsistency and unevenness that defines our humanity.

Thank you very much.