



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
following the swearing-in ceremony
in the German Bundestag in Berlin
on 22 March 2017**

Joachim Gauck, you yourself have felt the wave of affection that has washed around you on your farewell trips and appearances in recent days. And the words of farewell that you have just spoken served as an impressive reminder to the German people that you have left a profound mark on the office of the Federal President and you have championed a republican, an enlightened sense of pride for our entire country. If there was anyone out there who still did not know what the Federal President stands for under our constitution – then you showed them during your time in office – with wisdom and with charm! You embodied and promoted the unity of the country, including all that our society stands for and is respected for around the world: freedom and democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

Mr Gauck, at your election five years ago, you proclaimed to this plenary chamber: “What a beautiful Sunday!” With everything that you have done for our country together with Daniela Schadt, allow me to say, as you take your leave: “What a nostalgic Wednesday!” All of us would like to express to both of you our deep gratitude, and this gratitude will remain.

However, it is not only our gratitude that will remain. Defending freedom, the rule of law and human rights – this task remains too.

Even more so at a time when old certainties are being shaken. Many are wondering: how firm are the foundations of democracy? Does the West have a future as a model? Where is Europe headed?

Our gaze is fixed on the elections in France, on Russia and the US – but especially on Turkey right now.

A great deal is at stake for Turkey, and also for Turkey’s relations with us.

We are trying not to pass judgement too readily. Those who travelled to Turkey 30 years ago saw an underdeveloped country. The people were poor and millions left their homes in search of work across Europe. Today, Turkey is a different country. It has enjoyed a phase of economic development and reform and – as I do not believe anyone would dispute – a period of drawing closer to Europe. We Germans have acknowledged and supported all of this. We even felt a very special affinity with the path that Turkey trod over two decades – also because of the many people of Turkish origin who live and work in Germany and who call this country their home.

As this is the case, we are not approaching the Turkey of today with arrogance or condescension. We are aware of Turkey's situation in the neighbourhood of the major crisis regions of Iraq and Syria. We condemn the attempted military coup last summer. However, our gaze is also filled with concern that everything that has been built up over years and decades is collapsing. This concern is the reason for my appeal: President Erdoğan, do not jeopardise what you yourself have built up along with others! Credible signs of détente are welcome. But stop the unspeakable Nazi comparisons! Do not sever the ties with those – like us – who want a partnership with Turkey! Respect the rule of law, the freedom of the media and journalists! And set Deniz Yücel free!

However, ladies and gentlemen, we should avoid the temptation – also with regard to our own continent – to pass quick judgements. Attacks on liberal democracy are not just taking place elsewhere – far to the west and east of Europe's borders. The truth is that a new fascination for authoritarianism has penetrated deep into Europe. As much as I am delighted that our Dutch neighbours fought back the attack on their democratic traditions at the ballot box, I believe it is important not to be complacent.

Does this have anything to do with us in Germany? I think it does. We cannot sit back, pat each other on the back and award marks to others. We do not live on an island. Worldwide trends have an impact on us too. Our 20th century history has not made us unsusceptible to them. The history of the Weimar democracy – the centenary of which we will be celebrating next year – shows that democracy is neither something to be taken for granted nor does it come with a guarantee for all time. It reminds us that democracy – once achieved – can also be lost again if we fail to look after it.

"Liberal democracy is under fire," is how Joachim Gauck put it in his farewell speech. Yes, it is under heavy fire from radicalism and terrorism. Under fire from power-hungry autocrats who – around the world – are making it increasingly difficult for a free civil society to breathe.

However, there is the other side of the coin, which is the creeping erosion from within – fuelled by indifference, inertia and apathy; or as Mr Lammert said at the Federal Convention, challenges from those who no longer want to view parliaments and democratic institutions as a place for achieving political solutions, but who dismiss them as a waste of time – and the politicians into the bargain.

Populists are inflaming the public debate with a panoply of enemy stereotypes. They are encouraging people to join the fight against the so-called establishment and promising a bright future after its demise. There is, to be sure, no reason to succumb to alarmism in Germany. However, in view of what is looming on the horizon, allow me to say the following with all due seriousness: we must not only talk about democracy – we must learn to stand up for it once again. That is the task we must tackle.

Standing up for democracy is not just the purview of politicians. But politicians must understand that these times are different. These are times in which old certainties have disappeared and new ones have not replaced them – times in which international conflicts are giving us cause for concern about peace and also cause for concern with respect to security in our own country. Times in which parents are asking themselves whether their children will prosper as much as they have. We are living through a period of transition. There is no one single answer to the question as to what the future will look like. The future is not something without any alternative. On the contrary, the future is open and it is overwhelmingly uncertain.

While this openness is a reason for hope for some, it is bound up with fear for others. "Those who are driven by fear avoid what is unpleasant, deny what is reality and forfeit what is possible," or so Heinz Bude wrote. I also believe that those who live in fear are susceptible to the calls of those who are always on hand to offer simple answers. I have the impression that the range of simple answers is expanding week on week. And yet we should really know by now that the simple answers are generally no answers at all. Is there anyone out there who really thinks that, in a world that has become more complicated, the answers are becoming simpler? Is there anyone out there who really thinks that, after the bloody 20th century and the lessons from the two World Wars, the old models of isolation and nationalist zeal make the world a more peaceful place? When all is said and done, the new fascination with authoritarianism, also in parts of Europe, is nothing but a flight into the past borne of a fear of the future. This cannot – and must not – be the path that we take in this country, in Germany.

I know regions of the world where the future is much less certain than it is here. I am thinking of my last meeting with Shimon Peres before his death last year. We were both on our way to visit the

Hebrew University in Jerusalem – a day which, to this very day, I have not forgotten. Sitting in the afternoon sun, in the fresh air, on Mount Scopus we watched the proud graduates receiving their degrees.

After the ceremony we were standing with a small group of students having a discussion when a young woman asked: "Mr Peres, what does the future hold in store for us?"

Instead of a long answer, Shimon Peres told her a story.

"The future", Peres said, "is like a fight between two wolves. One is evil. It represents violence, fear and oppression. The other is good. It represents peace, hope and justice."

The young woman listened with a look of fascination and asked with great interest: "And ... which one will win?"

Peres smiled and said: "The one you feed."

It is up to you. It is up to all of us. That was his message to these young people.

He is right: societies are not at the mercy of an uncertain future – most definitely not democratic societies.

Who if not us Germans are fortunate enough to be able to testify to that? Who if not us knows from experience that peace can evolve in the aftermath of two World Wars; that years of division can be followed by reconciliation? Who if not us knows from experience that the mania of ideologies can be replaced by some kind of political reason? Not everything in our country is good but we have achieved much – and we have done so by working together. First of all, we therefore have every reason to say: let us preserve what we have achieved in this country.

However, this will not be enough. For all of us have seen that what we have just achieved falls short of what is better and is always far removed from what we were hoping for. Once we have solved problems, new ones emerge – or the old ones reappear in a new guise.

That may be frustrating for some. However, we know that democracy is never completely finished. Democracy endows temporary power and only provides temporary solutions. A wise woman from India, a former colleague, once gave me the following comforting advice in the course of our conversation: there is no full stop in the spelling of politics, rather there is always only a comma.

The question is: should we find that frustrating? Or is this not actually democracy's strength? Democracy is the only system of government which allows mistakes because the ability to correct them is an integral part of democracy. The strength of democracies is not their sense of mission but their capacity for self-criticism and self-improvement.

- Where else but in a democracy can the different interests of young and old, town and country, industry and the environment, be peacefully reconciled?

- Where else but in a democracy do citizens come face to face as equals and with equal rights regardless of their background?

- And where else but in a democracy, where minorities have a voice and are heard, can the huge task of integration be tackled successfully?

We can only achieve this in a democracy; that is its strength and that is why we need it.

Pointing out shortcomings and striving for solutions – that is hard work. Democracy is a trying system of government – and, at the same time, it is a bold undertaking: we trust each other to govern ourselves. Government of the people, by the people, for the people – that is what a great American President once taught us – a Republican, by the way.

That may sound too idealistic to some people. And it is idealistic. However, it stems from the profound insight that running away from the hard toil which democracy involves does not lead to better policies. Especially when it comes to the policies of those who claim to be speaking on behalf of the “real people” or of the silent majority against “those at the top”.

Let us not forget that nowhere was the idea of government by the people abused with such catastrophic consequences as in our country – where it was equated with a party, race or ideology.

Democracy, however, recognises the people only in all its diversity. Therefore, anyone in Germany today who wants to express their concerns and shout out “We are the people!” is entitled to do so. However, they have to accept that other people with other views have just as much right to claim this proud slogan. For example, the lively mix of young people I saw a few months ago in Dresden holding up a banner simply proclaiming: “Nope – we are the people.”

And how right they are. In a democracy, the people is made up of many individuals and has many voices.

Never again should a political force pretend that it alone represents the will of the people and that all others are liars, intruders and traitors. I therefore urge you to ensure that wherever such forms of populism spread – whether in our own country or amongst our friends and partners – we all speak out together.

We are navigating unknown waters; whether we look to the east or to the west: we are heading towards uncharted territory. Often we will have to give answers without being able to rely on others. That will require self-confidence.

Even more, however, it will require courage! The courage to think ahead to the future – and not to hope to find the answers in the past. The courage to take our fate into our own hands – without an emperor or a “big brother” or self-styled “strong men”. Courage is the lifeblood of democracy – just as fear is the fuel of dictatorship and autocracy. That is why democracy is government for the courageous.

Democracy needs courage on both sides – on the side of the governed and on the side of those governing. For only those who have courage themselves can encourage others and expect them to show courage. Politicians are doing themselves no favours if they do not talk openly about people’s concerns, about negative political developments, about unresolved issues. We are living in very political times. That requires the courage to say what is what and what has to be done.

- How can integration be achieved successfully? How, Mr Gauck, can we reconcile our big hearts and our finite capabilities?

- How can we renew our pledge of upward mobility through education, which helped me personally and a whole generation to get on in life?

- How do we maintain hope in those villages where the school, doctor, hairdresser and petrol station have long since closed and now the last bus service is being axed?

- How do we create ethical standards – also in the private sector – which hold together those at the top and those at the bottom of society? So that the top does not act in accordance with rules which people regard as improper or unfair. When severance payments and bonuses provoke only “disbelief” among ordinary people – as a leading representative of the German business community wrote recently in DIE ZEIT – we should not be so quick to dismiss the discussion “as an envy debate”.

And I believe he is right. We are talking about our common interest in ensuring that confidence in our economic and political order as a whole is not shaken due to the actions of a few.

It is not the Federal President’s job to make suggestions on this. But society needs a lively debate on these issues. I believe that if we do not have this debate then populists of all shades will take hold of it and use it against democracy. Therefore, we all have to play our part.

That is why we need a culture of democratic debate.

We will rarely all share the same opinion. It is therefore all the more important that we take good care of our common basis of democracy, without being afraid to argue about ideas, options and alternatives. We need ongoing discussion among democrats – where necessary heated discussion. Daily confirmation of our own opinions from like-minded peers is of no use. Before we get used to only talking

to those with the same opinions, I say: why not talk to the people Facebook does not suggest as contacts for a change? Why not drag our gaze away from our smartphones and take a look at real life?

I want this society to keep its communication channels open. The space of democracy is one in which many voices need to be heard, and indeed, which should also contain a few people who are prepared to listen. I want us to have the courage to venture out of our echo chambers, and to move away from some of the self-assuredness of our intellectual armchairs. And to move right away from the anonymity offered by the internet, where the dividing line between the utterable and the unspeakable is gradually disappearing, and a language of uncontrolled aggression prevails, generating new waves of agitation on a daily basis. Above all, I want us in Germany to keep a firm hold on the difference between facts and lies. Anyone who dispenses with that shakes the very foundations of democracy.

Some months ago, a prominent member of this House – admittedly with the best of intentions – asked me: “Mr Steinmeier, after so many years in politics, can you really be neutral?”

The honest answer is this: no, I am not neutral. Yes, I can look beyond party lines, as this office demands. But I believe I cannot afford to be neutral when fundamental principles are at stake. That is why I say to you that I intend to be partisan – partisan for the cause of democracy.

I will also take a stand for Europe. I am delighted to see the many, most of all young, people who in recent days have been going out on to the streets and taking a stand for Europe.

Those gathering in the streets remind us of the extent to which we Germans in particular are indebted to a united Europe: our country’s return to the fold of the international community, reconstruction, growth and prosperity. And above all: 70 years of peace. We owe all of this to the mothers and fathers of Europe who after 1945 had the courage to learn the right lessons from centuries of wars.

We need courage to stand up for Europe again today. It is true that Europe is far from being perfect. We knew that long before Brexit. We should not gloss over what is going badly. And of course it is high time for bold reforms. Perhaps it is not necessary to defend tooth and nail every detail of the constitutional institution that is Europe.

But to those who say today: “Oh, I’ve had enough of this Europe – let’s go back and hide behind the familiar thick glass panes of nationalism,” I say in response: that is too simple, and it is the wrong road to take. Jean-Claude Juncker recently said that we do not have the right to use patriotism against one another. And that is how I see it too: enlightened patriotism and support for Europe go hand in hand.

For even if my generation does not use the term: for many of our children, Europe has long been a "second fatherland". For this reason, let us speak out with one voice – for a better Europe, a Europe that stands for political freedom; that uses its clout to bring about a more peaceful and just world; that fosters good neighbourliness. I, too, want to stand up for this goal – with as many of you as possible.

All those who show courage, all those who speak out for democracy will know that the Federal President is on their side. My first visits to our *Länder* in my new role will take the form of a very special tour of Germany: I intend to visit the sites of German democracy – and above all the people who inhabit them and breathe life into them – the people who, to refer back to Shimon Peres, feed the good wolf.

I want to meet the people who, after leaving work for a well-earned rest, fight in their local councils to preserve swimming pools or libraries in their neighbourhoods. I want to visit the small and medium-sized enterprises that have to hold their own on international markets but at the same time shoulder responsibility for their employees, their home towns and regions. I want to meet the members of works councils who have helped enterprises to survive the years of crisis and who strive to ensure that company staff are treated fairly. And I want to get to know the people who read to children in nurseries or care for the dying in hospices. And if I wanted to give medals just to all those who have worked themselves into the ground looking after refugees – and believe me, I would like to – then I would know now what I would be busy doing for the next five years.

But I do not have to. Because when I speak to members of the fire brigade, members of the Red Cross, youth trainers or representatives of the church, they tell me that they are not expecting medals. No, they tell me: "We're not bothered about what we get out of it for ourselves, it's about what we can put in for others."

And it is not just one individual or ten or a minority. No, there are many millions of people in our country who are concerned about more than just themselves; who take responsibility for their neighbourhood, their village, their region; who provide help where help is needed. There is nothing more precious than that, and that makes me so proud of our country and its people. And because this is something unique which distinguishes us from many other countries, I am also convinced that we can weather the storms we encounter and provide our children with a worthwhile future.

In 1949, on the day our constitution entered into force, Theodor Heuss declared: "With the Basic Law, a very small piece of firm ground has been created to shape Germany's destiny."

Today, this Basic Law constitutes a broad foundation for the reunified Germany.

In 1969, Gustav Heinemann said: "We are right at the beginning of the first really free period in our history. [...] It is high time that liberal democracy became the vital element of our society." Today it is something we take entirely for granted.

In 1990, the year of unification, Richard von Weizsäcker said: "Now we have to master the task of existing in freedom. That is the challenge." Today, others who live under oppression elsewhere have placed their hopes in us.

What a long, what an amazing journey! Is it not wonderful that our country, a country with this history, has become an anchor of hope in the world? And is it not an unfathomable privilege that we – our generations – are able to experience this?

Who else, then, if not us, is called upon to take a courageous stand for democracy when it is now being challenged throughout the world. That is the courage I am speaking of, that is the courage we need. Not faint-heartedness – there is no cause for that. Not arrogance – we have seen enough of that in Germany. Instead, the active life-affirming courage of democrats – that is what we need!

Thank you very much.