

Speech to mark the Twentieth Anniversary of German Unity
"Valuing Diversity – Fostering Cohesion"
Bremen, October 3rd 2010

Today we celebrate what we achieved twenty years ago: unity and right and freedom for our German fatherland. We recall that momentous day, a day such as few nations ever see. Today all those images of Berlin on the eve of 3 October flood through my mind: the people who stood in front of the Reichstag building; the moments of tingling suspense, just before midnight; the sound of the Freedom Bell ringing; the moment when the flag of unity was hoisted; people singing our national anthem; the joy; the tears; the cohesion at that defining moment in our history. Twenty years on, this still fills me with the greatest gratitude.

For twenty years we have, once more, been "Germany, one fatherland". But what does "one fatherland" mean? What binds us together? Have we grown together, despite all our differences?

One answer to that question is immediately obvious: we have a common history on which to look back. We pay tribute to all those who made this unity possible. To the civil rights activists who resolutely stood their ground against a dictatorship. The late Bärbel Bohley was one of them. She showed that courage can move mountains and thereby gave many other people courage. "Nothing was too big for us to tackle, nothing too small for us to care about." That was one of her sayings. It still moves me today. I bow before Bärbel Bohley and all those who fought for freedom.

Our churches offered a safe haven for this newfound courage. Many people felt something had to change - but a feeling alone changes nothing. I myself must act in order to change things. And it began - with the Monday prayers and the Monday demonstrations. First it was just a few, then more and more people found the courage to take to the streets throughout East Germany. It built up to the "Miracle of Leipzig". The way it combined moral force with non-violent conduct was truly a miracle - a turning point. Brought about by people. Freeing themselves from dictatorship - without bloodshed. The people's desire for freedom had always been there, unrelenting. But now the time had come. And the spirit that had been crushed by tanks in 1953 could no longer be contained in 1989. This is the people's true historic achievement. Their courage impressed the whole world.

Without the freedom movement that was manifesting itself all over Europe, German unification would have been unthinkable. It would have been unthinkable without the Polish workers, backed by the Polish Pope, John Paul II, who himself travelled to Poland to tell them: "Do not be afraid." "Solidarnosc" gradually secured their freedom and, ultimately, also ours. It is a particular pleasure for me to say this here in Bremen, which is twinned with Gdansk. Nor would unification have been possible without Mikhail Gorbachev, who gave up the Soviet Union's claim to the right to rule over other countries, as Glasnost and Perestroika took hold, and thus enabled the people of Germany to exercise their right of self-determination. It would not have been possible without the Hungarian Government that was the first to open its borders. We received so much help from Russians, Poles and Hungarians - friends from whom we could not really expect such support, given the events of the first half of the last century.

We recall the months in which the members of the Volkskammer and Bundestag wrestled over the many small steps that would lead to German unity. What the politicians and administrations in both parts of the country had accomplished by 3 October 1990 represents an unparalleled achievement.

There were others with misgivings who were resistant to change. Abroad, especially, many asked whether it would be a good thing if Germany were to prosper again. Who could blame them, after the terror and havoc caused by Germany in the first half of the 20th century, after all the wrong turns it took.

Farsighted statesmen helped to overcome the resistance and misgivings - Helmut Kohl and Hans Dietrich Genscher, together with Lothar de Maizière. Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt had paved the way. They constantly increased others' trust in our country, in our people. Without this trust, reunification as we know it would not have happened. This was a major achievement of the politicians and diplomats in the past few decades. Reunification would likewise not have been possible in the form it took without our friends in the transatlantic alliance, who guaranteed the freedom of the Federal Republic and West Berlin for forty years. We will not forget the support for German unification shown by George Bush Senior. For all this we are infinitely grateful.

Germany was able once more, as a united country, to become an equal member of the international community. We are surrounded by friends. What a great gift for our country and for all people in Europe.

Two countries became one. This was not without its difficulties. But there was a tremendous amount of solidarity - West Germans rolled up their sleeves to help the East, offering their expertise, entrepreneurship and political experience. But it was the East Germans who shouldered by far the greatest burden of change so that our country could come together again. In a sense, they had to restart their lives from scratch, to reorganize their everyday lives, to make the most of fresh opportunities - and they did, showing a remarkable openness to change. To this day, this has not been given the recognition it deserves.

Many were able at long last to fulfil their hopes and dreams - they could travel wherever they wanted, read and study as they chose, debate whatever issues they wanted with whomever they chose. They could pursue a career of their own choice or turn their own business ideas into reality. For many others it was a long, hard struggle to make a fresh start in life. For some it still is.

Without doubt, things were lost that were worth keeping. But something of infinite value was gained: people's realization that - because of their courage to change - they were able to fashion their own lives in freedom. They added an important chapter to our German history. They turned the single Germany into a new and different Germany. They have shown us by example how to master radical change, to bring both individual happiness and cohesion to us all.

This brings us to the second answer to our original question about "Germany one fatherland". What does it mean today? Twenty years after unification, we face the important task of finding new courage to change, fostering new cohesion in a rapidly

changing world. For in this world old certainties are of course popular, but they are often unreliable.

Our country has become more open, more outward looking, more diversified - and more divergent. Our lives and our life choices have been changed. You all know the reasons: global trade routes and competition; new technologies and boundless means of communication; demographic change and immigration - as well as new threats from outside. In our country differences between various social groups are on the whole growing - between the older and the younger generation, between top earners and those living at subsistence level, between those with secure jobs and those without, between people and their representatives, between people from different faiths and cultures.

Some differences give rise to fear. We must take such fears seriously. But nonetheless, it cannot be said often enough that a free country such as ours thrives on diversity, on varied lifestyles, on being open to new ideas. Otherwise it will fail. Too much uniformity chokes people's own creativity and can ultimately only be gained at the expense of freedom. Our country must be able to withstand diversity. It must actively want it. However, differences that are too great threaten cohesion.

Valuing diversity and closing divides in our society - that's what safeguards us from illusion and promotes true cohesion. That is today's task for "German unity".

In 1989 the East Germans chanted "We are the people, we are one people." This evoked a sense of national identity that had long been buried - for understandable reasons. Now, twenty years on, a new self-confidence has taken hold throughout Germany, a relaxed brand of patriotism, a frank assertion of belief in our country - a country that is aware of its great responsibility for the past and that is shaping the future accordingly. This self-confidence and self-awareness are good for us. And they are also good for our external relations, for people who like and respect their own country are in a better position to approach others.

"We are one people!" This cry for unity must today be an overture to everyone who lives here. An invitation that is not issued on a whim, but is based on values that have made our country strong. Cohesion will be attained if this "we" is understood to include everyone living here - those who have only recently arrived and those who have lived here so long they have forgotten that their ancestors, too, may have come from abroad.

When German Muslims write to me, saying "you are our President" - then I answer from the bottom of my heart that, yes, of course I am. With the same passion and conviction as I am the President of all people who live here in Germany.

I was likewise delighted to receive an open letter from a group of school pupils whose families come from 70 different countries. They all hold scholarships from a foundation that supports dedicated young people in Germany. They wrote: "It is not important to us where someone comes from, but where they want to go. We believe that we will find our path together. We want to live here, for we are Germany."

Of course, it does play a role where someone comes from. It would be a shame if that were not the case. But the key message contained in this letter is "We are Germany!"

We are Germany. Yes, we are one people. And because these people with foreign roots are important to me, I do not want them to get hurt in debates that we very much need. We must not allow myths to be created, we must not allow the cementing of prejudice and exclusion. It is in our own national interest not to let this happen.

For, as I am firmly convinced, the future belongs to those countries that are open to cultural diversity, to new ideas, to people from different backgrounds and to the unknown. Germany, with its globe-spanning links, must be open towards those who have chosen to come here from other parts of the world. Germany needs them. In competing with other countries to bring the best minds to Germany, we have to attract the best and remain attractive so that the best remain. I enjoin you all: let us not allow ourselves to be forced into false confrontations. Ten whole years ago, Johannes Rau most astutely and wisely called on us all to live together in Germany "without fear and without illusions".

We have long since turned our backs on three firmly but falsely held beliefs. We have realized that guest workers did not just come temporarily, but came to stay. We have realized that immigration has indeed happened, even though it took us a long time to define ourselves as an immigration country and to shape immigration so that it serves our country's interests. And we have realized that because of our illusions of multiculturalism we have regularly underestimated the challenges and problems, such as prolonged dependency on the welfare state, crime and the prevalence of macho attitudes, a refusal to be educated or contribute to society. I have read the hundreds of letters and emails I received on this subject. The worries and concerns of our citizens are very much on my mind, and are clearly and with good reason being taken seriously by the politicians.

And yet, we have already come further than one would think from listening to the current debate. It has long been widely accepted that people have to learn German if they live here. It is widely accepted that German laws and regulations have to apply in Germany. For everyone - we are one people.

Hundreds of thousands of people work every day to foster integration. Many - for example as integration mentors - as unpaid volunteers, out of altruism alone. Our local communities and regions can achieve a great deal when politicians and citizens join forces. We must jointly weave the net that holds our society together, in all its diversity and in spite of all its tensions.

And even if we have already come much further than one would think from the current debate, we have clearly not come far enough. We do indeed need to make progress, for example on integration and language courses for the whole family, lessons to improve people's command of their native language, the teaching of Islamic studies - in German, naturally - by teachers who have been trained here. And we do indeed need to enforce our rules and duties far more strictly - for example when it comes to truancy. That, by the way, goes for everyone living in our country.

But first and foremost, we must adopt an unequivocal stance. We need to view German identity as something that is not defined merely by people's passports, family background or faith, but is something broader. Christianity is without a doubt part of German identity. Judaism is without a doubt part of German identity. Such is our Judaeo-Christian heritage. But Islam has now also become part of German identity. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe put it nearly two centuries ago in his "Poems of the East and West": "He who knows himself and others, here will also see, that the East and West, like brothers, parted ne'er shall be."

How did the pupils put it? It's where you want to go that's important. They believe that we will find a common way forward. But a common way also requires agreement on a common goal.

And now I come to the third answer to our original question. "Germany, one fatherland" means respecting and protecting our Constitution and the values enshrined therein. Above all, the dignity of each and every individual, but also freedom of opinion, religious freedom and freedom of conscience, equality between men and women. Respecting our common rules and accepting our way of life. Anyone who doesn't, who holds our country and its values in contempt, must expect to meet with stern resistance from us all - be they fundamentalist, right or left-wing extremists.

We rightly expect everyone to contribute what they can to our community. We do not turn a blind eye to those who take undue advantage of our spirit of solidarity. "Our social state is not a shop where you help yourself to everything without giving anything in return." This simple metaphor chosen by Judge Kirsten Heisig from the Berlin juvenile court is extremely apt. "If people are supported by the state," she wrote in her book, "the community can at the very least expect that their children will be sent to school so that they can tread a different path from that taken by their parents and stand on their own two feet when they are older."

We respect everyone who contributes something to our country and its culture. Be it as a doctor, a German teacher, a taxi driver, a TV presenter, a greengrocer, a footballer, a film maker, a minister. These are just a few examples of successful integration, by men and by women. We should emphasize these positive examples more often, and take courage from them.

We can be proud of our cultural, scientific and economic achievements. We can above all be proud of the social climate in our country - of tolerance, the ability to compromise and solidarity. Incidentally, these characteristics also helped us during the economic crisis. Trade unionists, employers and employees all showed that the strength to achieve balance, to negotiate, to find creative solutions, to stick together, to reach consensus - that's what makes Germany what it is!

New cohesion in society is only possible if none of its stronger members withdraw and if none of its weaker members are excluded. When everyone is handed responsibility and everyone can be responsible.

Anyone who has been fruitlessly job-hunting for a long time, who has to muddle through from one precarious job to the next, anyone who has the feeling of not being

needed and is not given a perspective will understandably turn away from this society in disappointment.

And those who count themselves among the elite, the decision-makers and bearers of responsibility, who withdraw into their own parallel world - they, too, are turning their backs on society. Unfortunately this is precisely what we experienced during the financial crisis. No one should forget what they owe to the chance of their birth and to our country - and they should regard it as a duty to give something back to our society.

The ever increasing number of older people in our society already contribute so much of value. Many of them want to continue working past retirement age, though reducing their hours. We have to make that possible. Others do voluntary work, share their knowledge and experience; why shouldn't there be a Voluntary Social Year for older people as well as for the young?

What does a society in which no one feels superfluous and no one is rendered superfluous look like? How can those who haven't worked for many years be integrated? How can those who still do not have the same possibilities open to them as others because of disability participate?

The most successful way to strengthen cohesion is to put trust and confidence in others. People can achieve so much if someone believes in and supports them. I, too, have seen this time and time again. In our son's crèche, where disabled and able-bodied children are looked after together, there is a little boy. His parents were told that because of his disability he'd only ever be able to crawl. Now he is three and can walk. This is thanks to modern remedial care and therapy, and because his parents and the crèche staff had confidence in him and supported him, and he was able to learn from other children.

We have to start with children. Just as many people once believed in unification, although it was a long way off, we now have to set ourselves goals which seem a long way off but are achievable. No child may now be sent to school without a good knowledge of German. No child should leave school without any qualifications. No child should be left without any hope of employment. It is our children and young people who are at stake here. They are the most valuable thing we have, not least in the light of the demographic change our society is undergoing.

Some things don't cost a cent, just time and attention: spending quality time with children - and not just one's own - reading to them, listening to them. We need parents who say to their children: make an effort. We need praise and support for teachers who say we will never relent in our endeavours to encourage each individual child and to set each child on its way. We need more bosses, male and female, who say we will give the many people who have earned it a chance - irrespective of whether they're called Schulze or Yilmaz, whether or not they have children, whether they are considered too young or too old.

Many who have built a prosperous future in the face of adversity owe their success to people who helped them at decisive moments - just like that. I myself had teachers and neighbours who helped me when my mother fell ill - just like that. Hermann

Gmeiner, the founding father of the SOS Children's Villages, put it like this: "Every big thing in our world only comes true when somebody does more than he has to."

"We are the people": with these four words people who stuck together brushed aside a whole regime. Everyone who chanted this slogan had cast off the feeling of powerlessness, decided they were called upon to act, and shouldered responsibility. Our children should understand our country's history and the immeasurable value of freedom, of responsibility, of justice, viewing them in this context.

They should learn how important it is to tackle the challenges of the future side by side with others. Not to make light of fears of the unknown, of the new, of competition, but to approach the future all the more spiritedly and courageously, for fear, as we all know, is a poor ally indeed.

The European Union is a wonderful model of successful cooperation. I am delighted that so many representatives of Europe are here. "United in diversity" is Europe's very fitting motto, in accordance with which we have achieved an unparalleled integration of nation states. It shows the whole world that we Europeans have learned from the bitter past. We will have to tackle the pressing global issues of the future - such as climate protection, poverty alleviation, the fight against terrorism, reorganization of the financial markets - together as Europeans. The world is changing. Emerging countries are taking their rightful places, be they Indonesia, Brazil, China, Russia or India. We Europeans must now help to shape a world order in which we feel comfortable even though our relative weight decreases. Europe is often criticized at the moment. But I will never stop championing Europe, for Europe is our future and we Germans should remain its engine.

On 3 October 1990, twenty years ago today, our country's hopes were fulfilled.

On this same 3 October, we were given a unique opportunity to make a fresh start. We made good use of this opportunity. Let us jointly take pride in what we have achieved - today and every day. We have not however finished our work. A state, a nation, is never a finished work. We've got to safeguard freedom, to seek and establish unity time and again. We've got to make everybody feel at home in our country and work for social justice - for everybody. This country belongs to all of us, from East or West, North or South, whatever our background. We live here, we like to live here, we live here together in peace - here we uphold unity and right and freedom.

We move forward with courage and confidence. The past twenty years have shown what can be achieved when we work together and, accordingly, what we will be able to achieve in the future, too. We have - in both senses - grown together and we have grown together.

God protect Germany.