

Federal President Johannes Rau's Berlin Speech (May 12, 2004)

Abstract

In 1997 Federal President Roman Herzog (CDU) established the “Berlin Speech” to address issues of fundamental importance for the country. His successor, Johannes Rau (SPD), continued the tradition. Here Rau focuses on the crisis of confidence in politics and society and encourages his fellow citizens to actively engage in making Germany “better and more humane”.

Source

Trust in Germany – an encouragement

Berlin speech by Federal President Johannes Rau

I.

This is the last “Berlin speech” that I will be giving as Federal President. On this occasion in years past, I articulated my position on fundamental issues. I tried to provide guidance, as people expect from their country's political representatives. I spoke about the integration of immigrants, about progress on a human scale, about the necessary structuring of globalization, and about Germany's role in the world.

Today, I want to talk about what I consider the most important issue in the current political debate. In so doing I am addressing all who care about the future of our country – those who bear responsibility today, and also those who can and must take on responsibility so that our country can emerge from a difficult situation and gain new confidence and dynamism.

I am not referring to tax policy, I am not talking about the pension or health care systems. I am also not talking about the necessary restructuring of federalism, or the urgently needed changes to our education system, nor a fair transformation of the welfare state.

No, I want to talk about the basis for any change. I will talk about what, in my experience, makes the necessary changes in our country possible in the first place: I am talking about trust and responsibility.

II.

For years now, we have been presented with **one** picture time and again: we face a gigantic mountain of tasks and problem. Unless we do everything differently than before, we are told that we are threatened by ruin, collapse, decline, or other catastrophes.

Scenarios of doom and apocalypses are actually the tools of political outsiders who seek to force social change. Today, such descriptions often also come from responsible parties at the center of the economy, society, and politics. The goal is the same: scenarios of doom are supposed to help push through certain goals and win over majorities to that end.

Today, with so much talk about the future, there is so little confidence, so little self-confidence, and so little trust in the future. Many seem to expect mostly bad things from the future. There are many reasons for this, and many concerns are justified.

However, the crucial thing is this: if trust is lacking, uncertainty, indeed, fear, holds sway. Fear about the future is the surest way of not securing it. Fear paralyzes our ability to act and clouds our perception of what must in fact be fundamentally changed in our state and society, what must be adapted to new conditions, and what must stay as it is under any circumstances.

The future is not simply coming our way. We must shape it according to our own ideas. After all, we want to be able to live together peacefully and in freedom also in the future – in a society in which accomplishments matter and in which justice and solidarity are alive.

If we want to shape this future, if we want to shape it in a humane way, we need two things: trust in those who bear responsibility for us, and the willingness to take on responsibility ourselves. I am firmly convinced that we can accomplish the necessary changes. But I believe just as firmly that the lack of trust and willingness to take responsibility is the real reason for the massive feeling of insecurity, for the pessimistic mood in many places, and for the lack of strength to change.

We all know: trust cannot be ordered, cannot be commanded. Trust cannot be decided on. Trust must grow. Trust grows between individual people, in communities, and it must mold an entire society.

Without trust, people cannot live together in peace.

Without trust, we cannot solve our problems.

Only trust creates the climate for economic success, for scientific and social progress, for technological innovation.

[...]

XIII.

Today, too, our society is not rigid. It is on the move. We have bold entrepreneurs, internationally renowned researchers and scientists, creative engineers, and superbly qualified workers. They are looking ahead and are moving our country forward.

There are many social initiatives. Voluntary participation and networks that ensure social support, try out new things on a small scale and advocate change on a large scale. What succeeds in one place can spread quickly through new means of communication and often attain global importance.

I see that more and more people, also among the younger, are again recognizing the value of family and the value of stable, reliable bonds. I see that children are being given more time and attention – this provides them invaluable support and a basic trust that nothing else can replace.

However, in the face of all the pessimistic tones we must not fail to see how many traditional or new organizations and social interconnections are functioning, and how much commitment and solidarity are alive in neighborhood help, in self-help groups, and in manifold forms of voluntary work.

[...]

Eighty-two million people live in our country, that is eighty-two million different experiences, aptitudes, strengths, and talents. Much of that flows into our companies, into schools and universities, into art and culture. This potential is still not tapped nearly enough on behalf of our community.

[...]

XIV.

There are plenty of reasons for trust in Germany. There are even more reasons to take on responsibility and get involved.

There are plenty of reasons to be confident that we in Germany will master the future. There are even more reasons to apply oneself for our fatherland, a place where we are happy to live.

It is up to every one of us to make this country, our country, a little bit better and more humane every day.

Source: Johannes Rau, "Vertrauen in Deutschland – eine Ermutigung," Berliner Rede, 12. Mai 2004, http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Johannes-Rau/Reden/2004/05/20040512_Redde.html.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Federal President Johannes Rau's Berlin Speech (May 12, 2004), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5350>> [May 07, 2024].