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We can make so much happen here

Inaugural Address by President Horst Köhler to the German Bundestag 1 July 2004

Mr Speaker, Mr President of the Upper House, President Rau, Mrs Rau, Mr Chancellor, Mr President of the Federal Constitutional Court, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you all for your kind words and good wishes. I was heartened to receive them. They will spur me on and give me courage in my new office.

Our thanks go to you, President Rau, as do our praises. I recall with pleasure our discussion on globalization. We agreed that globalization provides opportunities, but that it also needs to be given political direction. For you, Mr Rau, it has always been the individual, with his inalienable dignity, who is at the heart of your every thought and action. And it is your Christian faith that has informed your perception of human nature. Thus you won the people's confidence. You became, in the best sense of the term, a president of the people. And as such you will remain our example. Mr Rau, we thank you today for having set such standards. We thank you for your great services to our country.

You once said: "Without my wife I would not have been able to fill this post." I am sure the same will be true of me.

For this reason, you too deserve our respect and recognition, Mrs Rau. You opened hearts and won minds with your commitment and dedication, above all to children in need and in particular street children. You showed that hardship and need are not

anonymous. They are attached to names, names of people whose fate we should not just accept. You have done much good, Mrs Rau. For this we thank you!

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to start off by recounting something that rather surprised me. In the weeks following 23 May, the date of my election by the Federal Convention, I was asked again and again what it is that I love about Germany, or simply why I love Germany. When I mentioned the countryside, the dialects, the literature, the music, my interviewers said that was certainly all true, but they also said that it could not be all there was to it.

And indeed, the countryside, language, music - is that really all there is? Particularly at a time when many people in Germany have grave worries, when our country is unmistakably in economic difficulties, when new rifts are emerging in our society, rifts that did not exist in this form only two or three decades ago.

I am not referring solely to the differences between East and West Germany. I am referring to differences that run right through our society. On the one side, people who have work, and on the other, people who live with no job prospects; high earners with no children to support and families with children or single parents with no regular income or prospects. I am referring to the dramatic ageing of the population and the latent conflict between old and young. And I am also referring to the danger of creating parallel societies in our cities, a danger ex-acerbated by the failure to integrate people of different origins and religions.

But it is also true that the beauty of our country, the history of our country, and the problems of our country - are and will always be Germany. It is our country, it is our homeland. And it is also true that in spite of all difficulties, problems and crises that our country

may currently be facing, we Germans are far better off than three quarters of the world's population.

Do we actually know what it means to have to live on less than two euro a day - as three billion people around the world do?

But I don't want this argument to give the wrong impression. The fact that other people are worse off than us is certainly cold comfort for those in Germany who have to count every cent.

Nevertheless, our country should be worth something to us. Notwithstanding our current difficulties, the Basic Law and our social market economy represent a particularly successful and peaceful phase in our country's history, as President Rau mentioned. I myself am a member of the generation that experienced the Federal Republic as a unique success story, from the re-conciliation with our neighbours to the economic miracle and ultimately reunification. These are all great historic achievements and good reasons to have confidence in ourselves. And in my eyes, they are good reasons to love our country, our homeland. And therefore I ask: Can we afford not to care whether our country is flourishing or if it is losing out to global competition? Can we afford not to care whether one of the motors of Europe is increasingly prone to stall, as some say? I don't think we can. Why? Firstly, because our partners in Europe and around the world are watching us and rightly have high expectations of us. We are 80 million people in the centre of Europe and we have no choice but to assume responsibility. Germany must be a country which generates political ideas and leadership, which is capable of compromise, which is sovereign and yet knows that it needs its partners on both sides of the Atlantic.

A few weeks ago we were reminded that other peoples - in particular the United States of America - fought so that we Germans could live in liberty. That we should never forget.

For me liberty is the most important value that forms a lasting bond between Europe and America, and I continue to regard America as the stronghold of liberty. It is of course true that the Americans have made their mistakes, as we Europeans have made ours. But I also think it is clear that nobody has any interest in distorting America's image. That would only harm all those who champion freedom and democracy around the world. We Germans should seek a healthy partnership and a new dialogue with America - one in which we are self-assured and capable of expressing constructive criticism to friends with whom we share common values and interests.

Shared values and common interests - much more can be built on these than on gratitude alone.

Many of our country's people are already making an exemplary contribution to freedom and international stability on a daily basis. I would like to thank our soldiers, our policemen and women, the officers of the Federal Border Police, the staff of the Federal Agency for Technical Relief, charities and the many non-governmental organizations. They are doing a great service around the world and are excellent ambassadors for Germany.

Ladies and gentlemen, Germany's fate is decided first and foremost in Europe. Reconciliation and cooperation in Europe have brought us freedom, peace and prosperity. Who would have dared to believe 50 years ago that we would achieve so much? The enlargement of the European Union and the agreement achieved by the Heads of State and Government on the constitutional treaty are further milestones on the path towards a united Europe, a

community of values. Germany should continue along this path with determination and patience.

But the fact that barely four in ten Germans bothered to vote in this year's European elections should make us stop and think. Too many citizens obviously do not understand Europe. Let us work together to explain Europe better. As Federal President, I would like to help strengthen our European identity. It will supplement, not replace, our national identity. Transparency, democratic decision-making processes and a clear delimitation of competences - these will stop people feeling that they are at the mercy of anonymous technocrats in Brussels, and they will be the yardsticks by which the everyday working of the new constitution will be judged.

The Franco-German friendship has, in the course of four decades and more, been transformed from a vision into a vibrant reality. It was crucial for the unification of Europe. A new era began for Europe with the enlargement of the European Union on 1 May 2004. As I am particularly conscious, given my own background, the requirements of this new era are a challenge to which we must rise.

I will therefore support personal interaction between Germans and people from the new member states, in particular between young people. And therefore my first trips abroad will be to Poland and France.

However, I would also like to see a Europe which supports the UN Development Goals not just with words, but also with deeds - to be specific, by further opening its markets to poor countries and by providing more official development assistance.

In my work for the International Monetary Fund I came face to face with starvation and un-told hardship, above all among women and

children. But I also saw that targeted development cooperation can do great good.

In my view, the humanity of our world can be measured against the fate of Africa. Do Europe's self-respect, its foundations, values and history, not require it to play an honest and generous role in Africa?

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a second, even more important reason why we should not simply accept the state our country is in. We are responsible for awakening the creative forces of our citizens and bringing them to fruition. A fresh wind must sweep through Germany - in our own interest. We must mend the rifts in our society. But we will only manage to do so if we identify the causes and not just the symptoms, and if we see our country as it really is. We have our strengths, but we also have our weaknesses. We must safeguard and build on our strengths. We must learn from our weaknesses. I am sure that we have the skills required. What we lack are the right framework conditions, the right climate, in which to develop these skills. We should not discourage ourselves by thinking we cannot make it.

As Federal President Roman Herzog said back in 1997: "Germany needs to jolt itself into action." He was right. But we have already lost a lot of time. Why don't we manage to get ourselves in gear? Because we are all too busy waiting for it to happen.

What do we need for such a jolt? Above all, we need viable ideas. Every individual has ideas, both you and I. But we do not fight hard enough to see them implemented. We all just wait.

This is also true of the political parties. But a step in the right direction has been made with Agenda 2010.

What we now need is single-mindedness and determination in continuing down this road.

I therefore say to the majority of the Bundestag and the majority of the Bundesrat: if we are serious about Germany's renewal, we cannot afford to lose a single year to electioneering.

We need the Government's courage to launch initiatives which resolutely continue down the road to renewal, and we need the Opposition's courage to clearly set out their alternatives in full.

We need something else, too - the ability to reach constructive compromises. The agreement on the Immigration Act and the compromise achieved in the Mediation Committee on the reform of unemployment and welfare benefits show that Germany is shifting into gear. This I welcome wholeheartedly.

The cross-party debate on modernizing the interplay between the federation and the states - as referred to earlier by the President of the Upper House - also gives me reason to hope. At present, too much legislation passing through the Bundestag also requires the approval of the Bundesrat.

This results in compromises, which veil where responsibility lies.

I hope that all levels of government find the strength to clearly delimit and regulate the competences of the federation, the states and the municipalities, and to encourage competition between various policy options.

Not least, I hope that local councils are given more leeway to implement their ideas, otherwise we risk depriving ourselves of their considerable potential.

If we make progress on these issues, we will have greatly enhanced our country's ability to reform.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we know where we want to go, then even a stony road is bearable. Everybody says that reform is needed - I myself have said it too. Many people are already sick of the word. We have obviously not succeeded in properly explaining the aims of the reforms. It is our duty to do so.

So, what is our goal? I will put it simply: we want to make Germany a successful country again, a country in which people are happy to live, above all a country in which people can find work and pursue their dreams, a confident country, a go-get-it country, a country with ideas. This is what we ought to achieve - and can achieve.

Over the centuries Germany has produced hosts of people with prolific ideas. Exactly 358 years ago today, on 1 July, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was born. This all-round genius did not just reflect on the now proverbial "best of all possible worlds", he also conceived very practical ideas - for example, the use of power of the wind to drain the mines in the Harz mountains - for its improvement.

Or is that not sufficiently future-oriented in your eyes?

Leibniz also invented, independently of Newton, the differential calculus and introduced -over 300 years ago, I may point out - the binary system using the digits 0 and 1 on which our modern computer technology is based.

But ideas also need to be translated into action. And that will happen only if conditions are right. Why is it that where ideas and innovations are concerned we have lost ground in recent decades?

There are countless cases - cathode-ray tubes, for example, or Konrad Zuse's first computer or - particularly topical - the MP3 technology - of new ideas that have been developed here in Germany but created jobs elsewhere. I will be glad to explain afterwards to anyone interested what the MP3 technology is in more detail.

It is something radically new. And while all these are German inventions, they have been developed and commercially exploited mostly outside Germany. There is a risk the same will happen with nanotechnology and biotechnology. Clearly there is something in Germany we have to change if we want our ideas to thrive here and not go to waste.

As an exporting nation Germany has - perhaps more than any other country - benefited enormously from globalization over the past 50 years in particular. But it is also true that more and more countries are currently doing better than we are.

Labels such as "Made in China" or "Made in Malaysia" are today gaining a worldwide reputation. Our response cannot be a retreat into isolation: the only course open to us is to foster creativity and make the label "Made in Germany" our trump card.

On that score even the 2004 European Cup has good news for us Germans.

Although the official competition ball is manufactured in Asia, its design - i.e. the sophisticated know-how that went into its manufacture - is "made in Germany" and helps secure jobs here at home. Unlike its predecessor, the heavy-as-lead, rain-sodden ball used in 1954, when the German team pulled off the "Berne miracle", this year's ball has a seamless surface, thanks to a brilliant piece of German materials research.

As this example shows, also in the age of globalization pushing back the frontiers of know-ledge, developing innovative ideas is an excellent way to secure jobs for the future. That alone will not suffice, but it is an important part of what needs to be done. Germany can still boast entrepreneurial success stories. In areas such as software development or mechanical engineering we have produced cutting-edge technologies and global leaders. But there are too few companies of this calibre. We need more.

In the social arena, too, we need still more ideas of the kind pioneered by the Berlin Urban Mission. With the help of private and commercial sponsors, the charity established five years ago the Lehrter Street Centre. In addition to offering homeless people and former advice and support to prisoners, the Centre provides activities and hostel accommodation for young people and a forum for encounters and contacts. Without waiting for the state to step in, private citi-zens came together to provide practical help for those in need. They were courageous, crea-tive and ready to take risks. They did not wait for others to act. Similar initiatives are found up and down the country and undoubtedly we could do with still more. Such projects - an-other dimension of the "made-in-Germany" idea - I find a source of hope and optimism for the future.

But if that is the case, why are we still finding it so hard to embrace an agenda of renewal? Of all the possible answers I will consider here just two. Firstly, we cling too much to what we already have. And secondly, we are too afraid of failure.

In my view the welfare state represents tremendous progress for mankind, an achievement of which we can be rightly proud.

But the welfare state we have in Germany today is no longer viable, I believe, in its current form. That is the bitter truth.

We have failed above all to adapt the welfare state to the requirements of an ageing society and changing employment patterns. Simply increasing the national debt is no solution, for the size of the present debt is already a heavy burden on our children's future.

What our country needs is a change in mentality, a new balance between individual responsibility and collective solidarity. In the field of social policy, too, we must make sustainability our watchword: in everything we do, every new law we enact, we must consider also the implications for future generations, for our children. That is an aspect we have too long neglected.

In this context there is one thing all of us need to realize: even now the task of remodelling our welfare state is making considerable demands on many people in Germany. People are going through hard times, for the cuts affect those, after all, who in any case do not have much. I know it and all of us ought to know it. No one can seriously promise there will be a bigger slice of the cake any time soon. In this situation it is all the more important to ensure that everyone bears their share of responsibility and makes a certain sacrifice - a sacrifice commensurate with their circumstances.

We need a "development policy for a developed country", as Germany's Roman Catholic bishops have put it. Development, may I point out, not demolition or dismantlement; de-velopment in the sense of remodelling.

If we are to accomplish this task, we must also find the strength to overcome our "them against us" attitudes. All of us - the two sides of industry, the cultural, academic and business communities - are sitting in the same boat, after all. Everyone can take responsibility

for our country's welfare. Everyone can set an example to others - as a nurse or teacher, as a junior team coach in a sports club, as a journalist or entrepreneur. Most business leaders in Germany are doing exemplary work in difficult times. They realize that - particularly in today's know-ledge society - motivated employees keen to give their best are a company's greatest asset. Especially in these difficult times for our country, I would like to see our business leaders committed to an ethos of responsibility and moderation.

A second reason why we in Germany are so hesitant about tackling the challenge of renewal is - as I have already pointed out - our fear of failure. Being human, we know of course that whatever we turn our hand to, there are bound to be setbacks and mistakes. But the important thing is not to give up, to muster the courage to start afresh and not let ourselves be dis-couraged. Take Leipzig's bid to host the Olympics, for example! I do not deny. There were mistakes and problems in certain quarters. Yet the fact remains that Leipzig put its whole heart into a thrilling new venture, it dared to pit itself against cities such as New York, London and Paris. In the end its valiant effort did not produce the desired outcome. But I am quite certain the citizens of Leipzig - and indeed of Rostock, too - have gained a new strength and confidence in themselves as a result of this experience.

People with courage, ideas and a sense of responsibility do not just appear out of the blue. They have been moulded by their families, their schools and neighbourhoods. That is why the education and upbringing of children is the key to Germany's future. The essence of education is to stimulate creativity, encourage experiment and ideas, foster values. That requires people who demonstrate in their own lives the ideals and values to which they are committed, people to whom the young can look for orientation, with whom they can put their own ideas also to the test. It is perhaps in this

area, to my mind, that action is most needed. Education means investing in both hearts and minds. We need an education system that not only encourages people to give their best, to discover the thrill of learning but is also in itself creative and capable of further development.

Ladies and gentlemen, here in Germany I have the impression we are now seeing a renaissance of the family. I sense this all around me and it makes me hopeful for the future. This is a trend we must encourage and strengthen. I was particularly struck by one comment I read recently about family ties: children, I was reminded, are the only bond that we can never sever.

That is why it is so important that parents once again understand the importance of their own role. To bring up children means first and foremost setting a good example. Being a father or mother is, as we know, one of the most difficult missions anyone can take on, especially in the present day and age, when young people find it much harder than my generation did to get a job and earn the respect of the community. They have a tougher time than we did.

Another reason we need to rethink education and the family and the way they interact are the tremendous problems that lie ahead on account of our rapidly ageing population. Without children our country has no future. Clearly, if we want to make Germany a country of ideas, we must make it above all a child-friendly country.

We must make Germany a country where no child suffers neglect, where no one puts up notices forbidding children to play, where no one goes to court over children's noise.

And we must make it quite clear that looking after children is the business of both parents, not women alone.

Most young people would like to have a career as well as children. But there is another, very important point I would make. Germany must become a country where equal opportunities for men and women are a matter of course.

That means in particular that women must be able to rise to top positions in all areas of national life. In this respect Germany is a developing country. With my international experience, I can assure you, that is the case.

There is one thing we men must realize: it is not so much the children and family dimension that is the crux. The real crux here is women's creativity and competence, which we sorely need.

We must find the strength to create an environment that enables people to start families and at the same time continue their training, earn a living and pursue a career. I appeal to everyone in politics and business, to federations, associations and government bodies, and especially to all organizations that run their own affairs: act now and act quickly to create that environment! Play your part in ensuring that women and men can opt for a career without opting against children!

We need more day-care centres for children and more flexible working hours so that people can combine work and family responsibilities more easily.

At the same time I am concerned to make one thing plain: mothers who stay at home to look after their families should also receive greater recognition from the community, recognition that is tangible and meaningful.

I have a particular appeal to address to Germany's young people. This 21st century is your century! The agenda for Germany's renewal is first and foremost about building your future, the future of our country's young people! We need your ideas, your commitment. You have abundant freedom and opportunities! Use that freedom and those opportunities to shape this new century of yours! Yet - and this, too, is very important - do not blithely disregard the ex-perience of older people. You may find it of great value. We live, of course, ladies and gentlemen, in an ageing society. But here, too, there is good news: for ideas, for commitment one is never too old.

That is the essence of my appeal to our older citizens: reach out to our young people! They need that contact! To create a new kind of community between young and old: that is a tremendous opportunity for us, an opportunity to make the Germany of the 21st century a genuine country of ideas.

For clearly, ladies and gentlemen, we need to realize that both for us Germans and for the world at large this watershed change is an immense opportunity that must be grasped. In the past we in Germany have seen that the strength derived from debating pros and cons, learning how to overcome differences, living in a climate of freedom has produced manifold benefits: Western integration, the post-war economic miracle, also the fresh ideas - despite the excesses - provided by the 1968 students' movement, German unity and the process of European inte-gration.

Although there has been plenty of often fierce controversy, we have nevertheless managed to build bridges, overcome differences and resolve problems. One thing especially should enable us to face the future with confidence: the memory of what happened 15 years ago, when people in Eastern Germany successfully mounted

a peaceful revolution. From their courage and their experience of radical change we can all learn a great deal.

To the challenges ahead we must now respond as one nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I realize that what I say here and now cannot address every concern or every section of society. Some who feel their concerns have not been addressed will be disappointed, on that score I hold no illusions. To those people particularly I would say - without intending any kind of threat - that this speech is in no sense the final word.

No one, I freely admit, has all the answers to the many questions we face today. We must learn to live with question-marks. The important thing is that as individuals and as a society we remain willing to learn and be partners in dialogue.

I view the oath I have sworn as President as an obligation to work for Germany's renewal. This means I will scrutinize what I see, ask questions and - on occasion - also call into question. I will be guided by the Christian ethic and an awareness that human action is by nature transient. By and large I am an optimist.

Goethe once said that no one knows the limits of his strength until he has tested them.

So let us now put our ideas and strengths to the test! Here in Germany there is so much we can make happen. To do it we need both greater freedom and a greater sense of community. I am convinced we shall succeed. I have faith in this country, because I have faith in its people.

Thank you very much.