

Pressezentrum

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Politik und Freiheit (Originaltitel: Politics and Freedom)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this meeting. Only too often it is thought that politics and faith should be kept apart, that it is unwise to discuss these two separate fields on the same forum. I agree that we should not blur the line between politics and faith. They are, indeed, two very different areas. But it is also true that people of faith are also political actors and political actors may have their own faith. We are well advised if we do not use faith for political purposes or use politics to interfere with issues of faith.

Politics and freedom is a topic that has plenty to do with issues of faith. Without freedom there cannot be freedom of conscience. Without freedom of conscience there cannot be freedom of faith. Freedom is therefore the key to both, to politics and to faith.

After the second world war much has happened on the political arena in these issues. Decolonization was an enormously extensive and at times a violent process as many nations were struggling for freedom. There were fortunate processes where the colonial masters relinquished their holdings without struggle. But there were also protracted struggles with most unfortunate consequences, such as the partition of India and the strife that led to the forming of the Indian republic and Pakistan.

In a number of countries that were carved out of the colonial empires freedom has been the gate to well being and prosperity. However, in too many of them the colonial masters have been replaced by new, unelected masters or populist leaders who have ignored the needs of their people as soon as they have gained the reigns of power.

A large part of Europe was for several decades under autocratic rule. Those in power were highly suspicious of all demonstrations or manifestations of freedom. There was censorship, there were severe travel restrictions and many other limitations to personal freedom. It is obvious that very many people could hardly even dream of the kinds of freedoms which to the more fortunate Europeans were a matter of course, so self evident that most of us hardly

thought about them. The first precondition for freedom is to be aware of ones rights. It is true that even in these autocratic countries people had – in theory – much more freedom than was the case in practice.

A decisive turning point was the convening of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The process started in Helsinki in 1972 and it reached its high point in the first post-war political summit in August 1975 in Helsinki. The Final Act, more often known as the Helsinki Accords, was a unique document. All states responsible for security in Europe took part in the proceedings and signed the Final Act. All of them pledged to respect freedoms and rights of their people. What was important was that all governments undertook to publish the documents so that everybody would have access to them. That was done and millions of Europeans became, for the first time, fully aware of their rights and privileges.

I am not trying to maintain that these events were the decisive force that lead to the peaceful and virtually bloodless revolution that meant an end to those autocracies. But I do not hesitate to say that it was an important contribution to the profound political reforms we saw in Central and Eastern Europe. That was a great victory for freedom as a political idea.

One of the principles enshrined in the final act – respect for human rights – deserves to be reiterated. It reads like this: *“The participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion”* (Helsinki Final Act, Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States, paragraph 1(a) VII).

It was also solemnly stated that the observance of these rights and freedoms are *“an essential factor for the peace, justice and well-being to ensure the development of friendly relations and co-operation among themselves as among all States.”*

I have chosen to stress these things because today there are governments which no longer live up to these commitments by limiting freedoms and rights in violation of their own freely accepted responsibilities. Talk of limited sovereignty or privileged interests across the borders are not in line with the accepted principles. The closing of newspapers or muting of radio stations are violations of commitments undertaken during the “cold war.” Today, after the end of the “cold war”, at a time when all European states profess democratic faith and fundamental freedoms such acts of states cannot be accepted.

We who are among the fortunate ones who have the privilege of freedom do not always meet the responsibilities that come with freedom. We fail to live up to our responsibilities if we claim that our participation in politics is useless or unimportant. A democracy is only as strong as is the willingness of the citizens to contribute to its success. From time to time this preparedness to shoulder responsibility is tested.

We are facing elections to the European Parliament in a few days. The trend in voter participation has been in decline for a long time. Fewer European citizens make use of their right to vote claiming that it makes no difference whether they vote or not. That is a serious mistake. The parliament which is to be elected in early June will have more power than any other European parliament before. Nor are these powers irrelevant to the daily life of the citizens. They have much to do with our well being, with our rights and freedoms and with justice. Not to vote is to decline one’s rights and responsibilities. It is to belittle the achievements we have won with the unification of Europe.

There have been important changes in the political culture of several mature democracies. Political parties have lost much of their earlier strength as advocates of ideals and philosophies. They are today much more advocates of material interests. That is perhaps

unavoidable. So much of the well being of the common man depends on the political process as it guides the activities of the governments.

There may also be other reasons. Many political processes are so technical and so difficult to express in plain language that they become distant and obscure to those who are not prepared to dedicate much time and effort to the understanding of them. Our newspapers have lost in circulation and the new, modern electronic means for transmitting news and information tend to be less interested in political affairs than what has been the traditional role of newspapers. To be well informed is certainly possible – perhaps it is fair to say that to those who really want to be well informed the conditions are even better than ever. But not without considerable effort.

Here we have a paradoxical situation. Our very well being depends on the well functioning of our governments – on the local level, on the regional level, on the national level and on the European level. There is even a global level of governance. In spite of all this it seems to me that very many people think that politics is not worth their time or attention.

Such an attitude puts enormous pressure on those who chose to stand for political office and who assume the responsibility of representation. The much maligned politicians who act on our behalf need our consent and advice to succeed in their work. After all, they work for us. They use powers given to them by us. If we do not care what those powers are, we are not only risking our interests but we also risk our freedom.

In a number of countries the political cultures are such that there is no clear separation between the political organizations and the religious bodies. We know the separation of state and church. We know the doctrine of “two kingdoms” as defined by Martin Luther. The one kingdom as that of God, the other that of the world. They are separate but parallel. That is an essential part of his political philosophy.

Not all political philosophies are built on such an idea of separation of state and church, or state and religious organizations. In a number of cases the thinking has it that there are no such separations. The same principles and the same institutions cover the same area of social life. It is no surprise that as people grown up in such cultures come to our midst, they are puzzled by our way of seeing two different and separate kingdoms. They find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept such a division. This may lead to cultural confrontations.

Unfortunately, however, such confrontations are not always based on these basic considerations. Only too often differences in religious and political philosophies are exploited for purely political purposes. As this happens, ignorant and innocent believers are used as a tool for ends that have little to do with their religious commitments or their true faith. It seems that many of the burning conflicts of our time have such characteristics.

It has often been said, and by many, that politics is dirty business. Political maneuvers and tricks, political subterfuge and machinations are often quoted as examples of. Politics is about power, how to gain it, how to use it and to what ends – these are crucial questions.

Great transparency and openness are, however, necessary to keep politics clean. That, again, is only possible if the citizens insist on these virtues. If they punish corrupt or devious politicians by declining their re-election, or, in extreme cases, bring them before justice, politics remains what it should be – taking care of our common and public affairs for the good of all. It is certainly true that power leads to temptations and not all political leaders do resist these temptations. Therefore a well informed, alert political constituency is the best guarantee for keeping politics clean.

That is possible if we elect to leading political positions citizens whose great merit is in their character. Their moral fortitude is more important than their technical expertise. Facts and figures, information and advice are necessary but the sources for them are plenty. Such things can be outsourced, as the current saying goes. But character, honesty and good judgment cannot be outsourced. It is overwhelmingly important that voters do not become cynical as they make their choices for representation. If they care little about the moral backbone of their representatives, and focus only on how they deliver benefits to their constituents, politics does become rotten. That is not good for any of us.

Freedom is a tender flower in our garden. It needs much care and support. It is an easy victim to abuse in the hands of those who do not recognize what it requires of us. The more there is freedom, the greater is the responsibility. Freedom without responsibility ends in anarchy. Anarchy is a poor bed for the flower of freedom. Therefore whenever the importance of freedom is stressed, it is equally important to stress that freedom is not license. License is an enemy of freedom. Freedom is an empty word if not twinned with responsibility.

What, then, are our responsibilities in the world of today? How can we strengthen the forces that support freedom? In my view one of the great tasks before us is the solving of conflicts. In conflict situations freedom is the first victim. The parties of the conflict are often prepared to use all means at their disposal to find a solution to their liking on the expense of others. It means limitations to freedom of thought, freedom of expression, even freedom of conscience. In violent conflicts everyone suffers.

In my experience even such conflicts that have been doomed to be eternal can be solved. If the possibility of a resolution is not used, protracted conflicts may turn into frozen conflicts, long lasting sources of tension and havoc. Parties of such conflicts have lost their sense of proportion and they chose not to see a way out.

There are various arrangements, under international law, for the purpose of conflict resolution. Although such systems are indispensable and most valuable, they are not always suitable tools for conflict settlement. There may be room for softer methods than going to court. There may be more convincing arguments than naming and shaming. It seems that informal ways – without the pressure of formal arrangements – can sometimes be the best way of exploring avenues for a settlement of a conflict situation. The main thing, whatever the method, is that conflicts which poison their environment are brought to a settlement in a fair and mutually acceptable way.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, during the long period of time that I have had the privilege of holding public office or working for public purposes I have learnt some lessons. One of them is that in politics clean play brings the best results. Openness and fairness create confidence. Political action based on confidence is a demanding proposition. It requires much not only from the actor but also from his constituents. If they put their trust in their representatives they also know that if they are betrayed in their trust, they have the power to throw out such an unworthy representative. That power is theirs as long as they live in a free environment. Freedom is an absolute precondition for good politics. Good politics thrive only in an atmosphere of responsible freedom.

I thank you.