



**Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the fourth Forum Bellevue "Society
without politics? Liberal democracies put to the test"
at Schloss Bellevue
on 23 May 2018**

Today is a special day. Germany's Basic Law was formally signed 69 years ago to the day, on 23 May 1949. This was the birth of our representative, parliamentary order, and it is, of course, no coincidence that we are continuing our panel discussions on the future of democracy on this very day.

The architects of the Basic Law acted against the backdrop of the failure of the Weimar Republic. They knew that a democracy is based on conditions that a constitution alone cannot guarantee. Democracy needs democrats who are prepared to get involved and to cooperate. It needs citizens who respect others as equals and who do not put their own interests first, who have the courage to engage in open and fair debate and – what is no less important – who have the same courage to compromise. This presupposes an interest in the community – certainly more than indifference and laissez-faire at any rate.

One of the architects of the Basic Law, Theodor Heuss, who went on to become Federal President, summed this up succinctly: "Without me", he said, "represents the destruction of all democratic sentiment, which is based in essence on the notion of 'with me', 'with you'".

We know that this "democratic sentiment" developed only gradually in the Federal Republic. And the people of East Germany were only able to get to grips with democratic practices during and after the Peaceful Revolution. None of this happened overnight, however, and there were setbacks and disappointments along the way. But it is difficult to deny that – above and beyond these changes – Germany became a vibrant democracy with stable institutions. Compared with many other countries, we live today in a cosmopolitan society with well informed and committed citizens, with diverse and

independent media, and, if I may add, certainly with responsible politicians.

The reason why I say this is because it has become fashionable in recent times to claim that the apocalypse has come and to prophesy the demise of liberal democracy. I have no intention of chiming in with this chorus of doomsayers. And I even believe that it is dangerous if democrats succumb to bouts of depression without standing up and making the case for their institutions and convictions.

It is precisely because we live in a stable order that we should confidently face the challenges with which democracy is confronted nowadays and which put it to the test, in Germany, Europe and in many parts of the world. And this is what we intend to do together today.

This positive assessment does not alter the fact that changes are occurring. We all sense that something has shifted in our liberal democracies. Cracks have opened up in our society, too, while hatred and contempt have wormed their way into our political discourse. The democratic attitude of "with me" and "with you" of which Theodor Heuss spoke has, in some sections of society, given way to "without me" or even "against them", which is sometimes reinforced by sentiments of "against them up there".

We are witnessing, for example, that while many citizens are passionately committed to civil society, they show no interest in becoming involved in political parties and democratic institutions. It gives me cause for concern when I think of the extremely tough time parties had trying to find candidates for city and local councils in Thuringia just a few weeks ago.

It would seem that citizens from the younger generation in particular have lost trust in democratic institutions. At any rate, they no longer view parliaments as places where solutions are found that improve their lives. Their mantra of "without me" often feeds on an ironic or cynical distance from "political machinery", and sometimes even on contempt for politicians and institutions. Giving politics a wide berth has become "cool" for many as, at the very least, this justifies their lack of involvement in this area.

We are also witnessing the rise of new political forces that go to great lengths to rally people against the so called "establishment", against a purported power cartel in politics, the media and business. They claim to be the sole representatives of the "true will of the people", discredit compromise as a weakness, promise simple solutions – and often rail against social minorities. "Us against them" is the prevailing attitude here.

Some movements support the cause of direct democracy or want to introduce a digital "click democracy" in order to help the "will of the

people" win through. We must ask ourselves whether this is also expressive of a longing for redemption from politics, the desire to escape the long and drawn out slog at the negotiating table and the arduous balancing of different interests. With this in mind, I believe that it is not at all surprising that French publicist Jacques de Saint Victor talks about the "antipolitical" with respect to certain trends of the present. This is a controversial theory that we should discuss.

Of course, it is not terribly enlightening simply to bandy about vague labels here. Terming movements and parties as "populist" seldom gets us very far. For some, this is a justification for not listening carefully to fundamental criticism, while others feel quite at ease with the accusation that they are only the voice of the real, the true, people. Both sides steer clear of each other in this distribution of roles. Debate is what is required – this is what democracy thrives upon! The only question is where the boundaries lie in this debate.

One of our panellists today articulates how difficult it is to stake out boundaries when he writes: "Nobody need fear absurd political proposals and harsh words. Populism may be as anti establishment as it wants, as long as it is not anti parliamentary or anti democratic."

Well said! But is this not precisely the problem? Is this – this anti-parliamentary reflex – not precisely what we are looking at in many Western democracies? And did we not learn from the first democracy on German soil that radical populism is primarily focused on contempt for political institutions and their representatives?

"Bonn is not Weimar", and Berlin is certainly not. However, I was, like many in my generation, inspired by Kurt Sontheimer's analysis that excessive and mass media criticism of the system, and above all criticism of parliamentarianism, paved the way to the failure of the Weimar democracy. Has this analysis become historically redundant? Or has it made a comeback at a time when the "failure of the rule of law" or the "failure of democracy" is proclaimed on multiple occasions each year?

Indifference towards the political sphere, turning away from democratic institutions, resentment against the "establishment" – this is what we intend to discuss here at the fourth Forum Bellevue today.

We want to explore the social causes of these developments, and also to consider the shortcomings of our representative processes. And we want to ask what we can do to ensure that our democracy remains vibrant and for political commitment to remain or become attractive for as many citizens as possible. New forms of participation that have the capacity to complement established institutions and enrich the debate are particularly important to me in this regard. After all, it is a strength of our democratic order that it is not institutionally rigid, but remains open to change.

I am delighted to be able to welcome this afternoon three vocal public intellectuals who seek to shed light on this issue from very different perspectives and who have made very different proposals for how democracy can be revitalised.

Christoph Möllers is a professor of public law and legal philosophy at the Humboldt Universität here in Berlin.

A few months ago, writing in the magazine "Merkur", he described a bourgeois middle class that has, and I quote, become used to "believing in a world without politics, or at least in one in which politics can neither take anything away from them or offer them any benefit".

For him, these are citizens who by no means consider themselves to be apolitical, who go to the ballot box, lend their support to associations and projects, take to Twitter to protest – or indeed read or pen clever essays on the demise of political culture. However, Möllers observes, they do not care about political institutions in the strict sense of the term.

"Anyone who believes the framework of order as it is to be worthy of protection", he writes, "will have to place their trust in its political forms". I am, of course, taken by his call to get involved, "to join political parties" and to devote an appreciable amount of one's own time to political activities – that should come as no surprise to you.

But why is it that sections of society have turned their backs on politics? How can we bridge the divide that appears to have opened up here? To what extent do parties also have to change? I intend to talk to him about all of this in just a moment. Christoph Möllers, allow me to offer you a warm welcome!

I am delighted to be able to welcome an academic working on different forms of politicisation that we have also observed in various guises in Europe for a number of years now. Donatella Della Porta is a professor of political science at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence and she conducts research into social movements and political protest. She can – against the backdrop of current events – tell us a great deal about a country that is giving Europeans even greater cause for concern at the present. Perhaps she will tell us that we worry too much. In the distinction she makes between regressive and progressive forces, she places Cinque Stelle, the Five Star Movement, which is poised to join the government in Italy, in the progressive category – a category of positive political forces. I would like to hear from her in a moment what she considers to be advanced about this movement – and whether she is sure that left wing populism strengthens democracy and that only right wing populism is detrimental to it. She must tell us why in just a moment.

At any rate, political protest, according to Donatella Della Porta, is an indicator for the "shortcomings of representative democracy". Parties, she argues, are no longer able to feed pressing issues of concern to citizens into the political system. She therefore calls for greater opportunities to become involved, for greater "deliberative democracy".

But how should we imagine this precisely? To what extent are new movements changing existing party systems? Do they strengthen or weaken representative democracy? I would like to discuss that with her in just a minute.

Thank you for joining us today – benvenuta, Signora Della Porta!

My third guest is David Van Reybrouck. He hails from Belgium, is a historian and archaeologist, writer and playwright, and his essays "A Plea for Populism" and "Against Elections" have caused a sensation also in Germany.

Van Reybrouck believes that representative democracy is undergoing a "dramatic" crisis. The cause of this, he posits, is a growing gap between educationally disadvantaged classes and highly qualified elites. Populism, he writes, is a "cry for help from the low skilled and forgotten voters" who feel out of touch with their MPs.

Instead of looking down on and excluding these voters, Van Reybrouck wants to include them in the political process – and create forums where people from different classes can meet and enter into discussion. While some of you in this room will say that this idea is not all that new, with his civic platform G1000, Van Reybrouck not only advocates greater participation in Europe, but a further idea of his sounds quite revolutionary – he calls for a second chamber to be added to the elected parliament whose members are chosen by lottery. While this is a point of view that is not anti-parliamentary per se, Van Reybrouck considers elections to be a "primitive, aristocratic" element and believes that democracies that are only based on elections come up short – hence his support for what is known as an aleatoric democracy, one based on elements of chance.

Such proposals sound surprising, even strange, and I have a great many questions about this, particularly with regard to Germany. For instance, I would like to know to what extent populism can "enrich" democracy. Which "new problems" does it put on the agenda and which "blind spots" does it uncover?

He will explain this to us himself shortly. Allow me to offer you a warm welcome, too, David Van Reybrouck!

Today, on the anniversary of the signing of the Basic Law, we see in sharp relief just how fragile democracy is and, above all, how little it can be taken for granted. And looking back at the past 69 years makes it clear once again that democracy is always a work in progress. We

cannot, as the political scientist Klaus von Beyme once said, "store it in a sort of intellectual botanical box as a dried specimen of the doctrine of forms of government".

I am therefore delighted that we have an opportunity now to discuss the democracy of the future, first here on the podium and then throughout the room.

At any rate, I am delighted that you have come to this event and would like to bid you all a very warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue!