



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the eighth Forum Bellevue
“Which Future? On Democracy and Progress”
at Schloss Bellevue
on 25 November 2019**

What better idea could there be than to meet in a palace named for its beautiful views in the foggy month of November to talk about the future?! We have some marvellous guests here this morning, and I am delighted that you have all come to listen to us and to join with us in debate. Welcome to the eighth “Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy”!

Nowadays, when people think about the future, a beautiful vista is not necessarily how they would describe it. The future of the climate, the future of work, the future of living and mobility, the future of cities and villages, the future of democracy, the European Union and the international order – these are all matters that now occupy our thoughts and are constantly on our minds.

Self-confidence, courage and optimism are, by and large, notable for their absence. Indeed, many people look forward with great concern. Climate change, the digital revolution, globalisation, and tensions and conflicts on numerous continents all contribute to a sense of anxiety. The generations before us were driven by the determination that their children should and would one day lead a better life than they themselves did. This determination has in many families given way today to a resigned, “things can only get worse.”

“Things can only get worse” gives expression to the fear that hard-won gains are being lost. The prosperity that the family had gained by hard work. The fulfilment of individuals’ dreams. People’s sense of security. Decency and civility in social affairs. Political achievements such as the rule of law and the liberal democratic order. The longer these worries endure, the longer this insecurity prevails, the more people’s faith is obviously diminishing in the ability of

politicians and society to solve pressing problems and improve conditions.

It is at this point that people's fears for the future become a problem for democracies. Last week we were given a scare by an opinion poll which found that we were facing "an erosion of trust" in Germany – a massive collapse in trust was the term used. Obviously, ever fewer people consider our political system to be a special strength of our country. Fewer than half of the respondents believed that the state was functional. In other words, everything is getting worse, but nobody can do anything about it.

I consider this finding to be exceptionally dangerous. Democracy is the system of government of the brave, not of those who are resigned to their fate. People who feel powerless cannot make their voices heard, cannot join in the action, cannot change anything; they perhaps don't even want to. People who don't expect anything good to come of the future won't even try to fight for something better.

And this although we Germans have ourselves so often seen just how open the future is, how much it depends on us, how huge the potential for change is! 30 years ago, a German grassroots movement brought a dictatorship down and reunited our country. And today we live in a strong democracy, where the rule of law prevails, we still have record employment levels, and the welfare system in Germany is among the safest in the world. Worldwide, too, people are better off, in spite of all the crises and disasters. Our guest Steven Pinker will tell us more about this in a few minutes. His take is that no, things cannot only get worse. Things can get better. Much better!

Sometimes it maddens me to see how we downplay or downright ignore progress and achievements, opportunities and potential. How we allow them to be overshadowed by the flood of negative news that grabs our attention daily with its shock value. The way we publicly talk about ourselves distorts our view of reality – our guest Maren Urner will tell us much more about this in a moment. A sense of powerlessness is fostered if the future is painted solely in sombre tones, if crises and disasters alone are the prevailing themes. Politicians also bear a share of the responsibility when they evoke a golden past in order to avoid providing answers to the complex questions of the day. Or worse, if they play with apocalyptic visions to sow fear and stir up anger, from which they hope to gain political capital.

But don't get me wrong. Democracies need sceptics, doubters and critics. Democracies need unsparing debates about injustices and shortcomings. These are the wellsprings from which we draw the energy we need to move forward. It is the idea of the daily apocalypse that paralyses – because it makes the challenges seem too big and our options always too pitiful. Constant alarmism and doomsaying weaken

democracy. And this is all the more dangerous at a time when democracies need their full strength.

Indeed, we have particular need of strong democracies when the challenges are big. We should guard against downplaying the courses of action open to a liberal democracy – as many people in the so-called West are currently doing, secretly admiring the autocrats who can take and implement decisions so quickly and efficiently. But at whose cost, one has to ask. Although the answer is given on a daily basis, too. Politics in a democracy is a complicated task without end. It is the single-minded and patient unpicking of knotty problems. The idea that someone will come along and slash open all the knots with one mighty stroke is an eternal fallacy, but also the empty promise of those who harbour desires other than democracy. We should not forget that only democracy provides a mechanism for self-correction, for a fresh attempt when the path taken proves to be mistaken or if we have not pursued it with the necessary resolve. Only an open society gives us the space in which to persuade a majority of people that swift action and fundamental change are needed before it is too late.

Precisely that is what we are seeing once again. Grassroots engagement, even if unconventional and loud, is able not only to open our eyes, but can also give politicians new scope for action. It is first and foremost thanks to the young activists of the Fridays for Future strikes that we are now more focused on the climate crisis. It is above all the drastic calls made by the climate movement that have induced us to rethink matters and helped us to take the necessary steps or – and this is true of us all, not just the politicians – to objectively examine some of our lazy habits. The Fridays for Future protesters are strong and effective, and I am glad this is the case.

But we should also remember that society's power over politics in a democracy is nothing new. Just recall the introduction of women's suffrage, access to education, the campaign for nuclear disarmament, the peace marches of the 1980s, the end to discrimination against homosexuals and much, much more.

If you look back at the history of our Republic, you will see there have time and again been situations in which the political class was persuaded by social action to rethink and reconsider.

Because the future is open, we have to discuss – and if necessary argue – about the shape it should take. Because the future is open, we must not squander it – not for ourselves, nor for our children and grandchildren. It is the responsibility of us all – primarily politicians, but all of us collectively – to take the right decisions today, decisions that will enable us to live together in peace, comfortably and sustainably.

However, this is why political horizons must not be too short-term. We need to look beyond the next elections, beyond the next Summit. That is why we need many voices to join the conversation about the future, a conversation that goes far beyond the world of politics, that takes place in parliaments, online, on the street, in universities, companies, church halls and cafés. This does not, however, mean the conversation should be a non-committal chat. Far from it. Even parliamentary democracies need to adapt. They perhaps need new and more binding forms of participation to regain the trust of those who have turned their backs.

I could say, "there is much that we need to do, but there is also much that we can do." That, at least, is my attitude towards democratic policy-making. We should not focus on the idea that things can get worse, but should marshal our forces so that we can make things better. How best to go about this is what I would like to discuss today with you.

What are the necessary prerequisites to make us as a society better prepared to face the future again? How can we regain the trust that is needed to this end? It is my pleasure to have three guests here today who look at democracy and progress from very different perspectives.

Steven Pinker is an experimental psychologist, cognitive scientist and linguist. He was born in Canada, lives in the USA, lectures at Harvard, and, as most of you know, his books are bestsellers. The German weekly *Die Zeit* once called him a "globaler Starintellektueller", a term which needs no translation. However, he is not here because he is a star, but because I found his latest book, *Enlightenment Now*, absolutely fascinating.

This book bucks the trend to deliver a defence of reason, science, humanism and progress, a fierce but humorous response to the prophets of doom and the enemies of an open society.

Steven Pinker's provocative message is that the world has never had it so good. He sets out to show – in my view successfully – with a wealth of facts and data that the conditions humans live in have improved over the course of history. He views this progress as a direct consequence of enlightenment, democracy, free trade and international cooperation.

Steven Pinker has described himself as a very serious possibilist. He has faith in humankind's abilities, in the idea that we can make the world a better place with reason and compassion.

I will discuss with him in just a moment the question of whether we can manage the climate crisis and other problems, too, with these tools. And of course I would like to know his reasons for believing in the future of liberal democracies – and whether a renewed focus on

our achievements since the Enlightenment can help people develop new confidence in liberal democracies, their institutions and their representatives.

I am delighted that he is here today. Welcome, Steven Pinker!

My second guest this morning comes from my own home ground, East Westphalia. Maren Urner was born in Herford. She is a neuroscientist and Professor of Media Psychology at HMKW University of Applied Sciences for Media, Communication and Management in Cologne.

She is investigating the question of how the media influence our view of the world, our thought processes and our actions. In her opinion, the flood of bad news that we are constantly exposed to in the era of digital communication has fatal consequences for the individual, but also for society as a whole.

Maren Urner has therefore called for an end to the daily Armageddon. She argues the case for constructive journalism, which not only describes crises and problems, but which also identifies ways forward, ways of making things better. The online magazine that she co-founded is called Perspective Daily in precisely this spirit.

Is there any sign that new ideas are taking hold in the media sector? And is it really only the media who are to blame for the fact that so many people nowadays feel overwhelmed and exhausted? Those are further issues we will be discussing in a moment. It's wonderful that you are here today. Welcome, Maren Urner!

And last but not least, my third guest. He is well known to you all. His books have been available on the German book market for almost 50 years. Ian McEwan is a British author. His novels keep on winning prizes around the world. He writes not only about love and love's sorrows, but in each novel also examines contemporary problems – the major questions of our time.

The German translation of his latest book, *The Cockroach*, will be published in a couple of days' time. If you read it you will discover – as you are no doubt meant to – that the main character has certain traits in common with the present British Prime Minister. The book is a pleasurable, if at times terrifying, dissection of the Brexit debate in the UK.

His previous novel, *Machines Like Me*, is about the spread of artificial intelligence, the difficulties that people have or could have with it. This book uses a ruse familiar to Ian McEwan's readers: he portrays a world where history took a slightly different course. The novel is set in 1982, but John F. Kennedy and John Lennon are still alive, and England has just lost the Falklands war. Ian McEwan shows us, through his alternative historical narrative, how "the present is the

frailest of improbable constructs,” and how things could easily have been very different.

The story centres on the robot Adam, an attractive, intelligent and highly moral android, whose robot ethics repeatedly conflict with our far more pliable human morals. What happens when we create machines that are more intelligent than us, and are moreover morally stricter than us? That is the question that Ian McEwan has pondered in this book.

I would like him to tell us whether literature can bolster our confidence in the future. And whether he personally hopes that the international rise in populism and nationalism can be turned around, and whether enlightenment and reason will regain their lure.

Mr McEwan, I'm glad you are here. Welcome to Berlin!

Alan Turing, one of the pioneers of artificial intelligence, once said: “We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done.” I am certain that the more we look ahead, the better we will see what needs to be done. So let us turn our eyes to the future, on this November day in Schloss Bellevue. I am looking forward to our discussion. A warm welcome to you all once again.