

Rethinking Europe

Speech at the celebrations
for Helmut Schmidt's 100th anniversary of birth

Hamburg – 23 February 2019

Dear President Steinmeier,

Dear Peer Steinbrück,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the extraordinary honour to speak on this occasion. I feel a great responsibility in speaking after you, dear Frank-Walter, and after the beautiful words you just said.

Today we celebrate one of the fathers of the European Union. Helmut Schmidt was not from the generation of our founders – like Schuman, Adenauer or De Gasperi, who moved the first visionary steps towards a united continent. But the moment he lived was perhaps even more difficult.

We have heard it from President Steinmeier just a moment ago. The years of terrorism. The years of the great oil crisis and global recession. The years when Europe was at the centre of the struggle between the two super-powers of the time at the height of the cold war.

And yet in those very years – thanks to Helmut Schmidt and other true statesmen – the European project took some of its most impressive steps forward.

1. REALISM AND AMBITION

Helmut Schmidt had the reputation of being a pragmatic man. You all know his famous quote: “A man who has a vision, he should see a doctor.” He used to say that “in politics, emotion and passion should have no place – aside from the passion for rationality.”

He did sound very German.

We would need his “passion for rationality” in times like ours – when political decisions too often seem dictated by the mood of the moment, by the latest trend on Twitter, or the fluctuations of opinion polls.

But in spite of his famous quote, I believe that Helmut Schmidt had a very clear vision about the future of Europe.

A German journalist once told him: “You present yourself as a technocrat, while pursuing a vision as bold as a unified Europe. You seem to have dreams – but you understand Germany well enough to never admit this.”

His pragmatism was always at the service of strong principles and values. He used to talk about politics as “pragmatic action towards moral purposes.” As a reader of Max Weber, he believed that a politician should always balance an “Ethic of Responsibility”, with an “Ethic of Moral Conviction.” Pragmatism with a conscience. Realism with ambition.

This pragmatic man was behind some of the boldest steps towards a united and peaceful Europe. He gave to the citizens of our Union the possibility to elect for the first time their representatives to the European Parliament. He set up the original architecture of our monetary union. His name was the first signature under the Helsinki Final Act, creating a security architecture for Europe that was based on cooperation and shared principles.

2. THE RATIONAL CASE FOR EUROPE

Through his entire life, he never stopped making the rational case for a united Europe. His 2011 speech at the SPD convention represents one of the most compelling arguments for a strong European Union in the twenty-first century.

He realised that European nation states are simply too small in the world of today – both in terms of population and economic power. Even Germany is small in comparison to China, the US, India, or the growing countries of South America and Africa.

After World War Two, Europe hosted 20 per cent of the world's population and 30 per cent of the global wealth. But by the middle of our century, Europeans will only make 7 per cent of humankind, and produce 10 per cent of the global GDP.

Helmut Schmidt concluded that – and I quote – “if we cherish the notion that we Europeans are important for the world, we have to act in unison. As individual states, we will ultimately be measured not in percentages, but in parts per thousand. That is why the European nation states have a long-term strategic interest in their mutual integration.”

His words should sound as a wake-up call. Together, we can still make a positive difference for our citizens and for the world.

Giorgio Napolitano – another great European, and someone I consider a mentor – commented that Helmut Schmidt has never lost the pride of being European. His realistic assessment of the situation never led him to believe that there was nothing we could do, and that we should just accept an inevitable decline.

Helmut Schmidt and Giorgio Napolitano remind us that – together – we can still give “our unique contribution to building to a new world order, where our welfare and the achievements of our civilisation can still be safeguarded.”

Rethinking Europe means – first and foremost – to make sense of our role in a new reality, our joint place in a new world.

3. SECURITY THROUGH COOPERATION

I think we can all agree that the world is taking a direction we do not like. Last week, at the Munich Security Conference, we discussed a situation of great power competition and global disorder.

Not only power is much more diffuse than ever, with a growing number of medium-sized powers and even private companies with the budget of nation states.

The fundamental rules of international relations are being systematically questioned. Too many leaders only speak the language of power politics and confrontation. International law and multilateral agreements are perceived more as an obstacle for the powerful, than a guarantee for all.

This approach goes against everything we Europeans believe in. It is the law of the jungle, where might makes right, and decisions are taken by the big powers at the expense of everyone else.

It is also an approach that leads inevitably to instability. If rules don't matter and international agreements can be ignored, then conflict becomes inevitable. There is an incentive to always manufacture new crises, and new occasions to redefine the regional and global balance of power.

This mentality clashes with all our European values, but also with our fundamental interests. History tells us that Europe prospers when cooperation prevails over confrontation. And this is something that Helmut Schmidt and his generation knew from personal experience.

Helmut Schmidt was certainly not naïve in his approach to peace and security. He understood the logic of deterrence. He knew the difference between dialogue and appeasement. The development of NATO's double track decision is an exemplary expression of his approach, combining a genuine offer for mutual arms limitation with indispensable firmness in case of refusal. He stood by his position even though it splits his own party and ultimately contributed to the end of his political career.

But he also believed that peace could not be guaranteed through confrontation. He used to say that security could only be achieved “by means of partnership based on treaties, (and) by means of cooperation.” During the debate on euro-missiles, he kept repeating that disarmament and non-proliferation represented the only way to build a more sustainable security.

This was also the idea behind the Helsinki Final Act: that security in Europe required cooperation among European nations and global powers.

He always had faith in the possibility to find common ground with other nations – based on certain universal principles, and on the shared interest to avoid a new and more devastating conflict.

He refused to see war as a continuation of politics through other means. Together with Immanuel Kant, he believed that war is not inevitable, but peace needs our contribution and our commitment. Peace will not happen without us.

4. EUROPE’S RESPONSIBILITY

And the same is true today. Europe is more and more an indispensable partner to preserve peace and build a truly sustainable security. Rethinking Europe means that we must also understand our potential and our responsibility in today’s world.

In our times, security has many facets. In contrast to most other policy fields, citizens are increasingly looking towards the European Union, not the nation state, as security provider. This is only natural, given the complex and transnational nature of modern security threats. And indeed, the European Union is uniquely placed to respond to these threats with its perfect combination of soft and hard power, from conflict prevention, diplomacy and trade all the way through to military operations. We are also a predictable and reliable custodian of multilateral agreements, and of a cooperative approach to global issues. Together, we can resist the trend that leads towards more conflict and chaos.

I think we all wished to live in easier times for global politics. Clearly, we cannot choose the kind of times we live in. What we can do, is to try and shape our times, together.

This is the collective responsibility we have, as Europeans. We have the potential to make an impact in global affairs, but we need to take the decision to use our potential and do our part.

In his final years, Helmut Schmidt was often asked about the future of Europe, and how to change Europe for the better. He was a man who contributed to shaping the European institutions and our Union as we know it. And yet he always answered that it wasn't primarily about structures and technicalities. It was essentially about political will, from European leaders and from European citizens. It was about courage and ambition.

Ambition is our choice. Responsibility is our choice. These are choices only we can make, like Helmut Schmidt did before of us.

Thank you.