

The 180th anniversary of the 'Hambach Festival'

Hambach Castle - 25-05-2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

180 years ago, it was a diverse crowd of demonstrators who marched side by side to Hambach Castle, waving banners and singing: students and Parliamentarians; manual workers and farmers; journalists and lawyers; day labourers and servants; Poles, French people and Germans;

all united in pursuit of the threefold objective of freedom, unity and democracy.

Freedom, unity and democracy – even today, these demands still have the power to stir our hearts.

Freedom, unity and democracy – they remain as relevant a responsibility as ever.

The people who gathered here 180 years ago made a quite distinctive contribution to the centuries-long struggle to create a democratic Europe.

Freedom, unity and democracy – that is their legacy to us.

In Europe we share a common philosophical and cultural heritage. We share ideas and standards: governance emanating from the people, separation of powers, freedom of the press and human rights.

From the demos of ancient Athens to the fall of the Greek military dictatorship,

from the medieval free towns – where people believed in the slogan, 'City air makes you free' – to direct elections to the European Parliament;

from the Bill of Rights in England to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;

from the French Revolution to Solidarno;

the struggle to establish democracy and human rights runs through European history as a common thread.

Europe's road to democracy was never smooth; it was repeatedly interrupted by bloody revolutions and counter-revolutions, and suffered repeated setbacks.

Only after the Second World War did democracy irrefutably triumph over dictatorship, fascism and wars of religion.

Today we live in a society with a free press and independent courts, parliamentary democracy and political participation, universal suffrage on an equal footing and guaranteed civil rights.

We live in a society which places people at centre-stage.

In a united Germany, in a united Europe.

Down through the centuries, untold numbers of people devoted their lives to the struggle to achieve democracy, thus making it possible for us today to live in such a society;

untold numbers of people suffered torture, imprisonment, the loss of their place in society, or had to flee into exile;

untold numbers of people lost their lives.

The 30 000 people who gathered here for a mass demonstration calling for the sovereignty of the people, free elections, equal rights for men and women, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression were European heroes in the cause of freedom.

They were unbelievably courageous.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us remember: it was the period of the Congress of Vienna and the restoration.

After the fall of Napoleon early in 1814, representatives of all the countries involved in the war attended a congress in the 'Ballhaus' in Vienna to negotiate the postwar order.

The Congress was chaired by the Austrian Chancellor, Prince Metternich, who described the sovereignty of the people as the 'root of anarchy'.

The aim was to turn the clock back, to reinstate the old order from before the French Revolution – both internally and externally. To damp down the fires of revolution once and for all.

National, liberal and democratic strivings were then repressed, but once the ideas of freedom, democracy and independence had been launched, they could no longer be extirpated.

In 1830 and 1831 Europe was in a state of revolt: the July revolution in Paris; the independence of Belgium in October; the Polish uprising against the Russian forces of occupation in November, which was cruelly and bloodily crushed, an outcome which deeply moved the demonstrators in Hambach.

A wave of national and democratic liberation movements spread through Europe; their ideas were disseminated at tremendous speed, partly with the aid of print works which shot up all over the place and helped to create 'public opinion' by means of their leaflets.

At the time, the Bavarian Government was responsible for administering the Palatinate: its attempts to regulate the press by means of severe censorship decrees constituted the spark which was to finally set the revolutionary fervour ablaze:

The regional assembly mounted the barricades against the censorship decree.

King Ludwig the First responded by simply dissolving the regional assembly; working as a journalist became a punishable offence, newspapers were banned. Leaflets and posters took their place.

'Censorship is death to freedom of the press and hence to the Constitution,' wrote the lawyer, journalist and co-initiator of the Hambach Festival, Philipp Siebenpfeiffer, at the time.

Today we have a free press, and it is our responsibility to ensure that this remains the case.

This is a responsibility within Europe. Such is the line taken by the European Parliament when for example it debates freedom of the press in Berlusconi's Italy or the new Media Law adopted by the Orbán Government in Hungary.

And it is also a responsibility outside Europe. We shoulder it by pursuing an ethical foreign policy, demanding freedom of opinion and of the press from our trade and dialogue partners, and also by supporting today's heroes of freedom.

For bloggers in modern-day Tunisia, Egypt and Iran, Tweets and Facebook postings are the equivalent of the secretly printed leaflets of the democracy activists at the time of the Hambach Festival.

The medium has changed – the objective has remained the same: freedom.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A year ago the Arab Spring began in a spirit of hope. It has brought freedom to many of our neighbouring peoples.

At the time of the elections in Tunisia, Egypt and most recently Yemen, we saw the beaming faces of people who for the first time had the chance to cast a vote freely and by secret ballot. Those beaming faces remind us that, although each society is subject to its own realities and constraints, we are all united by the dream of being able to freely determine who is to govern us.

The legacy of the Hambach Festival confers on us a duty to support the transition processes of the Arab Spring.

The European Parliament bears a special responsibility in this context.

We wish to be a friend and partner to these new parliaments.

We wish to engage in open and lasting dialogue with them. Our Members from Central and Eastern European countries, in particular, could give sound advice on the democratic transformation process, based on their own experience.

For in the years to come, Parliaments will have a key role to play in ensuring that the promise of freedom held out by the Arab Spring is kept in the new Constitutions.

Acting on this responsibility also means using the great economic potential of the Mediterranean region and ensuring, in close partnership, that the younger generation in particular has a prospect of growth and jobs. Democracy always needs hope as well: we should not forget that.

Freedom, unity and democracy

The unity which the speakers called for here 180 years ago was the unity of the Fatherland, based on a Constitution and the sovereignty of the people.

Those who took part in the Hambach Festival were concerned to support one another in their fight for freedom; that was the unifying element: the desire which nations felt for freedom, which they believed could only be secured through national unity.

But even then, they dreamed of a confederal Europe, a Europe of the peoples, to be based on the nations. People from Germany, France and Poland went to the Hambach Festival side by side; the Polish flag was flown over the castle together with the black, red and golden flag. The slogan on the banners was 'Freedom, unity and Europe'.

The lawyer, writer and co-initiator of the Hambach Festival, Johann Georg August Wirth, concluded his address with three cheers for the 'confederate republican Europe!'

But the 'rebirth of the Fatherland' was to be the first priority.

They were not yet aware of the Janus faces of nationalism which, internally, exerts an enormous unifying force and creates solidarity among people who have never even set eyes on one another, and is also a source of identity

– at the same time, however, towards the outside world, it also possesses enormous destructive power – power which was to lead Europe into the disaster of the two world wars.

It was only out of the experience of the historical nadir of European history that the founding fathers – and mothers – of the European Union were able to realise the dream of a peoples' Europe. Partly because, unlike their forerunners at the Hambach Festival, they had realised that an institutional framework was needed for the purpose.

Apart from the Weimar Republic, a free and united Germany would likewise only come into existence much later: only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with reunification.

And it is no coincidence that this united Germany only became a full reality in – and thanks to – the unity of Europe.

Europe too had to wait a long time to achieve unity:

From the inception of the unification process with the Schuman Plan of 1950, via the laying of the foundation stone of the common market in the Treaties of Rome in 1958 to the present day...

to a community with 27 States and 500 million people, the European project has proceeded at a breathtaking pace.

Portugal, Spain and Greece have shaken off their dictatorships.

Two decades ago, the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union was dissolved, paving the way for the unification of Europe.

The enlargement to the East then definitively ended the artificial division of Europe by the Iron Curtain.

The prospect of accession assisted the peaceful transformation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, thus contributing to security, stability and prosperity throughout the continent.

We should never forget those who, like their kindred spirits at the Hambach Festival, devoted their lives to fighting repression and to the battle for freedom and democracy.

The Iron Curtain, the dictatorships in southern Europe, did not simply fall: they were toppled by peaceful protests by the people against a criminal system.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I should like to conclude today's address with an exhortation. Today we should not only utter fine-sounding sentiments about our history but take the legacy of the Hambach Festival seriously:

'Freedom, unity and democracy'; freedom, unity and Europe – what is the state of democracy in Europe today?

There are two developments which cause me great concern:

Firstly, the financial and economic crisis has increasingly grown into a crisis of confidence. People are increasingly losing their confidence in democracy and in the capacity of democratic institutions to act.

People are increasingly doubtful as to whether democracy is still able and willing to stand up resolutely to the dictates of the financial markets.

People do not understand why banks are being rescued with enormous sums of money but there is no money to invest in growth and jobs.

We must not allow people to become increasingly convinced that politics is driven by anonymous market forces, speculators and rating agencies: this calls into question the legitimacy of our entire political system. After all, why should I vote in elections if politicians no longer have any power in any case? That is dangerous.

Under the pressure of events on markets, and as those markets demanded a rapid response, many governments have largely excluded Parliaments from vital decisions.

Yes, Parliaments often behave inconveniently and engage in protracted procedures. That is precisely what they are there for!

They have to bring political decisions into the light of day and discuss them, amend them and sometimes even reject them in the public eye.

They need time for that purpose. Yes, democracy and Parliamentarism take time.

And if we are no longer prepared to allow it to do so, we shall change our model of society. Then we shall ultimately indeed have a democracy which complies with the requirements of the market – and not a market which complies with the requirements of democracy, which is what I would like to see.

Secondly, at European level the European Parliament has increasingly been by-passed as a result of the growing tendency to take decisions at summits, that is, the inflation of meetings between heads of government.

This does indeed recall the days of the Congress of Vienna in the 19th century, when governments representing national interests engaged in horse-trading behind closed doors.

For the first time, the Council's arrogation of powers is leading to a 'dismantling of democracy', as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas so aptly puts it.

This so-called 'Union method' – action by governments increasingly taking the place of action by Parliament and the Commission – is replacing what we in Brussels call the Community method. The Community method is not a technical concept but the soul of the European Union.

For what the Community method refers to is the principle of resolving conflicts through dialogue and consensus: replacing 'might is right' with solidarity and democracy. It means successfully balancing the interests of small and large States, North and South, East and West; and assigning the common good priority over particularistic interests.

Is the Union method really so much more efficient? It seems to me that the crisis management which we have seen from heads of government in the past two years speaks for itself...

The EU heads of government would therefore be well advised to make do with the Community method.

We should therefore also take to heart the call for unity. Postwar Europe is based on the sober realisation that our interests can no longer be separated from those of our neighbours;

it is based on the understanding that the EU simply is not a zero sum game in which one player has to lose in order for another to win. Quite the opposite: either we all lose – or we all win. Alone we are weak – together we are strong.

The national identities for which people fought at the Hambach Festival remain as strong as ever, and I cannot imagine that we in Europe will ever cease to regard ourselves as German, French or Polish.

That is to be welcomed! For our national diversity and our specific experience are a big asset for us in Europe.

But in the globalised world of the 21st century we need the European Union in order to preserve our social and democratic model of society.

For with 27 States, 500 million people and the largest and most affluent internal market in the world, it is clearly possible to exert greater influence: we do so by sharing sovereignty, and this means more power to act.

My friend the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, likes to relate how, when he meets the Prime Minister of China, he puts his arm around his shoulders and says to him, 'Between us we represent 1.3 billion people'.

We in Germany are particularly inclined to forget that in the international arena we will soon be just flyweights. Perhaps we could withstand transcontinental competition for a few years longer, but how will we fare a few decades from now?

Today Germany has a population of 82 million, which is declining in numbers, while China has 1.3 billion people and rising.

In the globalised world of the 21 century, the EU represents an attempt to preserve our social and democratic model of society in the face of newly emergent powers – in unity and freedom.

That is the society I wish to live in. I hope that my children and subsequent generations too will be able to live in this kind of Europe.

This is a cause worth fighting for every day.

Thank you for your attention.

For further information:

europarl.president.press@europarl.europa.eu

Armin Machmer
Spokesperson
Mobile: +32 479 97 11 98

Europarl President Press - Europarl.President.Press@europarl.europa.eu