

Political Review by the EBD president

Speech by Dr. Rainer Wend
at the annual General Assembly 26 June 2017

The spoken word prevails

Mr Vice Chancellor, Your Excellencies, Members of Parliament, Vice Presidents, Members of the Board, delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

On the morning of the Brexit shock, we commented in the Guardian, “This time the EU will keep calm and carry on.” Three days later the 2016 EBD General Assembly agreed with the Head of the Chancellery, Peter Altmaier: We remain committed to the EU community of democratic values and its freedoms. We are committed to solidarity!

State and society, we all demonstrated a clear pro-European inclination. In our Political Agenda “Think, act and govern in a European way!” and subsequently in our joint stance on the Brexit question. As social forces in Germany, we stand for a strong EU27! And we feel no Schadenfreude towards the people of the UK. We respect and regret the decision. Today, one year after the Brexit vote, we say: it is never too late to reverse the decision, but this must be connected with a clear pro-European commitment. Only a serious will to continue building the European house can repair the damage done and restore the confidence lost.

The current summit has shown that the EU27 are standing together. I do not consider it generous in this regard that Theresa May is offering the three million EU citizens in the United Kingdom residence rights. Nice try! The EU has more to offer: eleven million British and Northern Irish citizens can stay in the EU27 countries! The Prime Minister knows this but does not say it into British microphones. These are the *national* half-truths which influence the coverage of the summit. Westminster, in particular, has overplayed its hand and lost to the detriment of us all. It is not only in London that people in Europe are being hoodwinked with national flags.

This is also a result of the technocratic and media system of the European Council. In 2009 the Foreign Ministers had to leave the summit. Since 2009 it has been more apparent than ever that there are 28 different versions of reality in the living rooms of Europe. Every single reality is carefully planned and shaped in the government centres of the capital cities - thus obscuring the fact that we in the EU have long since had more decision-makers. We have two legislative chambers; the Council and the Parliament. We have a young and certainly not perfect European democracy. However, as long as a large German news channel continues to refuse to

broadcast parliamentary debates live from the European Parliament, and the Council is barely allowed to feature as a chamber, then the EU summit will remain a minor news item. So Mr Orban and others, with their complaints in Luxembourg, but especially for the cameras, are able to discredit European democracy by describing democratic majority decisions by the Council and Parliament as 'dictates'. Absurd. Boasting in the media against the EU is intended to cover up their own deficits.

I will agree with the smaller countries on one point, however: the large countries should not overdo it with an arrogant claim to leadership. I emphasise this point particularly here in the Italian embassy. As much as we welcome the fact that finally a fresh pro-European wind is blowing again now in Paris, as much as we are pleased that German-French cooperation is picking up new momentum again; we very much wish for a strong German-French engine, but not a tandem or a directorate of the greats - not of Germany and France, but also not of Germany, France and Italy. That is why we are so thankful for the Austrian, Danish and European-Greek voices here at our General Assembly. What we need is a form of intelligent governance in Europe, which can function as a community of the many in a way which is as openly pluralistic, democratic and parliamentary as possible.

As a matter of fact, this is also true in German European policy! Foreign Minister, Sigmar, the EBD is of course not suited for election campaigns, but this year we will be looking particularly closely at what the parties are planning in their election programmes. So far it is very encouraging; at least as far as our member parties are concerned. And it is reassuring that all of our member parties are currently working as a coalition and thus ensuring that the coming federal government will be pro-European.

We do, however, also need the right instruments for a good and convincing European policy. The new federal government must therefore modernise the ancient and antiquated system of European coordination. Time and again it gives a false impression to the German and European public. The multiannual financial framework for the EU budget was indeed responsibly negotiated by the Foreign Office - but then in the night of long knives at the EU summit pushed through with complete lack of transparency. (Incidentally, the recent decisions in the grand coalition on cohesion policy really do not sit well with the demand that the EU budget must also be prepared for great challenges.) If budget debates in the German Bundestag are a great moment for democracy, then EU summit nights are democratic tragedies.

By the way, Sigmar, the Board of the EBD resolved on wholly cross-party and cross-association terms that the EU can only act 'greatly in great events' if it is suitably financially equipped. The German net contributor debates are entirely exaggerated and not commensurate with Europe's real problems. I know that our thinking here is the same!

These are indeed important political demands. But we have to play within the confines of the reality on the ground - and here, unfortunately, only a few have a say. We were surprised that the current coalition agreement enshrines the old coordination system, even though parliament, line ministries and the Foreign Office have lost influence in European policy, which was not only a result of noteworthy and admirable (!) Euro-crisis rescue operations. The social forces that are so important for democracy, most of whom are members of ours, know the deficits. Access and openness are quite simply missing. The current federal government also does nothing to counter the opaque 'trialogue' legislation. It also does not act for at least a little more transparency in the

Council of the European Union or in the Permanent Representation in Brussels. In actual fact (the Head of the Chancellery also knows this as our former vice president) the Chancellery ought to be debriefing the EBD according to the European Council! I say this with all due respect to your current and future office.

We and our partners often do not know how “our country” is positioning itself, for there are so many voices speaking on our behalf. There are absurd internecine battles between ministries. There are even ministries conducting their own diplomacy and thereby simultaneously denying the Foreign Office its specialist expertise. The whole issue also has a European dimension. Smaller countries, but also German members of parliament, often can't get an appointment at the Chancellery.

Even ambassadors of larger countries know much less about the European policy of their government leaders than the summit-sherpas (envoys) do. This means that we are proceeding tentatively in too many important areas. Diplomatic decision-makers on the ground, but also members of parliament, are poking around in the dark. This should not be the case! A Europe which is growing together can only succeed if members of parliament and contact persons from friendly countries are capable of communication and dialogue.

The buzzword “sherpacrazia” is particularly applicable in this regard and comes - aptly for the genius loci of this embassy - from Italy. Minister of State Sandro Gozi created the term “sherpacrazia” as the opposite of “democracy”. If the summit-sherpas in the state chancelleries know one another better than they know the opinions of parliamentarians and social forces in their respective countries, then it should come as no surprise that EU treaties, as well as trade agreements, are not accepted ‘at home’.

In good time before the intense election campaign, we are presenting our positions to be resolved today. The draft of our Political Agenda also refers directly to your office, Federal Minister: “German diplomacy must not only represent a classical foreign policy, but must offer and promote a structured Europe-wide dialogue in the form of a ‘European Public Diplomacy’ beyond state actors. Insights gained in this way can improve German European policy, if the new federal government fundamentally modernises its European policy coordination and organises it in parliamentary and social terms.”

This demand contains a great deal that is of pivotal significance for the future of Europe.

If we tackle EU reforms in the way that the sherpas would like, then we will repeat the same mistakes in the important debates on the future of the EU. We need a broad discussion! If Merkel and Macron are in agreement, it is still by no means true that all is well. For then the same thing will happen as so often before. Too few people will be convinced and even good technocratic solutions by the sherpas in the ministries will cause frustration with those who have not been consulted. Even worse: the ground will open up for extreme populism.

Community institutions are crucial for the EU. We do not need an excess of summits. I expect the representatives of national governments to encourage and actively promote pluralist democracy - which they represent and which gives them their legitimacy! Democracy is not a delivery service. It requires involvement and engagement, but one must also allow both to happen. If we are serious

about pluralist democracy, then there is no requirement at all for the limiting adjective 'national'.

Minister, we would ask that you indicate a clear commitment to a strong European Parliament. For our member parties are committed to the leading candidates in the election of the next Commission President. We would like a similar formal commitment from the federal government too, from the German Chancellor and from the Federal Foreign Minister as representatives of the Federal Republic of Germany. Germany can surely follow Italy's bold example!

The EBD stands for more pluralism, indeed also for corporatism as it is successfully practised in meaningful social partnership. Parliament and Commission are on the right path for European democracy. The member states are lagging behind!

In the coming months, Germany and France will be making suggestions for reform of the European Union. The EBD is consciously not offering any ready-made solutions. We are not fighting for one big plan, but for democratic principles and European values. For values such as solidarity! Without it, we can neither shoulder the burdens arising from the refugee situation, nor protect our external borders. Without it, we can neither take effective measures against youth unemployment, nor stop climate change. And we want democracy to remain comprehensible on a European level too: more budgets and more bureaucratic jobs must not be allowed to 'improve' the young democratic system for the worse.

The unfortunately recently deceased Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori said in that vein:

Democracy must be as complicated as possible in the interests of the majority, but at the same time must still be explainable to people.

This is exactly right!

I am counting on the next federal government to do everything for a comprehensible, diverse European democracy!

The fathers and mothers of the constitution (also parents of the European Movement) were already agreed:

We are "animated by the desire to serve the cause of world peace as an equal member in a united Europe".

Europe is not only a German national objective. It is also a task for German society - that means for each and every one of us. Let us take on this task together.

Thank you very much.