

European issues
n°305
11th March 2014

The Franco-German friendship is vital for Europe.

Abstract :

The Robert Schuman Foundation is publishing the speech delivered by Nicolas Sarkozy, former President of the French Republic (2007-2012) on 28th February 2014 in Berlin at the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation on the Franco-German relationship.

Nicolas SARKOZY

I am very happy to be your guest here today. I have also come as a friend – a friend of Germany. I have no intention of bringing the period of reflection – the pause from political life which I have chosen – to an end. If I accepted this invitation it is to bear witness to the need for friendship between Europe's two leading nations. I would like to say how much a European I shall always feel, a convinced European, an active European.

I can honestly say to Hans-Gert Pöttering that he can be proud of his career at the service of Europe! Because Hans-Gert Pöttering's life has been one of a committed European. And Europe needs that commitment.

Aged barely 33, he was elected MEP. Re-elected time and again Hans-Gert is one of the only ones to have permanently had a seat in the European Parliament since 1979, a European Parliament which is unequalled in the world. You were its president, as you have been the president of our political family.

However when our friend Hans-Gert Pöttering was born in a village of Lower-Saxony his European career was hardly foreseeable – his family had been torn apart by war: just months previously your father had been killed in one of the battles of the Second World War.

You were born to a vanquished country, one that had been ripped apart, dishonoured by Nazi barbarity, to a country – your country – which no longer had a government, a State and whose future seemed dark and to say the least – uncertain.

You were born to a Europe that had been laid to waste, ruined, and soon, to be cut in two by an Iron Curtain that was to close off half of the European population in a merciless Communist prison for decades to come. You were born to a world that now seemed to belong to the American and Soviet giants – a world in which Europe was apparently against Humanity, veering from the status of leader to one in which the Cold War was

about to start. This was the Europe in the middle of the 20th century. We must forget this.

The nations on our continent, firstly France and Germany, have constantly envied one another, confronted one another and destroyed one another in war. I am not talking of the Middle Ages – I'm talking of the 20th century.

1945 – and I'm addressing the young people amongst us – that was yesterday, in that year France and Germany had already been to war against one another three times in 75 years. In the time of three generations France and Germany had found the means to attack each other three times in battles which were each worse, more destructive and more inhuman, than the other. By acting like this our countries involved our neighbours in the battle – firstly in Europe and finally the world was drawn into an abominable catastrophe. It was not the Middle Ages – it was yesterday. But why? The question each of us should ask: does the blame lie in those three generations of French and Germans? Were those three generations possessed by a kind of destructive folly? Were those three generations so totally bad? Those generations were also those of Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Marie Curie and Robert Koch. I do not believe that those three generations were totally bad. I believe firstly that they were caught up in a situation, by this I mean in a system of thought and behavior in which each nation believed it was above the others. A system of thought and behaviour in which each nation bathed in the glory of being above the other in the name of loathsome, infamous "sacred selfishness". That is where "sacred selfishness" took us – where it took the world of the 20th century.

The strength of the Founding Fathers, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle was first to understand that this vicious circle had to be broken. To do this they had to have the courage to reconcile with each other so that they could act not against one another but with one another for the common good. In doing this, by working with each other, France and Germany were not betrayed – I mean

The Franco-German friendship is vital for Europe.

the Founding Fathers – they remained passionately attached to their home countries. On the contrary they enabled their home countries to find peace again, then progress and then prosperity. It was in this way and only like this that the continent of Europe was able to count in world affairs in the second half of the 20th century.

This is why the Franco-German friendship is so important. It is vital for France. It is vital for Germany. And it is vital for Europe.

Deep down I feel that there was no alternative to reconciliation and to the Franco-German friendship. I deeply believe that the friendship between France and Germany is not a topical political issue; it is not a question of left or right. The friendship between France and Germany has nothing to do with democratic alternation in each of our countries. The Franco-German friendship is an absolutely strategic issue. I would even go as far as saying it is an existential issue.

Our people, the people of France, of Germany must realise, they have to understand that it is a question of standing together or confronting each other. That is about uniting or falling apart. The Franco-German friendship is the base on which European integration is built. Without reconciliation there would not have been a Europe, without this friendship Europe would not move forward and if Europe is not moving forward the danger is real – and that is of division.

This is what is at stake. We cannot gamble with matters as fundamental as this. Our people have shown that they can fight each other for centuries. Our people have been in peace for just a few decades. Nothing, absolutely nothing, must ever endanger this achievement. The Franco-German friendship is our common treasure – a sacred invaluable treasure! Without this friendship there would have been other wars, other battles and other human lives would have been sacrificed.

Who would be mad enough – or fool enough to believe that this treasure can be taken for granted?

It is fragile – and we are its guardians; to protect it there is only one way to act and that is to strengthen it.

Because in spite of these decades our countries have retained their different traditions, their characteristics and structures. This also shows that our reconciliation has not diluted our specific features and that is a good thing! But this means that our convergence is not automatic. It depends on us all, on our work, on our Adenauer and de Gaulle; it is up to the leaders of our respective countries to make his or her contribution. For five years in close coordination with Chancellor Merkel we did everything we could so that our countries would act together to prevent the banking crisis sweeping away the world economy, to save the euro from the turbulence that threatened to destroy everything. In the crisis Europe was in need of leadership. Leadership is not a swear word; it is a duty. And people are afraid of leadership – and when we are frightened of leadership it means we are frightened of our responsibilities. France and Germany have a duty to the entire European continent. By assuming their leadership during the crisis France and Germany did their duty.

The truth has to be said: either we work together in the future – join forces, make joint proposals – and our two countries will be worthy of their history in a world that will not wait for us – because the 21st century will wait for no one, or we neglect our friendship and Europe will disintegrate and with it everything we have patiently built up over the last 60 years – everything that guarantees peace and stability. There is no third way. Union or division, entente or confrontation. There is no half-measure, no pretence.

I believe more than ever before that we have to choose Europe. And it is because we shall make this vital choice that we will be able to achieve, impose and lead our partners towards decisions that can be delayed no longer.

The union of Europe is our strength in the face of an amazingly dynamic Asia, where dangerous rivalries are now starting to emerge. The union of Europe is our

strength in the face of Latin America, which is trying to assert itself but which has not yet decided between integration and withdrawal. Union is our strength in the face of Africa which has dispersed its potential for far too long amongst fifty States, whose stability and strengths are extremely unequal but which is now starting to wake.

We too have our weaknesses. In Europe our first problem is undoubtedly one of facing reality. Our problem is that we have to understand that there is not one Europe but at least two. By saying this we insult no one.

Who can say that the Europe of the euro and the Europe with its 28 members need the same in terms of structure, decision making and goals? For the euro zone – starting with France and Germany, the challenge is to take economic integration further, to create a zone of stability, which 13 years after the creation of the euro, has taken too long to happen. For the Europe and its 28 members the challenge is to focus on what is essential so that when time comes we can receive the States that are knocking on our door. The priority for the 28 is to focus on the essential and to give up – I say give up – all of the competences that cannot be ensured together now that we are 28. More integration for the Europe of the euro, less integration for the European Union. This is a paradoxical choice we have to make. The truth is that the euro zone countries are more than just a zone! We made a wager as we pooled our currencies. The euro has become the cornerstone of European integration.

The end of the euro would be the end of Europe. The end of Europe would be the end of peace, the end of stability, the end of the European model of the social market economy. Can we estimate how catastrophic this would be? Can we gauge the consequences of a cataclysm like that?!

This is why, with Chancellor Merkel, we did everything we could to save the euro when speculation was at its peak and threatened to sweep everything away in this path. In that moment of truth France and Germany stood together and in that moment of truth Germany

and France overcame the test together. No European country collapsed. On the contrary, the most vulnerable were able to achieve the impossible.

Today our economic policies must be coordinated, complementary and coherent. Since the March 2012 treaty the economic government of the euro zone exists; it has to act.

The European Union for its part will not move along at the same pace. We must respect this and take our responsibilities – i.e. organize it. The European Union now already has 28 members. Tomorrow or in the future it may have 32 and even 35. This is Europe's historic task.

It is notably in the interest of all Europeans that the countries of the Balkans join us one day and finally – thanks to the European Union – find reconciliation, stability and prosperity. I love what Konrad Adenauer used to say: "History is the sum of everything that could have been avoided." Just as we are commemorating the drama of the First World War I would solemnly like to say that Europe cannot afford to ignore Sarajevo and Belgrade. Back then the major powers neglected the drama that was fomenting in the region. On 28th June 1914, when the fuse was lit in Sarajevo, it was too late and the explosion simply affected the entire Balkan region engulfing a world, that of Europe which at the time was experiencing the "Belle Epoque". After the deflagration what was there left of the "Belle Epoque"? We cannot make the same mistakes!

To succeed in this historic mission the European Union must focus on what really is within its remit: ensuring a loyal, efficient market which is supported by some major policies. It must give up trying to regulate and dictate everything. This is not what the Founding Fathers wanted. As you quite rightly write Hans-Gert, "the European Union must focus on what is essential for Europe to be strong in areas where it is the only one to be able to act." I believe this too. The European Union must stop losing time, energy and especially losing its credibility over issues that are obviously not within its competence! The European Union has to stop exasperating its citizens. The European Union must

The Franco-German friendship is vital for Europe.

stop exasperating with issues that are increasingly secondary.

We should then – and it is a convinced European speaking – take responsibility and give up entire swathes of community work which today would help in terms of legibility if we were to focus on seven or eight major European policies – industry – research – energy, agriculture and competition. When we are strong and the European Union is strong we do not need to take care of everything. And because we have wanted to take care of everything we can no longer discern what our priorities are.

Let's be honest, we shall have to be very careful – because it is always easier to draft more texts and there is always room for strong, ambitious policies which we need – and there are always the wrong reasons not to act – to put things off until later, in expectation of something or another.

But this is how Europe will fulfil its mission, which is to ensure that the nations on the Old Continent can live in peace, with democracy and the rule of law. And because we have peace, democracy and the rule of law we might hope for prosperity. The future of both of nations is at stake, likewise our continent and the world

– because the world in the 21st century is hesitating between a model based on confrontation and one based on cooperation, of which Europe must be both the advocate and example.

Finally we shall have to propose to Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Russia a new framework to act and work together. There could be nothing worse than a futile confrontation with Russia – undoubtedly here in Berlin this is understood more clearly than anywhere else in the world. This confrontation would be catastrophic for both the Europeans and the Russians. The 21st century is the century of interdependence. The 21st century is one of cooperation. Withdrawal is basically one of the most dangerous choices for a nation whatever its size and however old its civilization.

And so, to rise to these major challenges, France and Germany must work together. If the French and the Germans are divided, failure is certain; together we can succeed.

I was very happy to pay tribute with you today to the path followed by a great friend of France a great German, a great European – Hans-Gert Pöttering.

Nicolas SARKOZY

President of the French Republic (2007-2012)

You can read all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.