

Interview with the Federal President in “The Sydney Morning Herald” and “The Australian Financial Review”

1. Germany and Australia are like minded yet far flung. They share a vital interest in keeping economies open. With the US withdrawing from the TPP, and Britain from the EU, do you have any thoughts on how Germany and Australia can energise the agenda for open economies?

Although over 14,000 kilometres lie between Australia and Germany, we share the values of democracy, the rule of law, the market economy and competition as key elements of high-performance and high-growth economies. The protectionism you described has arisen in part because many people feel unsettled by globalisation. The main way we can make open economic exchange more acceptable to the public is by consolidating the rules of a social market economy and ecologically sustainable development at international level. People will regain trust in free trade when they can see that the achievements of an innovative economy are of benefit to all. For example, Europe and Canada set a good standard in the CETA free trade agreement, which won majority support in Germany in the end, following a critical debate.

I hope that we can achieve an open, transparent and rules-based multilateral trade system with the WTO at its heart. It is in our joint strategic interest that Australia and the European Union negotiate the planned free trade agreement quickly. I am pleased that headway is being made here. Concluding this agreement in the near future would not only bring tangible economic benefits to people in Australia and Europe, but would also send a clear joint message of support for openness and trade.

2. More than sixty nations have joined China’s Belt and Road initiative. Germany and Australia have both been more cautious. But do the developed nations have any better alternative to offer for infrastructure investment and living standards or are we just playing spoilers to China’s positive agenda?

We have excellent economic relations with China and are following its Belt and Road initiative with great interest. The German business sector is interested in participating in

projects related to China's Belt and Road initiative. There are already several new railway connections between China, Central Asia and Germany. We have also encouraged our partners in the European Union to invest more in joint infrastructure projects with China. However, we need to keep investment rules and standards in mind at all times. And the same goes for fair access to projects.

3. Another shared interest of Germany's and Australia's is liberal democracy at a time when illiberal politics is on the rise. What message should the rest of the world take from the recent elections in Germany, in particular the high vote of the AfD? Does Germany have to do more to reassure voters about immigration, and if so, does that mean an even tougher regime for asylum seekers in future?

Germany is a strong democracy at the heart of Europe. Our country's history has taught us that we must never allow extreme nationalism, racism and the persecution of minorities to occur again. These lessons are indelibly enshrined in our political culture. We want a united Europe as a guarantor of freedom in a continent that experienced two terrible world wars. In the recent general election in Germany, the political forces that see themselves as part of this tradition won the most votes. That is the most important message for all of our international partners, including Australia. The fact that the AfD has now entered the German Bundestag does not change this in any way. But as has already been the case in other European countries, Germany now has a right-wing populist party in parliament. One reason for this, albeit not the only reason, is the increased number of refugees. This has led to significant polarisation in German society in recent years. The main thing now is to reassure people that rule-of-law processes work. That is why we also need a new consensus in society about how much and what type of immigration we want. In my opinion, that includes defining the rules of legal immigration to Germany more clearly and controlling and managing migration in accordance with our principles and priorities. The only way to overcome the polarisation in the debate is through discussion involving a broad spectrum of society.

4. Chancellor Merkel talked earlier this year of the need for Europe to find its own way in the future with less reliance on the United States and in the wake of Brexit. What role will Germany take in this process?

In a rapidly changing world, Germany's role and responsibility are also being reshaped. At times, this is not an easy debate. Following German reunification in 1990 and the end of the Cold War, many people in Germany had the feeling that no further difficult foreign policy decisions would need to be made. A popular belief was that in some way we were witnessing the end of history. We now see with drastic clarity that much of this was too optimistic. The future is open and it is up to us to make it positive. This will demand more of Germany in foreign, security, defence and development policy than has been the case so far. We will need to play a greater role. I am following Australia's discussion on very similar issues with great interest. This will also be an important topic during my talks here in Australia. For Germany, this debate is naturally always embedded in our firm integration in the European Union. It remains the cornerstone of our policies, including after Brexit. For its part, the United States remains the guarantor of our security in NATO. But that does not mean we can simply sit back and relax. The EU Member States are currently discussing in depth what role Europe should play in tomorrow's world and what instruments are needed for the continent's security, as well as for defence and crisis prevention. That will remain one of the big topics of the coming years – not because this is our heartfelt wish, but rather because we cannot avoid these questions in view of the developments in Asia, the United States, the Middle East and Europe.

5. The intensifying rivalries and arms races among the nations of Asia are reminiscent of Europe in an earlier era. Does Europe's past offer any useful lessons for Asia's future?

The rapid rise of new former great powers such as China and India, combined with the uncertainty in view of the political situation in the United States and the acute danger of nuclear escalation in the Korean Peninsula, not only affect people here in Australia, but naturally us too. However, geography makes a big difference. And I am certainly not going to simply apply specific European experiences to this region. But I think that talking about these issues helps both of us. We are united by very similar goals and standards, but at the same

time we view the tensions, conflicts and opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region from very different locations. That provides an ideal basis for productive talks.

If the world is becoming increasingly insecure and if our country is so closely interwoven with this world, what does that mean for our security and future? The answer is that we must make it a priority to work more actively and effectively with our friends and partners. By the way, Beijing is closer to Berlin than to Perth or Sydney.

6. You have called US President Donald Trump a hate preacher. Has your assessment of him changed since he became President?

I certainly wasn't the only person who was shocked by the tone and style of the last US presidential campaign. What is most important for us is that Donald Trump is now the democratically elected President of the United States. The United States remains an important partner and the guarantor of our security. We have extremely close historical, political and civil-society ties. We work in depth together every day and on almost every issue. I am also following the lively and at times heated debate in US society and media very closely. I am concerned about the high level of polarisation in society, in part because it is not merely a US phenomenon, but also gaining ground in many of our European societies. The entire world will be affected by what happens in the US, how its democratic system with its checks and balances develops, and where the debate on the role of the US in the world leads. However, Australia and Germany are among the countries that will be affected particularly directly. This will also be an important topic during my talks in Perth and Sydney.

7. Is there an aspect of Australia that you would like to see transplanted to Germany, and an aspect of Germany to Australia? If so, what are they?

Please ask me this question again at the end of my trip! This is my first visit to Australia. The last time a President of the Federal Republic of Germany came here was 16 years ago. A great deal has changed in the meantime, and I am here to learn more about your country and to gain a better understanding of the Australian point of view. In particular, I would like to take experiences and knowledge from Australia back to Germany – on dealing with migration and integration and how you see the rising China and the future of the West.

I would like to understand what moves Australia. And if in return you allow me to report on my experiences and they turn out to be valuable or at least useful for people here, then my trip will already have been worthwhile. The most important thing that unites us is not a material thing. It is the ability to learn from each other and grow together. When we achieve this, geographical distance is suddenly no longer so important.