



“The fall of the Berlin Wall was one of the happiest moments in our history”

**German President Christian Wulff
speaks at the ‘Falling Walls’ conference
on 8th November 2010
in Berlin**

Tomorrow it will be 21 years since thousands of East German citizens gathered on the east side of the border crossing at Bornholmer Strasse. Chanting: “Tor auf, Tor auf” (Open the gate, open the gate), they forced the opening of the Berlin Wall. The reason - after weeks of demonstrations - was a statement made at a press conference. The causes were complex.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9th, 1989 was a historic breakthrough in the truest sense of the word. The start of a radical change - for Germany, for Europe - a radical change that inspires courage. Tomorrow we celebrate the fall of the Wall as one of the happiest moments in our history; as the moment that allowed us to reunify in freedom and with self-determination.

This gives us an opportunity to turn our gaze to other places in the world where walls still hold back people today. It seems almost presumptuous to hold a conference under the heading: “Which walls will fall next?” My answer: It would be desirable to tear down the walls between the protagonists in science, business and politics; the walls between nations, between people of different religions, between rich and poor; walls that restrict our knowledge, our ability and our will.

It is good to ask what breakthroughs we need in order to coexist peacefully with seven, eight or nine billion people on this planet, without jeopardizing our livelihoods. Scientists can do a lot so that walls are removed, to overcome religious, cultural or economic borders, and to find answers to the great challenges of our time.

Science has always been applied to international and intercultural exchange and is dependent upon it. For example, I am looking forward to the lecture by Islamic studies specialist Sabine Schmidtke. Her research focuses on a time when Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars formed a unique cultural and intellectual community. A painting hangs in Jever castle in the former Duchy of Oldenburg that shows how dialogue between West and East and between religions was presented at that time, the 17th century: in a Mediterranean-looking foyer people who are obviously from different backgrounds engage in peaceful conversation. The picture reflects the ideals of the Enlightenment. And on a snuff box from a peasant household in East Friesland, a Franciscan, a Jew, a Protestant minister, a Muslim and a young free spirit are shown harmoniously side by side.

We have to cultivate such dialogue much more intensively. These days, those who entrench themselves behind the walls of their own specialist field will have little chance of contributing anything really new. Most of the questions of our time can be answered much better if they are tackled from the different perspectives of various scientific disciplines. We then begin to understand how complex many of the systems that surround us really are. We know surprisingly little about some of them: about the connections in local and global climate systems or how our brain and feelings function.

My feeling is: "The more we know, the more we know that we don't know enough." Two or three hundred years ago there were still universal scholars who had the full range of knowledge available to them and were usually in close proximity to politics. Think of Leibniz. Today there are experts everywhere who carry out isolated research in their respective niches.

Here again the motto is: overcome walls, forge new alliances, make interdisciplinary work a given, cross the traditional systems of knowledge thematically and methodically! With a large dose of curiosity about others, their methods and findings. But this also means exploring new paths: in cooperation with colleges and universities, designing curricula and also the structure of faculties.

A very recent good example of this, the latest hope as it were, is found in Alzheimer research. A team of Göttingen Alzheimer researchers led by Prof. Thomas Bayer, together with scientists from Amsterdam, Berlin, Bonn, Helsinki and Uppsala, have developed a vaccine that has arrested Alzheimer's disease, at least in mice. It would be fantastic if this European team of researchers could come up with a vaccine for a disease that 1.2 million people in Germany alone have to live with.

There are still so many walls surrounding science that need to be removed. We need more social climbers from the so-called poorly educated classes and more scientists with immigrant backgrounds;

more ways for people to get access to professional qualifications in the academic world. This is not just a question of justice but of wisdom. How are our academic elites going to be successful in a globalised world with people from different cultures, backgrounds and needs if they allow so little diversity and new blood in their own ranks?

We should do everywhere what they do in major research organisations, from the German Research Foundation, Helmholtz and Leibniz Association to the Max Planck and Fraunhofer Societies, and open ourselves up even more to students and researchers from other countries. Offering the best of them a new home here creates connections throughout the world, as well as communication and collaboration which a resource-poor country like Germany is dependent upon. At the same time, it makes an important contribution to a social climate of openness to cultural diversity.

Real breakthroughs are only possible, however, if scientists engage in dialogue with society, if they are willing and able to make their research understandable to interested laymen. If they seek dialogue with politics and business in order to make their findings productive. And if they encounter parliaments, governments and administrations that admit their deficits and want to remedy them.

We need many more border crossers who are able to switch between science, politics and business and know the conditions, constraints and opportunities that affect each of them. This is the only way good projects or products can come from good ideas. And that is why conferences like this one are so important: representatives from different sectors of society and from different countries come together. Here there is curiosity, openness and a desire to make new connections. The Office of the Federal President, which is also becoming a think tank, awaits the manuscripts with anticipation!

Most major breakthroughs are based on preliminary work done by many people. This is also true for scientific revolutions. But often we owe the breakthrough itself to an individual and often rebellious spirit who swims against the current instead of drifting with it and withstands opposition. Here Albert Einstein comes to mind, and not just his legendary outstretched tongue. No one foresaw that in a single year he would manage to permanently upset what had until then been the prevailing physical understanding of the world.

One thing is clear: scientific breakthroughs are almost always associated with challenging prevailing theories and by extension, the old powers that be. So anyone who wants to achieve breakthroughs must put up with free spirits and if possible encourage them. After the breakthrough everyone says they were all for it. Suddenly, the new thing appears to be a given for everyone. Examples of this are the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the labour movement and women's liberation. Basic freedoms, women's equality, democracy – they all

appear self-evident to us. But the law on equal civil rights for men and women is just 50 years old, while women's suffrage is not even 100 years old.

Ladies and gentlemen, the road ahead of us is longer than that behind us. Basically we can say that if in future seven, eight or nine billion people are to have a chance to develop freely and in peace, if they are to have enough food, clean drinking water, doctors, schools and energy sources available, and all without overstepping ecological boundaries - then mankind will have to create a very significant change. I believe there are cultural "tipping points", points at which a change that creeps up slowly is suddenly felt everywhere. At which people's view of the world changes very quickly, along with our behaviour.

We will still need many breakthroughs: for doing business in more energy- and resource-efficient ways; for improved coexistence between nations, cultures and religions. And here too we need to be aware of what a long way we have come in Europe's history. We need more decentralised development, especially as regards issues of agriculture and food. And we need a sound international financial order.

Science provides an impressive illustration of an ideal of humanity: the hope for a world without walls, where all can live well. And an ideal of encounter without walls in our minds, without the walls of background, gender or belief, but based on knowledge alone. This ideal should be our goal!