



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a state banquet in honour of the President of Ireland
Schloss Bellevue,
3 July 2019**

Very few presidents can boast such an enthusiastic online fanbase as you, President Higgins. As a fellow holder of the office, I must confess to a slight degree of envy... Particularly given the heading on this fan site: "Tired Of Your President? Then Take A Look At 24 Photos Of Ireland's President Being The Best President".

The photos show you in various situations – waiting your turn at an ATM, arm in arm with your wife Sabina, alongside the giants of the Irish rugby team, or – in miniature – as a crocheted tea cosy.

We are delighted that you are paying a state visit to Germany. Allow me to bid you a very warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue.

The tremendous affection felt for you both at home and abroad is down to your kind and empathetic personality and your determination not to lose touch with Ireland's people, as well as your widely respected erudition.

The story goes that you managed to outshine a former Mayor of London and subsequent British Foreign Secretary when reciting Ancient Greek poetry.

In the preface to one of your collections of poetry, the publisher describes you as a political poet and poetic politician. While you may not have had as much time to write during your term of office, your political work has been all the more fruitful. You have, for example, succeeded in further normalising Ireland's relations with the United Kingdom and in continuing the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland.

And you paid a memorable state visit to London, the first Irish President to do so. That trip garnered much approval and appreciation, not least here in Germany. I am quite certain that this gesture will take its place in the history books.

And yet the scars of the past have not yet fully healed. On no account must the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union be allowed to reopen these old wounds. Politically and economically, Ireland is more directly affected by Brexit than any other

EU Member State. For this reason, too, your country has our full solidarity. We have reiterated this pledge in recent months: Germany stands firmly by Ireland's side.

The European Union's value and internal cohesion have rarely been so plain as during the withdrawal negotiations. Ireland is part of this Union. And Ireland's core interests are and will remain the EU's core interests.

This applies particularly to the Northern Ireland peace process. We are aware of the great achievements there have been in building reconciliation since the Good Friday Agreement. We want to strengthen you in your endeavours to find a solution for the border which will underpin, rather than undermine, the peace process. Obviously this will involve the free movement of goods and persons. What it will not involve is barriers, customs duties and trade barriers. Here, Ireland's concerns are also our concerns.

The withdrawal agreement negotiated with the United Kingdom protects the achievements of the Good Friday Agreement. All EU Member States have clearly stated that renegotiation is not an option. We just have to hope that the new Government in London realises that too.

Germany has much reason to be grateful to Ireland. After the Second World War, Irish families took in hundreds of children from Germany, thus saving them from starvation and hardship. And in 1990, as the country then holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Communities, Ireland played a key role in bringing the process of German unification to completion.

For all that, Mr President, we Germans are and will remain grateful.

These ties, President Higgins, also found expression in our joint appeal to encourage EU citizens to vote in the European elections. Certainly we were both very pleased at the increased turnout.

Our close bond is also reflected by your visit now – a visit to friends. In Ireland you would say a friend's eye is a good mirror. I am keen to know what you see in the mirror of our eyes, and what experiences you will take back home with you to Dublin.

We in Germany can in turn take inspiration from Ireland – for example, when it comes to strengthening our democracy for the future, for instance with new forms of civic participation.

I have followed the work of the Irish Citizens' Assembly with great interest, for example during the preparations for the abortion referendum.

Ninety-nine Irish citizens, who had never previously met – students, lorry drivers, teachers, engineers and nurses, people from all

walks of life – gathered in a Dublin hotel, supporters and opponents of the constitutional amendment. They talked to each other, swapped arguments, weighed up the pros and cons. “Not exactly the stuff of political revolution,” as one daily paper put it.

Maybe not. And yet this group of citizens did manage to turn one of the most difficult issues in politics and ethics from one of confrontation towards consensus. In my view, this example can give us hope that our democracies can make things happen. Or, as that newspaper article said: “They showed the world what democrats can do with a little imagination.”

I am convinced that democracy needs such impetus for renewal. This is something we are sensing throughout Europe, including here in Germany. Democracy is changing. But that does not mean it is about to fall. Far from it. On the contrary: there is huge interest in politics, in shaping the future, especially among young people. Expectations, too, are high. I very much hope that our democracy can respond to and make use of this engagement. And so I wish those in positions of responsibility today – in political parties, parliaments, governments – the necessary confidence and openness not to regard what is new as a threat, but to dare to introduce new forms of participation and to chart new courses in politics and political institutions. To put it simply: I wish everyone, including us here in Germany, a touch of the Irish courage.

President Higgins,

You personally give your compatriots courage – courage in the democratic capabilities of each and every individual and of society as a whole. Or, as you said in your inaugural speech last year: “It is important that we seek to reach always for the best of ourselves, and the best of what we might become, and that we allow that to guide our collective ambition for our country.”

“The best of what we might become” – that is my wish not only for your wonderful country, but also for the friendship between us, between Ireland and Germany.

May I ask you now to join me in a toast to President Higgins, Mrs Higgins and the Irish German friendship!

Thank you.