Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening event of the Forum Bellevue on
Transformation of Society
at Schloss Bellevue
on 7 July 2023

A very warm welcome to the Forum Bellevue! Some of you will recall that we have met in this place under this name in recent years to discuss the future of our democracy. That Forum was and is close to my heart. Big questions meet sharp minds, that was always our ambition. New ideas, perspectives on the future, and indeed competition and controversy around the right direction for politics – that is what marked out our Forum with all of its participants. And that, dear guests, is just how we mean to continue.

And yet we are today beginning something new: the Forum Bellevue on Transformation of Society. We want to question even more closely, investigate even more rigorously, where the challenges to liberal democracy that we are seeing really come from, what the cause really is of the uncertainty, disappointment and bitterness that are vented in the populism of our age. A populism, I will add, that may be named for the people, but that generally ignores the democratic virtues of reasoned debate, rational weighing of competing considerations, and respectful majority decisions in processes subject to the rule of law.

I thus hope to use the Forum Bellevue to shine a spotlight on changes that are greater and run deeper than what is described with the cautious term “structural change”. The changes that confront our society are not taking place within specific structures; they are a break with the familiar. They are not happening gradually, but at high speed. They cannot be managed through political routines, but require new ways of thinking.

When the Austrian-American philosopher Karl Polanyi published his book The Great Transformation during the Second World War, he was seeking answers to the burning questions tied to the social collapse and extremism of his age. He explored the nineteenth and early twentieth
century with their dynamics of industrialisation and the market economy. When we speak today of the “transformation of society”, the industrial age is once again the focus. This time not from the beginning, but at its end – or rather, amidst a new beginning.

We face a historic task. We are leaving behind the industrial era powered by fossil fuels that enabled and accompanied Germany’s rise as an export nation – and we are entering an age without coal, oil and gas, an age in which we must prove ourselves anew. We are simultaneously entering the modern, digital age, in which networked computer systems support and indeed sometimes replace not only the manual skills but the intelligence and knowledge of human beings. Our country, our successful economic system, our lives are to become fully climate-neutral by 2045 – and at the same time we want to remain a strong industrial nation, cutting-edge and globally connected, but also robust and less vulnerable, sustainable and resilient.

I would like to summarise this in one phrase: We are living in a threshold era. An era of modernisation and possibilities. At once an era of uncertainties and risks. An era in which the new is emerging while the old has not yet disappeared. An era of change in which we must think differently and act differently.

In this era, we should be particularly cautious about rash promises. Anyone who tries to persuade people that the road ahead of us will be a smooth one quickly loses credibility. Yes, things will be hard – intensive years lie ahead, during which we have to reduce our emissions, modernise our economy and our transport systems, make our buildings and homes more energy-efficient. These years will require a huge effort. We will have to do much more than we have done to date. And we will have to accelerate our efforts.

But there is one thing that I would like to highlight as a kind of guiding principle today. We will not be celebrating any sort of cultural pessimism at the Forum Bellevue. This project is not about the decline of the West. I firmly believe that we do not need to be fearful, let alone defenceless, as we face the major changes that are coming. If we tackle them properly, if we take on the task that lies ahead of us together and, not least, if we have faith in ourselves, then we will emerge stronger from this transition.

All of that is what the Forum Bellevue on Transformation of Society will explore. Allow me to use this opportunity to thank the ZEIT-Stiftung, which has decided to take the plunge and join me in this experimental series of debates – perhaps, Mr Hartung, Mr Schwenker, because your foundation’s name means “time”, which is inherently incapable of ever standing still and is merely another word for change, for renewal.

This series of talks is intended to help ensure that the renewal of our country succeeds. I would like to hold conversations with the panel
members about the various paths to a post-fossil society that is equitable and worth living in. I want to hear what ideas and potential solutions they have. And I hope that we will explore possibilities and potentials together, in our panel discussions but also together with all of you who are my guests today.

When I speak of the changes that lie ahead of us, I am also thinking of the global dimension of climate change and thus thinking of fundamental issues of international solidarity, above all with the countries of the Global South. I am thinking of issues around education and qualifications and of what we need in our country so that we are empowered to help shape a world of upheaval and transformation. And I am thinking of the enormous challenges posed by artificial intelligence, a disruptive technology that will almost certainly change all of our lives and that raises quite fundamental questions concerning the relationship between humans and machines. All of these issues will be discussed at the upcoming events in this series.

Today, we are beginning with an area which holds vital potential for reducing carbon emissions, and which also makes up the heart of our value creation, of work and prosperity: industry and the energy sector.

I am interested in how we can decarbonise our economy, our businesses as quickly and effectively as possible while preserving our industrial base. I want to discuss how we can democratically and jointly manage the transition to the post-fossil age, and how we can win over all of those people who are currently uncertain or doubting, who feel patronised or lectured. How can we succeed in this transformation, how can we prevail amid this upheaval – and how can we ensure cohesion? These questions weigh heavily on my mind, and I know from many of my conversations across the country that the public feels the same way.

There are four points that I believe are fundamental, and I would like to briefly mention them before we launch into our discussion.

Firstly, we are not saving the climate, we are saving ourselves. The day after tomorrow I will once again visit the Ahr valley, two years after the extreme weather and subsequent flooding that cost 135 people their lives in one night in Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. Many places on the Ahr are fighting for their historical identity, because bridges and buildings have been destroyed and it is now uncertain whether they can be rebuilt in the high-risk area. In many families, the pain and grief of losing relatives are now mixed with bitterness when a house cannot be rebuilt where it once stood. We will have to get used to the idea of flooding as well as of droughts, in many places in Germany; we have to prepare for all possible extreme weather events.

My second point is that it now depends on the “how”, on convincing solutions and credible steps. Our society has committed to reaching a shared goal over the next two decades, by 2045. The decisions on
climate neutrality are made, and nobody wants to revise them. But for me the climate debate involves too much moralising and too little practical industrial policy, too much generic pledging and too little specific, actual expansion of the new infrastructures that are essential for us to make progress. To give just one example, we want to electrify large parts of our energy demand – we want to heat with electricity instead of gas, we want to produce steel with hydrogen generated using electricity instead of with coal, we want to drive electric cars instead of petrol or diesel. We therefore need rapidly growing capacities in energy production and transportation. But we are generating electricity from fewer sources, because nuclear power and coal-fired power generation are coming to an end. How will this all add up in the coming years? These are concrete questions that require concrete answers, if people’s trust is to be won.

Another concrete question concerns the prices, the costs and who will bear them. As our mobility and our industrial production processes increasingly become electrified, the answer to this question will determine how attractive Germany is as a place to invest. Very diligent work must be done to address this.

Thirdly, it is my belief that we can only speak of true progress if even the weakest have something to gain from it. The good news is that there has long been broad support across the whole of society for more, and more decisive, climate action. But political decisions must always prove their worth in people’s actual lives. We must speak honestly about ruptures that the necessary restructuring of our economy will entail. And we must not lose sight of the very different burdens that different people bear. In this time of transition, much will depend on providing social support to soften the impact of all measures and decisions, on always thinking from the very beginning about how to mitigate the societal repercussions. We must always answer the question of social considerations before it becomes a major political obstacle.

And my fourth point is that we must also protect our democracy, all of us together. Arguments and controversies have always existed in our country, in our open society – particularly before difficult decisions are taken. And I am aware, in light of the sheer scale of the tasks ahead – in light of the high energy costs and the possible financial burdens, and in light of a world of looming shortages and conflicts over the distribution of resources – that the argument and the debate occasionally become quite intense, in light of all that. This is something that must be endured, and our democracy will endure it. But those who speak like populists and the enemies of democracy, who use the same words and smears as them – even if only out of thoughtlessness – strengthen the populists and contribute to the loss of trust in our democracy. To my mind, we all have not just a particularly great task ahead of us, we also have a particular responsibility for our democracy.
I have no doubt that we have the necessary knowledge and all of the practical skills to prove ourselves in these times. The four points that I have addressed are, in my view, essential in order for us to do so.

However, no matter how hard we focus on ourselves, there is something that we should not forget. Germany is not an island, not an isolated society; it is a country with a dense network of ties and connections across Europe and worldwide. We cannot conceive of our future any other way. That goes for our economy, it goes for our supply of raw materials and energy, and it goes for our political alliances and partnerships. We need partnerships and cooperation, and we will be dependent on other nations. But we can also be of help to others, and as the fourth-largest economy in the world we can set an example of how climate neutrality can be reached.

The people joining me on the podium today, both of whom I have known for a long time, bring a wealth of experience in how the transformation can succeed, and I would like to briefly introduce them to you:

Christiane Benner has for eight years been Vice President of IG Metall, which is the largest single trade union in the world, with more than two million members.

Ottmar Edenhofer is Director and Chief Economist of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, and a professor at Technische Universität Berlin.

The other participants in today’s discussions, ladies and gentlemen, are you. With us today are experts from the worlds of business and research, from politics, civil society and the media, and you are all invited to join in. I will open the floor for you to do so in the second half of the event.

I am excited to see what everyone has to say and to search for answers together with you. And now I look forward to an enriching discussion!