

A toast by Klaus von Dohnanyi on the occasion of his 95th birthday at the Senate Breakfast on 13 July 2023 at Hamburg City Hall

(...)

95? First of all, let me tell you what the daily experience of living at such an advanced age is like: you read the newspapers attentively and critically and learn, for example, that the government wants to achieve this or that by 2030; you either agree or are annoyed. 2030, the date initially seems like the day after tomorrow – then you realise: 2030 means you will be 102 years old, and you may not live to see it! A strange feeling, being confronted on a daily basis with the imminent end of one's life.

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My long political journey began on April 5, 1943, when I had to watch from a distance as my mother was pushed into a black Mercedes of the Gestapo in front of our garden gate. Of course, at the age of 14, I already knew that we were not Nazis; but not much more. And in the years leading up to his murder in Sachsenhausen concentration camp on April 9, 1945, and in all the years since, even to this day, I have tried to understand how my father had been able to summon up such courage.

This has become and remained a lifelong issue for me. He himself wrote from prison that it was really just the way of a decent person. But you can also be a decent person outside politics. Why did this lawyer with an interest in history become a politician? I think what I learnt from my father was patriotism, the love of one's homeland without making a fuss. Because the fatherland is really a blind friend that you have to take firmly by the hand again and again so that it doesn't go dangerously astray. But that always takes courage.

Patriots, true patriots, that's what they all were back then in the resistance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, my mother's brother and my father's comrade, returned to Germany from the USA in August 1939 just before the start of the Second World War, against the advice of his American friends: in times like these, I must be with my people, he reasoned. Patriotism is not directed against anyone, it is responsibility there, where you stand. And where it may be necessary to courageously take the hand of this blind friend and protect him from going astray.

And so my father was also a careful and responsible guide. From a very young age, he had began researching the origins of the First World War, the "primal catastrophe of the 20th century" (George F. Kennan), with Dr. Timme at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin. Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, which held Germany solely responsible for the First World War, poisoned the climate in the young republic. My father wanted to know more, because you cannot understand the present without knowledge of history. I also learnt that from my father. He then continued his research here in Hamburg at the Institute for Foreign Policy, under the guidance of Professor Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy. My father's place in the Foreign Office was taken by Felix Gilbert, also a Mendelssohn descendant and later professor at the Princeton

Institute for Advanced Studies. In his memoirs, Gilbert strictly refuted any suspicion that the German Reich had been sought to be cleared of complicity in the war. It was a matter of truth, nothing but the historical truth. Christopher Clark's global bestseller "The Sleepwalkers" provoked much controversy. The lesson for me: you must never let the populists steal the truth. And: you should never be afraid of being accused of strengthening the populists by speaking the truth.

I was soon preoccupied with the question of how the Nazis came to power. Again, what was the truth? It was only late in the day, having been a member of the Social Democratic Party for some time, that I read how, in March 1930, the SPD parliamentary group withdrew the majority from its Social Democratic Chancellor because of a dispute over ¼ % of the unemployment insurance, refused, against wiser advice, to continue to participate in government and only decided to return – believe it or not – at the very hour when Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of the Reich, on the morning of 30 January 1933. You can read about this in the memoirs of Friedrich Stampfer, the spokesman for the parliamentary group, "Experiences and Findings". Democratic parties must always be prepared to work together in times of danger. Have we understood that today? What does this mean for future coalition problems in some of the "new" states?

Not so long ago, climate protection and climate impact were at the top of our political priorities. But now Putin's war in Ukraine is determining all of our political decisions, whether to convert more coal into electricity with an uncertain gas supply, whether to intervene dangerously in nature on the island of Rügen, or whether we do not have enough money for a basic child protection system, and how to alleviate the inflation caused by war in a socially just way: the consequences of this war are everywhere. Was it inevitable? Did Putin start the war without provocation? Or is Kissinger right that the West shares responsibility? The central issue was always the question of Ukraine's admission to Nato. Putin wanted to negotiate this again in December 2021. The USA and Nato rejected this outright. Now, just a few days ago, President Biden put his foot down and decided no, there would be no Nato membership now, perhaps never, and instead offered extensive security guarantees. Could this not have been said in December 2021? Why did it take so much blood? Where is the truth? Will we only find out again in a few decades?

In the meantime, the war in Ukraine has dangerous domestic political consequences. In opinion polls, the AfD occasionally scores even higher than the SPD or the Greens; it has doubled its popularity ratings, which the CDU leader wanted to halve. Because wherever I look in the polls on the Ukraine war, at least a good third of Germans want a different policy, would like to see significantly more diplomatic initiatives and finally a link between arms supplies and willingness to negotiate. Yet this third is not reflected in politics. There is no effective opposition, only demands for a further tightening of the war policy. Could the rise of the AfD also be linked to this? Do many Germans feel that German interests are not being represented? The situation is dangerous. Once again, the truth must be courageously revealed and convenient excuses must be abandoned. Our blind friend can always be seduced! Where are the democrats now who are taking him by the hand for peace?

That brings me to Willy Brandt. I met him for the first time in 1961, this great patriot and courageous peacemaker who returned from emigration to a destroyed Berlin in 1946. I learnt a great deal from him. The strange theory, only recently spread again by a prolific historian, that Brandt is no longer relevant is, in my view, simply nonsense. On the contrary: his policy, the combination of détente and readiness for defence, is more topical than ever. And his phrase "Foreign policy is general staff work for peace" is something that some people in Berlin today should bear in mind!

And so I would like to address you once again, dear Angela. You have admirably and courageously found ways to strike a balance internationally and at European level over and over again. Your idea in 2014 to reach a modern solution under international law for regional autonomy for the disputed Donbass in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia with the Minsk 2 agreement was peacemaking and groundbreaking. After all, neither the problems in South Tyrol nor those in the Basque Country, Northern Ireland, Catalonia, Corsica or even Quebec could have been solved any other way. But instead, Kiev wrote Nato membership for the whole of Ukraine into the constitution in 2019, thereby undermining Minsk 2. This was a backward, nationalistic and dangerous decision by Kiev in my eyes. You always took the blind friend fatherland firmly and safely by the hand. That is why many people miss you so much today.

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Let us now raise our glasses and drink to what we have and what we want to keep with God's blessing, which may also give us the strength to be courageous in critical moments.