

Hand on heart - Democracy needs honesty

We are at a decisive point in the history of our society.

Many people in Germany are realizing that, more than ever before, we are living in turbulent times. Fear of financial poverty, downward social mobility, war, and the climate catastrophe are omnipresent.

Gone are the days, when we could tell ourselves: "Our children will be better off than we were!". On paper, Germany is becoming richer, but that money is going to ever fewer people. The rising costs of food, heating, and rent, overwhelmed hospitals and unfair training opportunities: these realities are reducing the options available to many of us to improve our situations. Collecting old bottles for deposit, going to the food bank – these may once have been rare activities, but for more and more people they are becoming part of everyday realities.

These insecurities and fears are being misused by far-right political parties across Europe, in order to shift hostile and exclusionist perspectives to the centre of our societies. Even democratic parties are increasingly compromising on their values in order to hold on to power. Our democracy and our constitutional state are threatened.

Don't we already know that far-right parties have used crises in the past to come into power? In the era of climate catastrophe it is no different. Extreme weather events, diminishing groundwater reserves, crop failures, and increasingly expensive food: our basic existence is at risk.

First and foremost, the climate catastrophe affects those who are least responsible for causing it. Regions where today the majority of the human population lives may become unlivable, resulting in the suffering and death of billions of people.

Every day, people living in the global south have to flee their homes. Many have no alternative but to work in conditions that violate their human rights just to make a living. German politicians fail to recognize our responsibility in this issue. Instead, politicians allow systematic violence against people at the EU border. In the past, we criticized Trump for wanting to build a wall. Today, Europe is a fortress protected behind barbed wire.

We are standing at a crossroads. It is time to take a sincere look towards the future. We must recognize that a new fascism in Germany is possible, if we do not change course. A world with crises and failing quality of life conditions offers fertile ground for fascism. It is time – also because of our historical responsibility – to take a definitive stand against fascism.

We have to tackle the untenable social disparities and the climate catastrophe at the same time.

The government charges a CO2 price but does not pay it back to citizens. Yet the CO2 price makes simple necessities, like heating a home, more expensive. The poorest in our society and the middle class are forced to cut back. They can't afford energy anymore. Whereas the rich, who use the most energy, are unscathed by rising costs. Cutting back on energy use cannot be solved simply by raising prices! This is a matter of social justice, and thus a matter of fair rationing, that sets a limit on the overconsumption of the rich. When water reserves run low, we don't let the price increase infinitely, so that some of us cannot afford to drink anymore, while others can still water their lawns.

Why is it allowed for some people to own ever more properties while others are forced to live on the street? Sounds like the game Monopoly. We need that money for everyone, thus the super rich have to concede some of what they have – a wealth tax. Then we could finally repair and expand the train network, insulate houses, restore moors, so much is possible, that would benefit us all, instead of making luxuries possible for just a small few.

It is an illusion to believe that all the issues we face can be solved through technological innovation. It is high time to speak the uncomfortable truth: some of the things that we today take for granted must come to an end. If we want to protect the foundations of life, the government has to shut down the airline industry in a fair way – starting with private jets and domestic flights. Other sectors cannot continue to exist in their current magnitude – for example, the automobile and chemical industries. These challenges are so enormous that politicians turn away from dealing with them out of fear and continue to send young people to train in industries that have no future. There are initiatives in civil society that prove retraining is possible. For example, people can be trained within a few weeks in installing solar panels. In order to tackle these challenges, we need to listen first to the voices of those who are most directly affected by the impacts.

We need an honest debate. Only when our political parties stop telling us the same old fairy tales and finally start talking about what is really at stake, can we begin to address the challenges we face. The majority of people do not want our children's futures to be destroyed. The majority of people want a just society. A society that doesn't just make speeches about its values, but actually acts on them.

This is why people in our civil society and especially the federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, are required to bring honesty into our democratic debates.

Hand on heart. It is time for honesty.