

Speech

by

Martin Schulz

at the

presentation of the SPD Candidate for

Chancellor on 29 January 2017

Check against delivery!

Comrades,

ladies and gentlemen,

guests,

The party's executive committee has just proposed that I stand as candidate for chancellor and future party chairman. This is an emotional moment for me and I am glad I can share it with you here today. It is a magnificent scene from up here on the rostrum and it's wonderful to see the Willy Brandt Building so full.

Everywhere you go, you can sense the upbeat mood and the new hope placed in the party – not just here in the hall but throughout the country. We're going to make the elections a thrilling experience again this year.

I am very touched and grateful for the tremendous encouragement I have received from party members and the general public over the past few days and so I am looking forward to the forthcoming election campaign.

Sigmar, I am personally delighted and we are all very grateful

- that you selflessly renounced the office of party chairman and the position as chancellor candidate because you were convinced it was better for the country and for our party to do so;
- that we have stuck together through thick and thin over the past few weeks and months, even though efforts were made by others to prise us apart;
- and that you are my friend.

You're a great guy and, in proposing that I should now lead the party, you have taken a difficult personal decision with great equanimity. It is a decision which deserves respect and admiration. You have our respect and you have our admiration. I am confident you will be an outstanding foreign minister, just as you have been an outstanding party chairman and economics minister. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for our friendship.

In recent weeks and months we have shown that the party acts in a disciplined manner and in a spirit of solidarity. Plenty of people thought that was beyond us. Indeed, many people still think that politics is all about outsmarting each other and kicking each other in the shins. That's not true! Social democracy means being fair to each other. It means mutual solidarity. It means working hand in hand and side by side to achieve what is best for the country. We seek pragmatic solutions for the benefit of the people.

What a stark contrast to the tedious and never-ending arguments among the conservatives; what a contrast to the wheeling and dealing in the CSU and the humiliations inflicted daily from within the Union on its own chancellor. The reliable partner in the federal government is the SPD and the driving force the SPD group in

the Bundestag. It is we who have initiated the key projects for the future of our country and put them into practice.

The Social Democratic Party of Germany has set its sights on becoming the strongest political force in the forthcoming elections to the Bundestag. And I am determined to become the next Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany!

We want greater fairness in our country. We want to make sure people can lead good and secure lives. We want our children to have decent prospects. We want Germany to be a factor for stability in Europe and the world. For all that we need a strong social democratic party.

A great rift now runs through society, not just here in Germany and not just among our European neighbours, but all over the world. We must overcome the divisions and find new forms of cooperation. We need fresh courage and new confidence. We are the guarantee that things can take a turn for the better, provided we roll up our sleeves and get cracking together. We must regain lost confidence and make it clear to people that they can rely on us.

The SPD's core competence is its ability to weld society together. And welding society together will be our paramount task in the years to come, because that's the only way we can remain strong enough to oppose the enemies of democracy and meet the challenges we face.

Mutual respect is essential in this respect. It is important to me that hard-working people who stick to the rules, who look after their children and often enough their parents as well, and who sometimes only just about get by even on two pay packets –

that these people should be at the very heart of our policies. That is what I stand for!

The people who keep the show on the road deserve respect. Respect for their lifelong achievements. I have respect for them because I know from my own experience that some paths are arduous and stony and that you can go astray.

I want to see more fairness in this country.

- It is not right and proper if a family with children, in which both parents go out to work, can barely pay the rent in the urban district they live in.
- It is not right and proper if a company boss makes disastrous decisions and still pockets millions in bonuses, yet a shop assistant is kicked out for a minor misdemeanour.
- It is not right and proper if the little baker's shop honestly pays its taxes as a matter of course and so helps to finance the community, while the global coffee company avoids paying its taxes and parks its money in tax havens. Fair taxation and combating tax evasion will therefore be a major plank in our election campaign.
- It is not right and proper that employees should pay higher health insurance contributions than employers. Parity – fair cooperation between employees and employers – is the foundation of our economic success, after all.
- It is not right and proper that we should mobilise billions to bail out the banks, whereas in the schools our children go to the plaster crumbles from the walls.

It is the SPD's job to ensure fairness, to build up trust and so take our country forward.

We have already achieved a great deal in the present government.

- Andrea Nahles has introduced the minimum wage, launched many initiatives

for decent and secure jobs and made pensions fairer;

- Heiko Maas is the face of civil rights in the party who never forgets that fundamental rights must be respected and protected in the battle against crime and who doggedly opposes the actions of those on the far right;
- Manuela Schwesig has succeeded in making family policy a focal area of government policy and undertaken unparalleled efforts to achieve equal pay for men and women;
- Frank-Walter Steinmeier is the prudent diplomat who is rightly the most popular politician in the country; in two weeks from now he will be our next head of state. That makes us very proud.
- Barbara Hendricks has done an excellent job in the field of climate protection and ecological reconstruction and she also fights to secure affordable housing for all.
- Sigmar Gabriel's economic policy has been an astonishing success story: there has been a huge drop in unemployment and no stone was left unturned in the battle to save every job at Kaisers/Tengelmann. That was a glorious chapter in the history of social democracy in this country. I am confident that Brigitte Zypries will successfully continue where Sigmar Gabriel has left off.
- Aydan Özogus has done a really good job in difficult times as integration minister in the chancellor's office and has not been thrown off course by the hostility she has encountered.

It is the SPD representatives in the federal government and the members of parliament in the Bundestag group led by Thomas Oppermann who are taking

Germany forward, while the parties of the Union get sidetracked in senseless internal arguments and have not even decided yet whether the CDU and CSU will put up a joint candidate for chancellor. That's why this country really needs a federal government led by a social democrat, for the likes of Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt and Gerhard Schröder did Germany a power of good!

Social democrats are also demonstrating their level-headedness and reliability in running a number of federal states: Hannelore Kraft in North Rhine-Westphalia, Malu Dreyer in Rhineland-Palatinate, Torsten Albig in Schleswig-Holstein, Erwin Sellering in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Stefan Weil in Lower Saxony, Olaf Scholz in Hamburg, Dietmar Woidke in Brandenburg, Carsten Sieling in Bremen and Michael Müller in Berlin. They all demonstrate that it makes a difference whether social democrats or conservatives are in charge. After all, we stand for free education from kindergarten to university; we stand for fair and decent wages and for the struggle against precarious jobs; and we stand for affordable housing, because housing is a basic right. Social democrats are in power in 13 out of 16 federal states. That is good news for the people who live there and a sound basis for our election victory in September.

The same applies to cities and municipalities. Wherever social democrats exercise responsibility, pragmatic action is taken in the public interest. We want good prospects for people living in metropolitan cities and conurbations as well as for those living in the regions and rural areas. I can see plenty of work ahead of us when I look at the state of medical care, the lack of kindergartens and schools in rural areas and the lack of infrastructure and adequate services to cope with everyday needs there. Those who live in rural areas, villages or small towns have exactly the same rights as those who live in metropolitan areas.

Let me make one thing clear: the election campaign will be important in highlighting the differences between the parties and the candidates. I will not fight shy of any conflict. At best, an election campaign can be a glorious moment in a democracy. But there is something else I'd like to point out: the SPD, and I myself, will treat the political opposition fairly in this election campaign. Political controversies must not lead to hatred, malice or ridicule and we will unmask all those who offend in this respect. What we witnessed last year in the election campaign in the USA was a lack of decency in the debates that really shocked me, because it opened up deep rifts and ruined a great deal in a country that once stood for freedom and tolerance.

We must not let that happen in Germany. For me it is a matter of course that there should be proper mutual treatment and respect for differing opinions. I invite the other democratic parties to accept a fairness agreement, which includes the non-use of social bots, and to put our heads together on how to deal with fake news on the internet and with slander and defamation in the social networks.

The issue of migration is a source of concern to us all. Our society as a whole faces a major challenge because rat-catchers are trying to make political capital out of the refugees. That is both shameful and repulsive.

My approach to the debate rests on a very German experience. Our country is well aware of what war, dictatorship, persecution and expulsion mean. We Germans know that there are times and situations in which people have to flee in order to survive or to escape torture and persecution. Two days after the Holocaust Memorial Day let me, therefore, say quite openly: Heinrich Mann, Albert Einstein, Willy Brandt, Hannah Arendt and Anna Seegers all discovered that without political asylum they would not

have survived the National Socialist terror.

That experience means that if people flee from the brutal terror of the so-called Islamic State they deserve protection in Europe. In other words, blanket distrust of refugees is a victory for the so-called IS.

The right strategy for a humane refugee policy is to begin with the causes of flight, in other words to work tirelessly for a peace process in Syria and to combat the dramatic poverty and political and economic instability in Africa. This calls for a European foreign policy, for a German foreign policy and it is reassuring that Frank-Walter Steinmeier has pursued such a policy with great equanimity and that Sigmar Gabriel will follow in his footsteps.

However, Europe must deliver too: in combating the causes of flight as well as in protecting Europe's external borders and formulating a European immigration law.

There must be a fair distribution of refugees on our continent. For European cooperation rests on solidarity and fair burden-sharing. Germany acts in solidarity when other countries need help – including providing financial assistance. Germany acts in solidarity when other countries feel threatened and it accepts sanctions in such cases. But solidarity is not a one-way street. If some countries interpret solidarity as meaning 'yes' to the financing of the agricultural fund and 'yes' to structural funding but 'no' to human solidarity, then a future federal government will have to link the question of solidarity in refugee policy to the next EU financial plan.

That the most vocal representative of this erosion of solidarity in Europe, the Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban, who rejects any solidarity with Germany in its refugee policy, should be courted and applauded by the CSU is an open affront to German interests.

The refugees who come to our country and have the prospect of being able to stay here in the long term must be integrated quickly. That costs money – a great deal of money, in fact – and we cannot afford to leave the federal states and municipalities on their own, because they bear the main brunt. We must strengthen organisations and local initiatives and give them the financial means they require. Germany is a strong and prosperous country, and what civil society and volunteers have done over the past year to help refugees is an historic achievement of the people of this country.

However, advocating an open and tolerant country also entails resolute action against offenders. Olaf Scholz put it this way many years ago: “I’m liberal, but I’m not daft.” Therefore, let me put it straight on the line in a Rhenish accent: Those who commit an offence in Germany and who do not abide by the rules will face the full rigour of German law and the security authorities. The SPD interior ministers in the federal states are in favour of a zero tolerance policy exercised with the right sense of proportion, as are the security politicians at the federal level.

But, having made my stance on this issue very plain, I should point out that the following is equally important to me: We must never renounce our values, our freedom and democracy, our rule of law and our plurality, no matter challenges we may face. I say this quite deliberately because to me the fact that a US president wants to build walls, thinks out loud about torture and attacks women, religious communities, minorities, people with disabilities, artists and intellectuals with outrageous and dangerous remarks is tantamount to the breaking of a taboo and is intolerable. However, I am confident that, when they travel to Washington, European politicians will explain to the US government that international law and human rights also apply to Donald Trump. I’m quite sure of that! Because our transatlantic partnership is important and it must remain an integral feature of Europe and Germany.

Now, I can hear some people saying: “Schulz is a European politician. He hasn’t got a clue about the issues here in Germany.”

To be honest, such talk doesn’t really bother me. If you’ve been mayor of a town with 40,000 inhabitants for eleven years, you know what’s going on at the job centre, at the police station, at the youth and social welfare office, in the schools and retirement homes, in medium-sized businesses and small shops, at the sports club, in the local cultural scene and the fire brigade. Because every problem ultimately lands up in the town halls and municipal authorities, in other words at the local level; so I think some of the negative remarks made about me are an insult to the thousands of people who are actively involved at the local level and who do a great job there. After all, it is they who organise everyday life in our country.

Many people in Germany live in provincial communities and I myself am not ashamed to say that I come from Würselen, a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia.

But let me add something here. Yes, I do know what’s going on in Europe; I’m familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the EU and have many contacts throughout the continent. And because I know what’s going on, I can say with full conviction: a well-functioning Europe is in the vital interests of Germany, and a flourishing Germany is in the interests of Europe. So any attempt to play off European policy against German policy, to act as if German interests have to be defended against the bureaucrats in Brussels is both crude and stupid. European policy is German domestic policy, and German domestic policy has an influence on Europe. To set one against the other is to endanger the future opportunities of our children and the coming generations!

You won’t find me getting involved in any Europe-bashing. On the contrary, I regard it

as a compliment that I am regarded as an expert in European affairs, because that is absolutely essential if you want to become chancellor! And as chancellor I will do whatever I can to make Europe better and more efficient and put it in closer touch with its citizens.

Many of you here in the hall know me personally. I am the son of ordinary people: my mother was a housewife and my father a policeman. I was a keen footballer and much preferred being out on the pitch to sitting at my classroom desk. My dreams of becoming a footballer were shattered when I was still a young man and I consequently strayed off the beaten path. I know what it means to lose your bearings in life, but I also know how good it feels when your family and friends get you back on your feet again and you're given a second chance. I got that chance and I'm proud that I completed my apprenticeship as a bookseller and was then able to open up a little bookshop, which still exists today and is well stocked. When I went into politics, I had to learn everything from scratch – at the local level – before I was elected to the European parliament.

Like countless other people who nurse or care for others, who drive buses, who look after our safety, who run a company or repair things as craftsmen, who stand at a conveyor belt every day or who work creatively, I am proud of what I have achieved in my life.

But look at all the things I've been reproached with! That I didn't get university

entrance qualifications, that I never studied and that I come from a provincial town. I don't see any of that as staining my reputation, because those are things that apply to the majority of people in this country. The way I see it, a chancellor should not only have an understanding of the everyday concerns, hopes and fears of the people, but also feel deeply with them. Otherwise he or she is in the wrong job. That's why I regard some of the attacks that have been made on me – that I'm a European and local government oddball who didn't qualify for university – as simply arrogant, elitist and out of touch with the real world. The best response to these attacks was the backing we received from all those who joined the SPD this week and, in doing so, placed their trust in us.

In the weeks to come I will be travelling around the country a lot to meet people going about their everyday lives and talking to them about their ideas for a better, fairer and safer future. I shall be listening closely to what they have to say. At the party conferences in March and May we will present our ideas for the party programme in more detail.

We social democrats want to take things forward, because in times such as these it is simply not enough to “run on sight” or “play it by ear”. We need to be more ambitious in making our country fit for the decades to come. We need to earn trust and credibility by making our country a fairer place to live in. There is a great deal that has been thrown out of kilter.

- We must ensure good wages, because secure jobs and good wages are the prerequisite for a pension allowing people to lead a decent life later on. Equal pay for equal work must apply to all men and women; together with unions and management we must ensure wage increases for social workers in care and

nursing and so raise the status of their professions. Strong trade unions and works councils are essential for that purpose. I shall pursue with great dedication the new alliance between the SPD and trade unions that was forged by Sigmar Gabriel.

- Our innovative economy is the key to a good future because it provides good, crisis-proof jobs. We require greater investment to that end. We need it in infrastructure, in digital restructuring and for education and families. We might have a surplus amounting to billions in the federal budget, but that hasn't stopped the finance minister from promising tax reductions as an election gift, from which the rich will once again benefit the most, instead of investing in the education of our children. That only goes to show that we desperately need a social democratic finance minister in Berlin. I am grateful to Torsten Schäfer-Gümbel and the SPD finance ministers in the federal states for submitting good proposals for a fair tax policy and the closing of tax havens.
- We must do more for our families and children. It is in families that people learn to take on long-term responsibility for each other. I regard crèches, kindergartens and all-day schools as beacons in our towns and communities, not the skyscrapers erected by the global financial institutes whose opaque architecture documents and cements their cynical claim to power.
- We must ensure safety in our towns and communities by putting enough policemen on the streets. Because small-scale crime, domestic burglaries and vandalism lead to a feeling of uncertainty. I understand and respect that feeling. The SPD must, therefore, not only stand alongside those who are pushing ahead in a spirited fashion and with great verve; it must also serve as the advocate of those who are worried and afraid.

One thing is perfectly clear to me in this respect. The neoliberal ideology pursued in recent decades with its focus on a “lean state” and “private not public” has drained resources from the police and public security forces and made it harder to combat crime. So it’s about time a social democratic interior minister took charge after the Union has held this ministry over the past twelve years and consistently attempted to cover up its failures with strong words and pithy statements.

- We must ensure good education by working together at all levels in such a way that we can provide equal educational opportunities for all. Education must be free of charge from kindergarten to university; wherever social democrats are in the government, progress is being made.
- Education and training also covers cultural education, and to me as a trained bookseller it is especially important that we should not forget musical education and investment in libraries and theatres.
- Anke Rehlinger in Saarland, Torsten Albig in Schleswig-Holstein und Hannelore Kraft in North Rhine-Westphalia have given education a prominent place in their state election campaigns. And rightly so, because Hannelore Kraft’s motto “Leave no child behind” is the basis of a forward-looking policy.
- We must accept that in ever more regions affordable housing is becoming a major social issue and that we must therefore press ahead with the building of affordable homes and limit rent increases. For years, support for affordable housing was scorned as a public handout, but Barbara Hendricks has now put a stop to this erroneous approach.
- We must protect the environment in the interests of future generations. That means not only concluding global climate protection agreements – that too, of

course – but also paving the way for sustainable agriculture with healthy foodstuffs at the local level and taking landscape protection and animal welfare seriously. Protection of the environment is the main task of our generation. We cannot afford to leave our children a poisoned legacy.

- We must recognise digitisation as an organisational task, because it is absurd that a quarter of the people who live in the countryside should have poor access to the Internet or none at all. Digitisation is an important foundation for innovation and dynamism and it is a task for the whole of society which we must organise properly. But the digital world also needs rules so that not only the strong with their extremely powerful computers prevail. A charter of basic rights for the digital world is therefore an important instrument to put an end to the disorder in the net, to preserve plurality and ensure protection of the individual.

At the end of the day, all this is about ensuring the cohesion of our society. It is the sports clubs, neighbourhood initiatives, the churches, the trade unions, enterprises and educational institutions that hold things together. Support for civil society is the order of the day in the defence of our society. Ralf Stegner, whom I congratulate on his re-election as party chairman in Schleswig-Holstein, is right at the forefront of the defence of democracy and the strengthening of civil society.

There are, however, massive attempts to put pressure on our society.

On the one hand, we in Germany – like people in many other countries – are confronted with brutal terrorists who carry out abominable attacks in cowardly fashion and try to make us renounce our free and democratic social order. We must fight these

murderers with an iron fist, with the police, the security services and every means we have in criminal law, but without sacrificing our freedom and liberal approach.

At the same time, however, we must ask ourselves why people who have grown up in free and tolerant societies end up in the clutches of terrorists and totalitarian ideologies. Enthusiasm for our open and tolerant model of society is obviously no longer a matter of course and we must therefore explain more and fight to win people's hearts and minds. That also entails providing massive support for de-radicalisation projects.

Preventing and combating the causes of crime are important elements of social democratic security policy. But let me say this, too. Anyone who attempts to undermine our freedom and the basic democratic order under the cloak of religious freedom, anyone who refuses to accept the first twenty articles of our Basic Law will meet with decisive resistance on our part. There is no justification whatsoever for terrorism.

On the other hand, we are confronted by a rise in nationalism, populism and an ever more radical right wing. Le Pen in France, Wilders in the Netherlands and the AfD in Germany are just a few representatives of this movement, which constantly stirs up hatred against minorities, Islam, the media and Europe. Marie Le Pen's party, to which the AfD loves to refer, is called "National Front" in German. We have experienced a party of this kind with an aggressive nationalist stance here in Germany once in the past. We found out for ourselves in the first half of the 20th century where blind nationalism can lead. The party of the Höckes, the Gaulands and the Petrys is, therefore, not an Alternative for Germany; it is a disgrace for the Federal Republic.

Those who attack the free press and talk of lying journalists have their sights set on a different kind of country. As President of the European Parliament, I had to deal with such people day in, day out: people who want to make racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny and homophobia socially acceptable again. I myself and the whole of the SPD will resolutely fight all these racists, extremists and populists!

A few weeks ago I visited an action group in Dresden which reports via Twitter on the Pegida demonstrations. The founders of this action group are two young men who have been repeatedly attacked and threatened because of their exemplary work. I was greatly impressed by the dedication of these two young men and that of many other young people. So I am not at all concerned about the future when I think of the numerous anti-right wing action groups involving so many young people who receive consistent support from Manuela Schwesig as Minister of Family Affairs. The bulwark against this raging nationalism consists of three letters: SPD. For over 150 years our party has fought racism, anti-Semitism, chauvinism and xenophobia. It therefore makes me feel very humble that I have been asked to take on the office of party chairman – a position which has been occupied in the past by such outstanding historical figures as August Bebel, Friedrich Ebert, Otto Wels, Kurt Schumacher and Willy Brandt. The SPD is the party which has never had to change its name throughout its history, the party which came under attack in the Second Empire, under the Nazis and in the GDR and whose members were murdered, tortured and humiliated.

Let me say that in times of upheaval, in a period of uncertainty, in particular, you must be able to reflect on your traditions; you must be able to hold on reliably to your values. You have to straighten your back and take up the struggle against the radicals. And that is precisely what we will do!

I want to win elections this year: first in Saarland, then in Schleswig-Holstein, after that in North Rhine-Westphalia and finally at the national level in September.

Everybody can feel it: there is a surge going through the SPD, there's a surge going through the whole country. We want to harness this spirit of optimism. I want to join you in running a thrilling election campaign this year. I invite each and every one of you to join in and find the best solutions for our country together. It doesn't matter if you're getting involved for the first time or you're already active in the party or a trade union, church, club or neighbourhood initiative. Together with creative people and all those who want to make Germany better we should exploit the new momentum. So let's roll up our sleeves, make the country fairer and put an end to the dispirited attitude of "business as usual". With your help I know we can.

Thank you for your attention.