



Bundespräsident
Alexander Van der Bellen

**Speech by Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen
on the Occasion of the State Ceremony Commemorating the
100th Anniversary of the Republic of Austria
at the Staatsoper on 12 November 2018
“For liberal democracy and the commitment to democracy”**

Honoured Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you to the state ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of our Republic.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our democracy became a reality in 1918 with universal, free, equal, direct, secret and personal suffrage.

Women finally also had the right to vote.

They are still fighting today for their rightful place in politics, however.

Yes, women have now become members of parliament, party leaders, ministers, and speakers of the National Assembly.

But they are still underrepresented, and a great deal remains to be done.

Universal suffrage was an achievement at a time when there was otherwise little reason for optimism.

Our Republic had a rough start 100 years ago.

The First World War, which caused millions of deaths, had just ended.

The giant centuries-old Habsburg empire had collapsed.

Hunger and unemployment dominated people's lives.

The hope that the young Republic could come to grips with the immense challenges it faced was confronted with great deal of scepticism.

It was impossible for many to believe in a common, prosperous future in view of the animosity, uncertainty and fear that were features of everyday life.

And everything soon went wrong.

In 1933, parliamentary democracy was eliminated by Engelbert Dollfuss and an authoritarian corporate state was established.

After Hitler's invasion and the annexation of Austria, the "Anschluss", our country became part of Nazi Germany.

The name "Austria" was obliterated.

Hitler unleashed a new world war.

National Socialist terror was raging. The extermination machinery of the Holocaust was set in motion.

Once the war ended in 1945, a democratic republic had to be created again.

This new beginning was also laborious.

But there was a very important difference compared with the years after 1918:

we were now emphasising what we had in common over what separated us.

The parties worked together to found the Second Republic, jointly negotiated the State Treaty, jointly declared Austria to be permanently neutral and worked together to integrate Austria into the European Union.

The talent for creating a sense of commonality is at the heart of what it means to be Austrian.

It means recognising that the world is not made up of black and white, of irreconcilable positions, and instead that a solution that benefits everyone almost always lies in the middle.

Only a solution achieved by common effort offers the greatest possible benefit to everyone. This is an insight we should keep firmly in mind these days.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Only liberal democracy makes that common effort to find solutions that will benefit everyone. Efforts of this kind can sometimes be arduous. But they should never be *too* arduous.

Yes, democracy means discussion, arguments, even civilised conflict – aware that the outcome is still unknown.

Democracy means the person on the other side might also be right. You must engage with other people. You must listen. This takes time.

Some people may wish for things to move faster and be simpler. They sometimes believe things would move faster if our democracy weren't so liberal.

But that is a fallacy. There are no shortcuts. The path to a common solution is sometimes a rocky one. But it is worth all the effort.

This insight brought our country economic prosperity and social stability, making Austria what many have called a “consensus democracy”.

There was a balancing of interests that was successful for the most part.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Liberal democracy is more than majority rule.

Liberal democracy requires diversity of voices, and no voice may remain unheard.

Fundamental rights and freedoms, as well as inalienable minority rights, are therefore essential.

At the same time, democracy must be vigilant and uncompromising where those who are intolerant are concerned.

But it must also remain open to and tolerant of the exchange of opinions between the members of a democratic society.

This requires an independent, free media offering space for the different voices of a democracy, which is truly what allows a discussion among equals.

Today we also have the new media, allowing more people than ever before to express their opinions in public.

The only requirement for this is Internet access.

But the new media also have a downside:

Withdrawing into social media echo chambers and bubbles, in which one’s own opinion is merely reconfirmed hundreds of times, can lead to intolerance and a refusal to talk.

But refusal is no solution.

We must engage with other people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Democracy is a process.

This includes election day and the ballot box.

And parliamentary government is an important, even central, part of the democratic process.

But democracy also requires the individual commitment of each and every one of us.

Constantly and in all areas.

All of us are responsible for shaping our society.

This daily democratic coexistence continually ends up on the defensive.

People form an image of the enemy modelled on the pattern of ourselves and the Other.

The Other can be the elderly, sometimes young people, or Muslims, or Jews, Christians in some countries, or foreigners, the unemployed or recipients of social assistance.

Categorising people as the Other almost always leads to undermining fundamental rights and freedoms, as well as systematic discrimination.

Instead, we should more often see ourselves in other people's shoes.

All of us could ultimately end up in situations where we must rely on help, on solidarity.

So let us treat other people as we ourselves hope to be treated.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have emphasised the importance of commonality.

I consider this to be essential for the political culture in our country and for the future of Austria:

Seeking consensus does not mean sweeping conflict under the carpet, quietly dividing up power, or indefinitely putting off efforts to set the course and make decisions on the direction to be taken.

Seeking consensus does mean dealing openly with conflict, dividing up power publicly, and making legitimate efforts to set the course and make decisions on the direction to be taken.

But its objective is not solely to exercise the power of the majority;
rather, it is inclusion and respect for minority opinions.

People with different political opinions are partners in democracy, not enemies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The search for commonality has made Austria successful,
and many in Europe have envied us that.

Let us restore this commonality, let us restore this way of being Austrian.

Then we don't need to be fearful of the future.

That is because all of us are part of a peaceful, free and successful Austria,
and naturally part of a peaceful, free and successful Europe.

Long live our homeland, the Republic of Austria.

Long live our common, peaceful Europe.

Thank you.