

Christine Lagarde: Laudatory speech for Dr Wolfgang Schäuble

Laudatory speech by Ms Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank, for Dr Wolfgang Schäuble, at the VdZ Publishers' Night, Berlin, 4 November 2019.

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The English philosopher John Stuart Mill once observed that *“a great statesman is he who knows when to depart from traditions, as well as when to adhere to them.”*

It is with these words in mind that I would like to celebrate Wolfgang's contribution to public life. You embody what I see as the model of “Germany in Europe”: the Germany that is an implacable defender of its values and a beacon of liberalism and democracy; but also the Germany that is ready to move when needed to uphold the European idea.

This event is not about the ECB. It's not about monetary policy or other economic policies. It's about you, Wolfgang. So I will not talk about monetary policy or anything related to it.

I was asked to speak this evening when I was still Managing Director of the IMF, and I was honoured to do so in recognition of our long shared history as colleagues and friends. But the occasion has taken on added meaning in the light of my new role working for Europe.

There are few who have done so much for Europe, over so long a period, as you, Wolfgang.

I do not intend to use my remarks this evening to recall our many private conversations – they shall remain private – nor your many achievements: we all know what they are.

I would like instead to focus on three of the qualities that I have personally witnessed, and that have marked you out as one of the pre-eminent leaders of your generation: your commitment, your rigour and your statesmanship.

Wolfgang is receiving this award tonight in recognition of his commitment to a unified Europe and stable democracy in Germany. Commitment is a quality that has run like a thread throughout your public life.

On this very day 30 years ago, only a few blocks from here, a million people demanded reform, democracy and freedom in the largest demonstration East Germany had ever seen. The fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in a profound transformation of German and European history, and you, as Minister of the Interior, were at the heart of this process.

Your commitment to your own country was always matched by a commitment to Europe – and you understood that each made the other stronger.

You saw immediately that German reunification could trigger optimism at home but anxiety abroad. You knew that the best way for Germany to demonstrate the strength of its historical responsibility to Europe was to share a currency with its neighbours. At the same time, a single currency would safeguard the single market against the risk of competitive devaluations.

So we can be thankful that, when the crisis erupted, you were once more in a position of influence. You reminded us that the euro has always been more than just a currency, and your unyielding defence of Europe was a bulwark in those febrile times.

This is best captured in your belief that *“if a solution is good for Europe, it is good for Germany; and if something is bad for Europe, it cannot be good for Germany.”*¹

Of course, there have been different views about what constitutes a “good solution” for Europe, such as the appropriate balance between sharing risks and reducing risks.

But I was always struck by the fact that, once you had agreed a way ahead with your European partners, you defended it with conviction.

I know that this was not easy: you had to tread a careful path between maintaining confidence in the euro at home and making the necessary reforms to safeguard the single currency. The fact that 81% of Germans back the euro today, and the euro is more popular than ever among the wider European public, is testament to your skill in navigating that course.²

What allowed you to achieve this was your second quality: your intellectual rigour.

I have had many occasions to observe your forensic mind at work. You combine the subtlety and foresight of a statesman with the scrutiny and attention to detail of a tax lawyer. You are notorious for your ability to pick apart shallow arguments and for your intolerance of superficiality.

Your brilliant mind has often put you at the forefront of European debates. In the 1990s you were already writing about how to build a more deeply integrated European framework around the countries that would go on to share the single currency.³

You understood very early on that a monetary union comprising different sovereign states can only be sustainable if there is mutual trust. And you realised that trust does not emerge through declarations or treaties: it is built through actions that demonstrate the commitment of states to abide by the promises they have signed up to.

You saw, in other words, that rules are not an end in themselves.

I have so often heard you mention the words “implementation, implementation”, because you knew that it is through faithful implementation and respect for the rules that trust builds up between countries. And it is once trust has developed that more sharing of sovereignty can follow, which reinforces the strength of the Union and each of its members.

In the face of changing reality, the challenge, of course, is how to ensure that governance is both credible and flexible. As you have said yourself, “*sticking to rules [...] does not mean a lack of creativity or originality.*”⁴ And it is this spirit that we will need to channel in our efforts to deepen our Economic and Monetary Union.

If we are to move forward, we will certainly need leaders with your third quality: your statesmanship.

I have witnessed this in action during many long nights in Brussels and at global meetings. There is much I have come to admire in you at such times.

You are a formidable negotiator, yet I have always known you to be fair and straight, allowing points of difference to be identified and solutions to be found. One of the qualities I cherish is that you are a straight-talker. You speak “*Klartext*”, as you say in German.

Your directness has always been married with loyalty and kindness, however. You know that successful diplomacy is built not through sheer force of personality, but through shared understanding with one’s partners, and especially within Europe.

There were times during the crisis when you had to take tough decisions. You spoke recently of your sadness for those who have suffered, and said that you often think about how we could have done things differently.⁵ That is the mark of a true statesman: the capacity to examine profoundly the best course of action, while avoiding false certainty.

Wolfgang, for the past two years you have taken on a new role as President of the Bundestag. It is a step that befits a life dedicated to German and European democracy. Yet again, you are the

right person, in the right place, at the right time.

There is much concern today about the rise of extreme views and the coarsening of political discourse. But displaying your characteristic *sangfroid*, you have reminded us to be confident in ourselves and in the resilience of our democratic institutions.

As you have said, “*our free, democratic system based on the rule of law is so strong that nobody can wreck it, neither from within nor from without. Anybody who tries will fail.*”⁶

I believe this is a message all of Europe needs to hear today. A message of strength, resolve and courage. A call to remember our better selves and not to allow self-doubt to drag us down.

This is the message that rings loud from your career, Wolfgang.

For you, in the spirit of Max Weber, politics has always been more than a “Beruf”, it has been a “Berufung”. Not just a profession, but a calling.

Germany and Europe have been blessed by this calling.

Thank you.

¹ Interview with the *Tageszeitung*, 21 January 2012.

² According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, June 2019.

³ Schäuble-Lamers Paper, 1 September 1994.

⁴ Interview with the *Financial Times*, 6 October 2017.

⁵ [Interview](#) with the *Financial Times*, 22 March 2019.

⁶ Interview with *Bild am Sonntag*, 3 October 2017.