

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. In January, a conference about anti-Semitism, or more precisely *against* anti-Semitism, took place at the German Bundestag, bringing together experts from numerous OSCE countries. It was not the first conference of its kind. But it was the first time that such a conference was opened by a Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The conference was supported by all of the parliamentary groups in the German Bundestag: the Conservatives, the Liberals, the Greens, the Social Democrats, the Left Party. I have to qualify that statement, however: the conference was supported by dedicated members of these parliamentary groups. The conference has not yet received adequate attention in the plenary of the Bundestag.

I hope that this will be corrected as soon as possible. For it is impossible to talk about 60 years of Israel without also talking about anti-Semitism today. It exists. And, unlike general racism, it can be found on both the Left and the Right, with Islamist fundamentalism providing a further breeding ground.

No root or source of anti-Semitism can make it acceptable. Anti-Semitism is not a form of political criticism. Anti-Semitism is an ideology which holds human life in contempt. Never before in history had a people, culture or religion been condemned to death solely because it was that particular religion, culture or people.

Germany's history shows where that can lead. The Holocaust was an incomparable crime against humanity. When current studies in Germany now indicate that 20 per cent of the population have anti-Semitic views, it is not enough to take a purely historical perspective; it means that a problem exists today.

2. But there is currently also a risk of problems in looking back at history. There is a unique memorial in Berlin: the Holocaust memorial, which is a reminder, in the country of the perpetrators, of the industrialised mass murders. And it seeks to convey a warning: "Never again!" I am one of those who called for and supported this memorial. It has been visited by around 15 million visitors since 2005.

Work is now in progress on developing a national memorial strategy. I

consider this to be a responsible task. But there are important voices who say: we have done enough against the crimes of the National Socialist regime. Now the focus should shift to the crimes of the GDR. I consider that to be wrong and dangerous.

I was an active citizen in the GDR. I have since become a critic of the GDR. There are reasons for all of this. And that is precisely why I say that anyone who equates the GDR with the National Socialist regime is playing down the significance of the Holocaust and the industrialised mass-murder of Jews. And anyone who does that is misleading future generations.

The Jewish community in Germany has already withdrawn from many commissions dealing with memorials. I regret this, but I can also understand it. To put it another way: the conference at the Bundestag on anti-Semitism was important. But it is undermined if the opposite also occurs in everyday politics.

3. Last year, the Moses Mendelssohn Center invited many non-governmental organisations and representatives of all of the parliamentary groups in the Bundestag to a discussion at the Berlin Synagogue on Oranienburger Straße. The discussion was not about the question of whether anti-Semitism existed in Germany; it was about what could be done to counter it.

One joint proposal was that the Federal Government should submit an annual report on anti-Semitism, which would be discussed in the Bundestag and, of course, have consequences for policy-making. In the United Kingdom, an all-party parliamentary panel was set up for similar reasons, and has already submitted its first report.

The consequences of such a report must not, of course, be limited to eloquent condemnations of anti-Semitism. Many things must be examined: educational planning, integration strategies, the influence of the media, domestic and foreign policy, even the way in which language is used. In Germany, if something is not above-board, the phrase “Hier wurde ‘gemauschelt’” is often heard: a tendentious term from the National Socialist era.

But I would go further. I would like to see an independent monitoring unit on right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism set up in the Federal Republic of Germany. There is a similar body for the European Union, based in Vienna. The independent status of such a unit could help to overcome political obstacles.

By “obstacles”, I mean in this context that no politician, whether a village mayor, county district commissioner or federal minister, likes to admit that anti-Semitism is a problem within his or her area of responsibility. Frequently it is, however. And that is why we need a good analysis of the problem, because an effective counter-strategy is not possible without one.

For years, I have asked the Federal Government on a regular basis how many anti-Semitic crimes it has registered. Asking this question is not an answer to the problem. But it keeps the topic in the public eye. And sometimes even the media are horrified – as was the case recently, when it was disclosed that vandalisms of Jewish cemeteries have been taking place at a rate of almost one a week in recent years.

4. Right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism flourish in places where tolerance and democracy are underdeveloped. I have therefore suggested that the German Bundestag appoint a commissioner for democracy and tolerance. He or she would bring together and coordinate the activities of all of the departments and ministries.

The appointment of commissioners is not a solution by itself. But Germany does, for example, have a commissioner for human rights, who is active around the world. Why, therefore, should there not be a commissioner for democracy and tolerance, who would be active within Germany, but at the same time bring together international initiatives to combat racism and anti-Semitism.

I come from Berlin. Berlin defines itself as a cosmopolitan, tolerant and multicultural city, which is the daily experience of people from 150 nations. But this coexistence is no “carnival of cultures”. There are also dark sides, including right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism.

Social workers from an area of Berlin where many migrants live recently explained to me the problems they face. Global conflicts, including the Middle East conflict, result in growing tensions between young people in the area. These young people internalise the unresolved crises and act them out – to the point of violence – against each other.

5. I began by saying that anti-Semitism is not a problem that has been consigned to the past. It exists today and is finding new breeding grounds. And as I mentioned at the start: anti-Semitism is an inhuman ideology which no one and nothing can justify. I am therefore all the more grateful to be able to participate in and learn from this conference.