

Interview with the President of the Federal Council Minister-President Hannelore Kraft

The role of the annual, rotating Federal Council chair is marked less by politics and more by protocol and duty. All the same, have you set points you wish to emphasize during your term as Federal Council President?

Making our society more cohesive is a vital concern, one that was also at the forefront of my Federal Council presidency. That is why it was, and still is, especially important to me to work towards a policy of sustainable prevention that ensures as early as possible that people have fair and equal opportunities to participate in social and economic progress, and that no one—especially no child—is left behind.

Why did you decide to visit Canada?

As President of the Federal Council, it was an important concern for me to foster the good, international contacts of the Federal Council and to continue to reinforce, in particular, friendly relations with other federally organized states. When searching for the best possible destination for a trip to a significant, federal state outside Europe, I quickly chose Canada. There were several reasons for this. On the one hand, I feel a strong personal connection to Canada, as I was there in the past and greatly appreciate the country and its people. Unfortunately, Canada does not always enjoy the attention it deserves here in Germany, and I wanted to consciously help to raise Canada's profile in the eyes of the German public. I have the impression that this has been successful. Happily, my visit to Canada was reported in a lively and positive manner. On the other hand, more in my capacity as Minister-President of North Rhine–Westphalia, I hoped to gain important insights and suggestions with regard to the future handling of preventive social policies at home. Canada is—also against the backdrop of a self-confessed land of immigrants—known for taking preventive thinking and action seriously and for investing in equal opportunities in areas such as education, early childhood development and family assistance. Lastly, I also wanted to take a look at the economic relationships between Canada and

Germany, in particular with respect to my federal state, North Rhine-Westphalia, and the possibility of strengthening economic cooperation.

Were your expectations met? What impressions or what messages are you taking back with you to Germany?

My expectations regarding my visit to Canada were completely fulfilled. This also applies, by the way, to the entire delegation that accompanied me, for the representatives of our central municipal organizations, as well as for the experts that took part in the trip. On the one hand, I experienced Canada once again as an extraordinarily interesting and fascinating place, and the people of Canada were extremely open and friendly. I also experienced Canada again as a country that, in many respects, is close to us in Germany, and to Europeans in general—closer than the US—and, therefore, should receive more attention from us. My impression is that Canada represents a kind of bridge between the US and Europe on many issues where there are clearly differences and sometimes mutual misunderstandings. For example—just to pick one important example—this applies to issues relating to the provisions of the preventive welfare state.

Could you elaborate?

Contrary to the US, Canada sees itself as a welfare state, even—I became convinced of this during my trip—as a preventive welfare state. This includes a state-organized health care system, a state-organized education system, and much, much more. At the same time, I was able to determine that, in separating the duties and responsibilities of the State from those of society in these and other areas, Canada, just like the US, places more emphasis on societal and private initiatives and on individual responsibility than Germany and other European states. This is what I mean by the bridging role played by Canada, as I perceive it. Moreover, I was once again impressed how well Canada was able to build a society, despite the existing challenges, in which diversity and multiculturalism are seen as an asset, and which

succeeded in “founding” a special, national identity beyond an ethnic common bond or a “central culture”. I find this admirable and also a little enviable. Furthermore, in the end, I’m bringing home, above all, one central message: preventive education and social policies are worth it, also in the sense of “value for money”, and they can be organized if you have the political will.

Canadian federalism is much more decentralized than the tightly interwoven German federalism and its emphasis on social balance. Would you also like to see the German states have the same, significant political scope the Canadian provinces have?

I agree with the statement that Canadian federalism is clearly more decentralized than the German one and that the Canadian provinces have more independence than the German states. I was convinced of this during my many conversations while in Canada. Naturally, it is very appealing for a state politician to wish for an arrangement that allows for more political freedom. Nonetheless, in the end, I believe that, with all the details that merit reform, German federalism is better adapted to our circumstances than a system more clearly based on a separation of powers.

In your opinion, why does Germany need cooperative federalism?

Major social differences and development gaps between the individual German states would be regarded as unacceptable in the long run, just like, for example, highly divergent tax rates or major differences in the education systems. There would be no place for this in Germany against the backdrop of our political culture, the smaller land mass of our country compared to Canada’s—the huge distances are an important reason why the Provinces in Canada enjoy greater autonomy—and also against the backdrop of the highly integrated European Union. If the guiding principle of “unity in diversity” applies to federalism, then, in the end, a great deal of emphasis is still placed on the idea of “unity” in Germany. Contrary to Canadian federalism, this also includes, by the way, the common responsibility of the federal government and the states for the well-being and destiny of the entire country and,

therefore, also the intensive collaboration of the states in federal policy-making. We just went through this in the course of the expansion of the euro emergency rescue package, which also had to be dealt with in the Federal Council. In Germany, important decisions that affect the future of the entire country, and the European Union, cannot be made without the approval of the states; the Canadian provinces do not enjoy this kind of collaboration in federal policy-making. Therefore, more political room to manoeuvre would certainly be desirable in individual cases in my opinion as a state politician, but I would not like to call into question our entire system.

Publicly, German federalism is often on the defensive. This is especially true with respect to education, probably the most important policy jurisdiction of the states. What advantages, or perhaps disadvantages, do you see in German federalism?

Over the past year, the Federal Council again often demonstrated that federalism works and how essential it is that the states participate in the federal legislative process. That is why we will continue to assert our rights, on behalf of the states and the municipalities. There will always be those who say, “Now the states are putting on the brakes, now they’re throwing a wrench in the works”. But we should not let them bother us. The Federal Council is a powerful engine that propels our country forward. It is, namely, the states that often make it possible to arrive at tailor-made solutions, given their detailed practical knowledge. And only these solutions have people in mind.

However, let’s come back to your question about education, in effect, the most important policy-making responsibility of the German states. When the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, it was first and foremost the experience with National Socialism that argued in favour of a decentralized education system. In contrast, today, it is first and foremost the notion of competition that is the primary concern. The responsibility of the states for education leads to a competition for the

best ideas and concepts and to the possibility of experimenting with different types of education systems. However, this must never be at the expense of people.

From the point of view of our German Basic Law, it was important to unequivocally assign responsibilities in the area of education. The breakup of duties and responsibilities between the federal government and the states during our federalism reform a few years ago thus clearly assigned responsibility for education to the states. Seen from today's perspective, the question arises more frequently whether we went one step too far in this case, and whether in the area of education there need to exist avenues of cooperation instead of today's constitutional ban on cooperation, so that the federal government can take on some of the financial responsibility, for example, in the greatly needed expansion of full-day schooling. International comparisons also show that the future, ongoing development and optimization of our education system requires mobilizing all of our strengths if we are to meet the challenge of offering our children the same opportunities to participate and develop. This is truly a responsibility of the entire State.

Historically, North Rhine-Westphalia can be described as an “artificial creation”. The British occupational forces ordered the merger of the Prussian province of Westphalia and the northern section of the Rhine Province after the Second World War.

It is true that North Rhine-Westphalia did not grow historically as a geographic entity—but, on closer inspection, this applies to practically all the German states. The people of North Rhine-Westphalia see themselves mostly as Westphalians, Rhinelanders and—in order not to forget the eastern-most and smallest part of our state—Lippers or even as citizens of Cologne, Duesseldorf or Dortmund. Only then do they feel a natural connection to the State of North Rhine-Westphalia.

In your opinion, what makes up North Rhine-Westphalia's identity today?

The most important element of our identity as a state that binds all the people living on the Rhine and the Ruhr, in my opinion, is that North Rhine-Westphalia saw itself

—for decades—and continues to see itself, as Germany’s social conscience. Many of the state’s experiences and events are associated with this. In an almost unique way, we managed to transform the character of our state from a coal and steel region to a modern industrial, research and services region. Following the Second World War, our state became the home of the democratization of education. North Rhine-Westphalia is the state in which the most newcomers found a home, from the many Poles that immigrated in the course of industrialization to the many migrant workers who now call Germany their home. In North Rhine-Westphalia, there is also the major challenge of integration, yet generally, migrant and non-migrants alike live together well—even here, we see ourselves as the “social conscience” of Germany. I could mention many other examples, but prefer to point out that here, too, my visit to Canada has come full circle, in which the central point is the question of preventive education and social policies. In this area too, if I have my way, North Rhine-Westphalia will lead the way and set the tone.