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**Keynote Speech des
Niedersächsischen Ministerpräsidenten Stephan Weil
auf dem
Progressive Governance Symposium 2019 in Berlin**

(Es gilt das gesprochene Wort!)

Title of the Keynote Speech:

**„Standing up for the people and places left behind by economic
change“**

Salutation,

first of all, many thanks for the invitation and the opportunity to reflect together with all of you on how we can regain an offensive of the political line in a period of fundamental changes and increasing tensions.

Today we are talking about a "restart" in Europe and about transatlantic alliances for a progressive policy in the face of a variety of challenges. But the US is not Europe. Different political systems - let's take only the right to vote - and

a different political culture distinguish Europe and America, the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States from each other. Nevertheless, we are confronted with similar difficulties. Our open democracies, which, by the way, firmly link us to each other, have come under pressure.

A considerable number of people turn away disappointed from "the state" and "politics", either do not vote at all any more or choose political show-offs. Well, it is certainly not necessary to mention them in this round tonight. On the other hand, it is very necessary to think about how we can inspire those people again who feel homeless and unheard. So, what is to be done?

The most famous sticky note in recent history hung in the campaign headquarters of the Democratic Campaign for the 1994 presidential elections and read: "It's economy, stupid!" Nothing has changed and everything has changed. Where and under what conditions do people work, what about their social security? That must be the central point.

We are in a time of fundamental changes and the vast majority of people feel this very clearly. So, what's then the task of left-wing politics? More than one and a half decades ago, the SPD conducted an election campaign in Germany with the slogan "Security in Change".

For me these three words put our tasks of today in a nutshell. If we succeed in demonstrating competently and credibly how, despite globalization and digitalization, despite individualization and economization, work and social security

are secured and re-created, we will be able to regain a great deal of trust. I am convinced of this, because that is what is at the heart of the majority of the population.

The economic side is indeed of paramount importance. These days, more than ever, we are facing the challenge of balancing economy and ecology. And in addition to that, the contrast between capital and labor has by no means disappeared. It must always be the policy of the democratic left to stand up for good work that is fairly paid and socially secured. There should be no doubt about that at all.

In the end, social policy is also practiced, because those who eliminate economic inequalities pursue a real policy of prevention. After all, social problems such as poverty, violence and crime are often closely linked to economic precariousness.

In addition to this economic significance, however, there is also a social significance that cannot be neglected - especially in times of polarized societies. Work is a place of meeting and exchange. It is a place of encounter, where something is accomplished collectively: You do something together with your colleagues. It gives meaning. Making oneself useful is one of the most frequently mentioned answers given by employees to the question of what motivates them every day in their work.

Employees experience a sense of belonging in their job that should never be underestimated. Continuity in the local workplace, the community in the circle of colleagues, identification with the employer, in short: rooting through work – all these are important soft factors especially in uncertain times – also for solidarity and for the cohesion of our society. For many people, work is a piece of home. In recent years, we have underestimated this and instead set priorities on flexibility and market options.

Changes in the world of work always involve fundamental mechanisms of social coexistence, therefore we cannot simply wait and see. Rather, we must actively advocate that, for example, changes in employment biographies are not stigmatized as failure. New orientations must be possible without leading to a complete crash.

The internal climate in companies and institutions must also become more democratic. Those who want satisfied employees need to make them participate. When employees are valued, companies receive important impulses. This, however, requires companies to drive these processes forward. We should offer them the best possible conditions within this framework; after all, it is them who hire and pay the voters. Anonymous and abstract platforms on the Internet are unlikely to do this.

By the way, the traditional social-democratic idea of cooperatives could also be a new style-forming in the future - and in many places it has already been renewed. To sum it up: If these aspects are taken into account, technical developments should be seen less as a threat than as an opportunity.

There is no shortage of tasks. Digitalization and artificial intelligence will turn the world of work upside down. Climate protection and decarbonisation will force industry to restructure. In Lower Saxony, a focal point of the automotive industry, we know exactly what enormous efforts are involved.

The clearer and the better we succeed in creating work and social security under these conditions, the more successful we will be.

Salutation,

but it's not just about the political content. It is also about the form of politics. The international success of populism is also the result of a tough elite critique. Many people have less and less confidence in the political, economic and intellectual leadership of their state. This criticism is traditionally a privilege of the political left. Unfortunately, however, parts of the population understand the political left as part of the establishment, which they criticize and regard as distant, far removed from their interests and untrustworthy. Many citizens are by no means economically or socially dependent. On the contrary, they are often hard-working people who take responsibility for their families. They are "People who work hard and play by the rules", to quote one last time an American politician, Bill Clinton.

According to its own self-image, the Democratic Left works specially for the interests of these people. And it makes it all the more painful to note a distance

that can hardly be denied. The causes may lie less in the content of politics than in the appearance of politics. Let us take this evening as an example. We are sitting in a cool conference venue in Berlin-Mitte, we are primarily cosmopolitan academics and probably hold more or less the same views. The "unheard" people we are talking about are certainly not here.

In political reality, this is perhaps not even the exception, but the rule. This leads to politicians mostly being perceived only through the media as relatively elevated beings who no longer have much to do with the 'normal' people's everyday lives.

In such a situation, in connection with the uncertainties described at the beginning, a gap arises. It is not a harmless gap, populists can use it for their criticism of the elites, but also as a base for simple as well as false answers.

How can this unsatisfactory situation be changed? This is a challenging task and there is not the one big formula. In my personal experience, however, it helps a lot to use every opportunity to leave one's own bubble. In other words, going to the citizens instead of making statements. Listening instead of talking first and foremost. To discuss instead of delivering speeches.

Citizens' meetings, for example, are much more satisfying than the traditional events with speeches and panel discussions. That applies to the visitors of such discussions and that regularly applies to me because I learn permanently.

And perhaps something else needs to be taken to heart: Are many of these critical citizens, whom we are talking about, completely wrong with their suspicion that their own achievements are not sufficiently respected? Those who transfer shares from A to B at the push of a button and make a lot of money with it, may not work as hard as a nurse working shifts.

This is what we have to point out and these are the people we need to focus on. Getting them in a better position is a first step to regain trust.

Salutation,

one final comment: we must talk about political content, we must also talk about political culture, but what is the political purpose? Many of the fundamental changes in our time described at the beginning also bring great benefits, and I will not belittle that. But all of them amount to subjecting our lives to the needs of economic rationality and to advancing individualization. This is not the human image that the political left has always represented. It has always been a matter of forming communities, representing common interests and, above all, keeping them together.

Traditionally, the concept of solidarity has always stood for this. Today we may speak of cohesion (in German I often use the word 'Zusammenhalt'), but the content remains essentially the same. This content corresponds to a basic human need. To stand up for this value is just as important today and meets the needs of most people just as it has always done.

Cohesion, by the way, is also the sharpest contrast to the doctrines of populism, which is completely intended to divide society and to exclude a part of their members.

I am convinced that the best advice we can give ourselves is to defend this fundamental idea of cohesion in word and deed.