



“Changing Bundeswehr”

**Speech by
the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed
Forces
at the
Ambassadors Club
Berlin, 7th June 2017**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

warm thanks for your kind invitation! I am very pleased to have the opportunity to give you an overview on the topic of change and transformation of the armed forces in Germany.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

let me start with our German system of parliamentary oversight of the armed forces, one of the main pillars of democratic order.

There are various models for how this parliamentary oversight can be organised.

In Germany, there are two permanent parliamentary institutions: firstly, the standing Defence Committee and, secondly, the Office of

the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces is elected by the German Bundestag by an absolute majority. My term in office lasts for five years. The Basic Law, Germany's constitution, expressly prescribes the safeguarding of the basic rights of every single soldier as one of my functions.

Before being elected Parliamentary Commissioner, I was a Member of the Bundestag and Chair of the Defence Committee.

As Commissioner for the Armed Forces, I am authorised to visit our German troops at any time, at home and abroad.

Service personnel can make submissions to me without the need to inform their superiors.

I received 3,200 such individual submissions in 2016.

On the basis of all of these sources – visits, complaints and other information –, a total of 4,500 cases was raised last year.

This figure includes numerous cases that we call "unusual occurrences", for example reports of suicide attempts, sexual offences or training accidents.

It is my job to uncover gaps and weaknesses in the system of the armed forces and demand solutions.

There are several channels through which I work:

- **correspondence with the government on each individual complaint,**
- **plenary debates,**
- **I take part in every meeting of the Defence Committee**
- **and I have monthly discussions with the leading officials of the Ministry of Defence.**

Once a year, I present a report to parliament.

The Defence Ministry has to comment on the report.

The report is discussed in the Defence Committee and the plenary of the German Bundestag.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the reports illustrate the change in the armed forces since the 1950's. More than this, the reports contain critical comments and suggestions for improvements.

In 2017, I am able to note that political decisions have been made to set new trends: more personnel, more equipment and a higher budget. That is good.

Now comes the 'but': This is all being done far too slowly!

Servicewomen and men are suffering from overstretch right now, today. The current generation serving in the Bundeswehr is having to struggle with a rapidly growing burden of deployments. There is the enlargement of our

engagement in Mali and more and more naval missions; there is the expanding NATO Response Force and our troops sent to Lithuania.

It is not wrong to do these things. But 280 days away from home in a year is really too much, even for our Navy specialists. That destroys family life.

The change of course has begun. But our servicewomen and men are not yet seeing the arrival of more personnel and more equipment. For the time being, they are actually being given additional tasks.

That is why I wish to make this appeal: The Bundeswehr needs an initiative to speed up all the projects of improvement.

One area of concern is personnel: It has been calculated that 14,000 additional posts will be required to close the gaps in the structure of the Bundeswehr.

But only 7000 were planned to come until 2023.

This means it will take seven years to raise the forces' manpower by four per cent, half a per cent a year. That is very little.

Now, a new decision has been made: 12.000 soldiers more until 2024. That's better. But nothing is quick.

Another area of concern is materiel. Take for example our battle tanks: the fleet of 225 available tanks is going to be reinforced with 100 second-hand Leopard 2, which will need to be modernised. Over the next six years. If we

are buying back second-hand tanks – why is it going to take so long? The defence committee made this recommendation in September 2014. The contract was signed in May 2017.

The whole operation to ensure the Bundeswehr is ‘fully resourced’ for its ‘current’ functions is due to continue until 2030.

I believe we need a change of mentality as well. Business as usual and sticking to the old rules are not sufficient. Maybe the bureaucratic procedures of 25 years of cut-backs are no longer appropriate to our world of today.

Today's Bundeswehr is a Bundeswehr with a remarkable co-operation in NATO and with our European and international partners. And we look back at 60 years of Bundeswehr-traditions. When we talk about the public debates today about cases of right-wing extremism in the Bundeswehr let me say: Annual figures have not gone up in the last years. with a total of 63 last year. A search in the barracks of all 1600 properties of the Bundeswehr with its 250.000 people – soldiers and civilians – brought up a total of 400 "objects" with – or without – reference to the Wehrmacht. I do not find this extremely worrying.

I rather see, that our troops feel the pressure of general suspicion. Let me, therefore, conclude by reassuring you: In Germany, today, we have the most democratic army of our history. We are lucky with our army today.