



## Mag.a Helene Jarmer

### Inaugural Speech – Friday 10<sup>th</sup> 2009

Mr. President, Mr. Minister, members of this high legislative body, esteemed colleagues, esteemed fellow representatives and beloved fellow members of the disability community. You all know that I am deaf, and that's why there is a sign language interpreter sitting across from me, acting as my mouth and ears. The purpose right now of having the interpreter is so that everyone can follow and understand my address today in a barrier-free way.

My name? You already know my name. But here is my sign name [makes a gesture indicating long hair]--"Helene". Sign names have nothing to do with the spoken name itself. Instead, they bear a resemblance to a particular personal characteristic of the person named. I'd like to give you an example of a famous politician who you all know, Schüssel [makes the sign for a large bowl]. That would be the sign for "Schüssel," but that sign wouldn't really match any of his personal characteristics. Instead, his name sign comes from the sign for "bow tie" [makes the sign for Rep. Dr. Schüssel, indicating a bow tie]. Schüssel. Wolfgang Schüssel no longer wears a bow tie, but his name sign has remained the same. My name sign, "Helene," has also stuck with me, even though I have short hair now.

Today is a very special day for this high legislative body, since today marks the first appearance of two sign language interpreters here. That's so that ten thousand deaf people and sign language users can follow these debates in parliament.

I would like to give special thanks to President Prammar and the parliament directorship, the Presidium, and the parliamentary staff. Thank you. [Applause]

What you are seeing here is an accommodation for the special needs of deaf people. Disability has many faces. Deafness is one of those faces. And I would like to take the opportunity to thank the ORF for agreeing to televise the complete parliamentary debates, starting today. In this way, deaf people will be able to follow the parliamentary debates from their homes, and deaf people here sitting in the gallery will be able to follow the debates also.

Before I comment on the recent disability status report [published by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection], I'd like to add something about the nature of sign language. Many people might wonder about the term "Österreichische Gebärdensprache" (Austrian Sign Language), because many people harbor the misconception that sign language is an international language. It is not. There are different sign languages in different countries and there are even regional dialects of those sign languages. Maybe you were wondering about this.

Let me show you an example. In Austrian Sign Language we have this sign for "thank you" [gesturing]. You can try to sign it yourselves along with me. Here's the sign in Chinese [Sign Language]--[gesturing]--"thank you". It's derived from the culture. A person bows from the waist while thanking someone else. If you were to use that sign in Austria, it would be taken to mean "ink pen" [laughter]. Also, here's an example of dialectal variation: In the Styrian dialect, this is the sign for the verb "to make" [gesturing].

In Tyrol, the sign is done much differently [gesturing]. And so we who use sign languages have dialects, a concept with which all of you who use spoken languages are already familiar. There is also American Sign Language, which functions as a "world language" for deaf people, comparable to the way English functions as a world language.

I'd like to invite you to practice a few signs with me. Give it a try!--"Parlament" [gesturing]-- That sign is based on the way the rows of seats here are arranged--the special arrangement in which you are now sitting. "Abgeordnete"--[pauses]--What would you guess is the sign? [gesturing] It resembles a hand rapping on the table--"Abgeordnete". Here's a somewhat harder sign: "Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz"--[gesturing]. I think this is an important sign, especially for all of you [gesturing].

You might be thinking about how you might be able to work together with me. I am deaf. I hear nothing. I really hear nothing at all, so shouting won't help. I won't be able to hear it. Please go ahead and speak clearly, not in an exaggerated way, but slowly. Please maintain eye contact with me. That's very important for me. How can you get in contact with me?--By text messaging, by e-mail or instant messaging, and you can also call me on the telephone. I have an interpreter for that, just as we are doing here. It's simple. All this, in order to be able to interact with you. [Applause.]

I know that I always tend to sign too quickly and I have to learn how to pause occasionally. Now to address the issue of the grammatical structure of Österreichische Gebärdensprache (Austrian Sign Language) and sign language in general. Austrian Sign Language has an autonomous grammatical structure. A particular sign could correspond to one word or to several words. You can compare this to Chinese. In Chinese there are also written symbols, each standing for a word. And that's why my sign language interpreter usually needs some extra time, in case you were wondering.

I am a deaf person and I am also a spokesperson in certain regards. All disabled people are really close to my heart, regardless of whether someone is deaf, or blind, or uses a wheelchair, or is elderly, or mobility-impaired, including the multi-handicapped. All these concerns are important to me, but in this context here [in parliament] it is especially important that we be able to come together and create a binding policy, a written policy. We need to make it possible for disabled people to live and take part in society with equal rights.

Separate from considerations of my party membership, I wonder about certain issues. I really wonder about the current disability status report and the extent to which it shows an effective understanding of disability issues and disabled people. For example, the Interior Ministry says that certain polling places do not have barrier-free entrances for wheelchair users and for mobility-impaired people because the school buildings being used are older structures and it wouldn't be possible to upgrade them to make them barrier-free.

I read about something which provides another example: There are schools where instruction in Austrian Sign Language is supposedly offered, but in reality, teachers of deaf children are allowed to teach without even knowing how to form a single sign with their hands. I'm a teacher myself. Yes, you heard correctly. Deaf people can be teachers.

The disability status report must spell out what specific steps are necessary to be taken. People who want to make a difference and bring change to this area--those who would like see our society become a barrier-free one, need these steps to be delineated to be able to know what needs to be done.

In conclusion, I would like to say that, as it pertains to the topic of the law and equal rights for the disabled, I would gladly like to meet with you, and also disability-issue spokespersons, and have us all sit down at the same table so that we can really find ways to bring improvement to the law.

Politics has the potential to revolutionize the lives of disabled people! There are 1.6 million disabled people here in Austria, and we have the ability to make changes that will improve their lives. Let's not lose sight of the fact that the decisions we make will affect the lives of our not only our children's generation, but our grandchildren's generation as well.

And now in closing, if you would please allow me to make brief allusion to the current economic crisis, I remember something that former Chancellor Schüssel once said when he claimed that politics cannot create jobs--He was wrong. The fact that we have sign language interpreters working here today proves exactly the opposite.

I look forward to us all working well together in a barrier-free way.

[Applause]