



Welcoming address by Vice President of the Senate of the States General,
Mr. Joris Backer, on the occasion of the Ridderzaal Ceremony during the
Sharing Europe Festival - Congress of The Hague, on 25 May 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Senate of the States General I would like to welcome you in this very fitting place for the festival of the European Movement. In this Hall on the 9th of May 1948 - seventy years ago - the Congress of The Hague started its sessions.

This Congress is considered by many as the first federal moment of the European history and of course the start of the European Movement itself.

I assume my humble role as your host with great personal pride, as I have been member of the EB board of The Hague in my twenties (as you will notice, that is some time ago now). Would I have ever guessed that one day I should have the honour bestowed upon me to stand here in front of you? Not really!

The European *interdependence* is an even more ancient history than the one you celebrate today. Around the year 700 AD this very location - as the historical data suggest - existed already as a stronghold for the kingdom of the first "European" kings Charles Martel and Charles the Great respectively.

This Ridderzaal building, however, in English known as the Hall of Knights, was constructed in the 13th century.

The annual ceremony of the opening of the parliamentary year is held in this hall with a joint session of the House of Representatives and the Senate.



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In the latter, 75 Members from 12 political parties share ideas, debate decisions and strive to improve the health, safety and wellbeing of our citizens. We meet once a week across the court, on the Binnenhof.

For yesterday's and today's meetings the Agora is used by your organizers as a form of interactive participation of all attendees. As you probably know, Agora stems from the ancient Greeks. Originally, the Ekklesia - the popular assembly of ancient Greece, would be held in the agora.

In the meetings of Sharing Europe in your programme the agora of the Greeks as well as that of the Congress of Europe is reflected.

It continues in the same spirit: a festival, a relaunch, a commemoration and a movement that will engage a larger audience for the European dream.

It is my personal view that the European Movement is on the right track in selecting the market square to relaunch this debate. The EU can only assume these challenges successfully if it engages people at the market square in order to ensure the unwavering support of its citizens.

Let us return to this Ridderzaal seventy years ago in 1948.

Like today, a member of the Senate crossed the court to attend, the meeting of the movement in *statu nascendi*. It was the former minister of the war cabinet in London Piet Kerstens.

He was known as an outspoken federalist and probably his views reflected those of many others who were aspiring to build a peaceful Europe, after the disasters of two world wars that devastated the continent of Europe, including Russia and beyond.



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Some of the challenges of the post war years have disappeared, others we still face today or are re-emerging like identity based politics, trade wars and monetary volatility. New ones (or old ones in a different disguise) have emerged, such as climate change, cybercrime, digital economy, the growing influence of footloose global companies or migration.

Despite the overall high support for the EU in almost all member states, according to the statistics, the challenge for any politician is *local*: to reconcile those who feel left out - and rightly or wrongly blame the EU for the loss of control over what actually happens in their personal lives - and those- like myself - who believe that the EU is a *conditio sine qua non* to effectively tackle those challenges that need international cooperation, burden sharing and the building of a joint capacity.

The new paradigm shift that we face in this Trump-era, with the lifelong presidency of the Chinese leader and the Turkish model of illiberal democracy, calls for European solidarity, however organized.

For it to be democratically embedded it is not only trust and confidence building between institutions but first and foremost, between citizens and their political leaders. For this to succeed better transparency and two way communication shall be a prerequisite.

Citizens' trust and engagement does not benefit from closed doors as is the case in many of the decision-making procedures, even legislative, in the EU.

The Senate has been engaged in this endeavour since the Lisbon Treaty came into force (end of 2009). Recently, MP's from both Houses launched a



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transparency initiative that is currently supported by many of the other chambers of national parliaments. And this is also reflected in the focus of today's MP's. That focus is open, outward looking, connecting and consulting with others, from citizens to colleagues from other Parliaments.

In two years this Hall of Knights and the adjacent Parliament buildings will be closed for several years for renovation works that have been long overdue.

These renovations have a symbolic resonance as well: democracy cannot be taken for granted, democracy is a work in progress. As is the European Union.

I wish you a very inspiring and productive meeting.

Thank you.