

## **Europe's success and the ongoing task for citizens and politicians**

### **Keynote speech by Minister Ollongren at the Congress of The Hague, May 25, 2018**

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On 7 May 1948, there were 740 men sitting here in the Knights' Hall, and only six women. One of them was Princess – soon to be Queen – Juliana.

So it was mainly men who had convened to talk about the future of Europe. A Europe that had been torn apart. A Europe that was uncertain and impoverished.

In the words of the British historian Sir Ian Kershaw, Europe had descended into hell. Now it had to resurrect itself. It had to rebuild itself.

This was the task resting on the shoulders of a now-feted and illustrious generation. Here in The Hague, 70 years ago.

Among them were statesmen like Altiero Spinelli, Paul-Henri Spaak and Robert Schuman. A still largely unknown Konrad Adenauer. And of course Winston Churchill was there too.

Britain's wartime prime minister stressed the historic dimensions of the task that lay before them. I quote:

'We are here to lay the foundations upon which the statesmen of the Western democracies may stand, and to create an atmosphere favourable to the decisions to which they may be led.'

For Churchill, what mattered was cooperation. After the catastrophe of the Second World War, nations now had to come together. The congress had to display strength and offer a sign of hope to the peoples of Europe. And now, 70 years on, we are grateful to them. They did indeed lay the foundations on which the statesmen (and women) of the Western democracies may stand.

I don't think The Hague had ever before, or has ever since, hosted a gathering that has so decisively shaped the destiny of our continent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It was in this very spot, 70 years ago, that the first building blocks were laid of today's European edifice. This was the start of a remarkable and ambitious collaborative project – a project that is still ongoing.

## **A project that will always be ongoing.**

It's a partnership that is unique in the world. To many it is a source of surprise and wonder.

How can countries that were torn apart by war form such a close partnership? How can countries give up their long-cherished currencies in favour of a new common currency?

We Europeans tend to forget quite how remarkable this partnership is. We're so accustomed to it, we take it for granted. But just think: No more war. Instead of a divided continent, Europe suddenly became a close-knit Union. It's actually a unique story. A continent ravaged by two World Wars lost no time in rebuilding itself and grew to become the biggest trading bloc in the world.

But Europe's success is about more than its economy. Those gathered at the congress 70 years ago knew this only too well. The congress took the initiative to work together in areas beyond the economic alone. Their partnership was to go deeper. Fundamental rights, in particular, would also be given European protection.

A devastating war and terrible regimes had deprived people of their most basic fundamental rights. That could never be allowed to happen again. Europe would be more than simply a market. From now on, the rights of every European citizen would be made secure.

This was the task laid before the Congress.

As Churchill put it:

'The Movement for European Unity must be a positive force, deriving its strength from our sense of common spiritual values. [...] In the centre of our movement stands the idea of a Charter of Human Rights, guarded by freedom and sustained by law.'

That focus on fundamental rights has been a recurrent theme of European cooperation.

Coincidence or not, exactly 70 years after that celebrated conference in The Hague, today marks yet another important moment for fundamental rights in Europe.

After years of preparation and negotiation, the entry into force today of the new EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guarantees citizens' privacy, including in the digital sphere.

That's a fundamental right the Congress could hardly have envisaged, in an age of telegrams and fixed-line telephones. But it's one where Europe, again, is leading the way.

It's a good example of how the objectives of 70 years ago have lost none of their relevance. It's also an example of how we're meeting those objectives in today's rapidly-changing world. Such achievements are sometimes obscured by the political dynamism of our times.

Europe has grown over the past 70 years. It has left adolescence and entered adulthood. A process typically marked by crises. Crises that – in the case of Europe – can be hard to predict or even imagine, like the banking crisis, migration and Brexit.

These are issues that don't lend themselves to the EU's 'slowly but surely approach'. Or to 'technical' solutions arrived at by means of rules and treaties.

Fish quotas present a challenge of a different order than asylum quotas for the relocation of 160,000 refugees.

The European project is gradually developing from an idealistic endeavour centred on peace to one about power. A 'power project' in which nation states are 'bound together', so to speak, to better serve their common interests in the world.

We are seeing a shift from a rule-driven approach in EU politics to an event-driven approach. Europe has to respond promptly to events. Events where the stakes are high.

That calls for decisiveness and for initiative. For strong politicians who take the bull by the horns.

In short, it calls for leadership.

The continued success of European cooperation depends on continual commitment and leadership on the part of politicians. Just as it did 70 years ago, European cooperation today makes great demands on politicians. It demands leadership and ambition. It presents politicians with an immense task.

Johan Beyen, who was Dutch foreign minister for a time in the 1950s, one of the founders of the single market, and one of my country's greatest Europeans, once said,

'Politics is the art of the possible, but it should always keep its eyes fixed on what is not yet possible, and should never assume that what is desirable is out of reach.'

That's what leadership is all about: keeping your eyes fixed on what is not yet possible.

Leadership is courage, daring and the ability to improvise. Leadership is delivering a strong and compelling message that forms part of the bigger picture.

That message is now more important than ever.

In a globalising world, in which Europe faces major challenges.

In which some countries are resorting to protectionism.

In which terrorism presents a common threat to our beautiful continent.

So isn't that former urgency and desire for decisive European action more important than ever? Right now?

Isn't now exactly the time to talk about that broader vision?

**We can call for a smaller Europe focused on core tasks.**

But if we take the competition we face from the rest of the world truly seriously, and we truly wish to address the challenges to our security, shouldn't we be taking a different course?

True cooperation means daring to look further. So that we see the bigger picture. It means daring to look beyond our own interests for the sake of the common good.

70 years ago, here in The Hague, a group of people came together who did dare to look beyond their own interests. To look beyond the here and now.

The ambition demonstrated by that congress is still highly relevant. We too must now dare to look ahead. To the Europe of our children and our grandchildren. We need to decide what kind of Europe we want them to live in. And with that vision of Europe before us, we should take concrete steps to make it a reality.

Politicians never take decisions in isolation. I am a democrat. I believe in the power of democracy and the power of the people. After all, politics is too important to leave to the politicians...

In the end European cooperation is, as Churchill saw it, an alliance not of states, but of peoples. And so ultimately an alliance of citizens.

It's vital to involve citizens in European cooperation to ensure public support. Especially now at a time of broader debates about the future of Europe and the future of the euro.

That is why French President Emmanuel Macron has underscored the importance of citizen participation. He advocates setting up citizens' conventions where people can discuss their ideas about Europe and have politicians actively debate with them.

That will give citizens greater influence, and create new ways for them to connect with Europe.

When I served on Amsterdam's municipal executive I witnessed another way of connecting citizens with Europe. I was involved in one of the twelve partnerships of the Urban Agenda for the EU: the Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees.

I remember long discussions that explored the issues in depth. About the urban approach to refugee problems. About our responsibility for successful integration, since around 70% of refugees want to settle in cities. And about public support for these initiatives.

At that time I perceived a strong sense of solidarity. Of towns and cities that are ready to help each other. That don't tackle pressing issues like these armed with individual wish lists, but work out solutions together. With all stakeholders. Cutting across boundaries.

And this partnership has now borne fruit. In the shape of a European Migrant Advisory Board and an Academy on Integration.

That makes me really proud.

I began by noting that, 70 years ago, there were only six women sitting in this hall. I'm glad to see far more women here today. A lot has changed in Europe in those 70 years. And thankfully, many of those changes are for the better.

Amid all those changes down the years, one thing has remained constant: an ambition to work together, which started here, in The Hague.

I think we've jointly achieved a lot that we can be proud of.

If we keep debating, keep up our dialogue, keep telling the larger story with conviction, then I think we can face those challenges to European cooperation with confidence. Then Europe will truly enter adulthood successfully.

Thank you, and welcome to The Hague, city of peace and justice.