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President of the European Commission

Remarks at the opening of Europa House

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Europa House opening ceremony

Den Haag, 16 May 2011

Your Majesty,
Prime Minister,
Vice-President Lambrinidis,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Het is een grote eer om vanavond hier in uw huis te zijn, uw Huis van Europa.

Tonight we give the Union not only a face, but also a place in the heart of the Netherlands. This House is a way for all Dutch men and women to engage with our shared institutions; those pillars of Europe which the Netherlands helped to found and build.

If I may pay tribute to Your Majesty, by borrowing your words to the European Parliament in 2004, this House brings to life your belief that "direct contact between people forms the basis for mutual understanding." It is a gesture which reminds us that in Europe we have the good fortune of knowing that home and abroad are two sides of the same coin.

I hope this house becomes a place of debate – for Europe needs a critical debate. It also needs strong input from the people who make it possible – you. For the European Union is not an end in itself. It is our means of hearing and achieving our shared aspirations – peace, the rule of law, freedom and prosperity. This house should therefore also be a showcase of the culture of openness and open discussion that the Netherlands contributes to our European family.

Of course, I speak to you at a challenging time, indeed a time of enduring crisis. It is a time when many face great insecurity, and wonder about the value of government in general and of the European Union in particular. Our duty as leaders is to show responsibility. Because the EU is part of the solution, not part of the problem.

In saying that, I am confident in our common future. And we know also that the challenges we face, be it debt or unemployment or inequality, are not exclusive to Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With your support we will emerge stronger from this period, and to get there I call on you to be advocates of our common interest. Any country with a tradition of 'punching above its weight' – like the Netherlands – must look outwards to retain its place in the world. This is a lesson that has been learnt over centuries of prosperity and innovation in the Netherlands. From your historic role in welcoming merchants and exiles - including the Portuguese family of great men like Spinoza - through your Golden Age and onto your legacy of realism and ambition in building today's single market. It is this mix of cultures and ideas, and our willingness to work with others, that enriches us and makes us stronger.

Our contemporary debate on the Schengen Zone is a touchstone in this regard. The right to move freely is the embodiment of the European project – one of the most tangible results of the EU endeavour; central to both our economy and identity. And so we see that free movement is to Europe what foundations are to buildings. Remove it and the whole structure is undermined. This is why the Commission will not compromise on this principle.

Yet enduring freedom requires vigilance. We must all have confidence that our fellow Europeans are behaving responsibly. And where concerns exist they must be addressed in a coordinated response.

That is why the Commission is working on a more structured approach to migration, one that reinforces the Schengen governance system without compromising the principle behind it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to exercise both solidarity and responsibility; these twin ideas must be our leitmotiv. If we uphold these ideals we will do justice to the generations who have built the European Union, and the generations we hope to inspire.

So it is on that note, and with great hope, that I look once again to the Dutch, in all the richness of your prosperous and consensual society for examples on how to thrive in our changing world. Europe needs you and your innovations.

We will see Dutch leadership again tomorrow, when your government launches Digitalagenda.nl – the first of hopefully many Member States to build on the Europe-wide initiative led by our Commissioner from the Netherlands, Neelie Kroes. Here, the Netherlands moves first to invest, as we all must, in a common digital future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not want to take you away from your celebration tonight. I wish only to celebrate the Dutch contribution to Europe and to leave you with the knowledge that you are not alone in facing the global economy or social change. Where there is challenge or crisis or division, the EU must adapt and unite. The EU is here to help all of us be our best selves.

Thank you.