

**Toespraak bij de opening van Integrating Cities
donderdag 8 maart, 09.30 uur, Felix Meritis**

It is a great honour to welcome you to Amsterdam, for this edition of *Integrating Cities*.

The Eurocities network offers a wonderful opportunity for the cities of Europe to share, learn and be inspired. For two days, 260 participants from 25 different countries and 65 cities will focus on diversity and integration. We will look into the challenges of multicultural society, especially in the cities. We will share best practices. Amsterdam offers the Dutch masters, inspired by our great painters, masterclasses at different locations in the city. We will celebrate international women's day, with a dinner tonight. And listen to and discuss with wonderful speakers, starting with Mr. Zapata-Barrero, and closing tomorrow with Saskia Sassen.

To kick off this two day experience I would like to share with you what I consider to be my mission: to have a tolerant and resilient city for the future generations of our cities. When thinking about diversity and integration, our attention should be on these future generations, while we build on our histories and on role models of the past.

Amsterdam's history harbours both great achievements and painful scars. The City Hall was build inside a ring of the historical canals, a demonstration of the wealth generated by our sea farer ancestors,

amongst others from the trade in slaves. Next year, in 2013, we will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the abolishment of slavery in the Netherlands. In front of one of the entrances of City Hall stands a proud statue of Baruch de Spinoza, but just a few steps to the left you find a monument of the Jewish resistance during the Second World War, a sad commemoration to the holocaust.

Amsterdam has a tradition of tolerance, but this has never been easy and should not be taken for granted.

Last night we organised *Prinsenhof Revisited*: a conversation between generations on the struggle against discrimination. As you saw in the movie, the struggle of 1984 has continued today and remains painfully important in the Netherlands.

The diversity of our cities continuously increases. Amsterdam is an Arrival City, as many of our cities are. There is much ado about the value of multicultural society and about the influence of new arrivals to our countries.

Cities stand at the forefront of European migration and integration. Especially in times of crisis, were it economical, social or cultural, the cities need to uphold European solidarity and resist the mechanism to close off and lash out against what is considered threatening. This is why I strongly condemn the initiative of the PVV to open a website for complaints about

central and eastern European immigrants in the Netherlands, which caused a lot of discussion within our country and in Europe.

There is no way back from hyperdiversity. In reality our future generations will just have to make do. The question is how we can equip them to do so.

The complaint website and the peculiar burqa ban which the Dutch government has proposed are symptoms of a longing for security which is caused by the pace in which our societies have changed. Sociologist Zygmund Bauman describes history as a pendulum which moves between security and freedom. Both are crucial values in human lives, but they are tough to reconcile. Security without freedom brings slavery. Freedom without security brings chaos and insecurity. This is where we stand today. The question is how we can increase security and uphold freedom simultaneously.

The Dutch government allows itself to be taken hostage by fear and the misunderstanding that more security can be achieved by creating stricter socio-cultural regulations. It fosters an obsession with socio-cultural differences, proposing regulations which violate the freedom of our citizens. It fails to see that this effort to increase security, while perhaps bringing it for some, will undermine it for many others. It alarms me that young generations in Amsterdam increasingly voice the feeling that they

will never belong, no matter how hard they try. They fear this society will not accept them. Why should they even try?

We cannot prevent the future from happening, nor should we want to. We cannot close off our countries from migration, nor should we want to. If we try to do so, our policies will be harmful and negative. We will cause exclusion and marginalisation and thereby undermine the social fabric of our societies and in the end will make them unfree and insecure.

At the same time we cannot deny that something is happening in our cities. That with the arrival of new citizens, new problems emerge, or old ones prove to be persistent. Defending multicultural society should not be an excuse for denial. Problems are real and we need to deal with them.

To give an example:

1. When youngsters born and raised in Amsterdam leave school without properly speaking Dutch, this is unacceptable. Amsterdam works to better equip the schools and I will provide language training for youngsters that have trouble finding jobs.
2. When economic independence for young women of Turkish and Moroccan descent is a mere 24 per cent compared to 71 per cent of the indigenous Dutch, something is wrong that cannot be ignored. My goal is to increase their participation on the labour market, with specific measures to develop skills, motivation and support.

3. When the public sphere is increasingly confronted with clashes of different lifestyles and convictions, we cannot merely shrug and stay indifferent. We need to develop the capacity to deal with difference. We need to be able to talk about manifestations of religion in the public sphere, whether it is about men refusing to shake a woman's hand, or about a prayer room in schools. To defend the freedom of homosexuals and the equality of women. To build and protect the strength to carry this difference, which is what I believe true tolerance means. My goal is to increase the competence of Amsterdam's youngsters to deal with the challenges the big city poses. The competencies urban citizenship requires. To start with by speaking up, by organising debate, by opening up networks and creating role models.

The debate on diversity and integration should not be about what we have lost, or how we have changed. It should be about facing the challenges of the present and building towards the future. This is not only true for Amsterdam, but for many of Europe's cities.

I invite you to join me in this debate these coming two days at *Integrating Cities*.