



Toespraak

Opening remarks visit of His Excellency, Mr Noel Kinsella, Speaker of the Canadian Senate

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Your Excellency,

I would like to begin with one of Winston Churchill's most famous quotes: *"There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them."*

It is both an honour and a great pleasure to welcome you as our guest here today: an Atlantic Canadian from Saint John, New Brunswick – the oldest incorporated city in Canada. As a member of the Canadian Senate for 24 years, and as the Speaker for the past eight years, you will have seen great changes to the global order. From the unipolarity of the post-Cold war era to 9/11; and now the neo-multipolar era, with the rise of countries such as China and India as forces to be reckoned with in world politics.

This is your first visit to The Hague. I have been told that at their maximum points, the borders of Canada stretch about 5,500 kilometres from east to west, and around 4,600 kilometres from north to south. To a relatively small, densely populated country such as ours, these are unimaginable distances. Different though we may be in a geographical sense, however, we are strongly connected by our historical, cultural and economic ties.

Your Excellency,

Your visit is testament to the excellent bilateral relations between our countries. And I may say that you have chosen an perfect time to come. I understand that the Province of Ontario has proclaimed the month of May "Dutch Heritage Month". More importantly, though, your visit marks the celebration of 75 years of bilateral diplomatic relations between Canada and the Netherlands. I am proud to say that our countries share the same values of democracy, rule of law, international peace and security and free trade.



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Not only do we share the same values, but there is also a strong connection between the inhabitants of the Netherlands and Canada. There are over one million Canadians of Dutch descent, and the Dutch language is the seventh most spoken language in Canada. Due to their shared cultural and religious heritage, Dutch Canadians tend to form tight-knit communities. This has given rise to an in-joke known as "Dutch Bingo", whereby it is said that a Dutch Canadian can figure out if he or she is related to another Dutch Canadian by asking questions about the other's surname, birthplace, church, and the college they attended.

Your Excellency,

In two weeks from now, it will be exactly 70 years since D-Day. On the 6th of June 1944, thousands of infantrymen landed on Juno Beach, and parachutists were dropped behind enemy lines. These men left their homes, their families and their country, and were prepared to risk their lives for us. As the former commander of the Dutch armed forces, Peter van Uhm, put it: *"Those who serve do not only think of themselves. Those who serve do not only think in terms of 'I' or 'they'. Those who serve think in terms of 'we'"*.

With the liberation of the Netherlands by your country, we learned to understand the true meaning of the word "allies". The Netherlands will be forever grateful for your solidarity and friendship, and for the bravery and sheer determination shown by your young soldiers.

The tulip has become a symbol of this gratitude. After the liberation, Dutch civilians not only wrote "Thank you Canadians!" on their rooftops, but they also used tulips to spell out "Many thanks" on the ground. The Dutch royal family – whose members were given safe haven in Canada during the war – started the "Canadian Tulip Festival" in Ottawa. As a token of gratitude for her stay in Canada, and for the role played by Canadian soldiers in the liberation of her country, (then) Princess Juliana presented a number of gifts to the Canadian people, including 100,000 tulip bulbs. She continued to send thousands of tulip bulbs to Canada throughout her reign, resulting in the festival that to this day remains a popular, ten-day celebration of our friendship.

One of the major hubs of activity at the Tulip Festival is Commissioners Park, with its statue of the "Man with the two hats". An identical statue is to be found in Apeldoorn in the Netherlands. These twin monuments symbolise the link between Canada and the Netherlands. Although we are separated by an ocean, our two countries will always be close friends.



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Not only are we close friends, but I also believe that our two Senates in a way play similar roles in our respective bicameral systems. In the Netherlands, the Senate is referred to as the "Chambre de réflexion", which I think is to a certain extent comparable to your House of "sober second thought". Both our Houses were initially modelled on the British House of Lords. We are part of the crucial system of checks and balances between government and parliament, and within parliament itself.

From time to time our position is criticised, especially when the two chambers take opposing views on proposed legislation. I would be very interested to hear how this issue is dealt with in your country, and how you view your Senate's role in Canadian democracy.

In short, your Excellency, as I hope my opening remarks have made clear, our Senate attaches much value to our countries' shared past. And in this sense, we also strive towards a shared future; a future in which the transatlantic bond remains strong, our Senates remain close, and our countries remain allies.