



Subject: Speech: **'The Revival of the European Dream'**
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This document contains the translated transcript of a lecture given by Henri Bontenbal, the political leader of the CDA. This lecture marks the third and last in a series of lectures during the Parliamentary elections of 2023, that contain a vision of the future.

The first lecture, "*The Irony of Progress*", emphasized a need for a change of perspective; we are not the last, but the *first* generation to build a social and sustainable society.

In the second preceding lecture, "*Freedom, responsibility and a sense of community*", the interplay between freedom and responsibility was addressed; *both* are needed to build strong communities.

On November 11, 2023, Henri Bontenbal delivered his final seminal speech titled: "*The Revival of the European Dream*." In this address, he articulated a vision wherein a decent nation like the Netherlands thrives through interconnected and flourishing regions within a robust Europe. He emphasised the importance of shared values, collective commitment to justice, and advocated for a socially and environmentally sustainable economy.

You can read this speech on the following pages.

Dear Friends,

“We can’t choose our parents,
but we can choose who we become”

So writes Timothy Garton Ash in *Homelands*,
his personal history of Europe.

“Identity,” he writes, “*is a mix of the cards,
we are dealt and what we make of them.
It’s also a mix of how we view ourselves
and how others view us.*”

I am a Rotterdammer by birth,
a Dutchman by nationality,
and a European by conviction.

Foreign countries have hardly been mentioned during this election campaign.
While the war in Ukraine is also about *our* security;
The battle between Israel and Hamas also touches *our* hearts;
And the great geopolitical shifts
are also about *our* future.

The Netherlands is a small country.
That is exactly why these elections must also
be about the world around us.
About our place in that world.

About the challenges and risks.
About our hopes and expectations.

Europe in the world

In a world that appears to be on fire
the need for hope and change is great.

For that hopeful perspective
we need allies and collaboration.

That is what my story is about today.

Hope is the courage to truly take the now serious
and at the same time look forward to how things can be better.

Hope is a verb.
From the realization that what we do, has meaning.
Change begins with the choices we make ourselves.

These politics of hope also drove the people
who laid the foundation of the European cooperation.

The people of the Schuman Plan.
The hope of "never another war", through greater collaboration.
By sharing the raw materials of every war, coal and steel, together.

When Schuman, a staunch Christian Democrat, presented his plan,
A surprised journalist asked:
"But Mr. Schuman, this is a leap of faith!"
Schuman agreed with the journalist:
"Indeed, this is a leap of faith."

Because Schuman knew that hope is worth nothing
without being confident that things can be different and better.

What is left of those ambitions and ideals?
The analyses of the state of Europe are acute.

Jonathan Holslag, in his book *From Wall to Wall*
Speaks of a decadent Europe.
A Europe that is complacent and does not deliver.
A Europe that has dozed off.

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer puts it this way:
*"After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991,
Europe grabbed a folding chair and a glass of wine,
and watched how America guaranteed our security,
how Russia provided us with cheap energy
and how China made our stuff."*

That vacation from responsibility is over.

The United States are no longer our guarantee for security.
Certainly not if Trump or Trumpism retakes the White House next year.

Gas from Russia turned out to be expensive,
when Putin, with his hand on the tap,
used that dependence as a weapon against us.

And is the cheap stuff from China still such a good idea,
as it becomes increasingly clear that China does not only want to conquer the global
market, but also wants global domination?

There is every reason for concern.

At our borders,
Russia is waging the biggest and most devastating battle
since World War II.

Israel and Hamas are waging a horrific battle,
in a hopeless conflict.

China operates in an increasingly assertive and brutal manner,
with Taiwan as the greatest source of conflict.

The world around us is unstable and may be further disrupted
by globalization, migration and climate change.

Dear friends, this is why these elections
should also be about foreign countries.

Wilders thinks these problems can be kept at bay
by closing the borders.
Omtzigt suggests that opt-outs and vetoes
can protect our interests.

These are not "*forty steps backwards*",
as Mr. Dassen said, but the beginning of the end of European collaboration.

We should not go down that road.
If we continue to put the brakes on Europe,
under the guise of national sovereignty,
we neglect our common challenges: climate, security, fair prosperity and migration.

Too often national politicians indulge in duplicity:
when things go wrong, it's Brussels' fault,
when things go right, they did it themselves.
Europe demands sober politics,
For politicians with a straight back.
For radically honest realism.

The EU is not the answer to everything.
There is work in store for Europe, to get its own affairs in order.

We need to work on a Europe, that works - for all Member States, for all Europeans.

To this matter, I see four tasks:

1. We must return to the idea of Europe as a community of values
2. We must strengthen Europe as a community of law.
3. We need to build a European, sustainable, and social economy.
4. We must organize Europe as a Europe for the regions

The EU as a community of values

Unity in diversity - *in varietate concordia* -

is the motto of the European Union.

The motto expresses the will to cooperate.

But if you push unity too hard, cooperation is put under pressure.

However, if you emphasize diversity too much, conflict lies in wait.

This is what makes Europe special.

“European success usually depends on compromise and tape”,

as written by British historian Peter Wilson.

In all the diversity between Member States,
it is always European values that bind us together.

Europe is *more* than a market:
More than simply making money.

Europe was born out of a desire for peace and justice.
From the aspiration of countries that, after experiencing war, never wanted war again.

We share a vision of the good life.
In recognition of the fundamental rights of every human being,
including those of future generations.

We share a vision of a political system that serves the people.
Without corruption, without self-enrichment.

You cannot be like Poland or Hungary;
ignore all European rules from Monday to Saturday
and be at the front of the line on Sunday, when EU funds are distributed.

That's not how we do it!

Values require maintenance.
Permanent maintenance.

Values require protection,
against changing majorities, coincidental preferences and the issues of the day.

That happened when Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister,
flouted all the rules, and undermined the rule of law in his own country.

It was Esther de Lange who led the resistance,
along with the Belgians, the Finns, and the Luxembourgers,
who called Viktor Orbán to order within the EPP.

Enough reason for him to leave the party.
Those same values are the reason that we, here in our own country,
rule out PVV and Forum [for Democracy] to collaborate in a coalition.

Those who question the unbiasedness of the judiciary,
call the parliamentary democracy fake,
attack the institutions of democratic rule of law,
or sow discord among its citizens
undermine a peaceful and just society.
You can *and* must not cooperate with them.

That applies to my party, but it should apply to every party
that stands for freedom and democracy.

The rule of law cannot be trifled with, Dilan.

The EU as a community of law

I come to my second point:
strengthening the European legal community

What do we mean when we think of Europe as a community of law?

For me, it means that values are not optional.
In political action, we must put flesh on the bones of values.

In his book *Vigilant Citizenship (Waakzaam Burgerschap)*
former minister Ernst Hirsch Ballin argues for a reassessment
of the values of our democratic constitutional state.

“Human rights”, he writes, “are co-human rights.
*The recognition of the rights of all people,
also of people who do not belong to our group.
Especially and particularly of people who are exploited,
people who are victims of inequality or discrimination”.*

In short, of people who are in a vulnerable position.

Human rights are co-human rights.

That is why Europe, as a community based on the rule of law, must dare to be critical.
On how the rule of law functions in all its Member States,
and of those countries that want to join.

I mentioned Hungary, I mentioned Poland,
but I also mention our own country,
when we see how the government plunged the parents of the childcare benefits
scandal into misery,
or left the Groningers to their fate.
That can and should not happen.

In a community of law, the debate of values must always take place,
mistakes must be corrected, and we should not be afraid
to tackle, to cut down or, as the ultimate sanction,
expel the Member States who consistently flout the rule of law.

Only if the EU itself puts in the work for its own community of law,
does it have the credibility to play a significant role in the international legal order.

The European market

Our values are concretely expressed in our vision of the European economy.
That is my third theme.

Parties like the VVD speak of Europe as a 'single market'
That way, Europe is important because it provides us with 'jobs'.

We know the liberals.

They believe the chimney has to smoke
and for the past twelve years, we have been referred to the optician for vision.

In our vision, Europe is more than a market
and that is a good thing.

The European market approach, the Rhenish model approach,
is needed more than ever.
It is our answer to the Anglo-Saxon,
neoliberal way of thinking of the past decades.

Economic collaboration alone will not keep the Member States together.
“Nobody can fall in love with a common market”, Jacques Delors said.

Ultimately, this is also about a different approach, different from the one we have always heard so far:

It is not about profit, but about values.

About a market *with* morals.

What do we think is important?

What kind of economy do we envision?

How do we want to deal with our trading partners?

That is what it is all about.

We can sell European ports thoughtlessly, nice and easy money.

But that is how many ports end up in the hands of China.

Our new leading candidate, Tom Berendsen, is rightly concerned about this.

Europe must protect what is good,
especially our own industry.

And meanwhile, it must seriously work
on the sustainable, social market economy of the future.

That is green industrial policy.

That is working on a Europe that stands on its own two feet.

I will give three examples.

The first is CBAM, or, a CO₂ tax at the outside border of Europe.

This regulation has been in effect in Europe since the 1st of October.

It means that countries that want to sell their products in Europe
have to produce that sustainably, or pay duty charges.

We are making our own economy greener,
but that makes no sense
if other countries continue to produce in an unsustainable and polluting way
and dump that on our market.

With CBAM, we force these countries to produce sustainably.

The Netherlands cannot do that alone,
But Europe *can*.

A second example: Big Tech.

Criticism of big companies is growing.
The Google's, Facebooks, Amazons of the world.
We carry them around in our pockets, and they know everything about us.

The internet can be like the Wild West,
with no rules, no standards.

Are we okay with that?
How do we protect our children?
What are your rights in the face of these giants?

For that too, we need Europe.
Strict European rules ensure that Big Tech has to improve the online protection of minors.
And that they have to stop the collection of all sorts of data.

Could we, as the Netherlands, have done this alone?
To ask the question is to answer it.

And as a third example: trade treaties.
The totem pole of the left.

Trade treaties always assume reciprocity.

Quid pro quo.
And that makes them exceptionally suitable to connect our own interest
to the ideals of a better, healthier, sustainable world.

Europe can demand sustainable production,
Like ensuring that timber production
is not at the expense of important forests and ecosystems,
that no harmful chemicals are used,
that we prevent child labour.

Europe is a *normative power* in the world.
This calls for choices, for *vision*.

Green industrial policy is not just demanding things from others.
You also have to keep undertaking action *yourself*.

It is a vision of strategic autonomy.

That we are not too dependent on China
for medical devices or solar panels.

That we have food security,
energy security,
Our own thriving and green industry.

The EU as a community for the regions

I come to the last task:
The Europe of the regions.

Our connection to Europe teaches us that we need to look beyond borders.

But Europe can also have meaning within our borders.

For many people, Europe is far away and Brussels almost a swear word.

This is not justified.
Brussels itself is not an end, but a means to the common good.
Especially when it is about our home area, our regions,
Europe can make an important contribution.

Look at the north of the Netherlands.

Groningen experienced the misery of gas extraction.

But together with Europe
we are laying the foundation for a hydrogen-based economy.

To make Groningen *"the hydrogen capital of Europe"*.

Seven of the twelve provinces in our country are border-provinces,
directly connected to Germany and Belgium.

With the rest of Europe as a huge hinterland
and sales area for entrepreneurs and businesses.

They live off a Europe without borders.

Look at the Universities of Twente or Maastricht,
or the University for Applied Sciences in Zeeland.

They serve, already due to their location,
a much larger group of students than just the Dutch.
A ban on English education, such as the NSC proposed,
is penny wise, pound foolish.
It affects their survival, but even more so their unique cross-border cooperation
with institutions in other countries.

European thinking also concerns the accessibility of regions in the Netherlands.

About the connection of existing and new train tracks to foreign networks.
About important projects such as the Lelylijn, the Maaslijn and the Nedersaksenlijn.

With the new generation of intercity trains the NS is able to take a big first step
toward a domestic high-speed network, to get from A to B faster.

Not only from Amsterdam to Brussels, but also to Barcelona.

The region is the ideal scale for European thinking.
Even more so, the region is the ideal scale
to overcome doubts about European cooperation.
Through concrete projects,
that contribute to well-being and prosperity,
that show that the good life
- our way of life in all its diversity -
is worth protecting.

Epilogue - The European dream

Dear people,

I have made a strong case in support of European cooperation.
At the same time, I have been critical of Europe.

No, we do not want to erase the differences in culture and economy,
we do not want European uniformity.

But, in addition:
no, we do not go along with the simplistic and populist anti-Europe sentiment.

We are convinced that Europe will become stronger
if there is room for variety.

We share a common destiny with the other European countries.

We belong together.
We share a history.
And a future.

I am a Rotterdammer,
a Dutchman
and a European,
That is what I said at the beginning of this speech.

The realization of being European, dawned upon me at the age of 18,
when I cycled with some friends from Rotterdam to Rome.
From the Dutch polder landscape, through the Flemish hills,
through the French vineyards, over the Alps,
to Rome.

Timothy Garton Ash remembered his father's words,
encapsulating the contemporary European:
"I was at home abroad".

Reviving the European dream, is a task for all of us.
But the European dream is also a sign of hope.

According to Vaclav Havel, politics can be the art of the impossible.
*"Therefore", says Havel, "hope is not a prognostication,
not a prophecy, not a crystal ball.
Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, just like that and
always"*.

But hope is the belief that there are things,
that are worth fighting for.

"There's some good in this world", Mr. Frodo. "And it's worth fighting for".

Thank you.