

- A BRIDGE TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE - THE BUC CONFERENCE IN THE HAGUE

Council Chamber City Hall The Hague - Netherlands
Friday, October 3, 2025

On October 3, 2025, the council chamber of The Hague City Hall transformed into a vibrant hub of hope and connection. The Kingdom Conference, organized by the Benelux University Centre (BUC), brought together representatives from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Benelux region, and numerous diplomatic, political, and civil society organizations. Under the theme of sustainable cooperation and resilience, speakers shared their visions of a world full of challenges but also of opportunities. This gathering was more than a discussion. It was a call to address concrete issues in cooperation, a reminder of the power of unity in diversity. Let's delve into the inspiring moments that made this day so special.

A WARM OPENING: APPRECIATION AND REMEMBRANCE

The conference opened with a warm speech by Prof. Dr. Anton van der Geld, chairman of the BUC. He expressed his deep gratitude to the mayor and city council of The Hague for their hospitality. With a warm welcome to all present, from Kingdom representatives to international guests, he commemorated former Minister Dr. Willem van Eekelen, an icon of connection and inspiration. Van der Geld emphasized the timeless importance of friendship and cooperation within the Kingdom and the Benelux. "This conference will contribute to a sustainable society that does justice to generations now and in the future," he said confidently. His words set the tone: in a world of change, cooperation is our anchor. Mayor Jan van Zanen welcomed the guests with open arms, emphasizing The Hague's unique role as an international city of peace and justice. "Diversity and sustainable cooperation are at the heart of our Kingdom," he said, praising the value of culture and solidarity. His desire for inspiration, friendship, and new perspectives resonated throughout the room, reminding us that true progress begins with mutual respect.

GEOPOLITICAL HOPE Amidst FEAR

Prof. Dr. Jan Peter Balkenende, Minister of State and Head of the BUC, shared a reflection on the "New (Geo)political Realities: Between Hope and Fear." He outlined the tensions of our time, from the war in Ukraine to the dynamics between China and the US but refused to succumb to pessimism. "Division and a lack of trust can paralyze us, but look at the progress of the past centuries," he argued. Balkenende advocated for "team and strategy," responsible capitalism, and the Sustainable Development Goals. His message was powerful: with moral leadership and shared values, we can surpass ourselves. "Resilience and unity within the Kingdom make sustainable coexistence possible," he concluded, leaving us with a wave of optimism.

CONNECTION IN THE KINGDOM: AUTONOMY AND SOLIDARITY

Director - General for Kingdom Relations, Mr. Gea van Craaikamp, focused on relations within the Kingdom. She emphasized the balance between autonomy and solidarity, with a focus on good governance, healthy finances, and economic growth. "Young people, education, and culture are the keys to resilient communities,"

she said. "Through knowledge sharing and acknowledging our shared history, we build trust." Her appeal was heartwarming: with mutual understanding and engagement, the Kingdom can be a source of pride for everyone.

BRIDGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: FROM SHADOW TO LIGHT

State Councillor of the Kingdom, Paul RJ Comenencia, MA, and co-referent State Councillor Drs. Andy Lee delved into the cultural differences within the Kingdom. Comenencia advocated breaking down barriers to promote cross-pollination between the European and Caribbean Netherlands. "Respect, humor, and flexibility are crucial," he emphasized, citing historical connections and scientific insights. Lee added that challenges such as climate change and migration compel us to cooperate. "Only together are we strong," he said. Their stories were inspiring: differences are not obstacles, but opportunities for growth and a prosperous future.

THE POWER OF ART AND CULTURE AS A BINDING AGENT

Prof. Dr. Guus van Heck and Dr. Marlon Titre, director of Filmhuis Den Haag, explored how art and culture contribute to sustainable coexistence. In his PowerPoint presentation, Van Heck demonstrated how art can evoke empathy, fostering compassion and connection. Titre shared examples of exchanges between art, conservatories, and the recognition of cultural movements by UNESCO. "Art connects and enriches," he said, praising Spuiplein as the cultural heart of The Hague. Van Heck linked this to broader themes such as art, democracy, and human rights. Their message: become a catalyst for connection and creativity. In a Kingdom brimming with diversity, art and culture are the bridge to unity.

A NEW ECONOMY: VALUES AND SUSTAINABILITY

In his second speech, State Minister Balkenende advocated for reorientation towards labor, business, and society. He emphasized the role of culture in education and advocated for a balance between economics and ethics. "2026 marks anniversaries that prompt us to reflect on core values," he said, referring to the BUC anniversary and Adam Smith's insights. Economics and ethics need a new connection in the Kingdom. "First the values, then the vision." See his recent book, *Capitalism Reconnected*. His call: create a new economy focused on sustainability, equality, and the common good. The key to innovation and well-being lies within the Kingdom.

A VIBRANT FORUM: DIALOGUE AND INSPIRATION

Under the leadership of National Ombudsman Reinier van Zutphen, the forum came to life. The Kingdom of the Netherlands was broadly represented at the forum, consisting of Minister Plenipotentiary Drs. Gracita Arrindell, Professor Irene Asscher-Vonk (BUC chair), media producer Tanja Fraai, and strategic advisor Damaly Linkers. Speakers, forum members, and the audience exchanged ideas, with questions addressed immediately. This interaction was the heart of the conference: an open dialogue that pooled knowledge and experiences. The result? A sense of community, where everyone could contribute to a shared vision.

The BUC conference in The Hague was a beacon of hope in turbulent times. It reminded us that challenges—whether geopolitical, cultural, or economic—can be overcome through collaboration, respect, and creativity. Let us take this inspiration with us: help build a Kingdom where diversity flourishes, sustainability reigns, and the future is bright for everyone. Because, as the speakers taught us: together, as catalysts, we are unstoppable.