



Vlaams  
Parlement

## Address

in celebration of  
11th of July 2015  
National Day of the Flemish Community

Jan Peumans, speaker of the Flemish Parliament  
Saturday, July 11, 2015 – 11.00u – Brussels City Hall

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Honoured Guests,

On behalf of the Bureau of the Flemish Parliament I take great pleasure in welcoming you on this National Day of the Flemish Community to the Brussels City Hall.

Mesdames et Messieurs,  
Chers invités,

C'est avec grand plaisir que je vous souhaite la bienvenue à la Fête de la Communauté flamande.

Meine Damen und Herren,

Ich heisse auch unsere deutschsprachigen Freunde herzlich willkommen.  
Wir freuen uns dass Sie unseren Nationalfeiertag mit uns feiern.

Ladies and gentlemen of the diplomatic corps,

I am greatly honoured to welcome you here as the representatives of your country or your community to celebrate with us the National Day of the Flemish Community.

### ***Pride and a Sense of Identity***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 11th of July is by tradition our Flemish National Day. The date has been chosen in commemoration of the day on which the Battle of the Golden Spurs was fought, namely on 11 July 1302.

The date may merely have symbolic significance now, yet, that ought not on this present day to stop us from remembering it with justifiable pride. All human communities are proud of their achievements. The recollection of their outstanding feats and accomplishments cannot but impart to people a collective sense of pride and self-worth.

Pride is hardly a sentiment that we should feel ashamed of. Pride does not prevent us from keeping our two feet firmly on the ground, although it is not infrequently mistaken for vanity, pompousness, haughtiness, and even megalomania.

Already in olden times, cities demonstrated their pride by attempting to outdo one another through outstanding feats, the construction of the highest tower, the largest palace in the world.

It was in this manner that also Flanders, at the very peak of its world eminence, and prominence, proudly claimed title to the famous city centres that remain until this very day world-renowned heritage centres: I refer to Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Leuven, Ypres... these are symbols of ultimate architectural achievement. Brussels also featured very high on the list of such Flemish pearls. All you have to do is step outside: our City Square is living proof to convince you of our architectural and artistic greatness.

## **Artificial nation**

Brussels ultimately became Belgium's capital after our nation was created as the result of a deal between the great powers, with artificial boundaries, with two culturally very different regions: Flanders and Wallonia.

Flanders itself is now gradually developing into a nation. Gradually, since the evolution in that direction is happening as a natural process, not enforced by one or other post-war treaty.

The nation of Flanders is evolving in the way its self-identity and self-awareness are growing, meaning it is passing through a natural evolutionary process whose seed may be found in the manner in which Flanders was originally treated within that artificial Belgian State.

The Fleming has reared himself out of his once downtrodden status of underdog into a proud and self-conscious citizen, aware of his worth, knowing he represents a prosperous region within Europe and in the world.

## **Further state reform**

This dynamic also finds translation in a steady political progression. In the course of six successive state reforms we, Flemish, have achieved ever greater autonomy, yet we need to dare promote that right to self-determination with greater verve. Far too many foreigners still labour under the mistaken impression that French is the only indigenous and official language in Belgium.

To correct that misconception is a task reserved for our representatives abroad. They need to present a correct image of Belgium. For that reason, it is extremely important that we work out a full-fledged Flemish diplomacy that is wholly our own and which introduces our federated state to the world in every aspect of its autonomous constitution.

In its own country, our Flemish Parliament represents *thé venue par excellence* to promote our distinctive Flemish identity. Certainly at this particular time when the sixth state reform has even more emphatically underlined our autonomous nature.

The resulting financial consequences are known: the budgeting for our federated parliament has been raised from circa 28 to more than 37 billion euros per annum. We may look with pride on this increase, the outcome of a set of additional competences entrusted to us.

Nevertheless, this sixth reform must not be taken as a terminal point in our ambitions. In the past, the central authorities generally removed those policy areas about which consensus had not been, and could no longer be, reached. The competences were distributed *ad hoc*, the intention being to eliminate the tensions at the federal level.

Such also has happened during the latest state reform and, as was the case before, such an agreement invariably sows the seeds of new ambiguities. And this at a time when

there is real need for clarity, which the federated states can only achieve through still greater autonomy.

### ***Right to self-determination***

The greater the autonomy, the more important the role to be played by our Flemish Parliament.

This is made clear in Declaration 51 from the final agreement in the Treaty of Lisbon, concluded in 13 December 2007 by the members of the European Union.

I am quoting this Declaration 51 literally:

*Belgium wishes to make clear that, in accordance with its constitutional law, not only the Chamber of Representatives and Senate of the Federal Parliament but also the parliamentary assemblies of the Communities and the Regions act, in terms of the competences exercised by the Union, as components of the national parliamentary system or chambers of the national Parliament.*

The European Union hence acknowledges that our Flemish Parliament possesses equal status with our Federal Parliament. For a host of competences, culture, education, welfare, mobility, and the like, our Flemish Parliament thus acts as a National Assembly.

I can even go as far as to assure you that, in the course of many receptions of foreign delegations, I have noted a growing tendency to consider Flanders as a separate nation, as an autonomous entity.

### ***Europe in evolution***

As Flemish Parliament, we are already profiling Flanders to the outside world as an autonomous region. Call Flanders a region or a federated state, or whatever you wish, the terminology is not what's important. In Germany, they use the term federated states, in Spain, autonomous regions.

The breaking-away of those smaller entities fits seamlessly into the current evolution of Europe towards one major bloc of cooperative regions. It is worth noting that, on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Flemish Parliament, we conducted a colloquium during which this evolution towards self-determination figured as one of the topics.

It is then that we found out that this evolution is called 'devolution' in the United Kingdom and that this process of fragmentation started in 1997 with the formation of parliaments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

It is becoming ever more evident that the large bloc of the European Union is only to be carried by the base if and when within its compass sufficient freedom is granted to the various entities of which it is composed.

Small-size appears an asset in this process. It is, in effect, a truism that governments and parliaments cannot function properly if they remain at a remote from their citizens. They are there to serve the people, not the other way around.

And yet, at the top of the European Union we find certain prominent beliefs and ideas that appear to hold to a contrary view. Following the referendum on self-determination held in Scotland last year in September, we heard it proclaimed by those cenacles that regions cannot simply separate from a European Member State.

In connection with the Catalan region's pursuit of self-determination, we heard that regions that do decide to separate cannot as a matter of course be admitted to the European Union.

First, they would have to negotiate with their mother country and only then may the 28 Member States pronounce a decision about the accession of a new member.

This viewpoint is at odds with what we sense to be the reality at the base, whereby we from Flanders have invariably advocated closer links with Wallonia, with the Brussels Capital Region, and the German-speaking Community.

## ***Respect***

Pride and sense of identity certainly do not form an obstacle in the relationships amongst federated states, rather the contrary. Recognition and acknowledgement of each other's worth and merit will undoubtedly boost mutual respect.

Just recently, we were able to pay that kind of respect to the Scottish Community when with a delegation of our Flemish Parliament we paid a visit to their parliament in Edinburgh.

Shortly before that time, the SNP, the Scottish National Party, had managed to win 56 of the 59 seats during the elections in the United Kingdom. The Scots are clearly very proud of their nation and that elicits a lot of respect, not only from ourselves but also from a great many other nations and regions in Europe.

Only in London there remains lingering doubts about this urge for self-determination.

And yet, this striving is no more than the manifestation of a natural process that, within the European Union, ought to be given sufficient opportunities for development.

He who decides to oppose it risks a confrontational reaction. The Greek crisis presents us with a glaring example of what can happen.

And, in fact, the future will prove to us that the ambition for self-determination as expressed by some regions is absolutely not contradictory to their integration into the European Union. On the contrary, it will contribute to its evolution.

Flanders itself can provide sufficient arguments to make a case for its considerable contribution to the further expansion of Europe, in spite of its small size. I am able to quote you a number of relevant examples:

- our tropical institute plays a prominent role in the Ebola crisis,
- our dredgers are performing Herculean tasks in the construction of new harbours in Asia,
- a number of our universities have strengthened their position in the top 100 of the world,
- the number of Flemish Erasmus students has exploded during the past five years from 3,049 to 5,552, an increase of no less than 45 percent in 5 years.

## ***Solidarity and responsibility***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Flanders is a prosperous region, a desirable place to live and build a life, hence its popularity with immigrants.

This growing inflow of people demands an open vision.

For a Europe that is built on the regions can only function properly when there are solid agreements in place and given sufficient solidarity and a sense of responsibility.

Flanders provided a good example of this earlier this year when it appeared that the shifting of competences in consequence of the sixth state reform implied also a serious shift of financial responsibilities in the drawing up of the federal and regional budgets.

There was talk that Flanders, because of the adaptation of the Special Finance Act would have to make provisions for an extra 390 million euro. Well, Flanders managed that by taking account of this in its interim budget control.

This week it appeared that, in fact, these 390 million are, after all, part of the package of federal grants to Flanders.

Who will ultimately have to account for this amount may well become the subject of some future discussions, but the reaction of our Flemish Government spoke volumes. Flanders is fully prepared to assume its responsibilities. This was a perfect illustration of its desire for solidarity with the other regions and communities.

The Flemish citizen accepts that solidarity invariably will demand something from him in return for it is a fact, as recent studies adequately demonstrate, that Flanders continues to belong amongst the ten richest regions in the world.

Not surprising then that, within the Belgian State, Flanders represents the strongest economic and financial pillar.

This spring, the *Centre de Recherche en Economie Regionale et Politique économique*, a research centre at the University of Namur, calculated that 7.8 billion euro annually flow from Flanders to the other regions: 7.3 billion to Wallonia, slightly over half a billion to Brussels.

The Brussels Capital Region depends on Flanders for its economic prosperity: 80 percent of the economic activity in the Brussels Region is centred within the Ghent - Antwerp – Louvain Golden Triangle.

Solidarity therefore may be called a willingness to share. Nonetheless, to be able to function properly, this solidarity must be effective *and* transparent. We therefore expect from our partners in our country the same solidarity and the same sense of responsibility in return.

### ***Striving for peace***

Ultimately, each and every form of cooperation between people lies rooted in the peace existing amongst them. It is no accident that the development of our Flemish awareness is to be found in our sense of, and our striving for, peace.

It is especially the First World War, estimated to have caused the slaughter of some 20 million victims amongst the world population, which has come to be regarded as the main force towards people's pursuit of, and drive for, peace.

It is during that period that it became ever more evident that cooperation between people could be stimulated by allowing them a greater right to self-determination.

This also happened in Flanders. The best-known pacifist and pioneer for a Flemish identity was Herman Van den Reeck, alas, *nolens volens*; barely 19 years old, he was shot to death in the course of a protest demonstration in Antwerp.

It will, indeed, be of small comfort for the boy to have been the inspiration for one of the most expressionistic poems by Paul Van Ostaijen, who wrote his eulogy during his exile in Berlin.

Exiled he was, because he dedicated himself to the cause of peace. And, indeed, the post-bellum period proved ripe for peace and the Yser Tower was erected as its best known and revered symbol. In 1986, the Tower was officially recognized as the Memorial of Flemish Emancipation and Peace.

"No More War", so it is written in four languages on the monument's base. The message of self-government and No More War proclaims a Truce of God.

However medieval this concept may strike many of the younger generations, Truce of God stands for pluralism, tolerance, forbearance, peace and harmony amongst all populations, all races, and all peoples on this earth.

If, within Europe, we wish these populations to cooperate with one another, we must then recognize their essential role as building stones and reject the host of artificial barriers that on our continent have been the cause of discord.

We have only just recently seen an example of that, and very recently it was indeed. Today, 20 years ago to the day, the world witnessed the genocide in Srebrenica.

It behoves us, nay, it is even incumbent on all of us to commemorate also these less than enlightened and ugly moments in our history, year after year, as a warning to us, and as an example of how not to conduct ourselves in our dealings with our neighbours.

Moreover, it appears very evident from that example that the recognition of nations formed by natural processes results in their capacity to function with far greater efficiency and effectiveness as breeding grounds for a Europe that is free of conflict. The regions are the best building stones for a stable Europe.

We, in fact, consider that kind of European Union as the vehicle *par excellence* to provide us with the opportunity to shape our foreign policy. It is then, for that reason, necessary that we develop our own strong Flemish diplomacy.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to conclude with the message to all of you here present that we are fully justified to use our Flemish identity proudly to promote and propagate our region by our words and actions.

On the domestic front, this must be made clear by increasingly profiling our Flemish Parliament as a body that does not act as a subordinate, but rather as a partner who is equal to the other federated state parliaments in Belgium.

More than that even, as the strongest partner within that structure it is incumbent on us in good right to demand even greater autonomy. Not only for ourselves alone but for all federated states.

Given the required solidarity and sense of responsibility, those states can then generate a stronger federal Belgium: a nation of regions that are part of the base of a greater Europe formed by and composed of regions, and wherein Flanders can confidently proclaim its identity, proudly and aware of its worth.

The fact is that Flanders is a strong region. And that is a very good reason to celebrate.

I thank you for your attention.

**11 July 2015**

**Jan Peumans**  
Speaker Flemish Parliament

*Only the spoken word counts.*