



Welcoming address by Vice President of the Senate of the States General,
Mr. Joris Backer, on the occasion of the Ridderzaal Ceremony during the
Sharing Europe Festival - Congress of The Hague, on 25 May 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Senate of the States General I would like to welcome you in this very fitting place for the celebration of the European Movement. In this Hall on the 9th of May 1948 - seventy years ago - the Congress of The Hague started its sessions.

This Congress is considered by most as the first federal momentum of a movement of the European history and of course the start of the European Movement itself, in a way.

I assume my humble role as your host with great personal pride, as I have been member of the EB board of The Hague in my twenties (as you will notice, that is some time ago now). Would I have ever guessed that one day I would be the host and should have the honour bestowed upon me to stand here in front of you? No I wouldn't! But it's a great pleasure to do.



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The European - what I would call - *interdependence* is an even more ancient history than the one you celebrate today. In this hall, at this very location - as historical data suggest - existed already a stronghold of the kingdom of Charles Martel and Charles the Great respectively.

This Ridderzaal building, in English known as the Hall of Knights, was constructed much later in the 13th century.

In this hall the annual ceremony of the opening of the parliamentary year is held in this hall with a joint session of the House of Representatives and the Senate. You may have guessed already, these two seats are for the King and the Queen. This ceremony is chaired by the President of the Senate, who couldn't be here today, unfortunately. Therefore, I stand in for her.

The Senate consists of 75 Members, it's parttime, we have one session a week. We debate the wellbeing of our citizens as co-legislator.

For yesterday's and today's meetings in your Sharing Europe the Agora is used by your organizers as a form of interactive participation of all attendees. As you probably know, Agora stems from the ancient Greeks.



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It continues in the same spirit as that market place and your original Congress here in engaging people. It is my personal view that that is the right track because the EU can only assume these challenges successfully if it engages people at the market square in order to ensure the unwavering support for the European dream.

Let us return to this Ridderzaal seventy years ago in 1948.

Like today, a member of the Senate crossed the court to attend, the meeting of the movement in *statu nascendi*. It was the former minister of the war cabinet in London Piet Kerstens.

He was known as an outspoken federalist - like many more at the time - because they were aspiring to build a peaceful Europe, after the disasters of two world wars that devastated the continent of Europe, including Russia and beyond.

He would have been surprised if he would have attended today and see that many challenges of the post war years are still on the agenda. In a different shape, in a different disguise. We have again identity based politics, trade wars and monetary volatility. Now we can add climate change, cyberwars, the growing influence of footloose global companies or migration.



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Despite the overall high support for the EU in almost all member states, according to the statistics, it's the challenge for any local politician - whether in the Senate, whether in the House of Representatives - to reconcile those who feel left out, and rightly or wrongly blame the EU for that, and those - like myself - who believe that the EU is a *conditio sine qua non* to effectively tackle those larger problems that need international cooperation, burden sharing and the building of a joint capacity.

The new paradigm shift that we face today in the Trump-era, and new challenges. Who would have guessed North Korea is one of them and with the lifelong presidency of the Chinese leader, the illiberal democracies in Turkey and even within the EU.

For it to be democratically embedded it is not only trust and confidence building between institutions but first and foremost, between citizens and their political leaders, to start with at the local level.

The Senate has been engaged in making legislative processes more transparent. Recently, MP's from both Houses launched a transparency



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initiative that is currently supported by many of the other chambers of national parliaments.

It's a very well chosen day today, also for practical reasons. In two years this Hall of Knights and the Parliament buildings around it will be closed for several years for renovation works that have been long overdue.

These renovations have a symbolic resonance as well: democracy cannot be taken for granted, democracy is a work in progress. As is the European Union.

I wish you a very inspiring and productive meeting.

Thank you.