

Speech Samsom - Progressive Governance Conference 24 April 2014

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to The Netherlands, welcome to Amsterdam. It's an honour to welcome so many of you today. Some of you came from far away; others just finished their evening meal and parked their bicycles around the corner. But wherever you came from, I am delighted to see you all.

We haven't started yet. But I'm sure this will be a great Progressive Governance Conference. A conference that is designed to trigger, inspire and motivate scientists, journalists, opinion leaders and hopefully teach a few lessons to progressive but stubborn politicians like myself.

Let me first take this opportunity to thank a few people in advance.

First of all our friends from Policy Network, especially Olaf Cramme and Roger Liddle, and from the Center for American Progress: Matt Browne and Neera Tanden.

I would like to thank the Wiardi Beckman Stichting, in particular Monika Sie, Rene Cuperus and Naomi Woltring, and the people of the Partij van de Arbeid, Kirsten Meijer and Saskia Schinck.

Many thanks to De Balie too, for being such wonderful hosts, and to Andrew Makkinga, for leading us through the program.

And most of all, let's hear a large round of applause for the volunteers who helped making this conference a success. Thank you so much.

“Making Progressive Politics Work”. The wording in the title of this conference is a clever attempt to put work, jobs, front and center. But it also reveals the feeling of frustration of many progressives in this room. The feeling that progressive politics hasn't worked yet, or hasn't worked as well as it should have. Well it has worked in a few places. but it's undeniable that progressive politics – especially in Europe - has gone through tough times in the last five difficult years.

All the more frustrating since at the beginning of the financial crisis, it seemed that things would come our way. Wasn't it clear to everyone that the bankruptcy of banks meant in fact the bankruptcy of neoliberalism? The end of predatory capitalism? Wasn't it clear that we, social democrats, progressives, would now take over and that we would have the right answers?

Well, apparently it wasn't. We either didn't convince the electorate. Or when we did, we struggled to deliver on our promises. It's easy to blame others for making the mess: bankers, big business, conservatives. It is something else to come up with policies to get us out of this crisis. To hope that with just a few minor adjustments and a some patience, growth and jobs would return. That is fooling ourselves. A half hatched recipe won't work.

If we really believe in our ideals, if we're really convinced that our values provide the best answer for the problems that people are faced with today. If we really think that progressive politics works, we shouldn't be shy about it, our policies should be truly progressive. That's the only answer.

As the legendary Canadian hockey player Wayne Gretzky once said:

“A good hockey player plays where the puck is, a great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be. “

We progressives should have the ambition to be that great player. We need to be where the puck is going to be.

And we need to lead people to that place. For progressive politics isn't just about making progress. It is about taking people along on that road to a better future.

'Change' may have been a great and optimistic rallying cry for a Democratic president to get elected. Change can also scare the hell out of people. Our people. People that hear 'change' or 'reforms' and think of what that actually means for their jobs, their social benefits or their health care.

The same goes for Europe. Talk about the need for further integration, for the pooling of sovereignty, and people will tell you about their doubts and fears. We see eurosceptic parties on the rise all over the continent - and I consider the UK to be part of that.

Now does that mean that we stop arguing for changes in our societies? Does that mean we should stop making the case for Europe? Does it mean we should sit tight and wait for the storm to pass?

Absolutely not. It is the responsibility of progressive politicians to both take people's concerns extremely seriously and at the same time convince them that the right changes, progressive politics, can make their lives better. That is the real challenge for us,

In the last few years, the years of crisis, we have seen far too little of this sort of political leadership. Especially in Europe.

Let me take you back to July 26, 2012. It was on that historic day that the President of the European Central Bank, Mr. Mario Draghi, announced that the ECB would do “whatever it takes” to preserve the Euro. It turned out to be the turning point in – until that moment - an uphill battle to keep the Eurozone together. Only after Mr Draghi's speech interest rates started to drop, financial markets regained trust in Europe. Slowly but surely, Europe found its way up again.

For some people, that day in the summer of 2012 showed the strength of the European Union. For me, it was the day in which a crucial weakness of the EU was exposed. On that day, the determination to fight off financial markets didn't come from an elected politician. It came from an official, a bank president. Politicians didn't lead, they followed. Reluctantly. Their progress hindered by mistrust. Northern countries don't trust the promises of the Southern countries to strengthen their economies. And Southern countries don't trust the sincerity of the Northern countries to truly reach a helping hand.

Europe suffers a chronic lack of mutual trust, a lack of self-confidence. The gap is wider than ever. The results are visible.

The euro was saved, but the European project got damaged. Europeans see their politicians struggling, they feel the lack of confidence. They see Europe's leaders quarrel over where the puck is going to be. They hear about six packs, two packs and fiscal compacts. But people are not financial markets. One dimensional budgetary norms might please hedge funds and rating agencies. They mean very little to those who experience its impact on society. Think only of the enormous youth unemployment. No wonder they become sceptical or turn away from politics all together.

We need a better story and better politics for Europe. People are fed up with the Europe of markets and fiscal rules. We need Europe to become a project of hope again. We need politicians to take us to the place where the puck is going to be.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope at this conference we will be able to come up with some of these stories. I for one believe there is at least one important matter on which we must and can deliver. An issue that will be defining for the future of the next generation of Europeans. Energy. The way we shape our energy supply in the next decades will shape Europe in the next decades. Economically, ecologically and geopolitically.

The threat to our energy security is imminent, worrying developments in Putin's Russia are putting our gas supply at risk. The threat to our environment is clear: rising co2 emissions will cause irreversible and damaging effect to our climate. And the opportunities for our economy and recreation of growth and jobs are huge and underestimated. We could spur a sustainable reindustrialisation and innovation and create millions of new jobs if we are able to unify ourselves around the goal of a new energy deal for Europe. A common mission to ensure that by 2050 Europe will have a completely sustainable energy-system. With the urgent goal to be independent from imports of energy within two decades.

We can deliver on that goal. Europe has the largest concentration of innovation and knowledge and largest amount of companies working on sustainable energy. And the possibilities of geothermal energy, wind, solar, tidal, wave, hydro and biomass throughout the mountains, seas and fields of Europe are virtually endless.

But 28 separate energy policies will not deliver the progress we need. European countries need to pool their budgets for innovation, we should put the smartest people and the smartest institutes throughout Europe together to work on the innovation we need. Stop the spaghetti of different and interfering subsidies and make one European system to stimulate renewable energy, based on a carbon tax. And, at last, use the budgets for the common agriculture policy for a new future: renewable energy. Create a super grid so that hydropower from the north, wind power from the northwest and solar power from the south complement each other into one complete and reliable energy system for Europe.

And: we should dare to share financial risks and investments, by committing to energy-project bonds - for the mega-investments that we need so urgently.

If we succeed in this new Energy Deal for Europe, if we dare to take on other challenges, we can deliver on the promise of Europa again: a common mission that shows that Europe is able to make a difference, and more importantly: to secure a better future for next generations and create jobs and growth for this generation. This project will take everyone along. For too long, new energy, has been perceived as a project only for the well to do Europeans, the post-materialistic elite that had the luxury to dream. But it's not. Creating a new energy system, is about creating growth, jobs, for the steel worker, the ship mate, the craftsman. It's the best answer we can give to both the fear of a squeezed middle class and the fear of a jobless growth. This project is at the heart of social democracy. And we should understand that. And start to mobilise people on it.

Beginning with the elections for a new European Parliament in May. I can't help to notice that we, progressives, are still looking for the exact spot where the puck is going to be at the end of May. Off course, we have our stories, we have our ideas, we have our ideals to talk about. But here's the opportunity to start talking about a clear mission, an ambitious goal, about millions of jobs, about a Europa uniting, about a project of hope and inspiration. That's were the puck is, ladies and gentlemen.

Forget the endless demoralising, overly simple and untrue attempts to trap you into a debate pro of against Europe. Ignore the boring discussions about institutions, about federalism or the number of European Commissioners. That's not what the elections are about. Elections are not about subsidiarity, about qualified majority voting, nor about who would be the next commission president. The elections next month are are about nothing less than restoring faith in Europe as a hopeful promise for next generations. It's time we start showing people that we can deliver on that promise.

I wish you all a great conference!

Thank you.