

The Belgium Trade Mission Send-Off

May 26, 2011



HRH Prince Philip and Ambassador Gutman

Mission of a Partnership

Remarks by Ambassador Howard Gutman

It is an honor and a joy to welcome all of you to my home and to this send-off reception for the Trade Mission that will be traveling from Belgium to Washington, New York and Boston at the end of June. I often say that there are only two kinds of people in Belgium—those who already are dear friends and those who will soon be. Many of you have already become dear friends.

I would like to talk briefly about the Belgium-U.S. commercial relationship, a sort of global joint venture for mutual success.

But using the well-known speaker principle that this is my house and my microphone, I would like to take advantage of the rare opportunity that arises from the combination of the presence of the Foreign Minister, the Crown Prince, a microphone and an audience to express how much I admire both men and am grateful for their friendship. And I suspect it is not part of traditional diplomacy to pay compliments to Foreign Ministers and Crown Princes, but I have rarely let those rules stop me before.

In the smoothest of political times, it is difficult to juggle demands of being Foreign Minister. So quite frankly, when the government fell last May, I, my Embassy, my country and diplomats to Belgium generally thought we would be on hold before the business of Belgium and its strategic allies could go forward. But Minister VanAckere is a true pro. The Foreign Ministry runs with the efficiency that would rival any corporation, and with judgment, wisdom, and always with a smile. Under the Minister, Belgium has become a true leader in the diplomatic community, for example, bringing a measure of sanity and coordination in ordering operations in Libya. In talks about the mid-East with Senator Mitchell, discussions about our future with Vice-President Biden, meetings with Senators, the Foreign Minister has proven to be a partner in our joint quest for a better planet. And Steven VanAckere is a

true gentleman and a friend to many. When I had a group of visiting U.S. Ambassadors in Brussels, he came to address them. He is coming tomorrow to address 20 of the Ambassadors in Belgium on the G-20 meeting. So I thank him for his service and his friendship.

As to the Crown Prince, I come from a country where the closest thing we have to royalty is George Clooney. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what it meant. But I have learned firsthand the importance of all the Crown Prince and Princess Mathilde do. And I have learned firsthand the kind of warm and generous of spirit people that they are. Whether greeting Chinese leadership in Belgium at Europalia or meeting with President Medvedev, the Crown Prince and Princess Mathilde are the face of Belgium to many. And that face is one of love of country, Belgian care and concern for others and a desire for industry and prosperity for all. And I can personally attest that it is the face of friendship. Michelle and I thank them for all of their guidance and friendship as we have come to learn Belgium.

Ambassadors come in many forms. Kim Clijsters with her racket and her grace at the U.S. Open has done more for Belgian-American relations than I could ever hope to accomplish. Education exchange matters as an Ambassador as well. I meet Belgians daily who recount their wonderful days at the University of Chicago, at Wharton or around our country.

But trade and joint commerce are the most important Ambassadors we have had and will ever have. But it is no longer about sending waffles or frites on a boat to the U.S. or hot dogs to Belgium. The world has changed and it is changing daily. There has been a revolution in our economic interdependence that has made our way of thinking and our vocabulary obsolete. For example, as we all know, Delhaize began in Belgium, but 70% of their profit and turnover now are U.S. based. Is it more correct to describe Delhaize as a Belgian company that has expanded to the U.S. or as a U.S. company with Belgian roots? The answer is that the question no longer makes sense. We are all citizens of an entity that grows more undifferentiated even as it expands exponentially – the global economy. And because of such links, when one of us faces crisis, we all do. When one of us recovers, we are all lifted up.

The answer is that Delhaize or FedEx or Nike or the hundreds and thousands of companies that are citizens of both of our countries and others are first and foremost ambassadors in our global economy and in our social order. Ask a kid in Atlanta whose parent spent a career working for Delhaize or a Belgian textile manufacturer about Belgium and they will well know all about it. Ask a kid in Brussels whose parent has had a career at FedEx or Nike and they will have no doubt about the partnership between our nations.

Indeed, the numbers are striking. The United States is Belgium's largest non-European trade partner and Belgium is the 14th largest export market of the United States. We share over \$45 billion in bilateral trade, and we can boast a \$115 billion bilateral investment portfolio.

Almost 500 Belgian firms have branches in America – representing thousands and tens of thousands of Americans whose future is tied to Belgium. 900 U.S. firms have set up shop in Belgium. When you look at a company like InBev, you can hardly keep track of the geographic genealogy of Budweiser and Stella. But when it comes to beer, perhaps genealogy is less important than barley and hops.

And we have a bright future tied to the hip together. If you are a U.S.-based firm and have logistics in Africa, the Middle East and Europe, where else can you be but Belgium? Although all the countries in Europe are fine allies, why open in France, the Netherlands, the UK or Germany, when you can open in Belgium and cover the linguistic and centrality measures in one place?

You can read all day long about the high cost of labor, but if you need to make a capital-intensive or knowledge-intensive investment in Europe, where else would you possibly want to be?

And if you are a thriving Belgian company, how could you pass up the financial and consumer markets of the United States?

Our past is so linked, but our futures are tied even tighter. And thus this trade mission is important.

It is another ambassador and another bridge that unites us, that holds us together and that brings us jointly just that much closer to prosperity.

Thanks so much and all the best.