

Was I Just Saying That? OR We Cook Frogs the Same Way

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Belgian Trade Mission

Your Royal Highness, Minister Vanackere, Ambassador Matthysen and Other Good Friends:

Ik heb zo veel respect voor de schoonheid van uw taal dat ik niets meer ga zeggen in het Nederlands.

Et mon français aussi est très mauvais: je suis un cours de langue chaque matin – un jour en français et le suivant en néerlandais, un jour français et le suivant en néerlandais, mais les deux sont très mauvais et donc, je continuerai en anglais.

It is a great honor to be here today with you. I have long said that there are only two kinds of people in Belgium, those who are already dear friends and those who will soon become dear friends. But the longer I am in Belgium, and particularly on this Trade Mission, it seems that we have already all long been friends.

And I would like to single out just a few people. First, Ambassador Matthysen. Jan and I often work together, trying to get bureaucracies to move in the same direction. He does a spectacular job and I learn daily from his wisdom and am rewarded by his friendship. As to Minister President Peeters, Foreign Minister Vanackere and the Crown Prince and Princess, I have known many leaders in the world. Some impress by their competency and others by their warmth and humanity; in Belgium, those who lead radiate all three.

Because my speeches are posted on the Embassy website, I give them titles. And the problem with today's speech is that, when it was done, I could not decide which of two titles to call it: either *Was I Just Saying That?* or instead *We Cook Frogs the Same Way*. So to instill a bit of audience participation, I have decided that I will give the talk and you will tell me afterwards which title to use.

You see, I have been asked to speak for a few minutes on the importance of Brussels and Belgium in having your voice heard in Europe and throughout the World; the importance of locating businesses there, of opening law firms, corporate offices, consultancy firms there, of lobbying there. And the truth is that I have been talking about this topic for a very long time.

You see, for a short while after I arrived in Belgium as the United States Ambassador, I studied the country and its role and place within Europe. I learned about the character of the country and its people, and about the buzz of the home of the EU, NATO and a vibrant country all mixed together.

I realized that France was a wonderful country, that Germany was a wonderful country, that the UK and Italy were terrific. But I also realized that those countries and others often spoke past one another. That they and others sometimes spoke simply to be heard, with sometimes predictable tones and messages.

But I quickly came to realize that Belgium was different. Belgium spoke past no one but to and with each one. Belgium never spoke simply to be heard. When Belgium spoke it did so for only one reason – it had something to say. I realized indeed that, more than the rest, Belgium, though smaller and perhaps with less total wealth, led Europe in credibility. And Belgium also had the stage within Europe at any and all times: the podium and the microphone of Europe are always squarely in Belgium. And I realized that together credibility and a pulpit combined to make a very powerful voice.

I was still new to the job, but I was genuinely excited by my conclusion. And I was convinced that, given that Belgian credibility and given that pulpit, between Belgium and the United States, we could change the world together for the better.

In one of my earliest meetings with the then Belgian Government, I made my pitch and urged the Office of then Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy to join with me together to help change the world. My first audience was perhaps the most senior diplomat in Belgium. A good friend whom I respect greatly, whom I shall call Piet, since I have not asked permission to use his name. I urged Piet to use that Belgium credibility and the pulpit to have the Belgian Prime Minister speak at the Grand Place and call on Europe to act. If Belgium urged Europe to work together and with the United States, to lift what was then an overwhelming economic crisis or to get Europe participating together to help President Obama close Guantanamo; or to keep NATO moving in the right direction in rebuilding civil society in Afghanistan and far more, who in Europe would say no. If Belgium made the call, who would not answer?

When I was done with my analysis, it was clear Piet too valued the word and importance of Belgium, but I suspect changing the world together seemed like a rather big hurdle. So Piet asked me in response: "Howard, do you know the two ways to cook a frog?" And I said "No Piet, what are the two ways to cook a frog?" Piet explained: the first way is you heat up the water to a boil so you can quickly cook the frog. You then throw the frog in. But he feels the heat and immediately jumps out and you have no dinner. The second way, the Belgian way, is to fill the pot with cool water. You place the frog inside and he swims happily. You then turn on the heat and slowly heat the water and the frog and voila, you have dinner. Having listened to the story, I immediately responded, Piet, there is a third way to cook a frog, the Belgian and American way. You heat up the water so you can cook the frog quickly. You put him in the water and before he can jump out, you slam a lid on the pot. And voila, the frog goes nowhere. Help me slam a lid on the pot Piet.

Undaunted in my quest to convince the world that Belgium is the place to be heard, whether the speaker is a government, a business, law firm or corporate office, we actually then adopted a slogan at our Embassy which has served us well for the past year and a half, that says "If You Want to Be Heard, Say It In Belgium."

And then after Europe took steps to prove us right by selecting then Belgian Prime Minister Hermann Van Rompuy to become the President of the European Council, the Belgian Foreign Minister Yves Leterme became Prime Minister and Belgium got a new Foreign Minister. I researched the career and words of the new Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere, and realized that he was indeed a rising star and a person who held that Belgian credibility and the Belgian pulpit in Europe. And so, on his third day in the job, I went to ask the new Minister to change the world with me, for Belgium and the United

States to work together to get it done.

The then new Minister too understood the credibility and importance of Belgium and he has spent his year plus in office indeed helping to change the world. On that day, his third day in office, he acknowledged the vital role of Belgium as the credible and moral center, as the voice of Europe. As to changing the world that day, he did note however that, having been in office less than 72 hours, he had not yet found the coffee or the bathrooms at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so perhaps we could hold off just a bit before setting off to change the world together.

And I wrote that same message about the importance of Belgium in memos to Washington and when the memos came out, some of the newspapers noted the consistency of our Embassy in believing in the credibility and importance of Belgium. Others however wondered whether "I Was Just Saying That?" Whether I was buttering up Belgium to help the U.S. in its missions in the world?

And I took my discovery public about the power of the Belgian credibility and pulpit underlying the Belgian voice. On De Zevende Dag, Phara, in Le Soir and more. When I spoke at the Cercle Gaulois, I talked about the importance of Belgium and about every minister in that Kern cabinet and when I said it in Flanders, I repeated the same theme. And still dubious, some newspapers wondered whether I was pandering to regions or to particular political parties in search of partners on the missions of the United States, while others began to understand that indeed I believed to my core and was right that "If you want to be heard, if you want the voice of credibility, Say It in Belgium."

Nearly two years have passed. History has removed the doubts. History has indicated that Belgium's voice need never be loud but often leads. When a human rights crisis developed in Libya, Belgium responded and responds daily, both politically in helping to shepherd those divergent European voices that tend to talk past one another into a unified framework in NATO and militaristically in doing its share and more in the air. In Aghanistan, Belgium leads by its steadiness as a reliable partner – no drama just results -- in the NATO coalition, in training Afghans in the North, in guarding the base in Kabul, in flying F-16s in the South. Belgium leads economically – an inviting home for any corporate office or business -- in adopting the most responsible budgets for 2011 and heading for 2012 in Europe. And forecasts show Belgian growth in the next couple of years leading Europe and indeed surpassing Germany.

American law firms have long known it. There are more American law firms in Brussels than there are in London. Smart corporate offices know it – like GE, IBM, Toyota, and many more. Logistics based operations know it. Nike can and has reduced both its costs of distribution and its carbon footprint by locating in Belgium and taking advantage of its ports, canals, central location and multi-lingual strengths. Capital intensive manufacturing like Caterpillar knows it. Industries that depend on human know how more than backbone – like Pfizer or Johnson and Johnson – and now Microsoft or Google know it. Sure, labor costs remain too high and if they were brought down, all the better to do business. But with capital intensive businesses, or logistics, or intellectual capital operations, how could you not go to Belgium in Europe? Do you need also to base in Germany, France, the Netherlands and the UK, when you can linguistically and geographically and manpower-wise cover all from Belgium?

So we indeed cook frogs the same way. I indeed was not just saying that. And if you want to be

heard, Say it in Belgium.

Thanks so much and all the best.