

Interview with Ambassador Gutman in *Knack*

While Barack Obama has started his *four more years*, you have asked questions to Howard Gutman, The American Ambassador to Belgium.

When you first arrived in Belgium, you said that you would try to learn Dutch and French. How far have you come? (*Luk Willems, Asse-Kobbe gem*)

Howard Gutman: For the last three-and-half years I have happily been alternating Dutch and French classes. My French is better than my Dutch, because, although the Dutch vocabulary is closer to English, I find the grammar very challenging. I can understand Dutch fairly well, but constructing a sentence remains problematic. My French is horrible for the French speakers, and my Dutch for the Flemish. I once gave a speech in French, in Liege. Thank goodness my staff was smart enough to project what I was saying on a screen behind me simultaneously, because at the end of my speech, my French sounded Ukrainian (laughs).

What is the biggest lesson that Americans can learn from Belgians and vice versa (*Pieterjan Poelaert, Afsnee*)

Gutman: I think that we can learn the same lesson from each other, because Belgians and Americans are much more alike than the clichés would have one believe. Both countries, for example, believe that they are hopelessly divided and that their government sometimes does not function well, while we should be proud of our democracies. BHV as well as the *fiscal cliff* (editor: the negative economic consequences if the US did not approve the budget by January 1st) have meanwhile been solved. They are in fact *joys of democracy* in countries with interested and informed voters that sometimes have very different opinions about economic, social, and political issues. These are countries that also have sophisticated political procedures that eventually always lead to a compromise.

How come many prisoners in Guantanamo have still not been released or faced justice? (*Frans Hulsbosch, Hasselt*)

Gutman: The United States has not been able to reach an agreement on closing Guantanamo because of an impasse in Congress. Some of the 120 to 150 prisoners are currently facing trial; others are theoretically free. They just have nowhere to go. Reread my first speech as ambassador to Belgium which can be found online. In it, I state that Europe and Belgium can do a lot to help close Guantanamo. If all 27 European countries would work together and each take three or four people—more than they have up to now—we would be much further along. It will not work without our allies' help.

Later this year, the US will send a new ambassador to Belgium. What is the most important challenge that your successor is facing? (*Han Vloeberghs, Kessel-Lo*)

Gutman: The task for every American or Belgian is to *never go back to yesterday*,

no matter who the president, Prime Minister, or ambassador is. According to the Gallup Poll, in 2007, 8 percent of Belgians felt positive about the US and 65 percent negative. In 2012, this sentiment has changed. 46 Percent of Belgians support the American leadership and slightly less than half of this amount does not. Belgians and Americans have built a relationship over two World Wars and have shared values such as prosperity and compassion. In essence, we are all part of the same *brotherhood of man*.

Why does the US still not support the International Criminal Court in The Hague? How can America be a credible policeman of the world without having to be held accountable? (*Andy Vermaut, Koekelare*)

Gutman: With all due respect, I think that this is the wrong question. The question whether the United States is doing all it can for worldwide justice is much more important than whether or not it is officially an ICC member. Are the biggest international criminals facing justice? Does the US show the moral leadership and work together with the ICC? I believe so. You should not focus on a single tree; you should see the entire forest.