



unusual. During his four years in Belgium, he has visited all 589 communes. What he admits began as a vague idea will be completed on May 5 in Fourons. No one, not even the King, can pride oneself on having done the same. ‘These were four fabulous years,’ the Ambassador says.”

Question: Isn't Belgium boring?

Ambassador: ‘Come on, it is never boring here. You should know that, you are creating so many problems (laughter!) How can so many things happen in a country of 11 million?’

Question: Will you be worried when you leave the country because you witnessed the worst crisis in Belgian history?

Ambassador: ‘You are a society that can afford to have a robust democracy. If events like in Boston were taking place here, there would no longer be any political disagreements. But because Belgium is doing well, its economy is doing OK, and you do not have anyone starving, you can afford to debate on democracy. What surprises me is that you debate as much as the United States but in our country, we have differences. Belgium, and I have said it to the King, is the most politically united country I know. I come from a country that is divided 51-49 on issues such as health care, climate change, gun control, the importance of Transatlantic relations, and protectionism or not. And I am proud of that democracy. But there aren't two Belgium, from Bart De Wever to Elio Di Rupo, which disagree on these issues. You have 7 parties and many Parliaments which, in my country, would all be Democrats. It is for that reason that you can have the luxury of arguing on linguistic issues, among others.’

Question: Aren't you going to tell the next Ambassador that he will be the last?

Ambassador: ‘I would not judge that. But I sometimes go to schools with a copy of the *New York Times* whose headline is ‘Belgium might split!’ Students are suddenly horrified. And then I tell them: ‘do you know when this article was written?’ It was in 1930, when the University of Ghent became Flemish. To understand your present and your future, you need to understand your past. I am not going to comment on Belgian domestic politics but I watched you during the 540 days without a Government and you were able to go to Libya and to fly more than 600 missions while the U.S. did not fly any. If this is being without a

Government, then you are OK. But as soon as in rates went up because of the long political uncertainty, you formed a Government.'

Question: Did you meet with Bart De Wever?

Ambassador: 'On many occasions. He is a smart politician just like Elio Di Rupo is. To some extent, they are closer to one another than some of the people who ran for President in my country. Remember this: I have news for you! 'these are differences in politics.'

Question: Are our linguistic problems a luxury problem?

Ambassador: 'We all have luxury problems. But people must have a debate, they must complain about high labor costs in the South and about unemployment and austerity in the North and get to a compromise. It is not efficient but it works fabulously well.'

Question: What do you think is our main problem?

Ambassador: 'I see three. Sometimes it is linguistic but that is strength. Sometimes it is history – by looking back at the end of the war – but this goes away with time. I am the son of a Holocaust survivor but when I go to Germany, I think about the future. The third one is social costs but that is true everywhere in the world. And in my country, the difference is not between a bit more or a bit less social coverage but about social coverage or no coverage at all.'

Question: Why didn't Obama come to Brussels? Isn't that the sole setback of your mandate?

Ambassador: 'Yes, but I did not succeed in keeping a Belgian Government (laughter.) Obama was to come in October of 2010 and meet with Herman Van Rompuy, but the Government fell in May. And he cannot come without a Prime Minister to welcome him. The White House asked me for advice. You will see from my response that I was at the beginning of my mandate! I told them to give us a few weeks and that I am sure that it will work out. It lasted 540 days. The President comes to Europe all the time. If he comes to Belgium and there isn't a NATO and EU Summit, people will complain. Yet, there is no need for a NATO Summit at this point.'

Question: .Where did you get that idea of visiting all 589 communes?

Ambassador: ‘Our partnership which had been robust since the two World Wars had become bitter during the previous Administration to the point that Belgium was threatening to close the port of Antwerp to our ships and Belgian airspace to our aircraft. It was in 2005. I arrived in 2009. Polls showed that 65 percent of the Belgians had an unfavorable opinion of the United States. I knew that Barack Obama and Belgium share values. We needed to regain confidence and rebuild bridges. With Parliament and with Lambermont, that is rather fast. But if you want Belgian troops in Afghanistan, you must explain to the people why it is in line with your values and also that Obama believes in civilian reconstruction for Afghanistan. We needed to rebuild credibility and I thought that I needed to talk to people. And thus that we should visit all communes.

‘When it began, it was more figurative than literal. But in the end we did them all: Mons, Charleroi, Bruges, Hasselt, Dinant, Durbuy, or Herstappe, the least populated one. I don’t think that anyone has done that. There were communes where there was not even a pub but just a few houses. And we were there at 6 p.m. with my three security and someone from the Embassy, waiting for someone to show up. Sometimes, I had to go and knock on doors with my security. The person opening the door wondered whether he was being arrested! But I told him (in French) ‘Hello, I am the U.S. Ambassador, I visit all Belgian communes and you are my visit of the day.’ I shook hands and I took a photo. I really want people to say ‘I love the United States. I’d love to send my kids to study there next year. I want Americans on the Grand-Place of Brussels.’

Question: Did the election of Obama help?

Ambassador: ‘Yes. He represents the best brand but that does not sell Guantanamo or Afghanistan. Belgians must believe you. I did not refuse any question.’

Question: So all is nice and positive in your job?

Ambassador: ‘I think that I am factual. Tell me when I lied? You want to hear negative things? I would have liked more sunshine. And you Chinese food is miserable. Belgians must know that curry is not a Chinese dish!’

Question: Why did you pick Fourons as the last stop?

Ambassador: “This Partnership Tour is about the future, not about the past. What is better than Fourons to celebrate the friendship between two countries and to be able to tell on May 5 to all mayors, Governors, and the Prime Minister that ‘I have seen everyone in your country. You are a wonderful country.’

The article is illustrated by a color photo of the Ambassador in front of a U.S. flag in his residence and whose caption reads: “Howard Gutman, 56, will be the third longest serving U.S. Ambassador in Brussels with four years in Belgium. The man who was considered the best Washington lawyer was named by Barack Obama. He will now spend one week a month in Belgium, either on the board or as a consultant for Belgian and U.S. businesses.”