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“There Is No Political Crisis in Belgium”

BRUSSELS - The succession of political crises does not do any good to the image of our country, several experts warned over the past couple of months. Much ado about nothing, Howard Gutman, the American Ambassador in our country, says. ‘You bombard every problem here immediately into a crisis. You have to watch out with that.’

‘I am a political junkie. So I have come to the right country’, Howard Gutman, the remarkable U.S. Ambassador who knows Belgium in the meantime through and through laughs. ‘I start every day with reading the papers, both the Francophone and the Flemish ones. That makes that I have a distinct view on the matter.’

Q: ‘Tell us?’

Ambassador Gutman: ‘The Belgians are now concerned about that so-called political crisis, but that is not right. There is no crisis, there is discord at most. But you have that everywhere. The fight between Bart De Wever and Olivier Maingain is not much different than the discussions between Barack Obama and Bill O’Reilly (*opinion leader with the right-conservative TV network Fox News, which regularly violently criticizes Barack Obama, editor’s note*). A difference in opinion is an essential part of a democracy.’

Q: ‘Has that ‘political discord’ had a negative impact on our image abroad?’

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Maybe a little, but that is because problems here are immediately bombard into crisis. But political instability does not rule here, does it? That is what I tell to American investors who want to come here. Your investments are safe here; the country is not going to fall apart just like that. People do their job here every day without problems. But the Belgian media only talk about crisis, what makes it all hard. That is how a perception of disunion is created.’

Q: 'So we have to be more careful in how we talk about things?'

Ambassador Gutman: '(Makes a fending-off gesture) In the end, you have a healthy system. But it would not be a bad thing if the unity of the country is a little emphasized during the EU presidency, whether it is by the press or by the politicians. But I have all trust in the fact that the presidency will run smoothly.'

Q: 'Do you foreigners make the distinction between Flanders and Wallonia?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'I tell everybody, from VOKA to AWEX (*respectively a Flemish and Walloon institution supporting business, editor's note*), the same. In the U.S., everyone knows and respects Belgium, from school children to business people. But they have never heard about Flanders or Wallonia. Who wants to attract investments to here needs to realize that. The word Belgium brings a smile on everyone's face, Flanders or Wallonia only will get you a look of non-understanding.'

Q: 'A smile?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Yes it does. Belgium is perceived as a good ally and the Belgians as friendly people. No single American loathes Belgium. We get along with each other well. So far I have not met anybody here who hates Americans.'

Q: 'What is your advice to the next Belgian Prime Minister?'

Ambassador Gutman: '(laughs) No single Belgian politician needs my advice. I will primarily listen to your next Prime Minister, whoever it may be. That is what I have already done during my Ambassadorship: listening. I have met about every important Belgian politician now, both from the majority as from the opposition. In the morning, I talk with *Vince* Van Quickenborne, at night with Caroline Gennez. I look how I can help or be part of a solution. As fundamentally Belgium and the United States agree about everything.'

Q: 'There have been a couple of differences in opinion however, like about Afghanistan?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Now you are bringing up an old discussion. One has wanted to make it look as if I have come here to interfere in internal Belgian affairs, which is not correct. Belgium has extended the mission in Afghanistan. Not because I have asked to do so, but because the Belgian and the American government agree on one thing: civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan. Belgium does not believe in war, but Barack Obama does neither. He believes as much in peace as Dirk Van der Maelen. Just like he believes as much in climate as Jean-Michel Javaux.'

Q: 'How is the U.S. image in the rest of the world?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'People do like Obama a lot, but they have not forgotten about the Bush era. The image of Obama himself is better than the image of the U.S., and as an ambassador, I am trying to close that gap.'

Q: 'Does it work?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'I have already gotten standing ovations. A couple of days ago, I went to a school in Molenbeek, with a lot of nationalities, girls with headscarves, etc. But I got a wild applause and a perfect performance of the American anthem. Maintaining good relations with the Muslim community is one of my priorities. I come from a country where no one knows where people are coming from. My father was an illegal immigrant who was not talking a word of English. One generation later, I am already American ambassador: that is the *American dream*.'