

UMons

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University of Mons
Ambassador Howard Gutman

I am delighted to be here today.

It is a truly exciting day for me.

You see I often get to speak to today's leaders. At Parliament. In Minister's offices. At conferences and meetings and closed door sessions.

And I often get to speak to yesterday's leaders. At cocktail parties. At operas. If only I hunted.

But there is nothing more important than speaking with tomorrow's leaders.

And that is why I so enjoy speaking at Universities, to the leaders of tomorrow.

For far too long, my generation has made a mess of things. My generation got it wrong. On so many fronts.

We have left our economies, security, environment upside down, standing on their heads and our political system and media broken down on the side of the road.

We had been bailed out once. And indeed, it was young dynamic leaders then who came to the rescue. Following the Second World War and up to the end of the 1970's, America, Belgium and much of the world had largely been dependent on old industries and natural resources – steel, coal, heavy manufacturing. We all watched the 7:00 o'clock news and read a paper a day, and both were more factual than sport. Political rivalries existed but all knew that country came before political party.

But the industries based on consumption like coal, steel, heavy manufacturing slowly withered. We had not invested in the future—our formerly grand cities had instead reminisced fondly about the past. Just ask Newark, New Jersey, or Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, or Charleroi or the Winterslag mine. The economy seemed to have no place to go. And workers may have been faced simply with going home. Who bailed us out in the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s? Who put America back to work? Who saw the future when so many were still focused on the past?

Democrats? No. Republicans? No.

Dynamic young leaders. Young business people. It was people who at the time looked just like you. . . Bill Gates. Steve Jobs (may he rest in peace), Michael Dell . . . people creating companies like Microsoft, AOL, Apple, Dell, Cisco.

At the time, my generation thought Yahoo was something cowboys said when they chased horses and Google was a noise babies made when they finished with their bottles.

But that generation of creators saw a little further down the road. And we all thrived.

Did it last? Did we learn our lesson? The lesson about the path to continued success? The lesson about creativity, innovation, leadership by example and not by word, and entrepreneurship?

Hardly. It indeed led to a faster-paced world of fast money, big scores, and credit everywhere.

So, through most of the first decade of this new century, my generation continued to make a mess of things. Continued to leave our economy, financial system, security and our environment in disarray. And we headed right to the political chaos of today, accompanied by the media circus of politics as sport.

It was all too easy to get there. All it required was the cozy life, the path of least resistance. We needed to drive our cars and fuel our lifestyles.

In so doing, we failed to invest in new technologies and alternative energies that could fuel the next generation of employment opportunities, thereby limiting our employment prospects; while we at the same time contributed to the physical destruction of our planet choked in carbon. And we used a faster-paced media cycle to convert government into sport and lead to political stalemates broadcast 24 hours a day.

Could we get it more wrong? More importantly, who will bail us out this time? Politicians and our political system? There is an ever-growing lack of faith in that route. And for good cause.

You see, in Belgium, in much of Europe, and in the U.S. with the election of President Obama, they have well understood this mess and made plans to remedy it. For where others see crisis, true leaders see opportunity. Inherent in the collapse of an economy is the opportunity to rebuild it and to build it better. To honor the past by transitioning to job-creating industries of the future -- biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, agri-bio foods, clean energy. American bellwether companies, such as IBM, Disney, CNN, Microsoft, Whole Foods and Genzyme are just a handful of firms that were founded during times of great economic difficulties.

And in marching into the future, we can leave no one behind. Inherent in a better world is a socially just world. And in these fields –in a world of technology and alternative energy, of research and information – if you can build it in New York or Paris or Brussels or Mumbai, you can build it in Limburg, in Charleroi, in Newark and in Detroit. We can only succeed at the pace of our slowest runner.

But in both the U.S. and in Belgium, politics has threatened to get in the way.

For Belgium and the United States and their economies, it has been a surprising year.

Who would have thought that I could arrive today and explain that I live in a country called Belgium that has long had no government but has always had a budget, and that I represent a country called the United States that has long had a government but nearly had no budget?

Who would have thought that Belgium with no government was always open, but the United States with a government came within 24 hours of closing?

Who would have thought that Greece would nearly collapse, Ireland would nearly collapse, Portugal would nearly collapse, Spain would nearly collapse, and Italy would teeter . . . and the dollar would still fall down compared to the Euro?

You see, the parallels between Belgium and the United States this year have been extraordinary. Never before have two countries done so relatively well in such difficult times simply to self-impose extraordinary challenges on themselves through political chaos. And yet such political chaos in both countries is a luxury that we have chosen to endure at least in part because we can.

Such political chaos is at its heart caused by the inefficiency of democracy, an inefficiency that I would submit is ultimately not a source of embarrassment but of pride. Indeed, many throughout North Africa this year risked their lives or paid with their lives in the hope of one day attaining the inefficiency of democracy.

Now clearly, both countries – Belgium and the U.S. -- can and should do better. Leaders can and should look to the greater good, rather than to the political good that will make them greater. But, just as clearly, for all the pessimism that has reigned in both countries, for all the jokes and discussions of the Guinness book of records, for all the attention to rating agencies as if they were some divine determiner of prosperity, Belgium and the U.S. today remain “two democracy glass half full, not half empty.

Let’s start with America. We have indeed come a long way. And at a time, when others of our allies and perhaps even the forces of nature or the gods have not made the road easy. In early 2009, when this new Administration came to office, Americans were waking up every morning and checking the newspaper and the internet to see which bank might collapse that day so that they could transfer their accounts in time. Europeans at that time were furiously blaming America and filing lawsuits against American institutions for collapsing their banking systems as well.

Two year later, the picture has indeed changed radically. We have gone from lines outside of banks to withdraw money, to lines outside of banks to protest bank profits and bonuses, to no lines outside of banks. After having lost private sector jobs every month since long before the last presidential election, the U.S. economy has now added private sector jobs every month for the last 18 months. In that period, the U.S. has added 2.4 million private sector jobs. Think about that – at a time when the U.S. and this administration is under criticism for the failure to create jobs, it has created in 18 months about 60 percent as many jobs as exist in all of Belgium. And what is most shocking, for many of those months, for the first time in decades, the U.S. economy has added manufacturing jobs. You see, manufacturing jobs in the U.S. have been declining since 1980, and precipitously since 2000. In the 8 years that preceded this Administration, the U.S. had lost 6 million manufacturing jobs. But

since early 2010, the U.S. has gained nearly 300,000 manufacturing jobs. We are back to competing in sectors we had indeed long abandoned. And the car industry, on life support at the start of this period, is one of the engines of the economy.

All of that has been done in the context of such global disarray as the Eurozone challenges.

But the hole created by the financial crisis was indeed deep, and even expanding manufacturing and creating new jobs equal to 60% of all the jobs in Belgium leaves the U.S. with unacceptably high unemployment. So plainly more should be done.

But can more be done in the political climate that exists in the U.S.? I don't know. The President laid out a Jobs Package, but can it be passed? Can progress be made? I don't know. I am not here as a Democrat or Republican but as an Ambassador. So I blame neither side. But plainly, whether due to the constant media attention of 24 hour TV news, politics has gotten to be somewhat closer to sports and the results are at a minimum inefficient.

So our economy has rallied, has a ways to go, but politics may prevent it from getting there.

And yet, at a least some level, having the freedom to debate politics at the cost of efficiency and some prosperity is a luxury that for the most part the U.S. can afford. When faced with the default of the debt ceiling politics – a step too far – both political parties in the U.S. found a way to prevent tragedy.

Switching to this side of the Atlantic, the picture in Belgium is not too much different. Indeed, Belgium too has recovered relatively well from the financial crises. Belgium is famous for allegedly having no government but has been governed famously. Belgium ran a terrific presidency of the EU; its 2011 budget was adopted quickly and far exceeds the requirements of EU; it is in an easy position to adopt its 2012 budget; its projected growth for next year is the highest in Europe (including Germany); it has maintained an important role in Afghanistan and it took a leadership role in Libya. The Belgian government is fully open for business and indeed none of the stellar results are surprising. The supposed "caretaker" government is composed of experienced leadership. For example, Didier Reynders is one of the longest or the longest serving Finance Ministers in Europe and Pieter De Crem is the longest serving Minister of Defense in NATO. By all objective measures other than politics, the future for Belgium shines brightly while storm clouds hang over many other countries in Europe.

And yet, for all of its clear and demonstrable success, Belgium too finds itself on the edge. Like the U.S., politics seems to create doubt where economics and experience should eliminate it.

Yet, for me, despite being here two years, despite well understanding the controversy between the North and the South, the political interference in greater prosperity in Belgium is even somewhat more mystifying than in the U.S. You see, as I alluded to earlier, Belgium in fact, is one of the most politically unified countries on the planet. It sounds so astounding that I better repeat it just so you can be sure that I did in fact say it: Belgium is one of the most politically unified countries on the planet.

You see, most countries have significant substantive disagreements among their political parties. Over climate. Or health care. Over foreign policy. Over abortion and a women's rights to choose. Over debt ceilings. The gap for example in the United States between the tea party and liberal Democrats is quite large. Belgium would fit within one goalpost on the net—nowhere near the gap itself.

But like the U.S., Belgium too has the luxury to some extent of tolerating more doubt as a product of the inefficiency of democracy. When all agree on health care and climate, the difference between building a bridge or a tunnel can matter just as fiercely.

So shouldn't we feel depressed about or perhaps scorn for two countries who allow politics to invade prosperity at a time when we need government to be efficient and to solve our problems? I assure you that I too can feel frustrated. But if we got rid of the inefficiency of democracy and of contested politics, whom would you silence – Tea Party members or Democrats? Francophones or Flemish? The question shows that the price we have paid is well worth the return.

Haven't we both already prospered—indeed, haven't we already won – by having the freedom to opt for democracy over efficiency. Haven't we seen so many others opt to pay much higher prices in such places as Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya? Indeed, wouldn't the planet itself be so much more prosperous if such political inefficiency were able to reign in Iran? Indeed the democracy glasses in the U.S. and Belgium remain half-full, not half-empty at all.

It may be up to you to fill the glasses up. As I look around this room, I see the next Barack Obama, the next Steve Jobs. I see the leaders who will carry our countries to our next era of partnership, a partnership that brings prosperity to all the world. Indeed I see leaders greater than today's leaders: you are multilingual, come from a country of many identities and are building a European Union of many countries. It will be up to you to keep that link with the young leaders of my country strong. So I encourage you to leave Mons, leave Belgium -- but just for a while. Consider studying or interning in the U.S. To help you get there, I am joined by my Public Affairs staff today, but more importantly by our Student Advisor Erica Lutes and by the wonderful administrator of the Belgian-American Educational Foundation Marie Claude Hayoit. They will be here after the Q& A to consult with you about study abroad programs with the U.S.

Thanks so much to all of you and all the best.