

## **Speech Asscher - Progressive Governance Conference 24 April 2014**

### **Fighting Injustice**

Ten years ago Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was brutally murdered by a home-grown terrorist. The killer was a young man of Moroccan descent. Raised and schooled just a few miles away from where we are now.

In an attempt to understand the world and circumstances he grew up in, Dutch journalist Margalith Kleijwegt wrote the book *Invisible parents*, about class 2K of a black high school in his neighbourhood.

She described the powerless parents and a chaotic school where those in front of the class were forced to be policemen instead of teachers. Where children did not show up in class for months on end, without the school taking any real action.

She talked to parents who did not have a clue about the world their children were living in. Parents who sometimes literally did not even know the location of the school.

I'd like you to keep this image in mind.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to speak to you tonight. And it has been a great pleasure to be among so many progressives from so many different countries.

The discussions tonight have been challenging and inspiring. And before we all head to the bar, I'd like to talk to you about the responsibility that we progressives share.

Fighting injustice.

Take for example the Bulgarian men who respond to an ad in the local paper. They are told they can work as truck drivers in Belgium for 1500 euros a month. They can't believe their luck.

On their arrival in Zeebrugge, they are set to work for the Belgian Transport Company Transeco. But they never receive the promised 1500 euros. Some work 110 hours in only 11 days, and get paid 70 euros. That's 50 cents per hour!

Their pay is cut back because their fuel consumption is supposedly too high.

When not driving, they sleep in pairs in the truck cabin on the company's parking lot. After a while they take up the courage to complain to the Belgium police.

Last month this company was ordered to shut down for two years. The owner got a three-year sentence, his wife and the Bulgarian middlemen 18 months. They were fined 38 500 euros. But we know there are many companies just like this one.

You can ask the truck drivers who work for Albert Keijzer, a cargo company based near Amsterdam. Every single day, they see foreign trucks driving the Dutch highways. Seemingly powerless, they look at these competing companies dodging Dutch labour laws to cut down on labour costs. And by doing so, they are putting companies that do want to play by the rules out of

business. Leaving these truckers unemployed.

Some of them blame the Polish, Bulgarian or Romanian truck drivers who 'steal' their jobs.

All of them blame the competing companies, which are dodging regulations.

They blame the government, which is failing to act.

They blame Europe, which has opened up its internal borders, without protecting their livelihood.

Or let me take you back to Cyprus, one year ago. When ordinary Cypriots could not draw money out of the ATM machines. And their local branch was shut to avoid a bankrun.

The beautiful island had become a tax haven for rich foreigners and a money laundering paradise for Russian mobsters. And when everything went well, nobody complained.

But with an overblown and under-regulated banking sector, Cyprus plunged into a deep crisis when neighbouring Greece started to fall.

To stave off national bankruptcy, Cyprus had to sign a rescue deal with the European Union. A deal that was a radical departure from Eurozone policy up till that moment. For the first time in the euro crisis, private account holders were forced to co-finance the bailout: to bail in.

When the new head of Eurozone finance ministers, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, stated that Cyprus should be seen as an example, maybe even a template for future bank crises-management, he became the laughing stock of Financial Europe.

Clearly, this new Dutch guy did not understand the rules of the game yet. The rules of our free-rider economy. Where banking profits are private and losses are pushed off on the taxpayers.

The three pictures I just painted have something in common.

First, a clear injustice. Unfairness, modern inequality.

Second, a general belief that this injustice is impossible to fix. That this injustice is to be accepted as a result of immigration we wanted, the markets we created, the Europe we designed for ourselves.

Triple wrong and a triple deceit of our core values.

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow progressives,

Some of us blame the Third Way for all things that went wrong. In their search for economic growth Blair, Clinton and Kok supposedly lost sight of our common values. I don't know.

I don't care for a final verdict on the rights and wrongs of the Third Way.

I do care where the Third Way was supposed to be leading: Social justice in a market economy. That objective will never be reached if we desperately return to solutions of the past or impotent rhetoric. And it will certainly not be reached if we become defenders of market failure and apologetics of modern injustice. Defenders of the status quo.

And so we must work hard to transform Europe, improve our economy, improve the chances of every single individual and fight for values money can't buy.

As the Deputy Prime Minister, working in coalition with the Conservatives, leading the country in times of economic crisis and budget deficits, I know it is hard.

But I also know it is possible. It is possible to remain a progressive at heart. It is possible to follow your social democratic instincts in everything you do.

So, as progressives, let's formulate a shared agenda of radical change.

Let's embrace our old goals and start working on our future.

Let us strive to remain or reclaim the movement for the Middle class.

A shared agenda to fight the new inequalities of today.

This means we have to fight for work, fair and decent work. To decrease inequalities in income and in wealth. To stimulate a new, sustainable economy, providing the middle class jobs of the 21st century.

And, my friends, we also have to fight the new inequalities in life chances and security. The insecurity for people who got stuck in insecure low paid flexible jobs and the inequalities in chances between kids in good schools and kids in bad schools.

The examples I have given tonight are not just socially relevant. They are at the core of the future of our movement. Of our *raison d'être*.

Is social change of this magnitude even conceivable in this day and age? We know it will not be easy; it will not go as fast as we would like. But we are making progress.

Take the Cyprus banking crisis.

Jeroen Dijsselbloem pushed back the risks onto those who are responsible. He withstood the pressure of the financial elites in the City and chose to fight for common sense.

And now this new and deeply social-democratic approach has become mainstream with the advent of the European Banking Union.

I am very proud of Jeroen.

And last week Europe took a first but important step in the battle against social dumping. The battle against fraud and abuse at the expense of the posted workers.

When I first addressed the negative aspects of the free movement of workers, people accused us of the usual things. Ranging from xenophobia to downright racism. But things have started to shift.

And we are coming to an understanding that in order to protect the freedom of movement, we have to take measures.

EU citizens have the right to earn a living wage. Hence each member state needs to guarantee a decent income that meets people's basic needs. This way, working becomes profitable and no one has to see their children grown up in poverty. Progressive parties should fight for this in their governments and the new Commission should promote this.

Europe needs to remain a vehicle to improve the lives of its citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The road to prosperity should not be paved with disposable work. After all, disposable work creates disposable people.

So we cannot allow ourselves to sit back and accept the status quo. To fight for workers' rights is not a faint memory of the past, rather it is the struggle of today.

As Ed Miliband stated, we must fight against the conviction that in order to win the global race people have to lose.

I believe we have time on our side.

You can feel it in the air. Internationally the indignation about inequality is growing.

Even the IMF — not exactly the most progressive institute on this planet — is now advocating redistribution of income.

No longer it is held as self-evident that higher minimum wages are a brake on economic growth. In the United States there is a lively discussion about raising the federal minimum wage. And in Germany introducing a minimum wage is one of the most important aims of the new Große Koalition.

But fighting inequality must be more than just fighting income inequality.

So I am proud that we took some first but important steps to strengthen the position of workers with temporary contracts in the Netherlands.

In a Social Deal, government, trade unions AND employers agreed to make sure this group has a foundation it can count on.

I introduced a Bill in Parliament reforming our labour market. And for the first time in decades it improves security for flexible workers while maintaining the level of protection for workers with indefinite contracts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last week I went back to that same school in Amsterdam. After a colossal defeat in the local elections, I was moved to see what I saw. The same journalist presented a new book.

Ten years ago this school saw her as an enemy. Now they take her for the ally she is. The classroom, transformed into a reception room, was filled with people, who like her, had become very closely involved with the school. Among them were an overwhelming amount of progressives. Progressives with and without membership cards.

A collective force of change for the good.

Because a progressive is a combination of a hothead and a cool engineer

Of fury and impatience.

Of indignation and stamina.

And while it is easy to get fired up by indignation over injustice, it is also hard to have the stamina to make a real difference.

These people do have that stamina. They all contributed in their own way to bring about change.

Because they could not look away.

They could simply not give up on these children.

Not because it was written in the party manifestos. Not even because it was their job.

But because it is what is in our DNA: Sharing responsibility. Challenging the status quo. Reaching for the impossible and just keep on fighting, step by step for improvement.

And in that classroom, in one of the more troubled neighbourhoods of this beautiful city, the audacity of hope was almost palpable.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us be inspired by those people in that classroom.

Let us never give up and fight for our ideals.

Together.

Thank you for your attention.