European Conference
**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:
What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

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Opening Speech

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- The spoken word takes precedence -

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thinking about European citizenship, we must also think about what it is to be European. To be European is also to be Dutch or to be German or to be British. I am always fascinated by the differences, which define who we are and by the stereotypes we have of each other. One of my former colleagues from the Labour government in the United Kingdom, Gisela Stuart, was born German. She ran for election once in her home city of Birmingham, and while campaigning, she was stopped by a lady in the street who said: 'You're German aren't you?'
So Gisela said: 'I have lived here for more than 20 years, my children are English, my husband is English…'
Still, the lady insisted: 'You're German, aren't you?' And Gisela said: 'Well, you know I speak perfect English and I went to school here, and…'
And again the lady: 'Yes, yes but you're German aren't you?' So then she just gave up and said: 'Yes I am German.' And the lady said: 'Good, then I'll vote for you, because we could use some law and order around here.'

These stereotypes do give us some impression of how we see each other in Europe. But identity is also complex. I couldn't be European without first being Dutch. And I couldn't be Dutch without first being from Limburg, and I couldn't be from Limburg if I wasn't born in Maastricht. So we have all these complex identities, and the distinction that people seek between being either Dutch or European has nothing to do with the complexity in our identity. It has to do with the question of loyalty, which is a different question and has a lot to do with how we think about citizenship.

Shortly before he committed suicide in Brazil in 1942, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig completed his memoir, *Die Welt von Gestern*, *The World of Yesterday*. In his memoir, Zweig recounts the Europe of his youth, where, before the First World War any European – provided he could afford it – could travel freely, without a passport, throughout the European continent.

That world was gone forever, Zweig believed, and the final lines of his memoir describe his deep sense of loss. A shadow hung over him, and though he hoped that his friends would witness a new dawn, he himself couldn't see it. With Zweig, and also people like Joseph Roth three years before, the old Europe died a little more.

The European Union has recaptured a little of Europe as it was at the beginning of the 20th century, and it is especially fitting, in this commemorative week of the First World War, that we remind ourselves of how easily even a cosmopolitan, technologically advanced continent – as Europe was at the beginning of the 20th century – can descend into barbarism.

Today, we are talking about European citizenship. What *is* that? What does it mean? We must never forget that there is a difference between Europe and the institutions of the European Union. Europe, for those who love culture, has been a very real entity for centuries. But this Europe is not the same as that of the EU institutions, which have become so far removed from the public and the public discussion that they sometimes seem to block our view of the true and tangible Europe. I don't believe there's much value in a concept of European citizenship calibrated to these institutions. But before I discuss why, I would first like to invoke Jürgen Habermas.

Habermas, a leading European intellectual who was rightly awarded the Erasmus Prize last month, familiarised us with two important concepts. The first is that of the public sphere, or *Öffentlichkeit*. The second is that of a transnational democracy.

First, let's discuss *Öffentlichkeit*. Habermas argues that a public sphere is necessary for any political entity to take root and develop. In the late 18th century, at the start of an era of revolution that lasted well into the 19th century, this *Öffentlichkeit* not only sprang up in the salons of the French bourgeoisie, but also developed through something rather novel: mass media – books, pamphlets and, from the 19th century, commercial newspapers with growing circulations. Some regard this newspaper circulation as a vital point in establishing a national consciousness, one which came to life in the ritual performed simultaneously by so many each morning: walking to the letterbox to pick up today's paper. People felt that in reading the news they were part of something larger: a shared national experience, documented in print.

Habermas' second concept is that of *transnational democracy*. The European sphere, he argues, should constitute a transnational democracy. Europeans act within the collective bodies of their nation states, but are citizens of the European continent as well. They belong first and foremost to their respective nation states, but are also endowed with individual European rights and the means to petition against whatever is cooked up in Brussels. This dual citizenship supports a kind of European politics that fits somewhere in between a confederacy and a mere collection of unorganised nation-states.

When we combine these two concepts, *Öffentlichkeit* and transnational democracy, we can argue that the growth of a European *Öffentlichkeit* through the Internet is a promising development. The euro crisis gave rise to increased awareness and – thanks to online op-eds – even a kind of transnational online European debate. What helps is that, by now, especially the younger generation speak the same language all across Europe, and that language is *bad English*.

Optimists see a blossoming European *Öffentlichkeit* in this growing connectivity. Some say: 'Thanks to the internet, it's only a matter of time before we have a true European brotherhood.'

But the truth is that history gives no guarantees. Many Europeans failed to see the First World War coming, and couldn't understand why such an advanced continent, where many people lived in new-found prosperity, could be so barbaric in its ideology and politics. Stefan Zweig was bewildered as to why history unfolded as it did. The optimists of the day woke up to a bitter reality. If you have the time, you could look up the BBC documentary Michael Portillo made about trains. Portillo is a former politician who took a travel guide written in

1930 and travelled across Europe by train. He travelled the same way people would have travelled in 1930. And you can see the radical difference between Europe in this 1930s travel guide and Europe after the Second World War.

I think we tend to have a very strong identification with the transition that occurred in the 1930s and 1940s. But I believe the beginning of the century – in terms of society and politics – is perhaps more telling. In the Netherlands too little attention is paid to the First World War, because we managed to stay out of it. But for the way Europe changed, it was as monumental as the Second World War. The historical developments that came from it, and led to the events of 1938–1945 and after, perhaps only ended in 2004, with the accession to the European Union of states formerly on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall.

I don't want to succumb to pessimism. I think there are some inspiring examples of successful active citizenship in Europe today. Thanks to the Internet, European networks of citizens are starting to gain momentum. A new-networked kind of citizenship is evolving, especially in the younger generations. I think that we underestimate – people of my generation especially – the profound, worldwide change the Internet is driving. It changes the way people interact on a fundamental level, and it changes the way they think and operate. In my generation, we trained the brain to remember things. And the act of training your brain to remember things was also the act of training your brain to select and analyse things.

Now this generation – my kids' generation – they don't really need to remember things because they can look everything up. They know much more because all the information's at their fingertips. But the question is, how do we teach young people to analyse things – that's something that has become more difficult. And I believe that *our* analytical skills could be extremely helpful when combined with *their* skill – far better developed than ours – to look for information worldwide in the blink of an eye. I think that cooperation between generations could be extremely, extremely helpful.

This is one aspect of citizenship that we should develop, because another weakness of the younger generation, if I may be so bold, is that their sense of organisation is not as developed is in my generation. To get things done, we knew you had to get organized. And in this generation, they often think: 'Once I've put my opinion on the Internet, I'm finished.' But to get things done, you have to be able to influence developments and structures. It takes time and effort. The younger generation has to empower itself, take that power and put its influence into an organisation or form that will change the world. Because my optimism is linked to the younger generation taking responsibility for the structures that are in place, and changing them from the outside or from the inside to create a world that is more tolerant than it is today.

Returning to citizenship, we must still ask ourselves: 'What does it mean to be European?'

There are no European demos, we were often told. And of course it is true in the sense that there are no *demos* at European level that resembles the kind of collective public unity we see in nation-states. But should there be? Is it not enough to have a European consciousness?

This brings me to my key point. I commend the efforts of everyone who is working to build and sustain European citizenship. But that citizenship must be more than a formal set of rights and procedures through which Europeans can take part in the political process.
The Europeans who marched against ACTA for instance or signed the water initiative may not have known much about their formal democratic rights. But they knew something more important: they knew *what* they wanted, and why they wanted it. Europe must be something that lives in people's hearts, not just in their minds.

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Successful European citizenship cannot be taught rationally, but must aim to develop a European consciousness. Not to supersede the national or regional loyalties people feel, but to strengthen and support them, because they co-exist, side by side. You can't create that consciousness by ticking some list of educational boxes. Like so many of life's most precious experiences, we have to learn, step by step, to really appreciate its value. This is a long and subtle process, and often one quite unrelated to any formal curriculum of European citizenship. It is an attitude. It is not something you can set in stone. And we should embrace it as such.

Europeanness: we recognise it in art, music and literature and sports. In the diversity of European landscapes and the enticements of local life and custom; in the amazing music of Stromae, a young Belgian artist with multiple identities – the son of a Rwandan father and Belgian mother – who speaks of those things that people are mad about, happy about, or worried about.

To be European is not to cheer or champion the EU's institutions. To be European is rather to have a vague, somewhat sentimental love for this old continent we live in, and to hope that we can use cooperation – which I know can be difficult – to help our unique way of life withstand the challenges of the 21st century: environmental issues, globalisation, a world in flux, competition from other continents.

This European consciousness must be the foundation of our new European *Öffentlichkeit* and our European citizenship. It's about a shared history and a shared destiny. If you have too much historical awareness (as is the case in some European countries), you forget about your common destiny. If you have too little historical awareness, as is sometimes the case in the Netherlands, you won't really know where you're coming from, and you can never find the way you want to go. So as part of our *Öffentlichkeit*, perhaps the best contribution to creating and understanding European citizenship is to have better history education in European schools.

Nationalist politicians prop up false ideas of entire Europeanisation, and cast themselves as the ones protecting national identity or national interest. Since its dawn, nationalism has fed on the politics of exclusion, finding someone in the state who for some reason in *their* mindset does not belong there, consequently blaming that group for everything that's wrong, and trying to exclude them from the nation-state. This is not something that will ever die in Europe, it is part of who we are as Europeans, this idea of blaming or identifying a group we can shove aside. We should, as Europeans, be conscious of the fact that this is part of a psyche, part of who we are. What we must answer is how we deal with that very human concept of wanting to exclude and to blame. I think Europeanism should be about finding ways of dealing with this part of our common history and our common psyche in a way that does not exclude old or new minorities.

Achieving this requires the understanding that Europe, through the ages, found its strength in knowing who you are yourself, but also – as Camus would have said – in trying to see the world through somebody else's eyes. Because that's what makes you stronger and that teaches you something about yourself, too. We are all Europeans: Let's accept each other in our diversity and make this European *Öffentlichkeit* work, moving us forward in this new century.