

Australia Day 2018

Ambassador Mason's speech

I would like to welcome each and every one to my home, although it looks more like the Louvre this evening with all these beautiful works of art.

My good friend, Roelof van Ees head of the protocol department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, goes to National Days all the time. But I think I will break protocol tonight because we have only invited our best friends in the Netherlands, those people who have helped the Australian Embassy on its way, have helped the Embassy and me and indeed Australian-Dutch relations. Thank you so very much to my neighbours, tribunal heads, those from law enforcement, culture, musicians, dancers, business, science. We have the full gamut of the bilateral relationship here tonight. Thank you all for coming.

Australia and the Netherlands: a relationship grounded in values

I was reflecting this afternoon, that I have been here now for two and a half years and I am returning home in about six months or so. Australia Day gives you pause to reflect. It is true that Australia and the Netherlands are great friends. But we are more than that. Of course we are friends. This is a wonderful country, a comfortable country, a civilized and wealthy country. And very handsome people as well. It is a comfortable place to live. But our relationship is much more substantial than just friendship now. We are now more than good friends. In fact we are trusted partners and that partnership is becoming stronger and more important. It is a partnership based upon values.

The values of the Netherlands and Australia are similar. We have a similar outlook: we are both great maritime nations, we are both outward looking trade oriented economies. And as I always say, both the Netherlands and Australia are not scared of the world, our young people are to be found all over it.

We are both sensible middle powers. We don't believe that might is always right and we also believe in a rules based international order that, indeed, the Netherlands helped to create so many years ago. I believe our friendship will become more and more important as the years go by. And I will say this in my valedictory cable: Roelof, you can tell the Ministry of Foreign Affairs this, I am going to say that the Netherlands is now Australia's greatest friend in Europe. And in fact of greater significance and of growing importance to Australia.

Reflecting on Australia Day

Let me reflect on Australia Day for a second. It is challenging because Australia Day forces us to think about our national identity and what it means to be Australian. And one of the things that the Netherlands and Australia share is a sense of native egalitarianism. We believe that people should rise by virtue of their merits and not because of their birth. And yet as I have been reminded over the last few weeks, not everyone in Australia has received the same harvest, has received the same wealth and opportunity as others. There is debate

in Australia at this very moment about whether our Indigenous people have received enough of Australia's bounty.

There are other debates. Will we become a republic or should we change our flag? These are very sensitive cultural issues in Australia that go to our national identity and who we are. An issue that we share with the Netherlands, and this also sensitive, is immigration. I know the Netherlands have been thinking about this now as Australia has for many years. I like to think that our debate, our discussions about immigration, in Australia, have become rather more mature than they were 20 years ago. But we still have a way to go. Facing issues of cultural and national identity I hope that Australia can meet these issues with maturity. I know in the Netherlands you have sought to reflect on your history honestly and fearlessly. That takes courage. And I am confident Australia will also meet this challenge.

Art exhibition "Reimagining First Encounters: Portraits and Prints"

The exhibition I am happy to open tonight, again touches on Australia's history and national identity. Aboriginal Australians have the longest continuous cultural history of any group of people on earth - around 50 to 60.000 years. Australian indigenous art is born of this ancient culture and examples exist that date back 30.000 years. The more contemporary indigenous art work displayed here tonight is confronting. This art work forces us to question our own assumptions about early contact between European (Dutch) and indigenous Australians. Michael Cook's work repositions indigenous Australians into European fashions and forms. Geert Snoeijers portraits beautifully capture, in some ways, the opposite. Dutch features are reflected in the faces of indigenous people. On Australia Day we celebrate Australia and the unique joy of being Australians. But we are a strong enough country and a strong enough peoples to honestly reflect on our history and our identity. This exhibition helps us to better reflect on who we are and where we have been.