

Welcome speech at the presentation of the European Public Sector Award (EPSA) on 17 November 2011 in the Council Chamber of the Gouvernement Building in Maastricht

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKIE3IUkpk8>

Ladies and gentlemen,

Were you expecting our heroine “Blondie” to win this duel between citizen and public servant? I feel sure you were. After all, you are here today because your project to encourage better service, greater civic participation or sustainability in the public sector has been nominated for the European Public Sector Award. Your commitment is bridging the gaps that exist between citizens and government. Your work enables the “Blondies” of this world to use their unmistakable talents to tackle more meaningful challenges than fighting a battle with bureaucracy. In my opinion, you are all winners of the “Blondie” trophy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to our government buildings and welcome to this chamber. It is a location steeped in historical significance. It was in this very room that the Maastricht Treaty was signed, 19 years ago. That treaty represented a major step towards greater European union and paved the way for the euro. What better place to celebrate the achievements of outstanding public service providers from EU member states?

“Assess Yourself and Learn from the Best.” That is the motto of the award that will be presented today. It is a motto that holds particular appeal for me as a “learning governor”. I see myself as a learner because I have only been serving in this esteemed office for approximately six weeks. In fact you are the first European-wide audience that I am privileged to welcome here. But more to the point, I am a fervent advocate of lifelong learning. (It is no accident that, before taking up this position, I was Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Dutch Open University, an educational organization that gives people the opportunity to develop themselves academically at any time of life. In another job, I was even linked with the organizers of this award: I worked for the foundation responsible for housing EIPA, the lifelong learning institute for European civil servants.

In my view, it is essential that Europe should be a lifelong learning society if it is to continue to play a meaningful part in the world. And in such a society, the sharing of knowledge is vital. That is exactly what this award stands for: be good and share it.

Yesterday we saw how all of you – our fifteen nominees – put this into practice by sharing your outstanding projects with us in a series of presentations. And today you are here in this beautiful historic setting waiting excitedly to hear whether or not you will be taking home the award. Despite the rising tension, I hope you will forgive me if I make a few relevant points first.

To return to the video for a moment: it's an entertaining illustration of the fact that you need to be pretty resourceful if you choose to sit down across the table from the government. You will be confronted with an abundance of rules and procedures. Not only that, but the rules and procedures change as soon as you set foot across the border. Even if it is only the border with a fellow member state.

This is something we know all about here in the Province of Limburg. Our geographical location means we are often closer to our foreign neighbours than to parts of our own country. We have no qualms about living and working across the border and our Belgian and German neighbours are just as happy to return the favour. Yet even though the border can seem invisible, suddenly we find ourselves confronted with a whole different set of rules on the other side. It seems impossible to provide all of the right documents and copies in any given situation, not to mention knowing when to use the stapler! This can be a tough enough challenge when you speak the same language, never mind if you have to make yourself understood in French or German. Despite these challenges we are so Europe-minded in these parts that we do our utmost to cooperate.

Before I hand over to the next speaker, allow me to give you food for thought with a view to next year's award. Two weeks ago, the final post office in the Netherlands closed its doors. It was no longer needed and too expensive to run. With it, a natural meeting place has disappeared from our society for good. Inevitably, the rise of the internet led to our post offices becoming less and less busy. But still, their disappearance inspires a sense of loss. It also raises the key question of whether we are moving too far towards a dehumanized society. We no longer have to leave home or stand in a queue. We no longer have to interact with another human being in order to get things done ... One of the themes in this year's award was "Smart Public Service Delivery in a Cold Economic Climate". Perhaps next year it would be a good idea to add "the prevention of a Cold Social Climate". Especially in view of our ageing European population. It's a theme that is close to my heart but, dear nominees, it is time for me to make way and keep you in suspense no longer.

I will now hand over to the next speaker. As the excitement builds, I wish you all the very best but rest assured: in my eyes you are all winners. Who knows, we might meet again at a future award ceremony. And if not, I look forward to seeing you in Liège in 2017 for the Word Expo and Maastricht and the surrounding area in 2018 for the European Cultural Capital. There are more than enough reasons to return to our European microcosm. Come back and see us again soon!