

Lezing Nederland Amerika Instituut Limburg (NAIL) in Slot Schaesberg op 22 maart 2019

Ladies and gentlemen,

America and Limburg might not be close neighbors geographically, but we certainly have a bond. Historically, economically and – not in the last place, of course – by the presence of American military personnel in Brunssum. At NATO, for more than half a century.

So our bond goes back quite a long way, but you nevertheless thought it was now time to ask what I, as governor, of Limburg, actually do. Aside from the fact that you see me appearing on official occasions.

Such as 2 years ago at the 50th anniversary of NATO in Brunssum, but also every year at the moving Christmas celebration in the Groeve de Scharck cave in Maastricht and at Memorial Day at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten, or – for the Brits – Remembrance Sunday in November in Sittard.

And yes just in case you are thinking that this is going to be an extremely short speech, my position is not simply ceremonial. I am pleased to tell you more about it.

But first I must confess that I am not really a governor, but the King's Commissioner for the Province of Limburg. The Netherlands has 12 provinces and therefore also has 12 King's Commissioners, but I am the only one who is also called governor.

And as I trained as an historian, I can't resist giving you a brief explanation of why that is.

Any foreigner living here will have long since realized that Limburg is no ordinary Dutch province, but is quite unique thanks to its hills and its location being surrounded by Belgium and Germany.

But what you may not know is that we have, moreover, a very unique history. Because even though we became part of the then new Kingdom of the Netherlands in eighteen fifteen – after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo – we subsequently followed a slightly different route.

Between eighteen thirty and eighteen thirty-nine, we were also Belgian, and after that we were half-Dutch and half-German. It was not until eighteen sixty-seven that we became a normal Dutch province. That is why we celebrated our one hundred and fiftieth anniversary two years ago as a unique province of – and in – the Netherlands.

But before we *really* became a part of the Netherlands, it had started calling its Governors King's Commissioners.

This was a name change that we more or less ignored at the time, and never really introduced later...

...Limburgers simply continued to call the boss of their province 'governor'. Even the King has now accepted that. He, too, calls me governor.

But the fact that I am called so, does not make a governor in Limburg that same as a governor in the United States of America, of Ohio.

As Americans, you recognize a governor mainly as the leader of a state, such as California.

In contrast to a governor in Limburg in the Netherlands, an American governor is chosen directly by the electorate, and he or she has powers that vary from state to state but are almost always more extensive than those of his or her Dutch colleague. I am not chosen, but appointed by the Crown, which includes our ministers together with the King, our Head of State.

And that takes place on the nomination of the provincial Parliament, the directly elected administrators of our Province.

Ladies and gentlemen, as I have just said: America and Limburg have enjoyed a long bond. Both historical *and* economic.

An historical bond that started as early as the eighteen sixties and seventies, when many hundreds of Limburgers went in search of a better life in far-off America, but which acquired a very different dimension in the twentieth century.

A very different dimension that started on September 12, nineteen forty-four at 10 in the morning. When the men of A-company of the one hundred and seventeenth (117e) regiment of the thirtieth American Infantry Division – nicknamed Old Hickory – crossed the Belgian-Dutch border and liberated the little village of Mesch...

That was where the liberation of Limburg started; that was where the liberation of our country started. And there too – in Mesch – is where the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of our liberation will start this year.

A commemoration that will last just as long as the liberation of Limburg took, almost six months. And it promises to be very broad and diverse because the citizens – both young and old – are organizing most of the events themselves. So that they can pass on the great good that is freedom to the next generations...

But however important this anniversary commemoration may be, our annual commemoration on Memorial Day at the Netherlands American War Cemetery in Margraten is just as important.

I have the honor of speaking at this event each year. For this purpose, I always delve into the background of one or more of our liberators, who have stayed with us forever.

Who was he – or she – where did he come from, what was his personal situation, who were his parents, brothers and sisters, partners and perhaps even children...

In this way, I always try to create a story behind a cross, or behind a name on the Walls of the Missing in Margraten.

The way in which we moreover remember each day those who died, will also be dealt with in the contribution from the third speaker this evening.

But in addition to an historical bond, ladies and gentlemen, Limburg also has an economic bond with America. Our province has more than one hundred American businesses. These include: Boston Scientific, Medtronic Bakken Research Center, Hauzer, Xerox, Nordson, Office Depot and fashion label Michael Kors...

... And the provincial government is often involved in the acquisition and establishment of these businesses. And that gradually leads me to the content of my position.

As governor, ladies and gentlemen, I have various tasks to perform; four different tasks in fact.

Firstly, the State tasks. These are the tasks that I perform for central government and therefore not for the province. Think of: appointing mayors, monitoring the appointments procedure and organizing visits of members of the Royal Family to Limburg. Moreover, I also have a role in advising on who is eligible for a royal honor.

The **second** task that I have is that of chair of the Provincial Government, our provincial parliament. That parliament has forty-seven members, almost all of whom are part-time politicians. Elections are held for this parliament once every four years, and most recently two days ago.

I chair the parliamentary meeting, but I do not have a voting right.

As chair, I ensure that meetings take place in the correct manner, procedures are followed and I keep ORDERRRRR... Although you will never hear me say it like the speaker in the House of Commons in the UK. (On the other hand, it would never be such a chaos here...)

The parliament deals with a huge variety of subjects. Think of: sustainable spatial development, water management, the environment, energy and climate, vibrant and dynamic countryside, accessibility and regional public transport, regional economy, cultural infrastructure and preservation of historic building and sites, and the quality of public administration...

... So you could also ask yourself, are there any subjects that this parliament does not deal with?

Many of these duties are part of the so-called provincial tasks, however the parliament can also choose to deal with other subjects. Such as promoting healthy growth among children in Limburg, with quality food and sufficient exercise.

The **third** task is also a chairing position: that of chair of the Provincial Executive. Our – currently – five Provincial Executive members – or regional ministers - are the day-to-day administrators. They work for the province on a full-time basis and prepare and implement the decisions of the provincial parliament. This body also has its own responsibilities such as issuing permits, enforcement and granting subsidies.

As chair of the Provincial Executive, I also have my own portfolio including subjects such as:

general legal affairs,

official and administrative integrity,

coordination of national and international cross-border cooperation,

communication,

strategy and

lobbying.

And finally: the **fourth** task of the governor. That is the symbolic function of this position. As a sort of first citizen – or perhaps I can better call it ‘first ambassador’ of this province – I am a figurehead; I represent Limburg with as much vigor and passion as I can.

Let me illustrate those tasks, those roles, using a few examples. I would like to use Brunssum as a guideline, the municipality where JFC Brunssum is located and with which many of you therefore have a bond.

In my first role, as representative of central government, I am responsible for recruiting and selecting a new mayor. I do so, however, based on a profile – that describes the type of mayor they are looking for – drawn up by the municipal council. And it is also the municipal council that chooses its preferred mayor from my selection of about six to eight candidates.

Brunssum currently has Gerd Leers as acting mayor, who I can appoint myself as governor for a limited period. But it is, of course, the intention that he steps down in favor of a 'permanent' mayor who in turn – just like a King's Commissioner – is appointed by the Crown.

As chair of the Provincial Government – my second role – I chaired, for instance, the debate about the construction of the Buitenring, the new ring road that is almost finished and that runs close to JFC Brunssum.

This is a project for which our parliament has made available an amount of more than four hundred million euros. This is based on its budget right, which is one of the elementary competences of our parliament: making funds available for socially relevant projects.

In my third role, as chair of our day-to-day administrative body, I head the decision-making process relating to, for instance, the tender and execution procedure for the *Buitenring* ring road.

And as the Provincial Executive, we adopted a regional plan several weeks ago for the East Flank area in Brunssum, in order to facilitate large-scale economic development in that area.

The total area of 360 hectares will be entirely redeveloped. But in return, there will be: better connections, a facelift for business parks, new business lots and more space for green, energy generation and recreation.

And then – at last - my fourth and perhaps most visible role, that of ambassador of Limburg.

I will of course be appearing in that role again during the Worldfestival Parade Brunssum, that fantastic celebration held every four years that will be taking off again next year in two thousand and twenty.

As many of you will know, I enjoy being a guest in that ambassador's role when command changes hands and – as I said – when important anniversaries are celebrated, like in two thousand seventeen, during the fiftieth anniversary of NATO in Brunssum.

Ladies and gentlemen, that was my answer to your question about what a governor of Limburg actually does.

An answer in which I said that I was really not a governor at all, and that I cannot really be compared to a governor in America.

But what I *definitely* am, however, is your patron. A patron who is now inviting you to ask anything you still want to know about my position as King's Commissioner for the Province of Limburg.