

## 38<sup>e</sup> Olympiade Duivensport, 26 januari 2024

Goodmorning!

A warm welcome to everyone, from far away or just around the corner.

Welcome to the most international city in the Netherlands!

Where people come and go: international students, art dealers, lovers of the good life, researchers at our Brightlands campuses, negotiators for the future of Europe – it's a dovecote, one might say.

You are also visiting a region where people like to be part of traditions.

A place where we embrace our habits and history.

And where your sport - and passion - has been practiced for quite some time now.

Not just here, by the way, but also in Belgium and Germany, our neighbors, as in many nations around the world.

Worldwide, millions of people feel inspired by the stories of pigeons performing extraordinary things.

However, as with any sport or tradition, or with basically anything in life... it is subject to change as well.

It has become more professional through the years: the breeding, the training, the racing.

There is a lot more money involved.

And, fortunately, there is also much more attention to animal welfare.

But no matter the changes, pigeon racing remains fundamentally fascinating.

How do these little birds get it done anyway?

Is it the wind?

The sun?

The magnetic field of the earth?

Science teaches us more and more about the world. And yet how pigeons guide themselves and find their way home still remains, in part, a mystery.

For me as a politician, in mystery and in not-knowing there is always a hidden promise. It makes the impossible, possible. And that is exactly what we need right now.

We are living in times of tension, in many places around the world.

Perhaps you come from such an area or maybe you have family and friends in a place where borders are ignored in ways only birds are allowed to.

If so, you know better than anyone that hope is one of the tools you never want to lose.

You are right to continue to believe in hope, despite the greatest misery.

Throughout history, peace has managed to find its path in ways as mysterious as how doves find their destinations.

Dear all of you,

Your next few days here in Maastricht will be all about meeting, connecting and enjoying each other's company.

I hope you are well aware of this extraordinary gift.

Please get home safely afterwards – just as those miraculous pigeons do.

And make sure you visit our beautiful province again in the future!

Thank you.