

The 39th Singapore Lecture, by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte,

24 November 2016, Singapore

'The Netherlands, Singapore, our regions, our world: connecting our common future'

Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Professor Wang Gungwu, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, students,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you here today.

I'd also like to thank my host, Prime Minister Lee, for inviting me to visit your country.

2015 was a notable year for Singapore.

You celebrated fifty years of independence with a parade of 11,000 people, fireworks and 600,000 roses made from recycled plastic bags.

For me, those roses are typical of Singapore.

Both creative and responsible.

Even on a public holiday, you uphold the principles of the circular economy.

On 23 March of the same year your country was plunged into mourning by the death of Lee Kuan Yew.

He is greatly missed. In the words of his son and your prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, '*To many Singaporeans, and indeed others too, Lee Kuan Yew was Singapore.*'

Lee Kuan Yew's life ran parallel with Singapore's transformation from a colony to one of the best-performing countries in the world.

He was the architect of the republic.

In his memoirs he noted, '*We had to create a new kind of economy.*

Try new methods and schemes never tried before anywhere else in the world, because there was no other country like Singapore.'

His vision and dedication helped turn Singapore into an economic superpower.

With its low unemployment rate, high GDP, low levels of corruption, and well-maintained public spaces, Singapore has rightly been described as '*the little city that could*' and '*the envy of the world*'.

So what is your secret?

What makes us so jealous when we look at Singapore?

I expect you know better than I do.

But if I were to hazard a guess, I would say it's all down to education.

Singaporeans make Singapore what it is, and this country invests in its people.

You value your human capital.

Thanks to ISEAS and other research and education institutions, Singapore is a world-class knowledge hub.

Its universities are among the best in Asia and even the world.

But it all starts with primary schools and teachers.

And they too are among the world's best.

Your focus on education is all part of your focus on the future.

On the next generations.

On the world in 2020, 2030 and even 2050.

Indeed, your unofficial motto is 'staying ahead of the curve'.

You ask: what will the city look like in the future?

How will we live and work together?

You don't say 'let's worry about that later', because today we sow the seeds of tomorrow's world.

Take those recycled plastic bags.

Or your urban environment, where breathtaking architecture goes hand in hand with sustainability.

Lee Kuan Yew wrote that there was no other country like Singapore.

And that is still true today.

But let me ask you to picture a map of the world.

It will show that Singapore and the Netherlands are thousands of kilometres apart, at opposite ends of the giant Eurasian land mass.

From the Netherlands, Singapore is one of the most distant places you can get to by land.

And yet, our similarities are striking.

Let me start with the obvious ones: Singapore and the Netherlands are both small in terms of size, but big in terms of influence.

Not without pride, you call yourselves 'the little red dot', and I can see why.

Singapore may only be a dot on the map, but its influence is out of all proportion to its geographical size.

For our part, the Netherlands also punches above its weight.

We are slightly bigger than a dot, but not by much.

And if you look at the World Economic Forum's ranking of the most competitive economies, you'll find Singapore in second place and the Netherlands at number four, and we beat the

Germans last year. Both countries also make the top ten in the Global Innovation Index. And what about the 'Where-to-be-born index'? Here, too, the Netherlands and Singapore are both in the top ten.

How can we explain this?

It's partly to do with our strategic coastal locations.

Singapore is the springboard to the big economies of China and Southeast Asia.

The Netherlands is the gateway to a continent of over 500 million consumers who have money to spend.

So it's hardly surprising that trade is in our DNA.

With airports serving millions of passengers a year, and two of the biggest and busiest ports in the world, Singapore and the Netherlands have evolved into logistical hubs.

And your ties with the Port of Rotterdam are excellent.

A coastal location obviously has many benefits, but it also has a disadvantage.

If the polar ice caps melt, both Singapore and the Netherlands are at risk of flooding.

But as the late Dutch football legend Johan Crujff was fond of saying, 'Every disadvantage has an advantage'.

Keeping back the water has made us creative.

It has made us think in terms of opportunities instead of problems.

If we don't have enough room, we make space.

By turning water into land.

We have created polders and all the same is now taking place at Pulau Tekong.

Or by building upwards instead of outwards.

This may help explain why Lee Kuan Yew and the Dutchman Albert Winsemius got on so well when they met in 1960.

They recognised something in each other.

They were both pragmatic, optimistic and forward-looking.

Winsemius came to Singapore in 1960 as an economic adviser.

His involvement with your country lasted until 1984.

In that time he played an important role in industrialisation and the development of the port. Albert Winsemius Lane in the west of Singapore bears witness to the lasting impression he made.

And this was a two-way process.

An article in *The Straits Times* with the telling headline '*Adviser turned friend*' noted that

Winsemius '*became so committed to Singapore's cause that even members of his own family started calling him a Singaporean*'.

Albert Winsemius advocated an 'open door' policy.

For him, the success of small industrialised nations like the Netherlands and Singapore depended on free trade and an open economy.

Lee Kuan Yew agreed wholeheartedly with Winsemius on this point.

We have to stand up for those shared values of free trade, openness and optimism.

The Netherlands and Singapore particularly in these days must form a united front.

Especially in today's world.

At a time when support for protectionism and nationalism is on the rise, when the British want to leave the EU, and when unrest is growing on the edges of our continents, it's important that we think hard about the future.

About what matters to us.

What will the world look like in 2020, 2030 and 2050?

How can we ensure a safe and prosperous future for our people?

We have no easy answers to these questions.

The trend towards ever growing free trade, which has brought our countries great prosperity, is now meeting with resistance.

In Europe, the Brexit vote has created uncertainty.

After Ireland and Malta, the Netherlands has the highest percentage of GDP derived from goods and services exported to the UK.

Both Singapore and the Netherlands will take a hit due to our positions in the global value chain.

And the Netherlands is losing an ally in the EU.

For now, little has changed.

The UK is still an EU member and still subject to EU rules.

It's up to Britain to take the first step.

But the Brexit vote does mean that we in the EU have to consider the way forward from here.

The bottom line is this: the EU post-Brexit will still number 27 member states that are fully committed to working for jobs, economic growth and the safety of their people.

It may not be 'business as usual', but one referendum in one member state will not endanger the Union as a whole.

The point of the European Union is to enable us to tackle problems and take opportunities that transcend nation states.

Member states each have their own interests, but generally we all want the same thing.

We all want growth and jobs.

We all want to promote Europe's stability and security.

We all want to do something about the refugee problem.

These common interests make up the EU's sphere of activity.

They are the basis for its support and legitimacy.

During my country's Presidency of the EU earlier this year I saw once again what a difference the EU can make.

How working together produces results that individual member states could never achieve working alone.

The Dutch economy is firmly anchored at the heart of the EU.

The Netherlands has the euro, it is part of the Schengen Area and it is one of the Union's founding members.

The EU single market is crucial to our trade position.

For a trading nation like mine, with an international mind-set, membership of the EU is vital. It means the Netherlands remains a safe and reliable location for foreign investment, and a gateway to major European markets, served by excellent infrastructure and logistics.

But it's important that the EU continues looking beyond its own borders.

We have to stay committed to securing free trade agreements so that the world stays connected.

Signing CETA with Canada was an important step.

The EU-Singapore free trade agreement is now before the European Court of Justice.

It's high time this agreement entered into force.

I appreciate the patience Singapore has shown.

The Netherlands stands ready to ratify at the earliest opportunity.

Because of our locations and our size, our two countries place a high value on a well-functioning international legal order.

The Netherlands plays an important role here, with The Hague as the legal capital of the world.

And the eminent lawyer, Professor Tommy Koh, has made a major contribution to the development of international maritime law, whose origins go back to a treatise by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, *The Free Sea*.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, on which Koh worked so hard, has become the standard point of reference for determining the rights and duties of nations in relation to the sea.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our era will be defined by how we respond to the forces ranged against globalisation, and how we respond to technological change.

The consensus behind free trade agreements is perhaps yesterday's reality.

And uncertainty and resistance to agreements may be the situation today.

But the solution for tomorrow is definitely cooperation, cooperation and cooperation.

We must not retreat into our own countries, behind walls, barriers and borders.

We need to go out into the world.

We need to embrace cooperation and show what it can accomplish.

Knowledge and innovation are the engines of future economic growth and the answer to tomorrow's questions.

How can we protect our nations from a rising sea level?

How can we continue to provide the world's growing population with sufficient drinking water, food and energy?

How can we deal with demographic aging and climate change?

We, the Netherlands and Singapore, have the resources to come up with the answers to these questions.

We can innovate together.

We both have dynamic and creative economies in which our universities, the private sector and government work together.

And we have a solid basis to build on.

The Netherlands is one of Singapore's main trading partners within the European Union.

And Singapore is by far the Netherlands' biggest trading and investment partner in the ASEAN region.

No fewer than 1,300 Dutch companies have established a presence in Singapore, in part as a springboard to the fledgling ASEAN Economic Community, for which they have high expectations.

They want to be part of ASEAN's continued development.

Our tradition of cooperation and knowledge-sharing goes back to Albert Winsemius and Lee Kuan Yew.

Since then Singapore and the Netherlands have continued working together in the sectors that are so important for our countries: water management, biomedicine, transport and urban infrastructure.

One example is NUSDeltares, the knowledge alliance between the National University of Singapore and Deltares, the Dutch water research institute.

It pools expertise on water management in both countries, so that we can reach new heights. In this way we are helping each other to keep water in check where necessary, and to use water where we can.

Cyberspace is another area which presents both opportunities and dangers.

The Netherlands and Singapore are among the most connected societies on the planet, but that also makes us vulnerable.

A cyberattack could have a major impact, on our own countries and regions, and even on the world as a whole.

That's why in recent years public, private and academic partners from Singapore and the Netherlands have been working together to keep our societies cyber-resilient.

Urban infrastructure is another subject that is familiar to both our countries.

How do we use limited space as efficiently as possible?

Climate change adds a second challenge.

How can you build in a way that causes minimal harm to the planet?

Singapore is leading the way here.

Your City in a Garden is now full of 'Green Mark' buildings – I'm honoured you named this system after me, by the way.

They meet the strictest requirements for sustainability.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition is demonstrating business leadership by anchoring sustainability in business models and practices.

And my government aims to have a fully fledged circular economy in place by 2050.

Businesses, public authorities and research institutions are working together towards this goal.

Lee Kuan Yew once said, *'What I fear is complacency.*

When things always become better, people tend to want more for less work.' Wise words.

His warning is especially relevant today.

We cannot afford to sit back and take our achievements for granted, as global trends have

shown once again.

We have to stand up for what we believe in: free trade, an open economy, democracy, and the rule of law.

We must not only safeguard the legacy of Lee Kuan Yew and Albert Winsemius, but also update it for the present day.

By promoting prosperity and quality of life, while staying mindful of the planet's limited resources.

And we must do so by drawing on all the courage, creativity and cooperative spirit we can muster.

These are the foundations on which today's Singapore and the Netherlands are built.

These are the foundations of our success.

Later today, I will be talking to young people from Dutch start-ups who are part of the Startup Academy.

Something about the Singaporean mind-set drew them here to make connections.

They are now planting the seeds which will determine what Singapore and the Netherlands will look like in 2020, 2030 and beyond.

They are connecting us to our common future.

And that means we can look forward to that future with confidence.

Thank you.