

Speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham)
Inaugural dinner of the Rotterdam Chapter
Rotterdam, 17 January 2008

Ladies and gentlemen,

Jean Monnet, Founding Father of the European Union, once said: "thought cannot be divorced from action..." An appropriate expression, I would say, both for AmCham and for the city of Rotterdam: I've come to know AmCham as a dynamic and action-oriented organisation through my professional activities in Brussels – going back to 1992 when I first moved there from the US. I also had the pleasure of meeting some of you at an AmCham event in Amsterdam nearly three years ago: most of our conversations focused on what can be done in practice.

'Action' is equally applicable to Rotterdam, which is so special, I believe, precisely because it embraces both thought and action: city of Erasmus (who envisaged literacy as a mindset) *and* city of football and our country's busiest and most dynamic port. And more closely to the issue: Leonard Geluk, Alderman of Youth, Family and Education here in Rotterdam, has publicly expressed the ambition to be the first illiteracy-free city in the Netherlands. Mr Kaya... I very much hope that you achieve this ambition through action and that you will inspire other cities.

All this to say.... I am delighted to be with you, hopefully stimulating thinking and getting you into gear around the issue of literacy. There's little time to waste. I also hope that you appreciate the directness of my plea to you tonight: to do your part to help fight illiteracy. It's in the interest of this country, in many instances your own organisation and our fellow citizens.

When you think about it, don't you find illiteracy, particularly in a developed country such as this one, both unacceptable and unnecessary? I do (not surprisingly...). The good news is... you don't need to reinvent the wheel – as some of you, such as BP and the city of Rotterdam know first-hand. I'll come back to this shortly.

I know it's a festive night and I don't want to spoil the upbeat atmosphere, but I can't help sharing three figures with you to give you some feel about the scope of the problem of illiteracy:

- In the Netherlands, we're talking about some 1.5 million adults who can't read and write sufficiently to function fully independently. And it may surprise you: the vast majority of them was born and bred in the Netherlands... although you'd also agree that it is an unacceptable situation regardless of who's affected. Other Western European countries face similar and in some cases even worse situations.
- Also, we often believe that this is a problem of older generations, but isn't. Far from it, which is arguable even more worrisome: 25 % of our children start secondary school being two years behind in their literacy skills.
- And then the costs... Stichting Lezen & Schrijven commissioned a study into this. Looking at issues such as health, employment rates and crime, the research came up with staggering statistics: annual cost of illiteracy to Dutch society an estimated 537 million Euro. *[English version of this research report is available]*

Need I go on?...

When we ask ourselves why should care about literacy - we have a good basis for discussion: looking at your Priority Points 2007, you seem to share my strong conviction that education and basic skills are essential to the democratic, social and economic health, sustainability and durability of any society. The question is, what does this mean in practice?

When it comes to illiteracy, the main challenge is to identify those adults who are illiterate and encourage them to go back to school. The challenge is also to make sure our children know how to read and write by the time they leave school and that they see the relevance of reading and writing, no matter their choice of profession.

Equally important, there are some fundamental values of society that are also closely intertwined with literacy... values of a society where everyone is able to use language as a key to happiness, to work, information and others. I hope that you as AmCham continue to set this as a priority for the coming year – I guess that's the challenge for me tonight! Hopefully these values find a resonance with you as managers in the public and private sector, with leadership roles in today's and tomorrow's society, be it here or elsewhere. These values are: self-esteem, well-being, competence, democracy. A quick review:

Self-esteem. We take it for granted that people have self-esteem. Not so.

Not being able to read and write undermines self-esteem. This is a barrier to quality of life and self-fulfillment. Surely, this is undesirable for a society that so depends on people's ability to actively contribute to the prosperity of that society?

On the up-side, education and formation helps enhance self-respect and confidence. So many people have told me how empowered they felt once they'd learnt how to read and write. We need to break the vicious circle of those needing education most but not seeking it because they lack the self-confidence to do so. So everyone deserves and needs access to education – be it inside or outside company structures.

A second value: well-being. This relates to the quality of life experienced by people. It typically depends on a range of factors such as basic health, the quality of relationships, intellectual fulfillment and emotional satisfaction. For example, illiterate people can't read important messages of their health centre and sometimes don't know that they have any appointment. Inadequate *health literacy* can result in difficulty accessing health care, following instructions from a physician, and taking medication properly. Patients with inadequate health literacy are more likely to be hospitalized than patients with adequate skills. Absenteeism tends to be higher among illiterate people due to stress and the fear of tasks around written information. Experience demonstrates that learning to read and write has a direct positive impact on social and economic participation.

Third value: competence. In the debate on competence and knowledge, we tend to focus on issues such as university education, innovation, technology and research. As society leaps ahead, there is a distinct danger that those who lack the basic skills are being left behind, with serious implications for the individuals themselves and for our social cohesion and economic development. The knowledge-based economy that Europe intends to become will be built on shaky foundations if only the upper echelons of society are able to participate. Investing in all employees, of all education and skills levels is not just for altruistic motives, but also out of enlightened self-interest.

I commend you for recognizing that the capacity of this country to compete in the knowledge economy will depend on whether it can meet fast-growing demand for people with high-level skills. And that this demands significant improvements in the quality of schooling outcomes and directed efforts to reducing the numbers functionally illiterate citizens.

And if you're wondering about costs of training, JF Kennedy said it so well: "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Seriously.... Why is it that we don't question the costs of training of top management but we tend to question the costs for those at the other end? Apart from being unjust, it simply does not make economic sense.

Finally; literacy goes to the heart of a **democratic functioning of society**. Democracy, particularly as we know it with all the technological advances, places a high value and demands on individual qualities and abilities. Given the importance of technological channels of communications, literacy is a precondition for truly participating in democracy and making full use of its benefits. Without it, it's hard to absorb, grasp and actively use information independently. Being literate enables us to know the law and understand our rights and obligations. Literacy is a basic human right that we cannot take for granted - unfortunately.

Quite honestly, I cannot think of one real argument why not to act, why not to invest in basic skills. It is also timely to act: there are now ambitious national goals to prevent and reduce illiteracy. In September last year, the Ministries of Education, Culture and Science; Social Affairs and Youth and Family signed a *Covenant* with VNO-NCW and the trade unions. The parties recognize the urgency of the situation – Mr Wientjes, present today and important initiator of the Covenant can tell you all about this process. What the Covenant says in brief:

- By 2015: total number of low literate people reduced by 60 % to a maximum of 600,000. To achieve this, 100,000 adults need to be trained per year.
- By 2011: every pupil who leaves primary school will have sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to enter secondary school and no young adults leave school and start working or enter higher education without commanding basic skills.

Tough ambitions. A bumpy road ahead, no doubt. But in my mind, what matters is that we have a clear framework with measurable goals that everyone can work towards.

The brief to all of us in society is clear: we can only reduce illiteracy when all players contribute towards those goals. I'll mention just three to stimulate the minds:

Companies: You can contribute in many ways – from sensitizing front line service personnel about customers who potentially have trouble reading or writing... to training your own employees or working with suppliers such as your cleaning company. This is a process that demands utmost sensitivity: identifying adults who are illiterate within your company, creating an environment in which this subject can be discussed openly. Then start working with an educational institute - an ROC or one of the independent educational institutions in your community – to develop tailor-made training. As I said, there's no need to reinvent the wheel as a lot of companies went before you. For instance, Stichting Lezen & Schrijven developed a toolkit – “Taalkracht / Language Force” that lays out the various steps of the process – so it shouldn't be too daunting.

Cities: a clear message: keep illiteracy on the agenda. Don't be fooled by silence. This remains a priority. Despite the fact that people are no longer “politely amused” by me when I raise the issue of illiteracy (as was the case 4 years ago), despite the fact that we believe there's no longer a taboo around literacy, we're still facing a vicious circle: illiterate people feel ashamed – hence their tendency to keep their inability to read and write to themselves. Lack of public debate encourages them to believe that they are the only ones with a problem. As they refrain from seeking help, they feed the perception that this is a non-issue (and we all know what happens to real or perceived non-issues... they end up in a drawer gathering dust). That's why it's so important to discuss the issue of illiteracy in the open. Breaking through this vicious circle continues to be a challenge we face.

Take the example of Rotterdam: an awareness campaign last year, resulted in doubling the amount of people that attend reading and writing classes.

A wonderful achievement – from 300 to 670... but we need to increase those numbers dramatically if we want to come even close in making the ambitious goals of the Covenant a reality. These numbers show how hard it is to reach people.... Quite honestly, while there's been tremendous progress, we need to be vigilant that it does not fall off the agenda again and that we do increase the scope and impact of all the efforts.

The Port of Rotterdam: Your company has a lot of similarities with Schiphol Airport: transport en logistics is your core business. Schiphol Airport started their own project with 20 companies located within the Schiphol boundaries. With more than 50.000 people working at the docklands, it might be interesting to learn more about the Schiphol approach and see where you could take that and the lessons learnt and develop a programme here. Stichting Lezen & Schrijven is happy to share its expertise to do this as efficiently as possible.

To conclude... there is no silver bullet in eradicating illiteracy. We must work together to raise awareness, to develop and implement practical initiatives in a way that we can measure impact. You and I, we have a role to play.

We have to be ambitious and we have no time to waste. This is about investing in the immediate and long-term health, sustainability and durability of our society. Those of us here are in a prime position to act. Let's join efforts where we haven't already and where it makes sense. Let's remain open to learning from each other. Let's put the funds where it's most needed.

I so hope that you support my plea in doing your part to help fight illiteracy: as AmCham, as individual companies, as the cities of Rotterdam, The Hague , Amsterdam and all others, as a school or as an individual. That's my personal plea. Thank you.