My first visit to this great port city of Rotterdam was back in April 1960 (well before many of the people here were born, I'm sure). I came here then when I was schoolboy. It was my first ever visit to a country other than my own, so I wasn't at all a seasoned or sophisticated traveller. But I do remember being struck by how clean and modern Rotterdam seemed, compared to Birmingham, the city in the midlands of England where I was growing up at that time.

By 1960 Rotterdam had been completely rebuilt after all the bombing of World War II, with what seemed to me like modern infrastructure and fairly good air quality. By comparison Birmingham was still very smoky – I used to get bronchitis every winter because of the air pollution from coal smoke - the city still had many empty sites where buildings destroyed by wartime bombing had not been replaced, and the infrastructure was very out of date, with antiquated steam railways and little road building since the 1930s in spite of a big increase in car ownership. I also remember being impressed by the ambitious drainage and land reclamation projects that I saw going on at that time and the new towns that were being built.

Well, that schoolboy visit was seven years before I took my first undergraduate course in Public Administration and I don't think I had even heard that term back then, but on reflection I think I must have had the Public Administration 'bug' already, because what impressed the young me were the results of well-organized urban planning and infrastructure projects and the difference that such things make to everyday life.

It’s public administration – or whatever other term you use to describe the arrangements for delivering public services and organizing executive government – that makes the crucial difference to the quality of democracy and ordinary life. For example, free elections, the
basis of any democracy, don’t run themselves: they depend on the capacity to prevent
voters from being intimidated as they cast their ballot, the capacity to check eligibility to vote
to prevent fraudulent or multiple voting, the capacity to keep ballots in digital or paper form
secure, and the capacity to provide impartial and reliable ways of counting the ballots cast.

In countries like the Netherlands, it’s easy to take such things for granted, but often public
administration is most effective when we hardly notice that it’s there. So the theme of social
benefit or human betterment that is being stressed in the Dies Natalis today is particularly
applicable to study and research in public administration, but public administration is also
inherently fascinating irrespective of the social utility of studying it.

A lot has changed since my first visit to Rotterdam 57 years ago, but some of the
fundamentals have not. For example, the digital technology we have now was hardly even
dreamt of back then, and so were some of the problems with it (such as computer viruses,
which were known even then to be possible in theory, but had yet to emerge in practice).
Social behaviour and attitudes were very different too, for example in the prevalence of
smoking at that time compared with today, and the effect it had on mortality (the definitive
study on the link between smoking and cancer, the United States’ Surgeon-General’s report,
didn’t appear until 1964). Some of the major policy problems we face now, such as
population ageing or sea-level rise through global warming, were largely or wholly unknown
back then as well. And the research tools that we use to study public administration have
changed a lot as well, and in the so-called masterclass earlier today I aimed to explore some
of the future challenges we face in research in this subject.

But equally some of the fundamentals have not changed. Irrespective of what technology we
use and irrespective of whether we prefer an extended state that does many things or a
more limited state that doesn’t do so much, we want government to be economical, in the
sense that it is run at least cost, avoiding waste, and we want it to be fair, in the sense that it
frames and applies rules carefully and consistently, treating equal cases alike. We also often
want government to be coordinated, such that different units work together effectively and
that is often said to be the most difficult problem in public administration. Those basic values arguably don’t change much, but the challenge for public administration is to satisfy them as circumstances change.

Finally, while this is not my first trip to Rotterdam, it is of course the one in which I have felt most special, and I have to express my thanks for that. My wife Gillian and I have been treated royally by this university’s very well-organized administrators, properly briefed and with all the logistics very capably handled, and we are most grateful for that, especially to our point of contact, Marjolein Kooistra.

But my greatest thanks must go to this University’s Department of Public Administration and Sociology and the Doctorate Board in conferring this great honour on me. I can’t express how much it means to me to have my work recognized in this way by one of the leading universities in the study of public administration in Europe, and in a country that is well-known internationally for the quality of its research in this field. I hope I still have some more to contribute to the study of public administration, and I’m currently working on a research project exploring the efficacy of public expenditure control over time, but whatever the future may bring I shall always look back on this moment as one of the greatest highlights of my career.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart.