Guest lecture by Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb of Rotterdam

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Opening of the Academic Year, 4 September 2017

Ladies and gentlemen, ambassadors, excellencies, president of the university.

May I ask the technician to get some white lights on the audience? Can you help me please?
Yes, that is better. I am not an artist. That light is to help me to ask you a question. Who was born in Rotterdam? Not the majority. Who was born somewhere else in The Netherlands? That is the majority. Who was born in Europe? Who was born in China? A few hands there. Who was born in Latin-America? Who was born in Africa? Hm. A little. Who was born in Morocco? And Gizem was born in Turkey, is it not Gizem?

Correct, thank you. To start this speech I would like to say a very special welcome to someone whom I personally really appreciate and he is among us. Someone who, despite his age and his health condition, is ever, ever a man who is committed to Rotterdam, to the scientific community: professor Galjaard. I have known him since the late eighties when he sometimes came to the Ministry of Health, to talk to the secretary of Healthcare in those years. He was very involved in difficult matters of ethics and since those years we have never missed each other and we regularly had the chance to meet and chat and he is as sharp as he was in the eighties. Thank you for being here.

Ladies of this wonderful scientific community, ladies of kind of a family, I am really honoured to address you today, to talk to you about the challenges but also sometimes the concerns that I have when I talk about this beautiful city. And last week had a big event of the World Port Days in the city of Rotterdam and I had the honour to talk to some very old musicians, making very traditional seamen’s music in the city of Rotterdam. I asked them, who of you was born in Rotterdam? And really, a few hands. The majority of the hands was when I asked them who was born in Brabant and who was born in Zeeland. This city over the years became a metropolitan city, but really for many years it was shaped thanks to the domestic migration, coming from elsewhere in the Netherlands. As Mayor of Rotterdam it is my
privilege to give an insight in the Rotterdam approach to become a vital and future-proof city. And the president talked about a vital city and how important it is to be a resilient city. Resiliency is a word that comes, more or less, from the American approach of the ability to resist a stress or to overcome a disaster. But in social terms, being a resilient city is also a very, very important word. In the Netherlands, we have the tradition to be a resilient city because of our heritage, building dikes. We are good at building dikes, to keep the water outside of the Netherlands. And I am also always happy when I speak for an international audience, in the Netherlands or outside, to focus on that. But resiliency is more than that.

It was Ban Ki-moon, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, who said: our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities. Maybe you know understand why my struggle in the past weeks, to try to get access to our leaders in The Hague who are negotiating a new government. Because, it is really important for them to not only know, but also feel in dialogue that the efforts of a new government can maybe be doubled either succeed in getting a collaboration with the major cities, the engines of our future economy.

When you see our city with a bird’s eye view, global trends come into focus. Cities worldwide face the same challenge. Firstly, even more people move from the countryside to the cities, especially to delta cities. This growth has huge implications for the economy, social cultural dimensions, infrastructure and housing. In this western part of The Netherlands, we need and we expect approximately one million new inhabitants. One million new inhabitants. Most of them will not be immigrants, most of them will be coming from the countryside of The Netherlands. A coherent and integrated policy is then urgent to cope with these big dimensions. So, building some houses in the west and doing something in the east would not be sufficient. We are talking about major challenges. And when things become complicated, there are no easy solutions.

With the focus also on the international dimension of migration, we have to do more to attract more talent, to also cope with the international competition. So, not oil but knowledge is becoming increasingly important as a production factor.
Besides the great domestic and international migration to the city, a new industrial revolution is on the way. This revolution is initiated by the far-reaching modern technology. 3D printing and serious gaming and robotics are really very important elements to effect the new society in the future. In the port, in healthcare, in welfare and elsewhere. In October 2016 Rotterdam hosted our national climate summit, to talk about shaping the Paris agreement. Rotterdam is investing heavily in wind energy. In our port region, wind is now generating one hundred and fifty megawatt of electricity. By 2025 we want to generate three hundred and fifty megawatt, enough for two hundred thousand households, well over sixty percent of our current population.

We are also investing in solar energy. By 2018 we want to help four and a half thousands (4,500) households to use solar panels. Our current solar energy yield is now ten megawatt of solar energy, enough for all Rotterdam households.

When it comes to facing local and global trends, innovation is the keyword. Fortunately Rotterdam has many innovation hubs in the city, like the Investment Centre for Entrepreneurship, the Erasmus Medical Centre and YesDelft! in our region, and RDM Rotterdam in our port.

Also in October 2016 Rotterdam officially welcomed the CIC, Cambridge Innovation Centre, and Venture Café for connecting talent and ideas to each other and to investors and launching customers. Rotterdam is CIC’s first innovation hub outside the US.

Innovation is not only for high-end professionals, innovation will bring so much good for everyone. New investments, new companies and new jobs. Very importantly, new jobs follow skilled people too. That is my experience when I visit companies that invest in innovation. Not only the engineers and the designers of robots, but also creating jobs for those with lower skills.

Rotterdam School of Management is helping us and helping the city also in realising this ambition, to transform the "Head of South" area into a smart district in the next five years.
Ladies and gentlemen, I will move to another chapter that is really important when it comes to making a city. A city is not a place where citizens live, in my opinion where citizens live, go to vote once every four years and say to the people that have been elected: I elected you, I pay my taxes, do not bother me, fix it. That is not my definition of citizenship. My definition of citizenship is that I will like to bother you. Not to request you, as the president did - she was more civilised than I am - asking you to help the city forwards, but I want to bother you and call on you and say: please help me, because the city needs you. And helping the city is also helping yourself. So, I am really interested in very active citizens. Citizens that not only vote once a year, but are committed continuously to work to the benefit of all of us. Not only citizens, but also entrepreneurs. And that is why I am really happy with the big contribution students in Rotterdam give when it comes to the voluntary work. A lot of students are involved in doing voluntary work.

And we are moving from the ideas of the seventies and the eighties, that the government was the powerful buddy with the best ideas, sometimes ask a reaction to citizens: what do you think of our plans? We are moving from that idea to the idea of co-creation with citizens. Co-creation with citizens; that is the focus on the idea that the best ideas are on the streets, in neighbourhoods. That the best politicians are there to collect these ideas along with citizens. And that they trust citizens to such a degree that, when it comes to the execution of the ideas, not the government is there to execute, but the citizens themselves. But for that an approach of trust is needed. Without trust in citizens a government will always be more or less the highest body, acting on its own and not using the richness that is really there in neighbourhoods. That is why, ladies and gentlemen, you might find me as mayor once every two weeks, once in two weeks, somewhere in one of the neighbourhoods talking to citizens. And I always ask the vice mayors, if there is a theme in their own domain, to join me. Hugo de Jong is here today, he is responsible for education and also one of my partners sometimes in his neighbourhood. And if you want to see how this works in practice, maybe it
is an idea for students, for your scientific work, when it comes to participation, tomorrow will be the first one in this new season, in Tarwewijk.

But there is more, when it comes to building a society. More is needed. Trust between the city and the citizens is one, but trust between citizens is even more complicated and more important. I was not there, but I learned that there is American research showing that in communities that trust each other, there is a better chance on creating two percent more economic growth than usual. Well, that will be a fascinating event for our Minister of Finances. Just trust each other. And that is a policy theme which is very cheap. Building trust and building ties between citizens, for me as mayor is the cheapest policy instrument we have; a place like this one and a cup of coffee. No budgets, no complicated research things, just try to bring to people close to each other.

I remember when I became mayor in 2009 I asked my staff, when they were teaching me about the future shape of the city when it comes to architecture, the high buildings and the wonderful bridges... And they presented me with a booklet and said: well, this is what we call the vision of Rotterdam. And I said to them: well, I have the feeling this is fifty percent of the future of Rotterdam. And you know, a new mayor may ask stupid questions, so the reaction was: why mayor, do you think this is only fifty percent of the city? And I asked them: where are the citizens? There was not even a picture of citizens in this booklet, only buildings, streets, architecture. Well, my opinion is: bridges do not make a city. High buildings do not make a city. Even the headquarters of the university do not make a city. People make the city. So, investing in its people and creating the right atmosphere for talent and for people to trust each other is very, very important. Organising that in the actual atmosphere is very complicated. Yes, I am not blind. Yes, I am not naïve. I see the turbulences. And I also see the challenges, I also see the harsh debates and I also see the political movements to the right and to the left. But there is one thing that is really important when it comes to managing the city towards that vital city, that resilient city. It is, in the end, investing in people and for governments, staying optimistic.
I heard the university started a new knowledge domain, politics of criticism, scepticism?
Right. So, start another faculty: politics of optimism. We need optimism. We need an open window to the world. We need to believe that not your origin, neither your colour is decisive for who you are going to be. That is why I am really happy with the philosophy of this university to give young students, sometimes born from a mother who is illiterate and a father who is illiterate, to become the first students at this university and sometimes to become not only an ordinary student, but an excellent student. I know a young woman who studied at this university at the medical faculty, from a mother who is illiterate and a father who is half illiterate, and she made it, cum laude. She is a doctor now. I know her very well, it is my sister. And that is why I believe that in the end, fighting poverty in such a city is not only giving the possibility to people, money to buy bread and butter at the end of the week, but it is really important to invest in people. That is the way to escape poverty. And I can tell you everything about that. A lot of politicians talk about poverty, but have no idea what it is. And I am the product of poverty. That is why I would like to put the accents on a good chance on education to escape poverty.

University, ladies and gentlemen, is to me the great place to really play a fundamental role in elevating the city degrees towards more civilisation but also to more wealth, to more stability and to more optimism.

Thank you.