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From Tolerance to Integration: The Dutch Experience

Frans Timmermans , Joanne J. Myers

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[Rotterdam Skyline](#) by Pieter Musterd ([CC](#))

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs at the Carnegie Council. On behalf of the Carnegie Council and the Consulate General of the Netherlands, I'd like to welcome you here for a very special discussion with Frans Timmermans, the Dutch Minister for European Affairs. The subject of his presentation is "From Tolerance to Integration: The Dutch Experience."

Mr. Timmermans joins us as part of the [Celebrate New York 400 festival](#), which commemorates the long association between New York and the Netherlands. In the 17th century, when [Henry Hudson](#), an Englishman serving the Netherlands, began his exploration of New York waterways, it could be argued that his expedition changed the world forever. It set the stage for the settlement of the Hudson River Valley by the [Dutch West India Company](#), which in turn was the beginning of New York's longstanding and fruitful relationship with the Dutch.

Just as these new settlers saw in America a land of opportunity, a land where modern traditions of freedom and new ideas could flourish, one could also argue how the arrival of millions of Muslims in Europe, especially from Morocco, Turkey, and Algeria, is also having a remarkable effect on the continent's politics and is impacting the religious debates there as well; yet for the Europeans today, it is questions about what the best way is to absorb this population. This is a subject of countless government discussions and can even be heard in conversations with the man on the street.

For a long time, the Dutch model of a tolerant and multicultural society had been seen in Europe as a model for successful integration of people from different origins and different religions. But all that began to change with the murder, in November 2004, of Dutch filmmaker [Theo Van Gogh](#) by a Muslim fundamentalist.

Integration is not just a Dutch problem. Still, each time an incident occurs, whether it is violence against the Muslim population in France or Germany, or Muslims initiating the action with bombings in Britain or Spain, or in the Netherlands, the issue forces all of Europe to stop and examine the problems of assimilation and examine the success or failure of the Dutch multicultural model.

To give us a better understanding of the Dutch experience, I am delighted to welcome Minister Timmermans.

Thank you very much for being here.

Remarks

FRANS TIMMERMANS: Thank you very much, Ms. Myers, for that very kind introduction. I'm very glad to be here to speak to such a knowledgeable audience. I really look forward to the debate we will have afterwards.

Speaking on integration, it's a very topical issue, of course, today in the Netherlands. Just to give you a very personal example, somebody who is very dear to me, who is very close to me, who has worked her whole life in health care as a nurse, who is nothing but kind to everyone, who is not a racist, hasn't got a xenophobic bone in her body, recently said to me, "Son, I will vote for you because I still believe in you, but you are so wrong. They're taking over the country."

I said to her, "My dear, who's taking over the country?"

"Well, the Muslims, of course. Within ten years from now, we will be forced to go and worship with them. I will be forced to wear a headscarf in the streets. That is the future for our country."

Isn't it interesting to approach the issue from that angle, to wonder why somebody who has only got good feelings for other people certainly feels so threatened in her basic values by what is a very small minority in our population? What has happened? Why are we at this stage? What can we do to make sure that we can deal with this issue, just as we have dealt with other issues in the past?

I know that some of you are Dutch. You are going to hear something that's very familiar. But perhaps it is still useful for me to go back into Dutch history and talk about the origins of this tolerance in Dutch society, because what seems from the outside, perhaps, sometimes as an ideal model or a perfect model or a model to follow also has its flaws and also has its history, which perhaps deserves to be looked at.

The reason why we have this tolerance in the Netherlands is because there was never one group big enough to dominate the others and there was never one group so small that it could be assimilated into society—very much like New York, in fact. Nobody is big enough to dominate the others, nobody is big enough to tell others to behave in a certain way, so you tolerate each other, which is not only a good thing—to tolerate—it's also a bit callous sometimes.

Anyway, when the modern Dutch state came to be in the 19th century, people were looking for ways to have this system also as part of our political structure. What was developed then is what is commonly called the "pillarisation" of society. What you would do is have your own organization as a group in society—for instance, my background is Roman Catholic, and I have distinct memories, not personal memories, but stories of my grandparents and my parents about how they lived. You never got out of your pillar. All the Catholics were in one pillar. They all went to Catholic schools. They all went to Catholic butchers. They all read the Catholic newspaper and listened to Catholic radios and had Catholic insurance policies, went to Catholic football clubs. All of that was regulated according to your being part of one group.

I remember that, for instance, my grandmother, when she had visitors and we needed to go to buy bread, would say, "The baker next door, he's a Protestant, so we don't buy there. We go further on, where there's a Catholic baker."

That was the nature of Dutch society. So tolerance was based on the premise that I will leave you be so that you will leave me be. I will let you worship the way you want, I will let you live the way you want, so that I can be the way that I want to be. But it was not out of any interest for the other or for their way of living.

Another personal memory I have: With my parents, we lived abroad for a long time. But visiting my grandparents, my grandmother at some point said—I think I was nine or ten years old—she said, "Look at those people walking across the street. They're Protestants."

So I looked again. Two arms, two legs. They looked a bit like us.

She said, "They're even nice people. I spoke to them recently."

This was something that you told—you spoke to somebody who was a Protestant. This is how partitioned our society was. Tolerance was more live-and-let-live than it was an active society, an active interaction between communities.

Of course you needed to take care of certain issues that transcended the mere pillars. Some things applied to the whole of society, where you needed to find regulation. The heads of the pillars would then talk to each other and come up with a compromise. We have always been heralded for our compromises, but a Dutch compromise, in fact, is always a tradeoff. It is not "let's look for the best solution on one issue." No. Let's just say, "You will get free education for Christian schools if I get voting rights for all people." That is the way we had the tradeoffs between the pillars—again, not really a dialogue, but simply saying tit for tat. That was also a way of running the Dutch model.

Why do I insist on this? I insist on this because in modern Dutch society things can no longer be tackled that way. Of course, like everywhere in the world, we have moved on from a top-down society, where the leaders would say, "Trust me. I'll take care of things," to a more bottom-up society, where people would say to their leaders, "Show me, and then I'll give you my vote or give you my trust." The way we have organized our society is not really in sync with that development, the way we have organized our political structure, et cetera.

A second point of importance here is that ordinary people, people within the pillars, never learned to find ways of communicating, of negotiating with people with different backgrounds. The first thing, of course, is to have a certain measure of interest in the difference or in somebody else's background. But there was no need to have this, and so we never developed a concept whereby we could have ordinary people talking to each other and also looking for solutions to problems at the local level, even within one community or even on one street.

A third element which I think is of importance: Because also the issue of citizenship was decided upon and taught within the pillar, once these pillars disappeared—because now they have disappeared—we never developed a concept of active citizenship that would then be taught in different systems. Citizenship was always assumed because you were taught it at home and within your pillar, in the church or, if you didn't have a church, in the associations associated with the liberals or the socialists. This no longer happens. So now this assumption of educating citizenship is gone, but there is nothing that has replaced this. The educational system in the Netherlands is not geared on teaching people to be citizens—something we urgently need to change, very urgently need to change.

So all these elements, brought together, I think contributed to the situation where we are today, where there is this inherent fear of the other, simply because we don't know the other very well. If you analyze this—I spend a lot of time talking to people about why, why are you afraid? Of course—something I perhaps should have said before—fear is the best driving force in politics today in Europe. Fear will win you your elections. If you use fear in a political campaign, you are ahead a couple of points on your opponent. The sea change we have seen in the American presidential elections hasn't reached Europe yet. Fear is still the driving force in Europe. It might change—I hope so—but it has not changed yet.

Secondly, more importantly, why is fear so powerful? Because now average Europeans, not just in the Netherlands, but in many European countries, especially middle-income people, have lost their inherent belief in progress. Since the Second World War, the assumption was always, my kids will be better off than I am. My kids will have higher education than I have had, they will have higher incomes than I have

had, et cetera. Now there is this inherent feeling that we have reached the pinnacle and it's all downhill from here.

If that is the attitude of the middle classes, of course, they become very conservative. They want to maintain what they have, and every change is inherently a threat to their position. So you want to ward off changes, and the most visible agents of change are, of course, the foreigners in your society. They then become the easy target of fear. That, I think, is a powerful force in Dutch society today.

So that's the situation we have to face today in Dutch society.

Now, the numbers sometimes are staggering, and they are always used in the debate, by saying, for instance, 50 percent of our youngest population in the inner cities, the main cities in the Netherlands, are of foreign origin, which is true. If we keep counting people in their third and fourth generation still to be foreigners—this is what we do in the Netherlands. It's this fundamental point. That's where New York comes in. That's where New York could be so instructive to the rest of us.

If you step off a plane here to seek your fortune in New York, you are a New Yorker as of day one. Then you can be successful or you can fail, and then you can have consequences. You can draw your consequences out of your failure or your success. But inherently, in principle, you are a New Yorker once you choose to be part of this society.

In the Netherlands, we refer to second- and third-generation immigrants still as—we have this wonderful word for this—*allochtoon*, which is also a euphemism to say "foreigner." What I believe we urgently need—and this is something we could learn from the United States—is to have hyphenated citizens. It's very easy to get hyphenated citizens into Dutch—Turkish-Dutch, Moroccan-Dutch, or Surinamese-Dutch, or whatever. The only problem is, what do you do with the Dutch-Dutch? Which is an interesting point, if you approach it from that angle: Define yourself. If you cannot define yourself with a hyphen, how would you define yourself, as Dutch-Dutch? Traditionally, people would go back to religion or political choice, but now we are struggling to find that definition.

I think this is important because we are, as I said at the beginning, traditionally a society of minorities, and very recently we have developed this concept of a society of a majority, the Dutch, and, at the end of the day, a minority—the Muslims. It's very interesting that in Dutch society now we would have this dichotomy between two groups, whereas society is much more diverse than that. But in the political debate, this dichotomy plays a leading role and creates this platform for fear.

So looking at answers:

- As I said, trying to bring into the debate the idea of a hyphenated citizenship.
- Secondly, developing ways of creating active citizenship on a national level, which could then be applied in the educational system, but it could also give people tools in their private lives, in raising their children. As I said, these rules were always implicit. Now that they are no longer implicit, let's make them explicit. Let's write them down. Let's communicate them. Let's talk about them. That would be the second part.
- The third part, I think, which is very difficult but very important, is to increase the levels of interaction between communities in the Netherlands. Interestingly enough, if you look back at the last 40 years, successful integration always starts with interaction on different levels—first in sports, in the arts, then in education, in the economy. Then nobody sees the minority as a minority anymore. This is what happened to people who came to the Netherlands after [Indonesia achieved independence](#). It happened more recently to people who came to the Netherlands from Suriname. It's certainly happening right now, especially with the Turkish community in the Netherlands, and I'm sure it's going to happen with other minorities—the Moroccans—shortly. It's already happening in sports and in the arts.

So increased interaction is, of course, a main instrument.

But last week, thanks to [Humanity in Action](#), which played a very important role in this, we invited pioneers, as we call them, from New York, from the United States, and the Netherlands, 20 people—anywhere between 20 and 35 is the age bracket, more or less—to talk about the issue of active citizenship: How do you do this in modern times? What we discovered at that conference is that my generation—I'm going to be 48 next month—and even older generations have lost touch with their forms of communication. We need to rekindle our ability to communicate with younger generations. This is what I have learnt from the [Obama](#) campaign. His people were very successful in doing that. This is what I think we need to apply, under completely different circumstances, in Europe, which will need completely different instruments, perhaps.

But the main issue here is that if you talk to people about their fears, they project their fears on Muslims, on Islam, et cetera. But if you continue the discussion with them, the fear comes down to a lack of control, a lack of influence on what happens in their private lives, in the development of their lives. The fear is projected on groups or is projected on an issue, but at the end of the day, people feel they do not influence the choices that are made on their behalf that have an influence on the development of their careers or their lives. I think the only answer to that issue is to empower people to be part of decision making in a different way than they are today. This is by no means an easy issue. All the things I have said before, the three points I made before, are easy compared to this point.

Here in the Netherlands we have a specific problem—I shan't elaborate too much on it; it's probably very boring for Americans—we have a specific problem that our political and institutional structures are still based upon the pillarisation of society as it was before. For instance, in our general elections, we have a complete PR [proportional representation] system with no threshold, which means that the mood of the day determines the composition of our Parliament, and we are then stuck for four years with the composition of our Parliament.

The second point here is that you will always, always need coalition governments if you have a full PR system and no threshold, which then leads to disenchantment in the population because you have an election campaign between Mr. X and Mr. Y, and at the end of the day, after the elections, you will get a government with Mr. X and Mr. Y together in the same government. This, of course, leads to disenchantment with the political system in the population.

Of course, those of you who don't know the Netherlands as well as perhaps some others do would say, then change the system. But here again, pillarisation is not helping. Because of pillarisation, we have made the procedure to change our constitution so difficult that in a post-pillarised society, to get two-thirds majority in both houses twice, before an election and after an election, is almost impossible. You would have to get almost all political forces on board. And what I'm saying here is certainly not the consensus yet in Dutch society or in Dutch politics.

I want to emphasize this last point. I believe that if we are not capable of accepting the consequence of this analysis, then we will not be able to solve the root problem, I'm afraid.

On the other hand, I'm also a practical politician. I'm not a revolutionary. I also want to try to make steps forward where we can. I do believe that this momentous opportunity we have in transatlantic relations—you have no idea what happened in Europe last week with President Obama's visit, not at the level of the politicians, but at the level of the populations. I have not seen this in so many years. Apparently, Europeans were craving this, craving a different attitude. This has nothing to do with security issues or economic issues. I think this has something to do with something that is far more fundamental, which is the willingness of the Obama Administration to go back to the fundamentals, values-based politics.

My mother keeps telling me the story of how she was liberated by American soldiers in September 1944 in the south of the Netherlands—a very graphic way of talking about this. This is something I was brought

up with, and this is very much a part of my transatlantic belief and part of my pro-Americanism.

Last year I was at a rock concert in the Netherlands with my oldest son—he's 20 years old now; he was 19 last year—a rock band called Rage Against the Machine. I'm not sure that many of you will have heard of it. They make a tremendous racket. But they came onstage wearing orange jumpsuits, their hands shackled, and with hoods over their heads, and a siren sounding on the stage. My son said to me, "Dad, [Guantanamo Bay](#)." Forty thousand people present at this concert were silent.

Just imagine that I'm bridging here what my mother has given me and what my son is now telling me. Both elements are part of how we see the United States. I believe that eight out of ten Europeans want to be where my mother was and don't want to be where my son was last year. That is probably why you get this powerful reaction to the Obama election and to the presidential visit in Europe.

A final point on that visit. I was at a conference yesterday in Washington where we talked about global warming and about the Arctic problems. You almost want to simply get into bed and put the covers over your head, because the challenges are so daunting.

If you look at climate change, the financial crisis, the strategic choices we have to make worldwide, the relationship with Russia and China, energy issues, demographic developments—if you put all that together, the only way that we can actually come up with solutions that work is if Americans and Europeans stick together. There is no way one can be successful without the other. This understanding should be at the basis of our actions today. This understanding will help us in the Netherlands to come to terms with the challenges of diversity in our society. This challenge will certainly be the basis of 400 more years of cooperation across the Atlantic.

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: You mentioned hyphenated citizenship. I think most Americans feel that has been a disaster here. You don't have to come to America, but if you come, you come by choice and we expect you, maybe not in the first or second generation, to become American and forget about—you can use your songs and customs and all, but it makes a stronger country if you are an American.

I think this would be true in Europe, too, rather than using the hyphenated system.

FRANS TIMMERMANS: If I may react to that, what I'm trying to say is that, because we have this—for instance, how do you get citizenship in many European countries? It's the so-called [jus sanguinis](#) system, where bloodline determines your citizenship. Here citizenship is a matter of choice. What I want to try and do is to get to a situation also in Europe, in my country, where citizenship is also a result of an active choice. That is something that you can do without abandoning your cultural heritage or your cultural background.

A problem we also have because of our history is that people do not very often distinguish integration from assimilation. I think it's a fundamental distinction that needs to be clarified if you want to be a successful intercultural society. You have to distinguish integration from assimilation.

But as long as people believe—and too many people in the Netherlands believe this—that to be a full-fledged citizen you need to assimilate into Dutch society, we are not going to get anywhere. If you want people to get rid of their identity, it's like putting a gun to their head. They will always strike back at you and not try and integrate into society.

I think hyphenated citizenship is just a way of expressing this, that you can be Dutch and still feel Moroccan or Muslim or whatever—and still be a full-fledged Dutch citizen.

QUESTION: I have a very specific, even mundane question. I hope to learn from the Dutch experience. One of the striking features of the Netherlands educational system and that of many European countries, in contrast to the United States, is the governmental support of sectarian schools in pursuit of what we like to think of as school choice. In the United States there is tremendous opposition to the idea of vouchers, which would enable parents to send their children to schools that may become sectarian.

I would like to think that your experience has been very successful. But we don't really know. I know it has been in place for a long time, and the Netherlands is not alone in this. I'm wondering if you could tell us whether this has formed madrassas in which assimilation is not an important value, or whether instead it has fostered better educational opportunities and a respect for the civic values in the Netherlands.

FRANS TIMMERMANS: That's a very interesting question, and not easy to answer. Traditionally, in this pillarised society, the consensus was that you would have your own schools within the different groups, but that you would be united on the curriculum, as far as the academic curriculum is concerned. You could have your own religious education, et cetera, but you would have the state talk to you about the curriculum. The credits you could earn in the schools could only be given if the curriculum was in accordance with what was agreed at the national level, regardless of the denomination of the schools.

There is always tension between wanting to determine the curriculum and granting freedom of education on the basis of religious choice or other choice. In the past it was never a problem. With the Muslim schools that we have now in the Netherlands, sometimes it is a problem, because they simply cannot maintain the level of academic qualifications we demand. But if this becomes a topic for discussion, in some cases they will refuse this as a basis for discussion because they see it as an interference into their freedom.

Until now, we have always come to satisfactory solutions of these problems, although paying more attention to the quality of Muslim schools is necessary.

Does this lead to madrassas or to Wahhabist propaganda in the schools? Absolutely not. There are a number of mosques in the Moroccan community where sometimes you have Wahhabist preachers, mullahs coming in. In the Turkish community, of course, there's no problem, because they are so well controlled out of [Diyaret](#) in Turkey, which is the agency sending the imams to the mosques, and they make sure that they don't send subversive imams to the mosques. That is the state control over religion in Turkey.

But to answer your question very precisely, do we have problems with people being taught to become subversive or terrorists or whatever? No, not one indication. The quality is a problem sometimes.

QUESTION: It seems to me, though, that the main question that the education system poses for children of migrant backgrounds in the Netherlands is that the choice point for your career as to whether you are going into vocational training or university training comes fairly early. The kids from immigrant backgrounds are not going to preschool or kindergarten. They are at home, staying within their home-country languages, and there is a fairly short period—and even in that period, kids are coming home for lunch—a short period for them to try to prepare themselves to get on to a university track. Very, very few do, with the result that the educational system, despite the extra subsidy that is given to so-called black schools, or schools with lots of immigrant-background children, is still reproducing a very high level of inequality in Dutch society.

FRANS TIMMERMANS: You are certainly very well informed. The issue here is that we need to tackle it at the preschool level. What we see is people coming into the educational system at the age of five with such a lack of knowledge of the Dutch language that they struggle all through school. So what we have tried to do in the last couple of years is to force people to bring their children to school at the age of four. We are now even thinking about the age of three, but that's a bit much.

Outreach programs are becoming increasingly successful, where people go to the minority community

and talk to the mothers specifically. It's very often difficult to get to the mothers, but if you can invite them to come to Mother Morning in the health center—there are all sorts of interesting ways to get people to commit to each other within a community without being seen as forced by the states and then to get them to bring their children to school at the age of three. That is probably the most successful approach.

Now, the choice to be made at the age of 12, of course, is much too early, I would agree. But there is no way we could get a majority in the Dutch Parliament to change that. It is seen as very much a progressive or leftist agenda, to do this. It was tried in the last 30 years many times and it always failed. At this stage in the Dutch educational system, people are so fed up with the tinkering with the system that they want the system to be left alone and schools to take care of themselves. Sooner or later that will, of course, change. But that is where we are today.

So we need to concentrate on the very first years of a child. We also need to pay more attention to teaching Dutch language to immigrants and to minority groups. We need to get rid of our hesitation as far as foreign languages are concerned. In my experience, the best thing you can do for a child is to have them learn any language fluently as early as possible. To force them to learn a language their parents don't speak too early will only lead to catastrophe, because they will not be able to speak any language well. If you don't speak a language well, you can't think well and you can't learn.

QUESTION: First, a kind of social curiosity question that follows on this and then, actually, a policy question.

The experience in the United States for immigrants is that the magnetic pull of English as a language obliterates any effort on the part of parents to try to inculcate the home-country language. One doesn't know whether that's in part because the United States is seen as so overwhelming that the kids are drawn to it culturally and they'll talk back to their parents in English.

So the social curiosity question is, in the Netherlands do the children of immigrants have the same kind of phenomenon of using Dutch, speaking it to their parents? Does Dutch have that same kind of obliterating quality there for immigrant populations?

Then the policy question, in your role as minister of European affairs: Since the tidal wave of immigration rolling north through Spain or Italy and the supposedly weak border controls there, is that an issue that agitates Dutch politics? How does that poison—if "poison" is the right word for it—their view of Europe and a European identity, when they can't quite trust the folks on the southern flank or, if Turkey should ever become a member, if you go that far southeast?

FRANS TIMMERMANS: On your first question, I'm not sure the situation is always the way you describe it in the United States either. I was just told of a study done here in New York on a lot of schools about people leaving high school without being able to read, not learning proper English, and it's always a matter of numbers. If you have a substantial Hispanic group in a school, they will speak Spanish to each other, not English, and then not take English home, because they will not learn it. But if you are in a school—and I'm a case in point; this is what happened to me as a young boy—if you are in a school and you are the only one speaking Dutch, you had better make sure you learn English quickly, to be able to communicate with the others. It's always a matter of numbers and proportions.

That is exactly the same situation in the Netherlands. If you have too much of a concentration of one group in one school, they will talk to each other in the language they have learnt at home and not in Dutch. Then the school struggles in trying to teach them Dutch.

What happens in the Netherlands is that, especially in the last couple of years, the idea that we all need to speak Dutch to be successful in society is now commonly accepted by everyone. Also this pillarisation had a negative role in this, because we didn't even dare to tell people that they should learn Dutch to be fully functional citizens. This is now generally accepted in society.

The problem is that, apart from the fact that some of our minorities speak different languages—not just Arabic, but Berber or other languages—which is very confusing for the children. Also we have increasing numbers in the big cities of subcultures, where they develop their own language, which is a phenomenon you know here as well, which is also a very interesting phenomenon. I learned from my oldest son that they have developed a language—he likes to learn it, not because he's in that community, but because it's cool to speak that language—which has nothing to do with Dutch, which has Moroccan Arabic elements in it, Surinamese elements in it, Dutch elements, English elements. It's very interesting to see these subcultures.

But I think the United States and the Netherlands are struggling with the same phenomenon. If you have too high a concentration of one group, they will stick together, speak their own language, and not learn English or Dutch.

We are an aging society. Societies that get older get more pessimistic. Yes, of course, you need to have a lot of young people to be optimistic. If you get older, on average, you become slightly more pessimistic and conservative. So many things are seen as threats.

But given the demographic development, we will have to be an immigration society within this generation, if we want to remain successful in maintaining our social model or economic model, et cetera. We will have to be. And it will not be the traditional immigration of people coming here and never leaving again. It will be a completely different sort of immigration. We are seeing it already.

In our Turkish community, for instance, we have a lot of young Turks who have their business in the Netherlands and their business in Turkey, and they live in both countries at the same time. They are very successful. I think this is a phenomenon you will see spread out over Europe.

But specifically on Africa, if we do not commit to real development in Africa, if we abandon that continent, what will happen is—you can build the best fences you can get, you can build the highest fences you can get, but people will come and climb the fences. If the choice is between starving in Africa and struggling for survival in Europe, they will come to Europe. So we had better invest in developing Africa.

QUESTION: I guess I have a little bit of a story about immigration into the United States. I moved to this country about 15 years ago from Brussels. What always struck me—and maybe this is a question for the Netherlands and European society in general—is that the success of the U.S. integration model is mainly linked to two elements, I think. It is the aspiration. People come because they want to become American, because they want to be New Yorkers. It is a very interesting, beautiful image. It's a country branding, almost, that is flawless. That is something that I think Europeans have not understood. I'm talking as an American and as a European, I guess. We don't have enough of that understanding of the aspirational element. We probably need a very big project that really appeals to people, for people to really want to be part of Dutch society or European society as much as, for instance, I wanted to become American.

The second element that I think explains the success of the American model is the fact that the rule of law is very strongly implemented. What I mean by that is, there is very little difference, wherever you come from. The law is very clear. It's made very clear to you by different authorities—police or local government. It's idiot-proof. Let's put it this way. There is some kind of neutrality to the law and to the rule and the way it's applied in the United States. You never feel discriminated against—sometimes you do, I guess, but in general, there is always that possibility, that idea, that the rule and the law is more or less equal and is more or less just for all of us.

FRANS TIMMERMANS: To start with your second point, we have had a lot of misunderstandings on this in the Netherlands as well. I was talking earlier about these explicit and implicit rules of the game. Because we have lost these implicit rules of the game, in many quarters in the Netherlands people think that law is the solution to everything. They want to put everything in law.

I think what you are talking about is not just law here. Because it's such an immigrant society, rules of the game, general behavioral rules, are made more explicit, so that people can learn them more easily. What we have done in Dutch society and European society is like inviting people to come and play football without first telling them what the rules of the game are. Then we're angry at them because they don't score goals. It's a bit unfair.

So what I think we can learn from an immigration society is to make things far more explicit than they are in a traditional society where you have very few newcomers.

On your first point, because of this New York 400 celebration, I have become an avid reader of U.S. history and of the founding fathers and of everything that happened in the last 400 years. It has been a fascinating voyage, and I'm certainly not going to stop. But my conclusion after having read a bit is that if you can draw parallels between the way the Netherlands—you can include Flanders easily in that, just for historic reasons (we are distinct countries)—if you look at that part of the world in the early 17th century and if you then look at what happened here and you draw the lines until today, there are actually three elements that recur all the time. It's this zeal for liberty that's always there, it's this craving for opportunity, trying to be the best you can be and trying to use every talent you have—that's a similarity—and this passion for morality, in all sorts of forms.

Our morality today is very much about same-sex marriages, about your choice for life, et cetera, which in many quarters in the United States is not seen as an issue of morality, but in Dutch society is very much an issue of morality. Our choices are always soaked in morality, which is also a problem for us. That is something that really happens in American and Dutch society in the same way throughout our history.

If you look at those three elements, I think you also find, in answer to your question of how we rekindle the feeling of wanting to be part of the society, it's to go back to these three fundamental elements in our society, elements which are still much more apparent in American society—certainly in the last six months or so—which should be rekindled also in European society.

QUESTION: We have been doing some educational programming with refugee youth in the United States and their classmates. One thing that's really important to me is looking at, in terms of cultural integration, how American communities, as host communities to resettled refugees, can see them not only as victims that we are helping to support, but also as people who have a rich cultural heritage whom we can learn from.

An example is, I was in Indianapolis, which is my hometown, recently for [Chin](#) National Day. Chin are Burmese refugees from western Burma. They have this huge event where they have traditional Chin wrestling. It's really fascinating and a lot of fun. Some of the middle schools in Indianapolis are starting to learn Chin wrestling because it's kind of a new opportunity and something that the kids get really into, and it helps them break down barriers with their classmates.

My question is, your example of your oldest son being interested in this language—that is, this kind of mixture of languages—strikes me as an example of something that could help bridge divides between communities in the Netherlands. I'm curious if you have other examples of stories where people are starting to see the values of the immigrants, not only the challenges.

FRANS TIMMERMANS: One of the biggest problems in modern Dutch society is the lack of interest for one's own history and the lack of interest for storytelling. I think storytelling is a big part of the solution of our problems in society. This is what I have also learnt in reading Barack Obama's books the last couple of years—this very powerful element of storytelling as an instrument to get people to engage in debate. Sometimes it starts with asking questions.

A friend of mine told me recently—and it really struck me because I had never thought of asking that question that way, because I would have found it intrusive—he went into a taxi, and the taxi driver was

obviously of Turkish or Moroccan origin. He said to him, "I always have a problem distinguishing whether you are Turkish or Moroccan. Could you help me?" It's a question I would never ask.

The answer he got was, "It's very easy. The Turks have heads like this, the Moroccans have heads like this."

It's so telling. Apparently, these communities are much more relaxed if you interact and simply ask these questions than if you feel this sort of inhibition to show your ignorance. To be afraid of your own ignorance is perhaps one of the most painful elements in human behavior. Just to allow yourself to ask the questions that will open doors is so important. These are the forms of interaction that we should be seeking more, and also seeking new instruments for this interaction. The Net is very powerful. YouTube is very powerful in this, Facebook, et cetera, especially because our minority communities are very quick in adopting these forms of communication—much quicker than in becoming fully fledged members of the traditional forms of communication.

QUESTION: I have two short stories and I will follow up with a question. I will try to be very brief.

The first is that four years ago I took part in Humanity in Action, the program that you have mentioned. I am Dutch-Israeli. Some people do use a hyphenated identity already. A Canadian fellow who also took part researched faith in the Dutch army. There we discovered that at the time there was still not a Muslim religious counselor in the Dutch army, where there were rabbis and Christian counselors.

Just today I read that actually now, four years after, imams have been appointed to take part in the Dutch army. That is obviously something that is welcome. But it has taken a very long time, for reasons of secularism, for reasons of organizational difficulties in the Muslim community. But to me it is telling, in a way, of difficulties for the Netherlands in handling such issues.

The other story that I have is that three weeks ago I visited [Ellis Island](#) for the first time, and I was amazed. Seeing the way the United States, New York, approaches its history of immigration was extremely compelling to me.

I was wondering, why can't we have it in the Netherlands? Why can't we give such a similar portrayal or who the Dutch are, where they come from?

One thing that struck me is that apparently we do not have such a clear history of immigration policies as well. We do not see ourselves, obviously, as a nation of immigrants, very different from the United States. Maybe that makes us less apt in dealing with such issues.

My question is, how can we become competent, decisive, and quick in dealing with issues which are obviously pressing in Dutch society?

FRANS TIMMERMANS: On your first point, we have had halal food in the Dutch armed forces for ten years now. So I think in some areas we have made quicker progress than in others.

I think the armed forces, even in the Netherlands, are a powerful instrument for integration, because we have many minorities in the armed forces. Actually, yesterday a young soldier was killed in Afghanistan, and only judging by his name, I can assume that he's Muslim. Without exploiting that, we should point out to people that somebody who is willing to risk his life for this society should be awarded for this and should be welcomed in this society, not be seen as a potential threat.

On your second point, yes, of course, we for decades refused to accept the idea that we were an immigration society. Of course. It was something that was unacceptable. We called the immigrants guest workers who would leave. There is a very fundamental point here. Just go back to your own private lives. If you have somebody who is a guest at your table, you will not complain about his abominable behavior, his bad manners. You will just wait until he leaves and then talk to your wife or to your children and say,

"Oh, what a horrible person. I'm glad he's left."

But if you accept someone as a member of your family, you will talk to them, correct them if you think they misbehave, make them part of decision making. That is the fundamental difference. We have seen new minorities as guests who would leave at a certain point, which means that they were never integrated in society and they were also never contradicted or asked to change their behavior or whatever. And now we are trying to do this so quickly that, instead of creating a platform and openness, we are sometimes painting them into a corner, where they can, only by violent reaction, try to break out. I think this is a very fundamental point.

Finally—I might have mentioned this in my talk—identity. In the pillarised society, your identity was a given. You had an identity forced on you, and you could never leave that identity. Today identity is an issue of very, very personal choice. You can even have a virtual identity on the Net. So I can dress any way I want. I can be in any political party I want to. I can choose my religion and change my religion day by day. This is a new phenomenon, which has created an enormous sense of liberty, but which has also created an enormous sense of insecurity in society. This is something that we have not begun to understand, this fluctuation in identities.

JOANNE MYERS: I want to thank you very much for laying such an interesting foundation for the discussions that follow.

Consul General Scheltema, I want to thank you for suggesting that we host Mr. Timmermans. I think it's a win-win.

Thank you very much.

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