

Speech Kathleen Ferriere

Decolonisation Debates in International Relations

Good morning, dear guests,

First of all, I would like to thank the organization for the honor, to allow me, on behalf of the Netherlands Commission for UNESCO to have the opening words of this prestigious conference.

And apart from thanking, I also want to congratulate the organization, not only for setting up this truly timely and highly international gathering, but also for this location: the Peace Palace.

As you know, the Peace Palace in The Hague is a place for education on international law, it has a famous library, and it is home to the Permanent Court of Arbitration and to the Carnegie Foundation. It is absolutely a place – avant la lettre – in the spirit of UNESCO's motto: Building Peace in the Minds of People.

This place is of course inextricably linked to Andrew Carnegie, steel magnate and one of the richest people in the world of his generation. Perhaps we could say that he is the Elon Musk of his time, given his wealth, power, and influence. But with all that money, Carnegie, was able to be a great benefactor and philanthropist. He financed this much-needed place of education, law and culture. Carnegie was a visionary, a year after the opening of the Peace Palace in 1913, World War I broke out.

Building Peace in the minds of people, the mission of UNESCO might seem naïve to many, if we look at today's world, where armed conflicts are rising, where there is so much suffering in so many places and where people tend to lock themselves in their own world, their own apps and social groups, with people alike, who have the same opinion, and who confirm each other in their own beliefs and often also their feelings of superiority.

A world where people are less and less interested in the other, where people lose true interest and curiosity in other people, other cultures.

A world ruled by indifference, in which, the "my country first" and "my people first" policies have become a 'normality'. Accepting as normal what is not normal, is, in my opinion one of the big threats of our times.

As is also the inability of Europe, until today, to really unite forces. To stand for the values on which the European Community was once based.

But now that we see rapid geopolitical shifts, the rise of authoritarian inward-looking regimes, Europe has to stand up for itself to safeguard democratic values and civil rights.

And that, dear guests, is not a threat, that is an opportunity.

An opportunity because Europe must seek new allies. Now that the USA no longer is the trustworthy ally it used to be, Europe needs new allies. Allies that can be found in the Global South. In countries in Africa, in Asia and in South America, for instance.

This is an opportunity, because when democratic leaders really become aware that they need new allies, they will have to open their eyes and see how our world is still organized in a truly colonial way.

How still today: some countries are expected to deliver: goods, products and, if necessary, also people, to enable other countries to prosper. Exactly as it was in the colonial times: as a colonizer, you just take from the colonies what you need for your wealth, for the wellbeing of your country and your people, without worrying about what the effects are for the people from whom you take.

In that sense little has changed. Because we close our eyes for what we do not want to see. This goes for the relations between continents, between countries, but also within countries. The dynamics are the same.

The Netherlands UNESCO commission therefore launched a report recently, giving a platform to the diasporic cultures that are abundantly present in our Dutch society, but not seen, nor heard by many. Our report opened many eyes in this country and even beyond its borders.

In the same way eyes must be opened for the necessity to cooperate for countries in the global north and the global south. Simply because we cannot solve the challenges of our times, from only one perspective, one way of thinking, one world view. We need a diversity of views and ideas. Therefore, we must take steps, huge steps in the processes of decolonization.

Decolonization calls for a fundamental change in how we understand and organize our world. The colonial structures that shaped our world are no longer tenable.

Decolonization means acknowledging that one way of thinking and acting is not the only norm.

First steps have been taken and we do not want to lose what has been achieved and promised so far.... and furthermore we know that after all, we are still at the very beginning of this decolonization process.

Unmistakably: these times are an opportunity to take the necessary giant leaps.

In the Netherlands we have had studies from cities and banks about their role in times of slavery. Facts are on the table. Finally, it becomes clear that our shared human history has been primarily told from the viewpoint of the colonizers, those who "ruled the waves and the worlds". But finally, now we see, that there are so many other stories to be told, other perspectives to discover and to cherish.

Here in the Netherlands apologies have been made. Our former Prime Minister Mark Rutte even admitted that he was wrong when he said, -and he said this for many years-, that the times of slavery belong to a remote past. But he opened his eyes for

the fact that because of slavery, there is inequality in our society, structural racism and discrimination.

Our King, who ordered research on the role of his family in the colonial past, not only apologized, but asked for forgiveness, a very moving moment.

All this research and facts are necessary, but...they are not enough. What is needed is a healing process. To bring people together, people who live in completely different realities, worlds wide apart, even when they are neighbors. To bring countries and continents together, even if they live realities that are totally different and even if, because of the past, there has not been any interest in collaborating.

These times ask from all of us, people of good will, to see what is at stake and to stand up for our values. And therefore, to seek connection with others. Close by and far away.

But how do you reach the other, who is not interested in you?

As the chair of the Netherlands UNESCO commission, I am convinced, that all UNESCO stands for, science, education, communication, arts, nature and culture can really help us, to bridge the gaps in our societies and world.

Projects that showcase contemporary diversity, such as initiatives around hip-hop, underground cultures, and certainly also youth cultures that draw inspiration from various cultural interactions, remixing and furthering them, deserve more attention.

Connection starts with awareness. And we all have an active role to play in that. Policymakers, as well as community organizers and managers, should not wait until people with initiatives come to them; they must proactively listen to the voices of all groups in our society.

After WWII, wise people who laid the basis for the UN were sitting around the table in New York. They said: never again, never again a world war. And to guarantee World Peace, they defined three pillars: 1. Fair distribution of wealth, 2. international jurisprudence and 3. communication between the people . That last pillar is what UNESCO stands for and that unites people because of the simple fact that they are human. That is education and communication and science, that is art, that is culture. There, in that pillar, we can find the urgently needed tools to bring people together, to create curiosity, a sense of belonging, to feel ...that what cannot be expressed in words and to become aware that we human beings, need each other.

These challenging times, dear guest, are an opportunity to invite people, countries, nations and individuals to see the bigger picture, to see what is at stake, and seek the forces that unite us, instead of the forces that divide us. This time calls for a new mindset, where we not only acknowledge what went wrong in the past but also actively build just and inclusive structures for the future.

And I see opportunities in a world that is increasingly interconnected technologically. In a recent advisory report by the Dutch Council for Culture on recovery and

restitution in relation to colonial archives, for example, digitalization and digital accessibility are highlighted.

Culture is not just a trivial matter; it is the key to healing, connection, and progress..

This day, with this powerful program, with speakers from around the globe that will share their insights and views, undoubtedly will give a huge boost of inspiration to each and to all of us.

I wish you all a great day, a day in which you get inspired, and it is my wish that when you leave this Palace tonight you will feel as visionary as Carnegie was, equipped with the strong desire and the concrete tools to use the opportunities these challenging times are providing us, to make this world a better place for all.

Thank you