



Address by the Prime Minister on the occasion of the inauguration of the Van Der Veken House

Antwerp, 27 september 2006

29 september 2006

Mr. Van Der Veken :
Ladies and Gentlemen :

All of you are well aware that my personal concerns and interests in the Antwerp diamond sector run deep. Antwerp is the epicentre of the world's diamond industry. Eight out of ten diamonds traded worldwide pass through Antwerp, which makes this diamond centre one of the jewels in the crown of the Belgian economy. And, like diamonds, jewels are precious possessions to be cherished and treasured.

Nevertheless, we have to be on our guard against pretenders lurking just beyond the horizon. Cities such as Mumbai, Dubai, Tel Aviv, or New York are poised to push Antwerp off its pedestal as the pre-eminent diamond distribution centre of the world. This is something that neither the Diamond High Council nor the City of Antwerp, nor I myself for that matter, wish to see happening. To keep such pretenders at bay, we have on 30 May together concluded an important protocol.

On the one hand, we have together decided to re-organize the High Diamond Council. The Non-Profit Organisation has been turned into a Foundation. This foundation will be administered according to the rules of corporate governance. And it will be notable for its balanced representation. In addition, a separate corporation has been formed to look after the commercialisation of the diamond certificates.

Likewise, and furthermore, a 12-point plan has been devised for the purpose of providing Antwerp with a new world distribution centre dynamic. In this context, a stock revaluation was agreed upon, a move that also recently had been resolved upon by the Diamond High Council. Likewise, a Social Plan was created. One other decision has been the establishment of a free zone in Zaventem, and one other important measure has been the Public-Private Cooperative Partnership between the City of Antwerp and the Diamond High Council intended to provide security and protection for the diamond district.

I personally am, in any event, firmly convinced that the combined efforts by the federal government, the City of Antwerp, and the Diamond High Council will render the desired result, that result being the heightened attraction of Antwerp as the diamond world distribution centre and, consequently, the revitalisation of this diamond district.

This, however, does not tell the whole story. For the diamond district is only a small neighbourhood scarcely covering a surface area of two square kilometres. And while its attractions may well be enhanced, if there is no room for newly emerging diamond traders, we are not very likely to make any perceptible progress. What that means is simply this: without new infrastructure, growth is not going to happen.

In view of such reflections, I want to stress that this Van Der Veken House is to be seen as the right initiative that has happened at just the right moment. This new building will with its serviceable surface area of 2.300 m² distributed over seven floors make available the kind of office space that is now so much in demand. The office premises have been organised as individual work areas and satisfy the highest standards of excellence. And what is more, it is situated in a 'green zone' within the diamond community. All of this combines to have the Van Der Veken House meet all of the necessary conditions that forecast the ambitious future prospects of the diamond district.

And, because of such considerations, the initiator of this project, Christiaan Van Der Veken, deserves our praise and recognition. With this project he has demonstrated quite clearly that private investors, and what is more, Belgian private investors, can make a big difference in our country. I personally have become firmly convinced that the growth and burgeoning of this district shall for the future become and remain associated with the name Van Der Veken. Although it is true, of course, that the very name of this building assures Mr. Van Der Veken of his rightful place in the annals of the diamond history of Antwerp ...

Ladies and gentlemen,

The foundations of the Van Der Veken House have been laid. The opening of the building is anticipated for the end of 2007. At that time, also the protocol that we have concluded shall begin to bear fruit. That will ring in the historical moment when Mumbai, Dubai, Tel Aviv, or New York shall have to accept the fact that : Yes, indeed, unquestionably Antwerp is back ! And this translates into the fact that the Antwerp diamond has returned to greater glory than ever before.

I thank you all.

29 September 2006