



## Speech by Flemish Minister of Education, Youth, Equal Opportunities and Brussels: Pascal Smet

### 13<sup>th</sup> European Guide and Scout Conference

Brussels, 21<sup>th</sup> July 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Scouts and Guides,

As president of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union for Youth, as Flemish Minister for Youth and as an inhabitant of Brussels, I am very pleased that the thirteenth European Guide & Scout Conference is taking place in Brussels, my capital which is also a world city.

Scouting began in England 101 years ago. Sir Robert Baden Powell and Lady Olave Baden Powell are the founders of the Scouts (boys) and Guides (girls). Both the World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM) and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) have developed from this. This division still exists today. I do wonder why you continue to maintain it. Because society has undergone drastic changes in these past 101 years. There are female presidents, female pilots and female astronauts. Fortunately, girls can become anything they want these days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whilst saying it, I know that it is not entirely true. What I am saying is true (and false) in some parts of the world, but certainly not everywhere. WAGGGS and WOSM can play an important role in the emancipation of young people, in breaking through gender stereotypes. It is for this reason that I have gladly read your position statement on girls' education. And that, through your organisations, you are participating in the non-formal education of young girls and women. However, it goes without saying that eliminating gender stereotypes is not a task of and for young girls. Boys too must realise that their attitude confirms roles which force people – all people – often undeservedly into a straitjacket. "To be a girl" and "to be a Scout" should go hand in hand just as easily as "to be a boy" and "to be a Scout". Or to paraphrase Baden Powell: "You cannot build an A1 society on C3 persons, female and male." (The original quote was about men: "You cannot maintain an A1 Empire on C3 men.") Only in this way can we make sure that all young people become active citizens who, as equals, participate in our society and let their voices be heard.



Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the first Scouts groups in Belgium was founded in Brussels (1913). The Brussels scouts and guides still exist today. I am aware, however, that it has become much less evident these days to find locations where they can organise their activities. This is a pity because children need space and above all physical space. This is not always simple. In Brussels, for instance, each square kilometre has to be shared by 6,000 residents and 3,000 commuters. This is a lot, but this is not different of course from many other cities in the world where too many people live together in too small a place.

Apart from space, children also need structure. Space without structure leads to chaos. The space of the youth movement is shaped through commitment. The freedom you are given there is steered in the right direction through responsibility. A commitment is like an obligation of your own choosing. You choose to make a joint commitment, a voluntary commitment. What society gets in return is much more than what it has invested in it. Because solidarity is essential for society; it is the foundation which countries and communities are based on.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I state the obvious when I say that we are living in an increasingly globalised world. Distances are becoming smaller and smaller each day. It is not always easy. On the contrary, globalisation also means that each place becomes global, that the original individuality of each place is changing. As inhabitant of Brussels I know what I am talking about.

Still, it is also important for people in a changing world to have things in common. It is significant for instance to have a common language, a common attitude and a common vision. If you want to build a society together, you must at least understand each other. Scouting sets the right example in this respect, since you not only use the same words, but often also share the same values and codes of conduct. In my opinion, one of the biggest future challenges will be to understand each other's language, both literally and figuratively, and to impart values that connect instead of divide.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Only a week ago, I concluded the European conference on youth work. This conference pointed out, among other things, how important it is for children and



young people to really participate in policy. Naturally, this real participation mainly takes place at the local level and has an immediate impact on the biotope of the children and young people themselves.

More than ever, the world needs to shape citizens who are capable of dealing with diversity and change. The reason for this is that the internationalisation of youth work happens not only on the political forum, but especially also in the streets and squares of our cities. Youth work comes in very different shapes, but its foundation is always the same: to give as many children and young people as possible space to take responsibility for themselves and for each other and in this way guarantee the future of a solidarity-based society which excludes poverty and includes talent.

The recognition of youth work also implies the recognition of the importance of knowledge and encounter, of informal knowledge and encounter, because youth work is a continuation of the school (which is oriented towards formal knowledge and encounter). It is the recognition of the significance of play and encounter in itself, of commitment as the shaping of responsible citizens, of the transfer of values and norms that strengthen the rights of children and consequently also the human rights. It is the confirmation that youth work has a social as well as an economic impact. This recognition also means that those who cannot participate in youth work miss out on opportunities, and that we must make very sure that youth work not only strengthens those children and young people who are already given the best chances in our education system today.

Dear Scouts and Guides

We really need to start working on a diverse movement. Scouts and guides started as a middle-class story 101 years ago. Unfortunately, I find that after so many years it is still a middle-class movement, despite your efforts.

I am asking you, dear Scouts and Guides, to take up the commitment, together with me, to have as many children and young people as possible, and especially those with fewer opportunities, participate in your movement, in order to give them as well the opportunity “to be proud to be a scout”. Our ambition must be to make youth work in the world become the “eyes and ears” of children and young people in the world, as well as a megaphone for the voices of children and young people in the world. Of all children and young people.