

Dutch Immigration

Integration and Loss of Identity

Talk Held at the Celebration of the Dutch

Koninginnedag—Queen's Birthday

Sponsored by the

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It has been three decades or more since I last attended a meeting consisting *by design* of, for and by only Dutch people. So, I am no longer familiar with protocol in this cultural situation. Well, perhaps I never was! I am told we will have some very prominent BC Dutchmen among us, but, apart from the Consul-Generaal, and our former Premier Meneer vander Zalm, I do not know or recognize them. I only have read about some of them in the media. How do I properly address you? What, in Dutch culture, would be appropriate? You know, my name is Boer. So what chance do I have? It implies you cannot expect me to be an expert in such matters.

My solution is provided by Nigeria, where I spent 30 years. There, protocol at meetings can be time consuming, since every person with any position at all has to be singled out and recognized. Lately some have solved this predicament by simply announcing, “All protocol observed”—no one is slighted and everyone is happy.

So, ladies and gentlemen, all protocol observed!

In his response to my recent story in the *Vancouver Sun* about my family's immigration in the 1950s, I have been invited by our Consul General to speak on the subject of Dutch immigrants in Canada—their strength and their weakness. In an exploratory conversation at the Consulate we observed the strong tendency of Dutch immigrants in Canada to be quickly integrated into

Canadian society. If you have read my story in the Sun, you will have noticed our de facto family motto: *Laat je klompen thuis!* (Leave your wooden shoes at home.) Or, in the case of this 13-year old boy, “*Doe je pofbroek af/uit!*” (“Take off your pantaloons.”) Within two years we had switched to English at home.

My mother had nine children at the time and was in her early 40s. When she stepped off the Volendam on March 25, 1951, in Halifax, she hardly knew “yes” from “no.” But 7 years later, when I went off to some far-off college in MI, she wrote me faithfully almost every week, but never once in Dutch. Always in English. She so pushed herself.

Well, that seems to be part of the Dutch way—to *integrate*. I have lived in Nigeria and traveled in several other African countries, where I would meet Dutchmen, but they almost always insist on speaking English. They would not give me a chance to practice my residual Dutch. Though I still speak a fair amount of Dutch—the Consul-Generaal even generously praised me for my Dutch-- I don’t feel comfortable enough in it to address a crowd of distinguished Dutchmen like you.

You meet Dutch tourists in the Yukon, on the Vancouver Island ferries, in Banff, on the plane-- they almost always want to speak English. And while the Polish, the Chechs, the Germans, the Italians, etc. have their cultural organizations and identifiable halls and other buildings around the city, you will not see any such Dutch facility, except for churches. We integrate. We become Canadian. Even the church, at least the Christian Reformed Church, is very eager to shed its Dutch mentality and embrace multiculturalism. We speak the language very quickly and well. We allow ourselves to be absorbed in the new home culture. There is no Dutch ghetto. There may be places where they congregate, but no residential ghetoos like other immigrants. There is no place in either Vancouver or Toronto that is described as the Dutch quarters. And even though we occasionally hear jokes about the Dutch mafia in BC, there is no identifiable place where they are located.

Here in Canada, we find ourselves everywhere. We are well represented in the BC govt at the highest level. Dutch names appear regularly in all the media. We contribute in every sector, especially agriculture and horticulture, labour relations, education and religion.

Not only do we integrate as *individuals*, but also in our *organizations*. We have also done yeoman work in education. Victorial Cunningham wrote the book, *Justice Achieved: The Political Struggle of Independent Schoiols in British Columbia* (2002). This book is a tribute to the contribution of the Dutch to freedom in education in BC—but it is written by a Cunningham, not some by Vandersma. We have built undergraduate and post-graduate institutions in Canada. We have pioneered and continue to do so with more responsible labour unions. We have established a national Citizens for Public Justice, whose main founder has been decorated with the Order of Canada. All of these efforts, started by Dutch, have thoroughly Canadianized. They have been integrated and are part of the local and national scenes. *We are integrators*. That's our strength.

Then the Consul-Generaal and myself explored the other side of the coin. What happens to our Dutchness, to our own cultural awareness, especially with the second and subsequent generations. A few months ago, Edie Bijdemast, whom I expect to be here, but whom I have never met, told her story of estrangement and lostness in the *Vancouver Sun*. She had lost touch with her roots and it made her feel empty and rootless. She had to go back to the Netherlands to search for her roots and understand herself.

In preparation for this talk, I explored this issue with a nephew of mine living in Cobble Hill near Duncan, who wrote something similar to Edy's. He began his letter: "I feel we are lost." He was born on VI. His parents (my sister and husband, who met each other here) immigrated and, like good Dutchmen do, integrated—and, my nephew wrote, "we lost our connection. I am a Canadian with little understanding of my roots." Especially not being able to speak or read Dutch bothers him to such an extent that he has taken the trouble of learning a fair bit of it and also by going for an extended trip. He ended by suggesting that some exchange programme be established for Dutch Canadian youth to spend time in NL as students. Or some work exchange programme. Anything to help these youths get back to their roots and fill that cultural emptiness and loneliness.

The Consul-Generaal and I had this discussion only 10 days ago. Since then, I have done a bit of research on the internet. Beginning with Edie's story, I found to my astonishment that there are actually quite a few Dutch cultural activities going on around our city. I returned here retired in 2001—a good 6 years ago, but never heard of them. I hope to explore these a bit in the near future. Perhaps they could become the vehicles, in cooperation with the Consulate, to initiate some kind of programme to this end. My nephew

reminded me of the student exchange programme operated by the Rotary Club. In fact, they brought a distant young Dutch relative of mine to Nanaimo who was amazed to find herself surrounded by a crowd of relatives of whom she had never heard!

We are the opposite to most immigrants of the last few decades. Most of them are weak in integration and strong in retaining their traditions. We are the other way around. Integration is great and necessary. It enables us to contribute to the country of our choice. We have reason to be proud of this part of our tradition, but we are weak in transmitting the good things of our heritage to our children—and leave many of them wondering who they really are and why. *That* is our weakness that we should do our best to overcome. We have the necessary structures to do it along with our Consulate. The rest is up to you...*us!*

Meneer de voorzitter: Ik heb gezegd! Goeie mensen, hartelijk bedankt.