

Speech Wouter Bos

**Speech by Wouter Bos,
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**Opening of the Academic Year, Wageningen University,
4 september 2006**

Get Keen on Green

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to address you today at the opening of the Academic Year 2006-2007 of Wageningen University and Research Centre.

This is a university and therefore I would first like to say a few words about how we perceive the future of higher education. But this is also a university with a high profile in the area of ecology and sustainability, and so I can't resist sharing our ideas about that issue with you either. And of course, it is hugely helpful that we launched our election manifesto yesterday. No doubt you have all read it and put it under your pillow, but for the few who have not, I will deal with a couple of points from this manifesto!

But first things first: education. Traditionally, this is a subject that social democrats are eager to talk about. Because knowledge emancipates people, strengthens the economy and improves society as a whole. The subtitle of our election manifesto reads: 'Working for a Better Netherlands'. But working for the Netherlands of tomorrow means investing in today's education. From the first steps on the playground until the day you leave university with a degree or even a doctorate. And we want education of the highest quality during all these years, because children deserve that, because it is important to the quality of our society, and because it is badly needed for the future of our economy.

To be sure, all politicians are saying that. We are not different from the others in that respect. We are different in that we are the only party that now wants to release more than 4 billion euros a year for that purpose, including extra funds for fundamental scientific research. 'To put your money where your mouth is', as the English put it so well. The money goes not only to higher education, for that matter. It all begins with investments in good child care facilities, but equally important are salary increases for good and important teachers and cutting the drop-out rate in vmbo (preparatory secondary vocational education). And, in view of our tradition, it is also important to say that as far as we are concerned, there is no need for far-reaching changes in the educational system. Major changes in the system are the last thing schoolchildren, teachers and students need. Quality, accessibility and room for talent and initiative; these are our key words for the coming years.

So what are the concrete implications for the higher education sector and what do we say about that in our election manifesto?

First and foremost, open system experiments, tuition fee differentiation and selection will continue to be possible, but these should always be assessed in terms of their effects on quality and accessibility. Our basic principle is that students should have a choice, but that there should always be a place for everybody. The Dutch Labour Party also believes that there should be an ombudsman to receive student complaints about the quality and organisation of education. Students should not have to worry about getting value for their money and they should have access to an independent institution that takes their complaints seriously. When it comes to quality control, however, we will give the institutions themselves more freedom and responsibility and we will reduce the red tape surrounding visitations and inspections as much as possible. Why should we not move towards a system that rewards well-functioning institutions with less supervision? The better you perform, the less supervision and the fewer rules. We politicians have a lot to say about how we should have greater appreciation for educational professionals, and this seems to be a great way to go about it and give them the freedom they deserve.

Another ambition in our manifesto is to create more possibilities for student loans, so that students can also take out a loan for studying abroad, because studying in Cambridge or China can make a valuable contribution to their college experience. With its many foreign internships and foreign students, this university has had an international orientation for a long time now. This is good for this university, good for the students and good for the Netherlands. Let us strengthen this. And let us not be afraid that if students may keep their grants and loans abroad, this will have adverse effects on the position of Dutch institutions. Because at the end of the day, we are not in this for the institutions, it should all work for the students. And it is their interests that are served by an international orientation in our higher education sector.

As it happens, this is not only a matter of money. I am afraid that the people who work here at the International Office have to spend an incredible amount of time on IND procedures and arranging residence permits for foreign students and researchers. We want to make these procedures simpler and faster, because an open, tolerant and outward-oriented approach and a hospitable attitude towards foreign students and researchers are the prerequisites to a flourishing research environment and a strong knowledge economy!

Another and final point in our manifesto that I would like to address is the notion that universities and professional education institutions should cooperate more effectively. There is such a tremendous diversity of talent among students that too rigid a distinction between university education and professional education prevents the tailor-made services that do justice to this diversity. So let us deal with that in a creative and open fashion as well, without being guided by the interests of the institution in too conservative

a manner. Here, too, the student should be our primary concern.

As a matter of fact, this is not much of a problem in Wageningen, because effective cooperation is already taking place here. Partly due to the combination of university education, professional education and research, Wageningen has acquired an excellent position to meet the challenge of educational reform. At the same time, this enables Wageningen to effectively coordinate its operations and to respond to questions from noncommercial organisations, the business sector and the government.

As you can see, the Dutch Labour Party is not in favour of sweeping changes in the higher education system for the foreseeable future. In our opinion, rather than inventing new systems and structures, we should spend the next few years on improving implementation, with a clear focus on quality, accessibility and room for talent and initiative. That requires more than beautiful words, it requires investments – from primary school to university – because good education, rewarding initiative and talent form the basis for our society, our economy, and our future.

To be green or not to be, that is the question. I am convinced of that. But not everybody is. Just look at how people deal with this one central question: how does the pursuit of sustainable development relate to the pursuit of growth? Do a clean world and continuing economic growth go together?

Roughly speaking, there are three answers to this question. The first comes from people – mainly liberals – whose answer to every social issue is in fact: growth. This answer ignores reality, because the exhaustion of raw materials, deforestation and climate change are also societal issues and unfortunately, these processes are still continuing as the economy grows.

The second answer to the question whether economy and ecology go together is the exact opposite: growth is bad. Bad for the environment and therefore bad. This is selective reasoning, too. Nowadays, the Rhine is considerably cleaner than 50 years ago and the air in the cities is much cleaner than 100 years ago. Even so, the economy has been growing all the time.

The third answer is the following: growth is excellent – even absolutely necessary – but we should succeed in striking a balance between growth and a clean world. This is our story. A story about selective and sustainable growth. And this is not a weak compromise to avoid making a choice. On the contrary, it is a formidable challenge that involves a great deal of effort. It is many times more difficult than to say: 'growth is good' or 'growth is bad'.

My main point today is this: if we are to ensure that further economic growth will not result in the depletion of energy supplies and continuing climate change, we should begin by developing another energy supply system.

The lack of sustainability of the global energy supply will pose one of the most serious threats over the next few decades. The rate at which the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere increases as a result of human activities is threatening to change our climate drastically and is undermining the stability of ecosystems across the world. Our dependency on oil and gas makes us vulnerable to global power politics and results in unpredictable availability and prices of these primary sources. If we fail to face up to these threats, we will forfeit our future. We are already experiencing that we can by no means be assured of oil and gas deliveries as a result of tensions in the Middle East or Russia. A sudden halt in supplies is anything but imaginary and means nothing less than a direct threat to our prosperity.

But we can choose a different future. I hold on to the idea that the sun is an inexhaustible source of energy for us. When we realise that every single day the earth receives 4,000 times more energy than we consume worldwide and that the sun constitutes an unending source of energy in terms of human experience, the debate on sustainable energy assumes quite a different dimension. So if we do not invest in sustainable energy, we will only be dividing existing supplies. And that is surely no long-term solution to our energy problem.

We should change over to sustainable energy before climate change and energy shortages will confront us with insurmountable problems. At the same time, we should not take this step only because we are pessimistic about the future or out of a sense of inevitability. Sustainable energy is important not only because we are facing many problems. Professor Rudy Rabbinge from Wageningen University used to say: 'The Stone Age did not end because of a lack of stones.' The same is true here. Sustainable energy is not only a necessity because of diminishing traditional energy supplies. It simply offers so many opportunities! – and there are by no means enough of these. Unprecedented potential and opportunities for Dutch companies, universities and citizens.

Let us consider a few examples of our options here. This country has a great reputation in the field of offshore technology. Our offshore and salvage companies are imbued with Dutch commercial spirit and resourcefulness. Some years ago, two Dutch companies pulled off a job – the storing of the submarine Kursk – which was initially considered impossible. Even though salvaging submarines is not the same thing as building windmills, the nerve and resourcefulness needed for these activities are actually quite similar. And there is more that we can do with water. The participants in this morning's symposium have undoubtedly discussed this issue as well.

For example, the Dutch Wetsus institute, in which Wageningen University plays a prominent role, is at the forefront in the development of technology for generating energy by mixing fresh water and salt water. No science fiction, but reality, between IJsselmeer and Waddenzee, for example. The Netherlands has great potential for this form of energy: 7500 megawatt. By comparison: 7,500 megawatt equals 20 nuclear power stations, but this energy is clean and has been developed with Dutch expertise and technology. But there is even greater potential: Thirty percent of Europe's liquid fuels are produced in the Netherlands. At this

junction, these are still fossil fuels, but with our expertise in the field of agrotechnology – right now I am standing in the very centre of excellence in this field – it will be possible to turn these into green fuels, preferably by cascading and in close cooperation with Energy Valley in Groningen. And if we really make an effort, we might even use organic solar cells in the future. I realise that these technologies are far into the future, but ideals and ambitions are a prerequisite to progress!

All these innovations are possible, but they do require vision and ambition. And here, politics can make a difference. I consider the example set by Prime Minister Persson in Sweden inspiring. So many initiatives have been launched in that country after his government presented a target for Sweden to become independent of oil by 2020. Of course, I am aware that subsequently, they are firmly committed to gas, coal and nuclear energy and there is a lot to be said against that. But my point is that this kind of well-defined ambition is inspiring. It inspires industry, the higher education sector, and citizens alike. It unleashes innovation and all of a sudden, things that seemed impossible earlier are found to be possible.

This should be an example for the Netherlands as well. The Dutch government should not pursue a wavering policy when it comes to stimulating sustainable energy, as we have seen in recent years, but should define a clear ambition.

Today I would like us, as we are assembled here in Wageningen, to agree on a Dutch ambition for sustainable energy as well. With ambitions and ideals, a belief in a cleaner and better future, and with courage and confidence, we can take a truly great step in the direction of sustainable energy supply as well as a sustainable development of the Netherlands. Therefore, my ambition is the following. The Dutch Labour Party wants the Netherlands to have the cleanest and most efficient energy supply system in Europe by 2020. The sustainable energy share must have been multiplied by 10 by 2020. Our dependency on fossil fuels may almost be halved by 2020, and be completely ended by 2050. By this time, the energy we generate will be entirely clean and we will drive cars that are powered by sustainable fuels or they may even be hydrogen-powered.

I want to be absolutely clear about these ambitions and show my cards. Because it goes without saying that these ambitions should be based on a solid financial foundation; cash on the nail, in other words. It is the Dutch Labour Party's ambition to create a stable investment and innovation climate for sustainable energy, which has been very successful in Denmark, for example. To achieve our ambitions, we will therefore earmark 1 billion euros per year, for the most part from natural gas revenues, for the innovation and development of clean energy sources. In this way, our gas supplies – our old energy source – will pay for our new energy source.

Our plans reveal that a sustainable future and a strong economy can actually go hand in hand. Not by losing sight of the long term as a result of a complete obsession with growth figures, but by investing in the long term. Will this cost money? Yes, certainly. Will this cost a few tenths of our economic growth percentages? This may be so, but to be honest, I am much less interested in whether our economy will grow by 1.9% or 2.0% next year than in the kind of country and world (viewed from an economic and ecological perspective) we will leave for future generations. Growth should never be an end in itself. Those who consider only the quantity of growth and ignore its quality will look back one day and discover that the operation has been successful but that the patient has died.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about Wageningen University and Research Centre and the contribution that this beautiful university can make to knowledge, sustainable development and innovation in this country.

I already mentioned the Wetsus Institute, which carries out pioneering research in the field of sustainable energy. This year, IMARES, a knowledge institute that specialises in research into ecology and the economic use of the sea, has been added to the Wageningen knowledge cluster. The development of knowledge about water, water management and sustainable use will become increasingly important in the next few decades. It is also one of the key objectives of the Innovation Platform, but as I am saying this, I realise: just about everything is a key objective of the Innovation Platform, so, this may not be a very good argument ...

Finally, just one more thing. I am speaking to you as a vegetarian. I am standing here among all kinds of people who may well be able to explain to me in all kinds of ways why my reasons for being a vegetarian are right or wrong. So, we had better leave it at that today. But, notwithstanding all that, you may be proud of the reputation of Wageningen University in the field of food, food quality and new foods. To continue to feed the world, we need innovations. Innovations that allow more food to be grown on less land, such as the development of technology for salt water agriculture, innovations in crops less sensitive to plagues, innovations in food, for example, the use of fish proteins. Not every innovation will be welcomed straight away, however. We have seen the consumers' resistance against genetically modified crops. This is why it is important that knowledge is applied in a decent manner and that natural balances, animal welfare and other people's interests – often poorer people who cannot keep up with the rat race – are taken into account. Honesty to the consumer is essential in this context. The consumer should know what he or she eats.

I am reaching the end of my story. For a long time now, Wageningen has not been just an agricultural university. It is a centre of expertise in the field of ecology, food, life sciences, green issues and now the sea as well. It is eminently important to our knowledge economy, to our pursuit of a sustainable system of energy supply and to our pursuit of sustainable food production, both in the Netherlands and abroad.

I am convinced that politicians with a view on green and growth issues and an ambition focussed on sustainable energy will be able to inspire the Netherlands and give universities such as yours an even more important role in creating prosperity – responsible prosperity – than you already have at present. The Dutch Labour Party would like to start out on this journey on 22 November. I daresay these posters of ours will be flooded with red again, but my message today is: 'Get Keen on Green!'