NAMUR
CAPITALE

Speech of Walloon Festivities 2021

By the Mayor and Member of the Federal Parliament Maxime Prévot

On the 18th of September 2021

[Formal greetings]

How good it is to be back in the context of our Walloon festivities, after 18 months of more or less intensive isolation, depending on the moment, due to a health crisis without precedent for more than a century.

The Covid-19 crisis, like the dramatic floods suffered in Wallonia and even in the streets of our municipality, will have reminded us with violence that the probability of occurrence of atypical phenomena will have to be taken with more precaution in the future; the frequency of these problems is going to intensify.

These successive crises - one, the floods, added to another still unresolved, the health crisis - are challenging our certainties, challenging our habits, inviting us to change our vision, and requiring us to adapt our actions. Our software, both personal and political, must be updated. And quickly.

It would be too simplistic to become obsessively compulsive about climate change as if all the other challenges suddenly no longer existed. There are still huge tasks to be carried out in the area of social cohesion, the fight against precariousness, and the promotion of living all together in a society that is increasingly divided over migration issues. Expectations also remain high in terms of more effective governance of public structures, the safeguarding of the rights of women, LGBT individuals, people with disabilities, the sick and the elderly. In terms of economic development, increasing purchasing power, stimulating the entrepreneurial fabric to create virtuous growth and jobs. These challenges also affect Namur.

But it would also be totally irresponsible to bury our heads in the sand and not to realise that we have a rendez-vous with history. Not the one that will make us look better later, but the one that will prevent us from looking at our feet, embarrassed, when it comes to assuming for future generations the mitigated balance that we could leave by abstaining from action.

The ecological transition was already a strong axis of our policy, for fifteen years now, and even more clearly since 2018 with an aldermanship expressly dedicated to it. This strong axis must now become a structuring axis of our future policies. We are collectively convinced of this, and we have taken bold decisions in this area.

First of all, by being the first city in Wallonia and probably in Belgium to have developed a climate adaptation plan for our municipal territory, under the impetus of Alderwoman Charlotte Mouget. Increasing the greening of public and private spaces, improving soil permeability, preserving agricultural land as much as possible, rehabilitating and decontaminating former wastelands for housing, fighting against the vulnerabilities of our territory, and improving air quality. These are just some of the issues on the agenda of the City of Namur to make it an exemplary capital on these challenges.

Secondly, to reduce the harmful effects of future episodes of intense rainfall that we may have to relive sooner than 200 years from now, as was the case during the rainfall of last July, we wish to adapt our infrastructures to these perspectives and not only our territory. This is why your Local Council, despite a difficult budgetary context, has released an unprecedented amount of 6 million euros, in addition to the classic credits already included in our budgetary model, to respond as well as possible to the challenges of the sewage networks and other ditches or streams that need to be cleaned and maintained, but also to optimize the strategy of land development. Alderman Luc Gennart, who will activate these new resources, will therefore supplement the Footpaths Plan and the Roads Plan with a section specifically devoted to water-related risks.

This ecological transition will also find expression in energy and urban development issues. The developments planned in the primary neighborhoods, which are the most socio-economically weakened, will also make it possible to requalify these neighborhoods, reduce heat islands, and promote better living conditions and housing accessibility. These projects are made possible thanks to the exceptional aid from Wallonia within the framework of the integrated policy of the City. 66 million euros of investments will therefore be made over the next three years, in addition to our already selected projects, a good part of which will be devoted to energy renovations. The majority and the opposition have agreed on this ambition, which deserves to be emphasized.

Finally, mobility is also a key element in the great puzzle of the ecological transition. I say it and I state it as a strong ambition and an objective by 2030: Namur must become the Capital of Cycling. Active modes of transport must be further promoted to encourage a modal shift, reduce traffic jams, and improve traffic flows and connections between districts and villages, and neighboring municipalities. As far as cycling is concerned, Alderman Baudouin Sohier, who is in charge of sports but also of health, and who is active in all four corners of the municipality, can only welcome with enthusiasm, as we all do, the future Planet Bike project that the City and the Region wish to carry out together on the site of the former Sart-Hulet military barracks in Jambes. This is a happy reconversion, allowing for a harmonious and gentle cohabitation with the local residents, promoting passion and elite sports, with the first covered velodrome in Wallonia, tracks for BMX, mountain biking, skateboarding, freestyles, etc. This project, coupled with the national, European or world events of several cycling competitions that Namur regularly hosts, should consolidate this desire. More proactive developments of public roads must also accompany the movement, as we are already foreseeing thanks to our Bicycle Plan. Copenhagen can serve as an example so that Namur can join the network of the most cycle-friendly cities in Europe.

All the towns and cities of Wallonia must undergo such a change and turn the recent tragedies, especially in Liège, into an opportunity to rebuild a more agile territory. However, I must insist

that this climate revolution should not only be accessible to well-funded wallets but should also involve the most vulnerable people, who are statistically the most exposed to risks, as well as the working middle class.

In addition to this climate challenge and this transition, which we want to force the pace of, and which will find a place to be co-constructed within the NID at the tip of the Grognon, it seems to me that the Walloon cities are faced with three other major challenges. Three major challenges which, in my opinion, also concern our Capital City: safety and conviviality of the public domain, social and territorial cohesion, and urban attractiveness, whether commercial or touristic.

Today, public space is increasingly in demand. By walkers, cyclists, motorists, tourists, but also by scooters, skateboards, beggars, drug addicts and the homeless. Let's dare to look things in the face, without taboos, and without any tongue-in-cheek.

This makes cohabitation in the public space more delicate. Citizens are delighted to see young people taking over the new square of the Grognon with their skateboards, giving a nice intergenerational life to this place, as much as they deplore their presence, the risk for the ankles of passers-by during a failed trick, or the potential damage to the brand new concrete. Many citizens welcome the return of scooters to the city, and just as many regret the fact that they obstruct the passage by wildly occupying the pavements or passageways. The citizens are sympathetic and supportive of the great precariousness of certain people who have settled on the pavements or in the bus stops, but more and more Namurians and tourists are denouncing the aggressiveness of the beggars and the feeling of insecurity that is experienced by this difficult cohabitation in the public space. And dare I say it, complaints on this subject are reaching me more and more frequently.

These challenges are those of any large urban center in the world. Cities concentrate, much more than rural areas - and this is logical - the tensions linked to precariousness, insecurity, uncleanliness, mobility and diversity. Faced with these challenges, two positions are possible: resignation or mobilization. Your municipal team, not surprisingly, has opted for the second attitude. We have just decided to reinforce the teams of the City and the Social Welfare Centre to fight more vigorously against unoccupied housing, while it remains so difficult for many Namurians to find housing at a decent price. We will intensify the sanctions against negligence. The President of the Social Welfare Centre Philippe Noël is working on this. I have also asked him to act more voluntarily and with more results in the fight against aggressive begging, with the help of the police. Precariousness will always be respected and fought against. But it must not be used as a pretext to inconvenience others, passers-by, old or not, or tourists and shopkeepers. Namur has one of the densest social policies in Wallonia, and everyone has the possibility of being helped, provided that they want it. Which is not always the case.

We also wish to contribute to this conviviality of the public space, in particular through the requalification of Bomel-Heuvy, the urgent revitalization of the entire Station and Leopold district, and the extension of the pedestrian area. The participative process continues. With regard to the businesses that animate our city center, I would like to emphasize the powerful mobilization of the City alongside the merchants at the height of the health crisis and the lockdown periods. We have indeed been at the bedside of worried or weakened citizens,

working alongside health care personnel for an effective and rapid vaccination campaign, but we have also been at the bedside of the independent businesses, hit as never before by this crisis, demonstrating that not all of them are rolling in money as the popular caricature likes to believe. The Alderwoman Stéphanie Scailquin has ensured, through the millions of euros of the two recovery plans that we have released at the level of our municipality, that our craftsmen and traders hold on, receive bonuses and promote local products, including on the online platform NamurBoutik.

The attractiveness of the city shapes itself every day a little more and in a very visible way, thanks to the achievements which see the day, as the implementation of the cable car, formidable tourist tool which distinguishes us from the other Belgian cities, the next pedestrianization of the place Maurice Servais and its kiosk, the creation of new public parks to come on the site of the caserns and here next to it, on the site of the old high school, the patrimonial renovation of the Halle Al'Chair or the development of the Confluence. This magnificent square of the Grognon, which we will officially inaugurate this afternoon, was made possible, as was the Enjambée, thanks to European funds. Proof, dear diplomatic friends and dear Namurians, that we must constantly believe in the added value of international, European or global solidarity when it comes to building inclusive and attractive territories for our respective populations. Namur, as a regional capital, has assumed this duty of vigilance for 35 years now and will continue to do so, because I believe in the sincere mutual interest of international relations, in the open-mindedness they encourage, in the economic opportunities they offer and in the academic and cultural exchanges they allow. Namur will never be a rumpus capital but on the contrary an innovative capital. In this respect, the hosting next November of a high inter-ministerial summit of several French-speaking countries in Namur, on digital issues, shows once again the reputation and credibility that Namur-Capital has acquired in this field and which will be expressed in the Pavilion at the top of the citadel. In terms of Open Data too, we are at the forefront.

The attractiveness of the city is also due to its innovative tourism policy, its many performances, its citadel full of life, a panorama café in full transformation, a casino in full expansion, a stadium soon to be renovated, and the banks of the Meuse offering a great deal of entertainment. The Alderwoman of tourism, Anne Barzin, is working on these projects, as well as on the future realization of a terrace on the water, which will be attached to the foot of the Enjambée and the confluence point, to offer more (secure) contact with the water. When one is lucky like Namur to be a city of water, one does not turn one's back to the river, one values it.

For the social and territorial cohesion of our municipality to be intensified, we also wished to accentuate citizen participation. This is undoubtedly a leitmotiv of this legislature. The initiatives of co-construction and consultation of our population are multiplying, not as an obligatory step, but as an affirmed opportunity. Several major issues have been able to evolve favorably thanks to the citizen's perspective. The participative budgets, which will soon be launched for the second time, are the tip of the iceberg.

But this social cohesion is also measured by the ability of families, and particularly those with children, to be able to connect to the digital revolution. The period of lockdown and school closures has reminded us, with strange violence, how much telecommuting for work as well as for school, could have both beneficial and harmful effects. Some people have been able to

manage their time better, and have discovered a hitherto unknown faculty of resilience; while others have suffered burn-out or dropped out of school when it was not social. We know that our children are the future. Our local schools are also in transition. In digital transition, unprecedented means are made available to promote in-class and distance learning and to catch up. In ecological transition as well. Every day we take concrete action with our 4000 students, under the impetus of Alderwoman Patricia Grandchamps, to increase the amount of green space in the playgrounds, meals that give priority to local and organic products, alternative pedagogies such as the outdoor school, and numerous quality projects that have earned two of our schools the title of "eco-school": vegetable gardens, beehives, soft mobility or zero waste projects.

Waste is a global scourge that does not spare us. I despair every week that passes to see the incivility that remains in the heads of too many citizens. For years we have been deploying the widest range of actions to dissuade these problematic behaviors by sanctioning them as soon as possible. This time, Alderwoman Charlotte Deborsu has proposed to reverse the approach. From now on, we will certainly always punish uncivil acts, but we will also value positive and virtuous acts. After the stick, here comes the carrot! This is the ambition of the "Click" project launched in Namur recently, making our capital the first Walloon city, after Antwerp, to try this approach aimed at rewarding those who throw waste in the garbage cans. Let's hope that it works and that we are no longer obliged to dream of German, Dutch or Scandinavian cities to imagine what a clean city would be like.

The attractiveness of our capital is also its economic parks that are filling up, new hotels that are being built or are being announced, a splendid Grand Manège that offers the people of Namur and far beyond a real temple for classical music, singing, dancing and the performing arts, a modernized airfield, decision-making centers and numerous company headquarters that are settling here. These are also local projects, in the heart of our villages, with school, sports or cultural infrastructures that are being renovated or built. It is a hall for amateur theatre that will come to life in Erpent, a hall for handi-fencing that will be built in Bouge, renovations of public places in Belgrade or Salzinnes, etc. These are a multitude of projects, sometimes visible, sometimes less so, that are realized every month in our neighborhoods and in the countryside, by the Alderman for Heritage Tanguy Auspert and his departments. In order to manage our real estate with seriousness and to favor the associative dynamics of proximity.

Your municipal team, which I have the honor and the pleasure of leading, is taking care to implement all these projects through serious and rigorous management of public funds. In fifteen years, we have straightened out the communal finances - and we came from far away - having even built up a reserve of 20 million today. And yet, this reserve will melt like snow in two years. Because like all public authorities in Europe, our budgetary trajectories will inexorably deviate from balance. This is not due to negligence on our part. What we have in our hands as budgetary levers, we have controlled them well. I am thinking, for example, of personnel costs or our debt load. But, like all the municipalities in the kingdom, the announced explosion in the cost of pensions (which will double in 10 years), the increase in the costs of the Social Welfare Centre in view of the growing precariousness, the loss of tax revenue from the federal government because of the famous Tax Shift, the budgetary disruption caused by

the health crisis or, more recently, the damage and therefore the additional costs linked to the floods, all point to a not very promising budgetary outlook. Problematic even.

We take comfort in the fact that our situation will not be as bad as other large cities in Wallonia. But in the long run, it will not be very pleasing, because of phenomena that are foreign to us and that are not within our control. This is even more frustrating! But we will nevertheless remain proactive in order to act with relevance in the face of the realities on the ground, to be in solidarity with the victims or the poorest, to support the initiative and virtuous economic dynamics, determined to make Namur a capital of which the entire Walloon region can be proud. Regional aid will be indispensable, as you will have understood, in order to keep our heads above water.

But it is imperative that we continue to act not by thinking in the short term, but by drawing up perspectives for the future. By investing in the right way, governments around the world are calling for public investment to jump-start the economy and create jobs. So we will do our part. More than ever, we will be at the forefront of the climate transition, which has no regard for economic contingencies because it requires structural responses. We will continue to seriously manage the municipality to make it more beautiful, cleaner and safer every day. For our duty is not to have our nose in the air, nor is it to think about the next elections. Our most noble duty is to think about the next generations!

Happy Walloon festivities to all!

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