NAMUR
CAPITALE

Speech of Walloon Festivities 2022

By the Mayor and Member of the Federal Parliament Maxime Prévot

On the 17th of September 2022

Dear guests,
I would like to sincerely thank you for being present at my speech, which combines global considerations and local concerns. For your convenience and out of respect and gratitude, you can have an English version of my speech through the QR code on the card that was given to you. This should probably make practicing your listening less painful ;-)

[Formal greetings]

I do not hide from you that, a few months ago, I toyed with the idea of giving you a speech that would be interspersed with short sequences of comical songs to illustrate, with good humour and derision, various messages that I wanted to send you. In 2018, remember, I allowed myself this quirky style, and many of you encouraged me to repeat the experience. I do not know if it is for fun or masochism.

But although we are on a festive weekend, the heart is not light today as the context in which I deliver this speech to you is full of gravity.

No one had predicted that the year 2022 was going to be marked by the seal of a new conflict on European territory, in Ukraine, with the corollary of, on the one hand, the flow of refugees to be welcomed with dignity and solidarity as possible and, on the other hand, dramatic economic consequences, which manifest themselves on a daily basis in the increase in shopping cart prices as in the explosion of those of energy.

The electricity instalments that families, companies, and associations must now pay are simply staggering, in addition to a cost of living that has increased considerably, rents or mortgages to pay, children to preserve, health care to take on, and means to find to keep warm.

The middle class, or at least what is left of it, is falling apart. Retirees are cancelling aids or home care for lack of sufficient means. Fragile people flourish with new forms of precariousness. Workers sometimes have to look for a second job to make ends meet. The self-employed see the future with anguish as to the maintenance of their activity, already weakened by a health crisis whose effects have not yet been completely absorbed. The youth is brooding when they should be enthusiastic about the future. A future that appears to many

to be neither sufficiently sustainable, sufficiently united, nor sufficiently generating well-being, values, and meaning.

This insecure context, in people's hearts or sometimes in the street, obliges us, public officials at all levels of power. It obliges us to a triple title:

- A duty of lucidity
- A duty of truth
- A duty of efficiency

A duty of lucidity, first, on the difficulties experienced by many citizens, craftsmen, SMEs, and associative actors. A duty of lucidity on the expression of discontentment with drug addiction and insecurity experienced or felt in Namur. A duty of lucidity too, on the hassles of mobility or fears about the future pedestrian. A duty of lucidity finally on the urgency of the climate transition and the systemic change to face, what did I say, to assume and to accelerate.

For all these challenges, we must also play our part and not exclusively urge other levels of power. It is a duty of responsibility.

Thus, for citizens in difficulty, financial resources unparalleled in our city so far have been entrusted to the CPAS and our social cohesion service. Under the leadership of President Philippe Noël, we strive to develop a leading inclusive policy, even while being aware of a less pleasant collateral effect which is the attraction of marginalized people to Namur given the diversity and quality of its social services. This is why we must periodically remind ourselves of guidelines, as when I recently denounced the excesses of aggressive or harassing begging. But overall, we are still and always willing to assume our commitment to the most vulnerable audiences; seniors, disabled, veterans, or people in very great social or health dropouts. The president of the CPAS and the social action advisers, whose importance I am pleased to publicly salute once again for the importance of behind-the-scenes work, encourage the emergence of meaningful projects. The future central kitchen of our nursing homes will be operational in a few days. It will serve quality meals to our seigneuries but also, in a well-thought-out partnership with our market gardeners and local producers, healthy and short-circuit meals to all our municipal schools from next school year. Faced with debt mediations and energy accompaniments that are increasing, we are responding. Philippe Noël and I, as well as all our colleagues, would like to take advantage of this speech to reiterate our gratitude to the social services personnel who have been on the front line for three years, during the health crisis, the floods, or the management of Ukrainian refugees. Each time with harrowing human situations and an ability to adapt that honours the value of public service.

With regard to insecurity, which I have already been able to say in previous speeches the priority it represents in my eyes for our population, we must also look reality in the face. If the King's prosecutor confirmed to us recently that the phenomena had not statistically changed for ten years and that the situation remained much more significant in Namur than in other large cities of the country, I do not want to trivialise or minimise the problematic perception of perceived insecurity. As well as real insecurity in certain neighbourhoods. Because yes, the phenomena are increasing and the disinhibition of malicious citizens is worrying. We know the most problematic areas of the City. A handful of streets, mainly in the upper part of the city or in Jambes, where small traffic takes place. Where the aggressiveness resulting from addictions is amplifying.

Where incivilities are concentrated. Clear instructions have been given to the police. They have already carried out numerous punch operations, locked up several dealers or resellers, and carried out clean-up operations. The police force has been reinforced, the camera network will be extended and upgraded, and additional dogs have been trained. I say it clearly: there will be no respite for those who do not respect others, who commit theft, who offer doses to our young people, or who verbally or physically attack anyone. We have a duty, as a society that claims to be advanced, to offer our young people in particular an inspiring, reassuring, stimulating and exciting environment to bring hope, formulate dreams and develop projects.

Our duty of lucidity also leads us to see straight with regard to the climate emergency. Winston Churchill said "never let a good crisis go to waste ". The current energy crisis must certainly be vigorously sealed by strong and immediate decisions expected from our governments, but it must also serve as an adjuvant to more radical changes in behaviour and visions. This acceleration of our transitions, it is the now First Alderman Charlotte Mouget who has the difficult task. And she spares no effort so that Namur, with the support of the entire College team, takes the necessary steps to embody leadership in this area. Energy audit of our 30 largest buildings, agricultural and food belt around the City to increase our local food autonomy, analysis of the vulnerabilities of our territory to climate change to be the first city in Wallonia to adopt an adaptability plan to protect our inhabitants, in the future, from the harmful effects of urban sprawl, potential future floods or problematic heat islands. Speaking of the first Walloon, it is also in Namur that the largest mineral surface located in the heart of the city will be deconcreted to make way for a new large public park of 7000 m², just here behind you, in place of the old Espena school. The greening of the city centre continues. We are therefore lucid, not in denial. Even more, we want to be a locomotive of the transition, not a wagon that follows in a sluggish way.

And it is precisely because we must be innovative that we reiterate our conviction of the added value in terms of conviviality and attractiveness that the extension of the pedestrian area of our city centre will ultimately represent. We hear and understand the fears or reluctance of certain shopkeepers or residents. Any change of such magnitude is frightening, and the first reflex is then rejection or flight. The reception by shopkeepers, in particular, was just as reserved several years ago when one of my predecessors dared to create the current cosy pedestrian area at the bottom of the city. Could we imagine turning back today? The businesses there are doing pretty well! Even the pedestrian area in the centre of Brussels, once decried from all sides, is now a success and recognised as such by those who frequent it or shop there. Changes in mobility are also habits that need to evolve. No one wants to ban cars, but everyone knows that road space should be shared more widely with buses and bicycles. The Alderwoman for urban attractiveness, Stéphanie Scailquin, is doing a hard and difficult job, let's admit it, to change mentalities and to coordinate very regularly each of the stages with representatives of shopkeepers, residents and other categories of people affected by these transformations. She is constantly listening to everyone's legitimate questions, and she is piloting, with the Alderman of roadways, a methodical process which will offer a new attractive face to Namur, more peaceful, greener, more convivial, in a few years. I invite everyone to approach these changes with confidence in the final result.

Alongside the duty of lucidity, I told you that the situation in which Europe, our country but also our municipality that are evolving, also required a duty of truth.

A duty of truth on our local finances first. And this truth, dear Namur residents, is that of a city that until recently could pride itself on having a balanced budget, thanks to the long and in-depth work of cleaning up municipal finances that this majority has operated for more than fifteen years. Better than being in balance, we had even been able, thanks to our good management, to constitute a nest egg of nearly 20 million euros to face the unknowns of the future years. We have therefore worked on a healthy and exemplary financial recovery of our finances, distinguishing ourselves in this area from many other large cities. And yet, for a series of circumstances that all escape municipal action, our finances, like those of the vast majority of cities and towns throughout the country, will fall into bright red in the space of a few years. Debt will increase, as for all public authorities, because it will be the only way to get through these multiple crises.

Indeed, the Covid health crisis with its major revenue losses, its multiple expenditures to support the population, the various economic, social, and cultural sectors, and its reduction in the taxable income of citizens, already had a heavy impact on our finances. This was without counting on the floods of last summer and the millions of euros of unplanned investments that had to be made to repair or better prepare for the future. These are the harmful effects, of several million euros, of a federal tax shift which may have been beneficial for the citizens (we will see…), but in any case harmful for the municipalities. It is the explosion of personnel costs with successive indexations that never end. Just for this position of automatic salary indexation, we are talking about 10 million euros in additional costs, for not a single additional agent. It is very good – and even essential – as a mechanism for purchasing power, but it is dramatic for local finances as well as for the budgets of all employers. It is also the gigantic inflation of the costs of materials, in proportions more known for more than thirty years, and which increase the price of our sites by 20 to 30% at least. It is the inability of the Walloon Region to professionally collect the property tax and therefore a hole of several million more. These are the unforeseen costs of solidarity with Ukrainian refugees. It is also the energy bill of our buildings and the fuel of our vehicles that complete the blackboard. The conclusion: for all these phenomena which escape the municipal decision and over which we have no control, we are going to experience unequalled deficits.

And let's be clear; we are fully aware that what the city is undergoing in terms of cost explosion, citizens also experience it in their flesh and companies in their accounting model. Deficits that will force us to take progressive recovery measures for our local finances, in order to be able to avoid at all costs layoff plans or reduction of services offered to the population. But let's be clear and speak the truth, because the citizens deserve this frankness: the times to come will be hard, unpleasant decisions will be to be expected, for example, a reduction of our operating credits or certain subsidies, or a strong limitation of recruitments even when retiring. We made a commitment not to raise taxes. We will keep this commitment because it would also be nonsense to put more pressure on the wallets of the people of Namur even though the current crisis context is already weakening the purchasing power of many. The years to come will require courage from the elected representatives. You are entitled to demand it. We will preserve the municipal staff and the wallet of the people of Namur, the Oxygen plan of the Walloon Region will help us for several years. But we have a duty to see

far ahead, and therefore to face the next 10 years with the concern of speaking the truth and acting justly. We have broad shoulders to weather this new storm, one more. Our three-masted ship will make sure to keep the course of a city managed with seriousness and will also drive projects that meet the aspirations of citizens so that they live better every day.

The duty of truth in matters of public cleanliness is also a regular call in my speeches. The people of Namur are saturated with the incivility of certain people whom I once described as *barakis* in their behaviour. I regret that this indignation remains topical, despite the notable efforts of Alderman Charlotte Deborsu and all her brigades of efficient workers. People complain about cleanliness. We do not have streets as immaculate as in Scandinavian or Germanic countries, I am told. But our streets, thanks to the action of the Alderman, are much cleaner than elsewhere. Let's also be aware of this. And let us be especially aware that when rubbish litters a sidewalk, it is not because of the failure of municipal services but because of people's lack of education and good manners. Municipal regulations have recently been amended to strengthen the system of sanctions against environmental offences. Cameras will be acquired to track illegal deposits, you have been warned! The waste sorting system will be modernised.

The third duty of the virtuous triangle, after lucidity and truth, is the **duty of efficiency**. It is the one that should be the most obvious for public action, and it is sometimes the one in which citizens have the most difficulty believing. The dithering that overtakes governments, here as elsewhere in the world, the difficulties they experience in regaining control of the strategic policies of States that people think are more controlled by the market and its speculative laws, unfortunately all too often feed the feeling of an ineffective political power, incapable of responding effectively to the challenges of everyday life. In this respect, there is no level of power more effective than the local level. The City certainly does not have control over a series of phenomena that impact it, as I mentioned earlier, but on the contrary, we have, thanks to the hyper proximity with the citizens, the ability to tackle concrete actions. To make possible what is desirable.

So when we talk about climate change, we are acting locally. Particularly at the level of our municipal buildings and their energy sobriety. Alderman Tanguy Auspert has been making sure of that for a long time, just as ensures the proper maintenance of the heritage as a whole. The Halle Al'Chair is a good illustration of this, whose renovation is coming to an end to house the Tourist Office. The maintenance plans for all our buildings will lead us to renovate another big piece in a few months: the swimming pool of Jambes. We are aware that this means that its closure for works will handicap the schoolchildren, clubs and individuals who frequent our swimming pools. But it is a temporary evil for an essential makeover in order to meet health and safety challenges; failing this the swimming pool will be confronted until exhaustion, with successive closures for technical failures. With regard to swimming pools, I would like to remind you that the municipal College is working in partnership with the Walloon region and particularly its Minister for sports infrastructure, to eventually create an Olympic swimming pool on the Sart-Hulet site, offering great reception capacity for schools, families, and clubs of course for great competitions. We will put all our energy to bring the file to a successful conclusion as soon as possible.

Efficiency is also what the people of Namur demanded, and rightly so, of their municipal administration in the aftermath of the floods suffered last summer. Several services, under

the leadership of Alderman Luc Gennart, have been busy for a year, with substantial resources, to intervene here and there on the territory to repair, unclog, consolidate, channel, rectify, in short, secure. Developing a preventive vision, several studies on water management and its flow have been launched. The City has several action plans that they will gradually implement. These hydrological analyses were necessary to manage our territory virtuously. It will not happen overnight, of course, but it's happening. This is an issue as much for citizens and the preservation of their property, as for the adaptability of our municipality to climate challenges and future violent rains.

To manage efficiently, it is not enough to have a long arm, you also need a big ear. The one that we lend to citizens through participatory budgets, co-construction workshops, or any other form of consultation. And they are many! This citizen participation, and concern for children, will remain the spearpoints of our new Alderman Christine Halut. The school renovation projects, driven until recently by his predecessor Patricia Grandchamps, remain more topical than ever despite the tense financial context. Because what honours a public authority is also the care given to schools, places of education and dispensation of knowledge and skills. The next priorities will concern Bouge and its Centennial school, Boninne, Wépion, Belgrade and Flawinne. Always with the concern to promote inclusive schools, but also with the desire to overcome philosophical reluctance or confessional barriers, in order to work in good intelligence with the other networks, in particular for the optimization of extra-curricular reception.

You have understood, dear friends, that I was eager, in the current gloomy context, to share with you these considerations of lucidity, in truth, and with a concern for efficiency. But it is not because the context is bleak that we must be won over by the gloom. And even less by cirrhosis this weekend of festivities!

Because we representatives, I mayor, it is up to us, it is up to me, to set a course and embody hope. That of better days, that of happy days. That of an action that dissipates the fog and makes room for the sun. In the heads, in the eyes and in the hearts.

You will have noticed that the capital of Wallonia takes its part, and more, in the public action to be taken **against** climate change, against insecurity, against the social and geopolitical crisis, against vulnerabilities to floods, against galloping precariousness. But Namur also strives to constantly combine with the future, by working **for** initiatives and entrepreneurship, for conviviality and cleanliness, for a network of quality hospital care via our action at the CHR and the prospects available to it, for a city open to the world through relevant and assumed international relations, for ever more freedom, equality and humanity. Always more attractiveness too.

This concern for equality and humanity is embodied by initiatives in the fields of sport, youth and culture. I make sure to energize and support our rich fabric of cultural actors, while our colleague, Alderman Charlotte Bazelaire, accompanies our youth centres, our sports clubs and events that get people moving. It is she, in the wake of Baudouin Sohier, who will also make sure to offer the people of Namur in a few weeks an unprecedented international sporting event on our territory, in partnership with Wallonia: the European cyclocross championship. Tens of thousands of visitors are expected to come and discover Namur and its charms, and spend their money there for the benefit of our businesses. Renewed lighting of sports

grounds, renovation of playgrounds, creation of new areas, change of flooring, renovation of locker rooms, and so on. The Alderman of sports is on all fronts.

The attractiveness of the city is also the embellishment of our citadel. The orchestra conductor Anne Barzin, Alderman in charge of the citadel and of tourism, ensures that a beautiful score is delivered. The esplanade has increased its attractiveness with the cable car, the digital pavillon and the renovation of the Panorama brasserie, which she opportunely initiated. A big piece is planned for next year, in addition to the hangar aux affûts: that of the in-depth renovation of the Stade des Jeux and the Théâtre de Verdure, emblematic works that have shaped the identity of the citadel. You will have to be patient: 3 to 4 years will probably be needed to give them a makeover! Listen carefully in the streets of Namur and you will hear more and more foreign languages spoken. And so much the better! Tourism is picking up again, with its new Namourettes, and Namur is constantly attracting right up to the tip of its confluence. We must now collectively achieve the revitalization of the north of the corbeille and the station district, with the same success as the revitalization of the lower part of the city. The pieces of this puzzle will begin to fit together next spring, with the renovation of the entire station square. While waiting for the Leopold district.

Dear friends, on the scale of history, our Western societies have never been so prosperous, our industries so productive. However, we are far from the mark in terms of happiness, quality of life and fulfilment. Citizens no longer understand the collective course imposed on them and have the feeling that society is no longer making common cause but that everyone is trying to pull the blanket for themselves. In recent years, many voices have been raised calling for credible political leaders, a clear vision and responsible public action. Citizens aspire to regain a spirit of state. They tell us of their need to get back to basics. This municipal team heard them. Today, we live at full speed. We complain, we are indignant, we tweet, we post, we point out the culprits. Social network algorithms confine individuals to their certainties and reinforce divisions. We struggle to find meaning in the world around us or what we do at work, in this fast-paced life. For our part, we want to embody hope rather than stir up fear. We want to take a lucid look at our society in order to build another, together. A society where living together is meaningful, where otherness and change, far from being threats, are seen as riches and great challenges. This societal challenge is the one we want to succeed in Namur, but it is also the challenge of all the countries of the globe of which we have worthy representatives before us this morning. There will only be a satisfactory response to crises through the virtues of geopolitics and reciprocal benevolence.

Dear friends, I am coming to the moment that some are waiting with undisguised impatience because it heralds the aperitif: the conclusion!

Once is not custom, I will deliver it to you in poetic form. Oh, not that I'm particularly good at poetry. But after starting with a serious tone, I wanted to end with more lightness.

« And here come our Fêtes de Wallonie.
In the fridge two years ago, uninhibited now.
Purge of its peddlers,
We walk around singing.
And probably delighted to have found
Drums and trumpets, and the spirit of the guinguette.

The context is hardly encouraging,
But the peket from all sides flowing,
Will embrace the outstretched throats,
To be drunk in large sips.
Beware of mixing flavours
To avoid exposure on the sidewalks,
With lumps and odours,
Once regurgitated in the evening.
Have a good time with your friends,
The party in the neighbourhoods serving as a backdrop,
Dance to the rhythmic sound of the Masuis,
And especially at Les Molons reserve your 'cors'. »

Happy Walloon festivities to all!