

Key Note Speech: Showing the flag

René de Vries

Harbourmaster of the Port of Rotterdam

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honor to be here and to address some words to you. My name is René de Vries and I am the State Harbourmaster of the Port of Rotterdam. I am responsible for the safe and smooth handling of shipping and for sustainable and secure port operations. My organization is mainly built on Vessel traffic service centers to guide shipping, the Port Co-ordination Center to organize port visits and operations, the patrol vessels to be present, maintain order and for calamity abatement and an inspection department for inspections on board. The Harbourmaster division is part of the Port of Rotterdam organization, but we have our own public role and responsibility besides the commercial and quality responsibilities of our colleagues. We all are the Landlord of the port. We take care of safety and infrastructure, commercial companies hire parts of the port and transship goods or do business on their terminals otherwise. To be a landlord means that we are responsible for the infrastructure, wellbeing of the people, port development and to keep our license to grow. Keeping in touch with the public and with the ships from all over the world, but also doing business, needs certain symbols. We need and we are part of the colorful and fascinating world of flags.

Flags. Colours. Standards. Everywhere in our western society we see them. But I do believe that the maritime industry and tradition is especially attached to the flag. Colours and flags stand for symbolism, tradition and communication...in its broadest sense. The prime symbol for a country of course is the national flag. Our three colours. Red, white and blue...occasionally accompanied with the orange pennant. On days of national celebration where the Royal family of Orange is involved in. The national flag is not only a symbol at home, but also – or should I say even more – on ships overseas. Royal navy vessels and merchant navy do carry the red-white and blue everywhere, as wide as the world stretches. The flag on board of a ship is a sign that we have to deal with a Dutch ship. There are fiscal reasons for choosing the nationality and therefore the flag on board, but sometimes there is still some sentiment and pride involved in choosing the flag. The flag shows that the vessel is actually a part of the Netherlands. And it should be taken seriously. It should be treated with care. To be honest... the Royal Navy is even more attached to the tradition and ceremony than the merchant navy. Maybe there is more reason for promoting feelings of pride in the military world than in the commercial world. Midshipmen in the Netherlands learn as one of the first things when they arrive at the Naval Academy a hymn with the lyrics: We focus our eyes above, where it waves day by day. And we swear and we promise, to be faithful eternally to the Dutch flag...yes, it is an old song, but the midshipmen do still grow up with that promise... During their career as navy of-



ficers they look at this flag rather often. Every morning at nine is the flag hoisting ceremony and at sunset the same procedure the other way around. In foreign ports or whenever there is a foreign navy ship in a Dutch port, navy vessels will hoist another flag as well...the 'Geus'. This is a name for the Dutch rebels that stood up against the Spanish in the 16th century. I do not know the exact story behind this navy flag, but maybe I will hear this from you...later this day. Merchant vessels often do carry the ship owner's flag as well. But then again, it is all about symbolism and tradition. But not always...in the maritime world flags do have an applied meaning in communication between ships or between ships and people ashore. This is not completely history... communication using the flags still exists. Whenever there are diving operations in the port for example, the white and blue Alpha flag is being hoisted. Ships do hoist call signs with flags, just as a visual name tag. And we do use flags as business cards and underline our identity in a business environment. It strengthens our identity. In front of our office – the World Port Center – we hoist the flags every day. Not only the Dutch flag on occasion, but also our own flag with our own logo. A little bit less traditional, but a little bit more commercially motivated. We carry the flags with us on business missions and trips abroad. And flags and signals do form an ideal visual effect on marketing campaigns that are aiming for association with the maritime business. As an example, for the coming World Port Days in September – an immense event for the public to meet the port – we are campaigning with signal flags on the posters as well.

Flags and standards also help us with showing our hospitality. The Port of Rotterdam was one of the founding members of the Rotterdam parade of flags. On the Boompjes, the quay along the river in the oldest part of our port, in the urbanized area, we have all flags and all nationalities represented as a warm welcome to all nationalities and ships from all over the world. This parade of flags is a very strong symbol and we are very happy that the Port of Rotterdam could contribute to this initiative. Nevertheless there are also less positive aspects on focusing on the flag. It should not lead to nationalism in a negative way. I do like the use of flags, as in the parade, as a sign of respect and hospitality more than creating a feeling of superiority. But I will not talk with you about politics in that sense...however...there is one aspect in line with my remark on focusing on one flag. Internationally, politically and publicly the Netherlands is still seen as a proud and significant flag state. A flag state is defined by the number of ships under Dutch flags. Policy makers and commissions – for example – in the International Maritime Organisation are still structured and weighted by the flag state principle. But I do have to admit that the Netherlands is – as a flag state – not that significant anymore. The Dutch ship owners represent only a fraction of our clients in the port. The Dutch port cluster is one of the biggest and most significant clusters in the world. Together with Amsterdam, the North and Flushing we have a powerful port cluster that can compete with every other cluster in the world. Rotterdam is still the biggest port in Europe. Our ambition is to be a frontrunner in safety, efficiency and sustainability. We are ambitious. And therefore I would like to make the statement that the Netherlands should not be considered as a flag state in the first place, but as a Port State in the first place. Do realize where the clients are. Do realize where the real money is being earned. Sometimes symbolism and focus on the flag might obscure this idea.

This remark does not affect the enthusiasm and fascination you show. For me there are a lot of recognitions and familiar visuals in this world of flags, but there are also a



lot of opportunities for discovery and learning. I hope to speak with you later and that I will hear new stories and interesting facts on flags. I wish you a very nice week. Show the flag!

