

WHY THE BEST IS YET TO COME

Leesexemplaar

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Why the Best is Yet to Come

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**INTRODUCTION:
UNASHAMEDLY
AMBITIOUS**

‘Talent wins games, but teamwork wins championships.’ These are the words of my sporting hero, the American basketball legend Michael Jordan. By this, he meant that a team with a strong team spirit can achieve more than a team whose players are only playing for themselves. This is the guiding principle in almost everything I do. It was also the reason why I spoke those same words during my first speech as prime minister of Belgium, on 30 September 2020, in the great hall of the Egmont Palace in Brussels. This must have struck a chord with many people, because in the following days those words continued to echo throughout the comment pages and editorials in both the national and international media. A politician who argues for greater cooperation? Who talks about Belgium in a positive way? Who has a positive message *tout court*? It was something people were no longer used to.

Admittedly, when I walked down the monumental red marble staircase of the Egmont Palace that day, it is fair to say that Belgium was not going through the most glorious period in its history. After the federal elections of May 2019, it took a staggering 493 days to form a new and permanent coalition government for our country.

This was, quite simply, a disgrace for our political system and a defeat for democracy. To make matters worse, at the same time the deadly COVID-19 virus had already been spreading through the world at an alarming speed for the previous seven months. The administrative paralysis of the interim caretaker government meant that at first we were not sufficiently well equipped to deal with this crisis. People were angry – and they had every right to be. They wanted certainty and a clear perspective. Many families had already had to cope with the sudden loss of their loved ones. Children were not able to go to school because of corona. Self-employed business people had to close down their operations and hundreds of thousands of people found themselves temporarily out of work. What the population wanted was decisive leaders with a clear and unifying vision. At such moments, the very least we can expect is that politicians will accept their responsibility for leading the nation's citizens collectively through the storm. However, nothing could be further from the reality. In my first speech, I deliberately placed the emphasis on cooperation and working together, precisely because during those early corona months some key figures – much to my amazement – had refused to engage in all forms of collaboration. Ministers at different levels of government found it difficult to agree on a common approach, exclusively for political-strategic reasons. With my

studies in commercial engineering and my background in the private sector, I found it very hard to understand this aspect of the political world.

It is a cynical environment, where one man's meat is another man's poison. This very often results in a zero-sum game: your loss is my gain, and vice versa. The dominant idea is that to be successful you have to get one over on your opponents – or sometimes even your partners. A large part of our population is sick to death of this political form of trench warfare. People want solutions, not problems, especially in these uncertain times, when the world seems to be in a state of permanent crisis. A pandemic, a war on Europe's borders, climate change gathering pace, doubts about our economic future... In circumstances of this kind, we need leadership that is strong and collective, not just a team of individuals. That was why I thought it was so important on that last day of September 2020 to repeat the words of Michael Jordan.

But it was not just the importance of team spirit that I wanted to convey to those listening in the Egmont Palace and beyond. I also wanted to express my admiration for and my confidence in our fantastic country. This, too, attracted much media attention in the days ahead. It seemed like the political equivalent of swearing in church to have offered a not-so-veiled criticism of a political world in which it had become almost cus-

tomary to knock Belgium and depict it as a disappointing – if not failing – state. It is not the Belgian way to be proud of what we can do. Our national mentality is

Our national mentality is one that prefers to downplay things rather than boast about them, starting with ourselves.

one that prefers to downplay things rather than boast about them, starting with ourselves. It has always been that way, and this gift of self-deprecation undoubtedly has its roots in our unique and complex history of regional, linguistic and cultural differences. It has become an acceptable way of dealing with these dif-

ferences, but in recent times the pendulum has swung too far one way, leading to an almost constant stream of negative self-pity. Whoever listens to the same tune for long enough eventually becomes convinced by what it says. But it does not have to be this way. My book will provide convincing proof that the opposite can be true. In fact, I would put it even more strongly than that: in many domains, Belgium already works remarkably well. This might sound strange to many people, because we are so used to hearing nothing but an endless succession of negative stories, which we are expected to swallow hook, line and sinker. It is even a known psychological phenomenon: negativity bias. This explains why we are often inclined to notice and accept negative events and pieces of information more readily than positive

ones, so that we remember them better and are more strongly influenced by them. I can well recall an article that appeared in one of Belgium's leading newspapers this year. In large, bold letters, the headline proclaimed: 'Things are going badly for our young people.' However, the first sentence of the article then went on to say: 'Nine out of every 10 teenagers say that they are satisfied with their lives.' Proof positive, if any were needed, that it is easier to attract attention with a negative message. Or as a journalist once told me: 'It is not the job of the news to make you feel good; it just gives you information.'

I have often been struck by the fact that the way we look at ourselves in Belgium does not correspond with the way others look at us. This came home to me more strongly than ever before on a day in June 2023, when I visited the logistics centre of the American sports giant Nike. I had just sat through a difficult cabinet meeting about the right to strike. One of the conversation partners went back on a previously made agreement, while another became deliberately obstructive for futile and purely strategic reasons. This was the Belgian political world at its worst: small-minded, negative and unconstructive. The endless discussions meant that I arrived late for my scheduled meeting with the new American chairman and CEO of Nike, John Donahoe. This was his first visit to Belgium and he asked if it would be possible to speak with the head of the government. This is the

kind of meeting for which I am always happy to make time: the Nike distribution centre in Laakdal, along the E313 motorway, is the largest in the world. Every day no fewer than 1 million packages are dispatched to 39 different countries. It employs some 8 000 people and most of the senior management team are Belgian. In the past, some of them have even moved on to key positions at the Nike world headquarters in the American state of Oregon, where they are now known as ‘the Belgian gang’.

‘So how did it happen?’ I asked during my speech. ‘Why did you decide to set up the nerve centre for your worldwide activities in our country?’

I paused briefly for effect, before giving my own challenging answer: *‘Because we’re good.’*

This answer sounds very un-Belgian, but it is nothing more than the truth. This was confirmed for me by the enthusiastic applause that rang around the auditorium. And it was much the same story later that same day, when I visited the premises of the German industrial colossus Siemens as part of their 125th anniversary celebrations. I told the Siemens staff that we should all be proud of what we have been able to achieve in this little country of ours. Once again, the reaction was extremely positive. To me, it is clear that in international environments people do recognise and appreciate our positive qualities. True, we are only a small market

and our Belgian fiscal system is not as beneficial as that of Ireland or the Netherlands, but our world-class ports and infrastructure mean that we can offer a geographical location that is second to none. Moreover, Belgian workers are well trained and productive, highly motivated and flexible. Most of them can speak more than one language, sometimes three or four. The quality and accessibility of our universities is high and our academics are respected around the world for their groundbreaking research. The digital service provision of our SMEs is far above the European average. Some countries derive the largest part of their income from oil, gas or other natural resources, or from tourism built around their national parks and the remarkable natural phenomena they possess. Belgium's strongest trump card is, quite simply, its people. Thanks to our creativity, we are today at the forefront in many of the sectors that will define the future, a point that I will demonstrate with concrete examples a little later in the book. However, we urgently need to learn a lesson in self-esteem. We have so much potential but only exploit a fraction of it, often as a consequence of the strategic games and nationalistic navel-gazing that dominate our archaic political culture.

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For too long, Belgium was a country where it was better not to stick your head above the parapet. Success

was viewed with suspicion and envy. If you were successful, you must have done something dubious. There was also a generally negative attitude: 'If we don't aim too high, we won't be disappointed later if things go wrong.' Sadly, this mentality is still widespread today. But I refuse to believe in it. Our modesty is just a classic national stereotype, like so many others: the French are arrogant, the Dutch are tight-fisted, the Germans are methodical, and so on. A large-scale psychological study conducted in dozens of countries and involving many thousands of people came to a remarkable conclusion: our intuitions about national differences are usually wide of the mark. An entire population cannot be reduced to a handful of characteristics. Our self-image that depicts the average Belgian as an underperformer or underdog needs to be changed – and changed fast. It is simply not true. To back this up, we can point to splendid (and eloquent) world champions like Remco Evenepoel in cycling and Nafi Thiam in athletics, or to our national football team, the Red Devils. Until the last decade or so, they would set off to participate in European or world championships with little or no ambition. It was seen as a victory simply to have qualified! Once they came home (having been knocked out in the preliminary rounds again), the usual recriminations would follow, with groups of players, usually from different parts of the country, blaming others for

the failure. It became clear that the national team was actually a collection of clans, fighting out their internal disputes on the playing field. Compare that with the current generation of Devils. The key figures in the team are now players with a multicultural background, who travelled to join major international clubs at an early age in pursuit and fulfilment of their childhood dreams. It is easy to be critical about many of the unethical aspects of the football industry, but what these young men have achieved deserves the highest praise. Moreover, success has not gone to their heads and the hunger to win remains. When the team was welcomed back to a reception in Brussels town hall following their magnificent performance at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, one of the star players, Kevin De Bruyne, looked far from happy, notwithstanding the bronze medal hanging around his neck. Someone eventually asked him: 'What's wrong, Kevin?' 'Why should I be happy?' he answered. 'We only finished third.'

This is how Belgians should sound. Unashamedly ambitious. Setting the bar as high as possible and doing everything they can to achieve that objective. In recent years, a number of our fellow compatriots have emerged who already possess this 'un-Belgian' mentality. The brothers Manu and Michiel Beers dreamed of one day setting up a dance

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festival in the unlikely setting of a provincial park near the small town of Boom. Tomorrowland is now the hottest, hippest and most inspirational festival concept in the world, with franchises in Brazil and France. And it is the same story in other industries, sports, arts and sciences, where Belgians are making a name for themselves on the international stage. A few examples from the wide range of possibilities? The bachelor course in Digital Arts and Entertainment at the Howest University of Applied Sciences in Kortrijk has repeatedly been chosen as the best game design and development course in the world, and this in a sector that now generates more revenue than the music and film industries combined. At the start of 2023, Belgium was awarded the Innovation Champions Award at the Consumer Electronics Show, the world's greatest technology trade fair in Las Vegas. The Walloon-based John Cockerill Group is a world leader in electrolysis, a crucial technology for the production of green hydrogen, which is likely to be the fuel of the future (as I will again explain later in the book). The Flemish IMEC is respected around the world as an outstanding research centre for nano-electronic and digital technology, and at the World Incubation Summit in 2023 won first prize as the best mentor of tech start-ups and spin-offs, being chosen ahead of a further 1 895 participants from 56 countries. This means that no other organisation on the planet is more effi-

cient at providing guidance and help to university-linked starter companies. The words of programme director Sven De Cleyn in his acceptance speech are a clear indication of the direction in which we should be travelling: ‘In spite of our typical modesty, which persuades many of our entrepreneurs not to think big enough, we are still capable of achieving remarkable things.’

Unashamed ambition does not mean that you need to bulldoze your way through the world with an ‘over my dead body’ attitude. But there is nothing wrong with being honest about your dreams. What’s more, these dreams do not need to be confined to our national borders. Why not think of an idea that will make the world a better place? Create a Tomorrowland in your own sector. Be a Kevin De Bruyne in your own team. In 2021, Belgium was responsible for 20 percent of all the clinical studies conducted into cancer research in Europe. We excel in the fields of biotechnology and life sciences, thanks to a unique ecosystem of pre-clinical studies and advanced techniques of biotechnological production, which allow us to serve as a logistical hub for worldwide distribution. During the corona crisis, Belgium also played a key international role in the development and manufacture of vaccines. As a result of intense diplomatic and political efforts in recent years, Belgium is well on the way to becoming a vital

European energy hub. For several years, we have topped the list of the best-protected countries in terms of cybersecurity. In just four years' time, we have climbed our way up the World Competitive Index, which measures global economic competitiveness, from the 27th to the 13th position. At the same time, our healthcare system is the envy of the world. But the following statistic is perhaps the one of which I am most proud: according to the latest report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Belgium is the country with the lowest gender pay gap – the difference in wages paid to men and women for comparable work. This is irrefutable proof of our belief in the principle of equal opportunities, reflected in a policy that is spread evenly over different domains. For example, we are flexible in allowing time credit and parental leave, and our system makes it possible for parents in our country to both work and raise a family.

Why is it so hard for Belgians to accept that our country actually works, and works well? And it would work even better if everyone could be persuaded to all pull in the same direction. My positive attitude towards the future and my unshakeable confidence in technology have nothing to do with naivety. They are based on facts and figures, on conversations with experts in many fields, and on impressions that I see confirmed around me every day. Does this all mean that

we are already a model nation? No, not at all. Like every country, we still face our own set of specific challenges. Our chaotic and inefficient administrative organisation, the excess profit rulings in our fiscal system, the long waiting lists in hospitals, the difficulty in dealing effectively with asylum seekers, the amount of long-term sickness in our workforce, the overall high level of tax, the shambolic approach to spatial planning... These are a continuing source of irritation to us all. Our country also scores poorly in terms of social mobility. We are still not managing to create sufficient chances for everyone in our society. Too few people have a job, and the activation policy is too slow, too expensive and insufficiently transparent. According to international research studies, the quality of our education is slipping year by year. Our only natural resource is the intelligence of our people, but this is increasingly coming under threat. However, the analysis of our shortcomings and points for improvement does not mean we should constantly lose ourselves in needless self-recrimination and pity. We do not need to scrap our entire system, simply because it still contains a number of deficiencies. That would risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater. As the former American president Bill Clinton once said: 'There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.' And that applies equally to our country. All

the problems that Belgium faces can be solved by the Belgian people working together. Critics take every opportunity to compare our land with other European countries where things are 'so much better'. But is the grass really any greener on the other side of the fence? Our neighbours in the Netherlands are often praised for their supposedly 'model' political structure, but this did not prevent their government from collapsing in chaos during the summer of 2023. Since 1998, only one Dutch administration – Rutte II – was able to serve out its full term. Likewise in Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel found it very difficult to keep the various regional governments in line with her national policy during the corona crisis. And what of the Scandinavian countries, which are often pointed to as exemplary democracies with the happiest populations in the world? The statistics for the use of antidepressant drugs suggest differently, with Iceland, Sweden and Finland all featuring prominently towards the top of the list. As for Greece, Italy and Spain, we are all familiar with the political and financial instability they have repeatedly experienced in recent years. I could give even more examples, but that would serve no purpose. The point is not that we should take comfort from or even seek to gain advantage from the problems of others. The point is that we too should not expect to live in a perfect society, because that is never going to happen.

The ideal solution, the perfect wage deal for everyone, the optimum pension age that satisfies steel workers, bus drivers and HR managers alike, yet still makes it possible to meet the cost of an ageing population: sadly, these are all impossibilities. It is the lot of a politician and of society to work constantly with imperfect solutions. Even so, we must never forget to continue seeing the good in what we have.

It is the lot of a politician and of society to work constantly with imperfect solutions.

The facts, figures and examples in this book will demonstrate sufficiently that the time has come to let go of some of our ingrained but essentially negative beliefs. Each day, I see evidence that we are a community of open-minded people who have a natural inclination to seek solutions. For centuries, our land has been an international hub for trade, a safe haven for artistic expression, a cultural hotspot, a powerhouse of innovation. Working together with others is in our DNA. It is up to us, as a society and as politicians, to recognise and cultivate these fantastic characteristics, so that we can put them to the best possible use. In this respect, we can perhaps compare our relatively 'young' country, which is not yet 200 years old, with a teenager. In human terms, this means that Belgium is just 16 years of age and is struggling to find its identity. Belgium is an adolescent and, like all adolescents, has doubts

about how it can best relate to the outside world. It thinks that it is already mature, but it is not. It still lacks experience, self-confidence and perspective. It sees no future. The end of the world is in sight. Life is hopeless... As the father of two teenagers, I know that adolescents can approach this situation in one of two ways: you can either let yourself be consumed by all this negativity and end up drowning in your own despair, or else you can search for a perspective that emphasises your strengths and the possibilities that life offers. The situation is not hopeless. It is, in fact, full of possibilities and even beauty. But you must *want* to see it.

It is no different in politics. Those who remain cocooned in negativity achieve nothing. You must at least believe in the possibility of a solution before you can start to try and find one. At first glance, problems like climate change, inequality and recurring budget deficits seem insurmountable, but we have no other option: we have to do something about them. And the good news is, we can! We can solve them by dividing them up into small and more manageable chunks, which we can then deal with one by one. Step by step, but with the final objective always clearly in sight. Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy Agency, recently said: 'We are at the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era. This shows that our efforts on behalf of the climate are having an effect.'

In her book *Crisis!*, Beatrice de Graaf, a Dutch professor of international and political history at the University of Utrecht, argued that the succession of crises that the world has experienced since the 1990s has led to a new form of politics: crisis management. This resulted in the commitment of a much higher proportion of public resources to manage these crises. Ministers and government officials tried to learn the right lessons from these situations, so that they could deal with new ones more professionally. At the same time, however, the expectations, criticism and suspicion of citizens everywhere continued to grow. Professor de Graaf refers to this as the vulnerability paradox: the richer a society becomes, the safer it feels and the better it is able to avoid problems, the greater the despair when a new problem does eventually arise. According to the Global Wealth Report, Belgium is one of the richest countries on the planet. Our Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, shows that we are the third best-performing country of all the OECD lands. Even so, Beatrice de Graaf is right: the level of despair in Belgium has never been so great. More and more people are giving their support to unconstructive political parties and populists. This is not the path we should be following, since the statistics and a growing number of foreign examples show that this is the quickest way to impoverishment and disillusion. We must not let it happen.